

## **Philippians 2:1-11: Plunging into the Text Toward Becoming Non-Grasping, Self-Emptied Lovers**

### **Introduction**

Since our arrival yesterday evening, we have been retelling and re-entering a central founding story of our charism as Sisters of St Joseph --- the story of our vocation to a life of self-emptying love (aneantissement) --- the heart of Jean-Pierre Medaille's desire for his daughters and the prayer of Paul of Tarsus for his founding church at Phillippi. We have listened to the text of Paul's letter with our eyes, our ears, our minds, our hearts, and have entered the text by letting the symbols speak, core symbols of our lives and our created world; symbols which reveal us to ourselves in ways we do not yet adequately understand.

The symbols, replete with meaning, have drawn us to the Waters of unioning and communioning, self-emptying and reconciling love ... and to the Well of God's outpouring, self-giving Life. Paradoxically, the symbol of water that has reminded us of who we are and from whence we come is itself threatened today, even as we reflect on its overwhelming power to renew and sustain us, to image God for us so profoundly and persuasively; to embody this text for our time so poignantly. Yes, our symbols do indeed know us and our contemporary place in history and on our fragile planet EARTH, better than we know ourselves.

This morning, blessed for the mission of interpreting this text anew; and blessed by the mission that is alive in this very place because each of you is here, I invite you to enter with me into the beauty, fragility and threat of our contemporary situation in order to let this Philippians text live and move and address itself to us here and now. In the process of our communal interpretation of this biblical text, we will situate it within three cultural contexts, our own 21<sup>st</sup> century global situation; the 17<sup>th</sup> century French social world and the first century Roman province of Phillippi in Macedonia. We will then try to plunge a little deeper into some interpreted meanings of this Philippians passage before returning here to this gathering to ask what is being called forth in us who have for so long bathed in the transforming tides of this core text.

### **Context I: The Twenty-First Century Evolutionary Awakening**

The human community and the entire earth community are moving through a crisis of mammoth proportions. Earth is very much dependent upon humankind's understanding of and response to the experience of its own evolution within the larger eco-community. Today we are being provoked by life itself to grasp deeper insights into what has been happening in our world and what needs to happen within our human, global consciousness. We are being flooded with information, difficult to assimilate but too significant to overlook. From particle physics to philosophical hermeneutics, from the world of cosmology to the lives of mystics, the truth of our interconnectedness and inter-subjectivity is radically shifting our self-understanding. The once exalted sense of my individual selfhood, pre-eminent since Rene Descartes, has been replaced by an understanding of our mutual inter-becoming; life-evolving in-and-through the other.

But what is the proper relationship we share with all else that is? What concrete shape does mutual inter-becoming take? Eliabet Sahtouris, an evolutionary biologist, reminds us that our own personal interests as individuals or as groups can never be our starting point. An original unity preceded all differentiation. All diversification evolved. Sahtouris further explains:

“We’re all made of the nucleated cell; that’s what all trees are made of, all the things in the waters are made of. Everything we see around us is made of this wonderful, big, co-operative cell” (The Biology of Globalization).

The thesis that Sahtouris lays before us is a lesson she finds in this nucleated cell. Just as bacteria needed to learn to cooperate after earlier stages of competition and rivalry, so the human species needs to pass through this phase of its own adolescence and come through negotiation of differences into a cooperative sense of interdependent wholeness. What bacteria learned to do instinctually, the human race must choose to do intentionally and freely. Vulnerability and weakness are traits that human beings share in common with every other life form. Competition is a natural way of dealing with these conditions; rivalry, hostility and the will to dominate are necessary by-products of this weak, self-protective stance.

As a race, human persons continue to adapt to life with others by this mimetic/imitative pattern of hostile rivalry (Rene Girard), which we have learned from those who have gone before us. We continue to work out conditions for individual and group survival at a time when our planet and species is calling for new ways of thinking and acting. If this evolutionary awakening to all life as interconnected is stirring a seismic change in the life sciences, including spirituality, how has this shift affected the attitudes shaping our worldview, the values underlying our behaviors? Do we continue to pass on to the youngest and the most vulnerable members of our human family in our words and our actions the same, divisive message: “If you are not for yourself first, then, who will be?” rather than: “If you are for yourself alone, then who will you and we ever become?”

Stories of violence, retaliation, greed and abuse of life at every level all too painfully demonstrate our contemporary crisis. What we know and how we act need to catch up with each other. Our personal and corporate attitudes, dispositions of heart and movements of the will have yet to respond adequately to our growing sense of interdependence and relationality. We seem to know this truth at an intellectual level. But the shape of our personal and particularly our communal, societal life fails to reflect this vital, self-understanding. We will become who we are called to be as human persons, within a human community, within an eco-family, together --- or we will all perish by our refusal. We have arrived at a critical, evolutionary phase in human consciousness. All life is seeking to evolve in us. Evolution has moved to human interiority.

Into this contemporary evolutionary situation, the Philippians’ text is poised to address and provoke us. This provocation, I hope to stir by an inter-textual conversation with the writings of our founder, Jean Pierre Medaille. It is to his social world that we now turn in order to situate his words to us.

## **Context II: The Social World of 17<sup>th</sup> century France**

In at least four ways, the world that Father Medaille inhabited, resembles our own. Seventeenth century France was torn asunder by political and ecclesial wars, was plagued by socio-economic misfortune and human suffering, and though it called itself Christian, it was, at the same time, a sinful and violent world. Medaille called his first daughters of Joseph in their Constitutions to “be fearless in facing this sinful world.” The source of their fearless freedom would not be their might or power but their very humble zeal, their magnanimous littleness. Finally, not unlike our own day, the world in which Medaille lived was experiencing a renewed sensitivity to the spiritual. The grace of God was being stirred up in new spiritual leaders and congregations that emerged in the 17th century, from Francis de Sales to Vincent DePaul, from Reformed Carmelites and Visitandine Mystics to Louise de Marillac and the Daughters of Charity. The spirituality of Jean-Pierre Medaille and the first Daughters of Joseph takes its rightful place in this evolving spiritual current. Our sisters sought to stir up love by their passion for union with God and every neighbor without distinction in a world and church, which were both rich and destitute, graced and sinful. Medaille longed to infuse this “little design” in the heart of the church, to have it permeate, as God would will it, even in hidden and imperceptible ways.

Foremost in Medaille’s spiritual legacy is the call to a life of self-emptying love, which he humbly insists is the revelation he has been given to communicate. Nowhere does Medaille express this more passionately than in his Eucharistic Letter: Listen to the text:

“May I share with you the humble thoughts communicated to me concerning the design of God for us... Jesus has revealed to me the perfect model of this little design in his own eucharistic life --- a life totally empty of self. Ought not we also, in accordance with God’s will, strive to establish an Institute totally empty of self?”

Like his own spiritual father, Ignatius of Loyola, Medaille was not content to leave this “Little Institute” with meditative reading or spiritual nosegays. His goal was to offer them a spiritual method ... a way to shape their lives in response to grace. To this end, Medaille’s, *Maxims of the Little Institute* are designed to be lived rather than recited. They serve as symbolic mediations of the grace, Medaille believes, God has already poured into the hearts of each woman called to the Congregation of the Great Love of God. For Medaille, God’s love is great because it is entirely non-grasping and self-emptied ... a greatness only the very poor and humble among them will be able to understand deeply.

## **Context III: The Social World of First Century Philippi**

The city of Philippi, established by Philip of Macedon in 363 BCE had been won as a Roman colony during a famous battle involving Marc Antony, Brutus and Cassius. The inhabitants were proud to think of themselves as Roman citizens and to enjoy all the rights and privileges of such citizenship. Paul himself had established the church there during his second missionary visit between 49-52 CE. The story of its founding is recorded in Acts 16. Almost a decade later, Paul writes from prison to this Philippian

community, whom he deeply loves and who in turn have loved and supported him. Paul faces perilous circumstances, including the possibility of his own imminent death. But more to the point of his letter, Paul has deep concern for the well-being and unity of this church that he so longs for and cares about. Not only are external forces competing to divide and confuse the church, but, Paul has learned, their relationships with one another have been threatened by rivalry and self-interest. He exhorts them to live as citizens, not of Rome, the model of which they feel proud and haughty, but as citizens of the gospel of Jesus Christ. To urge them to this life in the lowly, exalted Christ, Paul, who most frequently introduces himself as “an apostle” presents himself to the Philippians as their servant, an introduction used seldom in his writings. In the Letter to the Philippians “servant-hood” starkly situates the author in relationship to his community. The designation will be paramount in the model of “life-in-Christ” he will entreat the Philippians and us to follow.

### **Plunging Deeper into the Text**

As I prayed with this Philippians’ text over the past few months, I became aware of a truth I already knew, but not sufficiently. I cannot do this work of self-emptying love alone. Not only is it irreducibly the action of God’s Spirit poured into my heart, but it is also, and just as irreducibly, dependent upon a community of others who are seeking the same way of mutual self-giving together. In interpreting this letter of Paul’s, exegetes make clear the communal nature of this address. Over and over again, the Greek “you” is plural, the emphasis is on communion, *koinonia*, sharing and partnership in Christ. Paul is convinced we become this “life in Christ” together. The Philippians are facing problems and Paul sees clearly that the problems must be resolved by “struggling together to be of one mind.” The Letter acknowledges that citizenship “in Christ” (*en christo*, an expression that Paul uses 162 times in his epistles) makes possible a new way of life. This life follows a pattern, one that must shape itself in them, as it did in Jesus of Nazareth, the Crucified and Risen One.

About that pattern of life in Christ, Jean-Pierre Medaille seems also to have had passionate convictions. He desired not only to grow in this Christic pattern himself, but he found this desire already awakened in the hearts of a seemingly insignificant group of six young French women, five of whom could not even sign their names. In them he recognized the same God-longing. He expressed his shared hope for them in Maxim 40: “Let your first and dearest desire be to resemble your Savior in all things. Let him abide in you and do you abide in him.”

That we might grow to resemble more closely the Christ in whom we abide, I would like to explore five streams running through this Philippians’ text, which have long been sources of living water for us as Sisters of St. Joseph. These are the waters we have gathered in; the flowing waters of unioning and communioning, self-emptying and reconciling love. We trace these waters to their originating source in the life of Christ, whose pattern both Paul and Medaille set before us today as the way to life, life for all.

► **Stream One: *Be persuaded by love to love*:** If our common life in Christ and the Spirit means anything, if tenderness and compassion move you, be united in your purpose and your love. As gift freely given, love cannot be forced or commanded. There can be no

compulsion; no power over another ... Only love, freely given, can persuade love in return.

► **Stream Two:** *Let there be no competition or conceit among you... Let no one think of her own interests first, but rather other people's interests instead. For your mind must be the same as Christ.* A new consciousness, a new attitude (*NRSV, New American*) or mind-set, must replace old patterns. The human attitudes of rivalry and self-advancement that have formerly shaped our behaviors must fall away as we “put on Christ.”

► **Stream Three:** *For Jesus did not think equality with God something to be grasped (NRSV, Jerusalem, New American) or exploited (NIV, New Oxford), but rather he emptied himself (Jerusalem, NRSV, NAB, New Oxford), made himself nothing (NIV)* The kenotic or self-emptying way of Jesus is central to the Pauline message. For this precise reason, many scholars argue that the new way, that is the Christian life, emerged from the selfless witness and the spiritual genius of Paul's writings. Once the insight dawns that *kenosis* is central, everything in the life of Jesus, recorded in the gospels, can be interpreted in light of this non-grasping, self-emptying pattern of Jesus, the Christ.

► **Stream Four:** *Jesus became as all humans are; (weak, vulnerable, dependent) in fact, he became humbler yet, taking the form of a slave, accepting even death on a cross.* Paul teaches that Jesus refused to deny the human condition, but rather embraced it fully. Following him, we are called to recognize ourselves as poor in the poor, to see our own vulnerability in that of others, to separate ourselves from no one on whom we inter-depend for our mutual inter-becoming. This is the humility of Jesus, freely embraced. And to make the lesson clearer, Paul insists, Jesus became “humbler yet” ... taking the condition of a slave, facing the ignominious death of a no-body, a rejected outcast, a scandalous criminal --- death on a cross!

► **Stream Five:** *God highly exalted Jesus from no name; no thing ... to the name above all other names.* The emptied out pattern of Jesus' life reveals human and divine fullness. In the Mystery of Divine/Human Kenosis, paradox abounds: loss is gain; death is life; the bent down is raised up, humility is exaltation; the stumbling block is the pathway; the paschal mystery of life through death is the conquering of death and the fullness of life. In the human face of Jesus, we encounter the Face of God; in the pattern of Jesus, life, death and rising to new life, we experience the meaning of mutual gift-exchange ---unbounded, unrelenting Divine Love, freely outpoured for the sake of Life, Life for all. In Jesus, that gift of life is fully and freely returned. A gift remains a gift only by perpetual donation --- no with-holding.

Throughout this letter, these streams twist and turn, washing over their hearers with meanings and values as foreign to twenty-first century North American sensibilities as they were to the Roman ears of first century Philippi. As a literary piece, the text is remarkably poetic in its parallelism, its integration of an early Christian hymn and its masterful integration of so many of Paul's most transformative spiritual insights, insights gleaned from his own love for and life in Christ. Within the stunning parallels of the text, Paul seems to make connections with the ancient text of Genesis, just as Father Medaille makes connections with this one.

The hymnic character of Philippians 2:5-11 has received much attention in biblical circles, but it's the work of Ralph Martin on which I rely to point out the parallelism that I find compelling for our understanding of and response to this text today. Martin has

developed the parallels between Adam, the first human, with Jesus, the new human throughout this text. In the contrast, we see clearly the effects of both negative/positive mimesis. In the pattern of Jesus' life we glimpse the way forward; the new consciousness so needed by the human community to save itself and our planet. Salvation does indeed lie in our response.

In the Book of Genesis we learn the mythic meaning of Adam, who set in motion the pattern of mimetic rivalry. We desire what we think others desire (Girard), an impulse that threatens the human with the temptations of acquisition. 1) Adam himself grasps to be like God. In a spirit of competition and rivalry, he desires to know as much as God knows. Jesus, by contrast, chose not to grasp or cling, even to equality with God. Rather he emptied himself ... becoming no-thing. 2) Adam spurned being God's humanum, God's earth creature. Jesus, however, took the human condition upon himself freely and fully, becoming poorer and lowlier yet in the form of slave. 3) Adam exalted himself while Jesus humbled himself. 4) Adam became disobedient unto death, while Jesus became obedient unto death, even the scandalous death on a cross. 5) Adam ate from a tree, pursuing the light of divine knowing; Jesus hung from a tree, embracing the darkness of human unknowing. 6) While Adam was banished from the Garden and the Tree of Life, Jesus was exalted to Glory and has become the Way to Life.

### **The Lessons of Paul in the Teaching of Medaille**

Paul's lesson-in-contrasts between Adam and Jesus was not lost on Jean-Pierre Medaille. In his own life journey, Medaille embraced Jesus the Christ, as the new humanum, the way forward; the One in Whom, love conquered hate and life claimed victory over death. Jean-Pierre Medaille, always practical and grounded in the real, human situation, realized that rivalry and self-interest, characteristics of the first human, continue to tempt the human heart. Only by a sincere and total gift of themselves to God and one another could the Daughters of Joseph grow to their full personhood and come to resemble Jesus in all things. Jesus, himself, must be their divine exemplar, the teacher and model on whom they would form themselves in this "Little Design." This Jesus, who emptied himself of divinity in order to reveal so perfectly the true nature of the Divine --- the poured-out Love that unceasingly loves creation into life. This Jesus, Medaille knew, would lift up those called to this Little Institute, would help them "put on the mind of Christ," would lead them to choose to become small themselves with a magnanimous littleness that "resembled their savior in all things." Medaille realized that the journey to a self-emptied life would ask everything of those who entered this congregation, so he prayed that God would call no one to it, who did not passionately desire to live this life in Christ, as he said "to let Jesus live in them and so model their lives on his virtues."

Throughout Medaille's writing, echoes of the Philippians' Letter resound. But I will focus solely on *The Maxims of the Little Institute* to emphasize Medaille's practical method. Thus, he sought to help the Sisters realize the pattern of self-emptied love in their own spiritual journey, a journey toward total double union, where love of God and love of neighbor is one single, outpoured life-gift. Like Paul's letter to the Philippians, Medaille's Maxims are addressed today to us. We can find the same streams of life-giving water found in Paul's letter throughout the Maxims.

And so, Medaille, with a gentle spirit, like Paul, persuades us by love to love. There is, he realizes, no compulsion. To love and be loved by God in a total and selfless way is pure gift, a gift God desires for all of us. "Try to live in such a way that your life will be a continual act of the pure love of God," Medaille urges in Maxim 4. Growth in such a way of loving involves a movement and transformation of the will toward greater freedom --- the freedom to love God and all in God. Medaille prayed this for the Daughters of Joseph and asked them in Maxim 93 to "Desire this perfection for your will--- the one freedom to go to God --- to love God and embrace God's providence with the whole affection of your heart."

The transformation of one's will, making it one with the Will of God is to "have the mind of Christ." It leads ultimately to a life of genuine self-gift, the capacity to grasp at nothing, even life itself. In Maxim 52, Medaille exhorts us to: "Have a heart that is always free and not attached to any earthly thing." But the total shift of our will away from self-concern toward God and others takes place over a lifetime, as we consistently strive to think of others' interests rather than our own. Medaille quotes Paul's teaching to the Philippians exactly in Maxim 49 which says: "Always prefer the will and satisfaction of others to your own." And again in Maxim 11, "Always speak well of others, esteem highly the good they do and excuse and conceal as much as you can the faults they may have." Thinking highly of others gradually takes over the pattern of one's mind, leaving little space for the clutter of self-preoccupation. In Maxim 21, Father Medaille continues this lesson: "Seek no praise or recompense for your good works in this life." In fact, Medaille urges us in Maxim 74 to "Desire that others think little of you and much of everyone else; be grieved that you should be esteemed but happy that others are esteemed."

It's clear in praying with our Maxims that Medaille continually exhorts us to "the more." He presses us gently until in Maxim 24, we read: "Belong entirely to God by holy abandonment." Perhaps, Wendell Berry saw the gradual unfolding of this way of life when he wrote: "Every day I find less and less reason not to give myself away." In Maxim 39, Medaille sums it up: "Be nothing to yourself, but be entirely given over to God and your neighbor." Here we are, totally given-away.

In response to the call of Vatican II, we, Sisters of St Joseph, sought faithfully to return to our sources. In doing so, we recovered the vitality of our Trinitarian consecration and this is indeed life-giving for us. It has revealed the profound depths of our relational spirituality, in which we are both grounded and stretched open. The dynamic life of communion in our Triune God fosters in us the vision of oneness, which gives our lives direction and meaning. However, it is the gift of Jesus, as incarnated, divine love --- love in human flesh --- that gives form to this vision; a form we are lovingly invited to follow, if communion is to be anything more than a beautiful vision of God's Dream for us. In other words, here in human history, a life in Trinitarian communion cannot by-pass the way of Jesus' self-emptying or kenosis. There can be no fullness of life without embracing the hideous scandal of the Cross, of dying to self for life in and for others. What hard-stuff!

In Medaille, we glimpse one who loved so passionately that he would not/could not spare the hard lessons. How clearly he echoes Paul to the Philippians once again in Maxim 3. "Empty yourself in honor of the Incarnate Word, who emptied himself with such love for your sake ... and practice as far as you can the most profound humility."

The cross becomes for all of us the central and unrelenting symbol of our Christian story, the way we are to go. In Maxim 45, we are invited to: “Live with your savior attached to the cross; live only for God and die completely to self.” Medaille explains this crucified way in Maxim 5: “Let the world be crucified to you and you to the world...Lay aside your old self and be clothed with the new. Thus, dead to the world and self-love, live a life full of gentleness, humility, sincerity ... inner and outer peace .... a life modeled on the holiness and virtues of Jesus...who is to be formed in you.” To this end, Medaille reminds us in Maxim 42 that we are to: “Be at least in desire the poorest in the world, the lowliest and the most humble, the most pure and obedient. Only in this way may you become like him who was the most poor and humble ... and who is the divine model on whom you should form yourself.” And he continues: “Make so perfect a sacrifice of yourself and of your will, that you may be empty of self... that you may no longer deliberately desire anything except that the Will of God be accomplished in you, by you and by the whole world. (Maxim18)

The “more” to which Medaille calls us is simply too much. And lest any of us be tempted to think that we have nearly arrived at this self-emptied living, Medaille has another caution just for us. In Maxim 82, he advises: “However pure your views and intentions may appear, be convinced that you still seek yourself in some hidden recess of your heart.” Ultimately, a self-emptied life is something that God sees, God orchestrates, and God evaluates. Our work is simply to be standing open and willing. God will do the emptying and the filling and God is very good at God’s work. Thus Medaille offers us the wisdom of Maxim 95 “When you have the happiness of experiencing the presence of grace and the effects of God’s love, keep in mind that this great good is lent to you, rather than possessed by you. It too belongs to the Savior Jesus, and to his merits, not to you.” Everything is gift. We are guests at God’s banquet of life, a life that flows through us; all is lent to us.

Having re-entered these core texts of our heritage, what are we to make of this “kenotic life in Christ,” which is the unique gift of Medaille’s legacy to us --- what he believed “Jesus revealed to him to communicate to us”? The “Little Institute” that he envisioned is now world-wide and faces new challenges. We come together for this Leadership Assembly and ask not to anticipate Grace, but to quietly await its movements. And when it comes, we pray to follow it, with great gentleness, humility, faithfulness and courage. (83) The grace that God offers is always particular to the needs we face. The needs we face breed fear, but the grace we’re offered brings freedom. We have every reason to believe God waits to flood us in grace. God will be the fullness poured into our emptiness.

### **Provoked by Paradox to Enter the Mystery of our Contemporary Situation**

Paradox is at the heart of a transformed life. Paul’s poetic words describe the ultimate paradox of Jesus’ life as the life that saves, the one we are called to imitate. Medaille’s invitations to a magnanimous littleness, an audacious humility, a disarming hospitality, a gentle boldness, a death to self for the sake of life show the paradoxical way of divine reversals. This is the dark path that leads to life. I know all too well that I cannot walk this road alone. We need to go together. This pattern of life “in Christ” is the way beyond the present crisis of fear and self-protection, where the powerful make their



importance felt and victims are left abandoned by the wayside. Our responsibility as Sisters of St Joseph to embrace our contemporary situation invites us now to this application phase in interpreting the text. What are we to do with our lives, personally and corporately, in response to all we've been given?

As we enter into a process of communal theological reflection, let me share a long-held conviction about the theological project. All theology, Karl Rahner insisted, is at least partially autobiographical. We have no access to God or the ways of God that are not first revealed to us. If we try to speak from any other place, it is neither God nor ourselves who are being disclosed. Given this autobiographical starting point, we need to ask about what has happened in our own personal lives, our life together as communities and congregation, our life as a federation that have helped us grasp the lessons of self-emptying love that the Philippians text teaches us.

Several pieces of this passage and our contemporary situation have been demanding my attention and provoking further interaction in me. I've been trying to uncover some meanings and values that might enable something essential, not simply interesting, to take place in my life as a Sister of St Joseph in response to this core text. The first has to do with growth toward authentic human freedom ---- the journey toward it in my own life, and for us as a religious and human family. The second concerns the haunting call to become more humble and poor, vulnerable and dependent, not as some abstract spiritual feeling, that affirms and justifies how I live now, but as a call to a radically transformed life for me and for all of us, who care about God and life together. And the third consideration flows from the other two. In fact, they may all be simply one great longing ---- to live a more yielded, handed-over, self-emptied life, not just personally but corporately in our congregation, in imitation (mimetic desiring at its best) of the one who emptied himself with such love for our sake. It seems to me that in reclaiming these insights from our primitive texts on self-emptying love, exemplified in this Philippians Letter, we must do so with what Paul Ricoeur calls a *second naivete*. Let me explain.

We all began our lives as Sisters of St Joseph at a time when the virtues of poverty, humility and death-to-self were handed on to us out of a static past with little awareness of psychological development, of women's subjugated place in the world and in the church, or of the importance of historical and cultural conditioning in shaping life as we know it. With new awakening to the various stages of human development, we came to judge these virtues, so central to our charism, with a newly acquired "hermeneutic of suspicion." We grew convinced that, at least for women, such aspirations were dangerously unhealthy and self-deprecating, rather than life-giving. A second naivete, Ricoeur suggests, enables us to take the best insights gleaned by the modern turn to the social and physical sciences and integrate these insights with a re-appreciation of the sacred. This realm of Holy Mystery, which science cannot make accessible or intelligible to us, defines the sacred character of all life. Rather than disappearing with the advance of science, the paradox of Mystery calls for our attention in new and disturbing ways, often through science. From this paradoxical, sacred place, the need for a new understanding of poverty, humility and self-emptying love, freely chosen, beckons to me, to us. If our Great God's very Life is revealed as poor and weak, small and humble, self-emptied and dependent on us, is this not the Mystery par excellence that we find hardest to grasp, most difficult to imitate? Imagine a God who has freely chosen to empty God's

own life into our creation, our salvation and our sanctification! To imitate such a God --- where will it take us if we personally and corporately dare to follow?

A word about human freedom --- to become free as God is free is to respond to God's great gift to the human species. The capacity to choose distinguishes us from all other life-forms. As evolutionary scientists have so aptly explained, the future of life rests with us today; it is up to us to make a choice for maturation beyond an adolescent phase of development. Just as bacteria and other life forms evolved enough to move beyond rivalry to cooperation, learning instinctively how to give and take, die and hand over their lives for the continuation of more complex and greater life, so must we. Unlike other life-forms, we can resist this developmental pattern. Growth toward co-operative living for the sake of "life as a whole" has everything to do with our choice to risk ourselves and let go. Fear and the need to protect our weak and vulnerable selves from others who would do us harm have caused us to cling to patterns of rivalry and self-protection, lest our vulnerability be exposed. Only deep faith and profound trust can empower human growth from fear to freedom, a process of greater and more authentic self-giving.

In *The Art of Passing of Over*, Francis Dorff lays out the following developmental schema for growth from fear to freedom. First, he describes our movement through early stages of life, characterized by a sense that we have something to prove. In varying degrees, we live in fear that we may not satisfy this need to "prove" we are worth something, against the charge that we are nothing, weak, not good enough. Freedom grows as we let go of this fear, cease clinging to our need to prove something to ourselves or others. With this letting go comes the first face of freedom, which takes its place in the world, freely witnessing: "I Have Nothing to Prove."

***My experience in year one of RENEW. "Cathy, you are the one."***

The second face of fear is one we humans wear longer into our adult lives. It is shaped sometimes by life's hurts, failures, confrontations with our very real, human limits and regrets. This face is filled with fear, caused by a sense that we have something to hide. The grace to live free of this fear becomes actual in us and our communities when we can stand before others, vulnerable and unafraid, confess our failures, our sinfulness, our weakness and find in that very honest self-disclosure a new face of freedom, one which says humbly: Rejoice with us in our new found freedom. We have nothing to hide. All forms of denial and deceit fall away. We see, as if for the first time that our vulnerability is gift; God loves us all in our creaturehood (Jessica Powers).

***A congregational freedom in shared vulnerability ... July 1997, 150<sup>th</sup> celebration***

Any of us who recognizes her own maturing face in these glimpses of movement from fear to freedom realizes the paradox of self-emptying and self-discovery inherent in such growth. She knows also that such freedom is the result of choices made through grace over a lifetime. Such grace longs to become operative in all of us for the sake of life. Only this movement away from having something to prove and something to hide can free us from our perceived need to compete, to outdo, to dominate the other in order to protect our own vulnerable positions. This maturing grace is God's great desire for us, not just as individual persons but as communities, as a congregation, that the world might grow less afraid and more genuinely free.

The third face of freedom is the one that has surrendered all; that stands open and powerless, ceasing to cling to anything or anyone, including fear itself. This face has let go of the ultimate fear that says: "I have something to lose." Though this final freedom

culminates with the letting go of life itself, it is experienced in partial glimpses in the midst of life, as we die to self over and over. We come to see with each experience of dying that even death is not the end. This face of freedom moves through grief-stricken experiences of death and loss and finds still more life. This is the face of freedom I recognize in the grief-stricken poem of Mary Oliver, entitled *Heavy*

“It’s not the weight you carry but how you carry it --- books, bricks, grief --- it’s all in the way you embrace it, balance it, carry it when you cannot and would not, put it down. So, I went practicing. Have you noticed? Have you heard the laughter that comes now and again out of my startled mouth? How I linger to admire, admire, admire the things in this world that are kind and maybe also troubled ---

Each encounter with this beautiful face of freedom prepares us for the ultimate freedom of facing death itself, when we return the very gift of life into the arms of its Giver. My father of happy memory used story, often mythic stories, to teach us lessons. I remember well his story about Uncle Patty, my dad’s brother, who never left their family farm in County Sligo, West Ireland. And so the story went like this ...

*(Insert story here)*

For me, it has been a grace to see this face of freedom --- “no with-holding” on our sisters, who in their diminishment and dying witness the gift of surrendering all, some in the suddenness of a flash and some in the slow process of giving back their lives little by little. The face of nothing to lose is the authentic face of life in Christ.

With this understanding of growing toward genuine freedom, poverty and humility take on a deeper and richer significance. They too are the result of choices made through grace over a lifetime. But it’s essential that in light of our praying with this text and our critical historical situation, we consider what poverty and humility ask of us today. For me personally, the thought of becoming humble immediately takes me back to an experience I had 31 years ago. I remember it like it was yesterday. It was 1976. I was a young sister spending the summer in a six-week house of prayer. Toward the end of that wonderfully intense spiritual experience, I went to the Sacrament of Reconciliation with an elderly hermit monk, named Father Urban. I remember not a single word of anything I said to him or that he said to me, except his final, parting words: “When you are humble, God will use you.” Filled to overflowing with the enthusiasm of this retreat, and as resolved as ever to do whatever I needed to do, I spent the next days or was it weeks or years, wondering how I was to become humble. How slow I was to learn that humility is a gift, and God would give me the grace to receive it in and through the circumstances of my life. I simply needed to pay attention to the invitation, each time it came, and respond each time it was given. God would do the humbling; my life would be the mediator of God at work in me. And so it happened and continues to happen. I’m grateful today for the ways God has humbled me, helping me to embrace my own creaturehood, my needs, my vulnerability, even my sinfulness. I have seen in the process how loved I am, precisely here, in my brokenness and insufficiency. I know that this is the beginning of my becoming humble. It is becoming myself, as God knows me and as I desire to know myself. And yet, the invitation continues to haunt me, as something we must embrace more intentionally together. Who are we as this Congregation of the Great Love of God, rooted in deep humility?

From Edward Schillebeeckx I learned most about looking for God in contrast experiences. I think that's often a good place to begin. I have longed to recognize humility as I encountered the face of arrogance or self-aggrandizement in myself or others, individuals or groups, our church and/or our country. Today more than ever we need a country, a church, a world-wide congregation of CSSJ'S willing to become humbler and poorer, rather than more self-sufficient and powerful. (***I hope these are some of the things we will talk about together ...***)What does the humility to which Jesus leads look like in us today?

St Paul makes it clear and Jean Pierre Medaille makes it practical. The "audacious humility" of Jesus is anything but self-effacing or passive. In fact it fully engages the active subject, requiring initiative and choice in a heightened consciousness. The audacity that is humility dares to open the door to relationship-building and relationship-healing. Humility is never afraid to celebrate the others, to admire the good they do, or to point out in order to forgive the wrong they may do. The humble are always the first to take a chance – to move toward another in welcome, in friendship, in pardon and reconciliation. The first to say: I'm sorry. I love you. Can we talk about our disagreement? The audaciously humble step out to risk the darkness --- the uncertain response of another weak and vulnerable human being, like themselves. They understand that each person genuinely finds her true self only in and through giving oneself to the other. The humble acknowledge and embrace others in all their weaknesses as other selves --- one like me, though not me. Empathy is humility's twin. The humble truly recognize with e.e. cummings, that "I am through you so me."

When Catherine of Siena experienced the most profound love of God, so totally and freely given to her intimately and unconditionally, she responded to God with the same passionate love, declaring that she longed to love God the same way God loved her. In reply to Catherine's promise, God taught her this essential lesson. You cannot love me Catherine the way I love you. That is not possible, because you see, I have loved you first. But that is why I have given you all these sisters and brothers. You are to love them the way I love you. You are to love them first. Each time I feel resistance in moving toward another, who seems little interested in any reciprocal attitude of love toward me, I hear this invitation to love first. This is the audacious humility I seek the help and strength of others in community to practice more fruitfully and I ask where we as Sisters of St Joseph are being invited to take a next step in being "audaciously humble" toward another, a person, a group, an institution.

In our 1974 Federation Prayer, we Sisters of St Joseph proclaimed before God and the church/world that we had heard God's call to surrender, to stand open and powerless, completely dependent upon Jesus." The grace of a self-emptied life is indeed the living underground spring from which our lives as Sisters of St Joseph are ever renewed and called forth. Thirty years later, we are still trying to understand what that commitment to self-surrender asks of us, but we have not forgotten, and its graced invitation calls to us with new demands for a new day. Perhaps everything has been preparing us for this moment in our history. The present crisis demands new witnesses, credible models of a freely, self-emptied life in the midst of over consumption and self-absorption, deceit and abuse of power, inequity and waste, human need and human greed. The contemporary culture makes that yielded, handed-over life both more difficult and more promising than ever. To challenge the spirit of acquisitiveness that has so gripped the cultural

consciousness of North Americans, including our young, we need modeling of another pattern, other attitudes, other life choices. But are we genuinely serving as models of an alternative way of life where non-grasping, non-possessive care for the other radiates a joy that comes in mutual gift exchange? From a young eighteen year old Rwandan schoolgirl, Edith, I learned that only by surrendering her own grief and self-pity in the loss of her mother, father, brother and baby sister during the genocide was she able to make room for the pain and grief of other girls in her class, who likewise suffered incredible loss. In making room for them, she found healing for herself and in return she came genuinely to love so many others. Edith taught me about the grace of a yielded life. In giving over my life with its self-concerns, I clear out a space for the other to enter. Here God dwells. In the process God carves out a space in all of us where Love can live. Here is the birthplace of humble love or compassion --- a place Jean Pierre Medaille and our first sisters knew well and to which they desired each Sister of St Joseph to find her way. Jesus birthed this place in his broken-open side from the cross of Calvary and each of us recreates this home called compassion, by the freely yielded gift of ourselves in the particular circumstances of our lives. It looks both different and the same in all of us; for it comes to be from the very stuff that is the womb of God (*rechem*(gr); *rahamin* (Hebrew) and the heart of the humble Christ (Matthew 5:5, and also, Matthew 10:29-30 *makikhe* (Aramaic)).

We recognize compassion as the place where all are welcome and recognized as lovingly one, though preciously unique; where we belong to all and to none, since all clinging has ceased. Daniel Maguire, a Catholic ethicist, insists that the teachings of Jesus about self-sacrifice, forgiveness and compassion can no longer be seen as the teaching of an idealist. In fact, Maguire reasons that this teaching may well be the last, best hope for the human family and the entire family of life on this planet at this time. In Jesus, we witness a human person **freely** choosing to live the pattern of a self-emptied life that other living species live instinctively. In Jesus, the human has reached the critical maturation point needed by our planet. **A new code for life's flourishing has been planted in us, who are planted in Christ.** The life of God alive in all creation demonstrates quite persuasively the kind of divine presence that fills creation. The very life of God is poured-out love; life freely given so that life may flourish --- life outside Godself is "life for and as others." God has become weak, poor, vulnerable, totally given over ... We have seen this for ourselves and can testify. But have others seen it in us?

The text of Philippians is waiting to reveal us to ourselves. What do we see being disclosed, not so much about us as individuals, but first of all, as a corporate body? How do we manifest our preferential option for the whole, for the good of all, before that of the individual --- our lives poured out for the many --- others' interest always placed before our own?

Two encounters with self-emptied love happened in my own life quite significantly over the past decade. The first was my experience of and reflection on my mother's death and the second was the gift I received from poor, vulnerable, humble, emptied-out widows and orphans of Rwanda. "When the student is ready, a teacher will appear" is an adage, familiar to most of us. Perhaps, it invites us to understand ourselves today primarily as learners, always waiting for a teacher (Isaiah 30:20-21). The experience of my mother's death and countless encounters with Rwandan widows/orphans introduced me to this Teacher, who refused to hide her face.

Today's text invites us to meet this Teacher in the person of Jesus Christ. Perhaps, there is something new Jesus invites us to learn in conversation with the new science shaping our awareness today. We revel that we are earth conscious of itself, don't we? As earth, we are discovering that the same genetic pattern recurs in every life form. This creative life force is perpetual self-gift. One life to and for another describes the entire creative process, as life moves through time and space to evolve into ever more complex and expanding forms of life today. The human takes its place within this evolving story of life giving itself away. At this moment in evolutionary history, the human is pivoted with a critical lesson to learn --- how to let go willingly, to empty out freely, to withhold nothing generously, so that more life may evolve. In summing up the contemporary North American situation, the sociologist, Bill McKibbins reasoned: "The 20<sup>th</sup> century was characterized by our learning how big and powerful we could become; we have become big and powerful indeed. Perhaps, the 21<sup>st</sup> will be determined by trying to figure out how to become smaller --- to see if we can summon the will and then the way to try to fit back into our place on the planet."

In Jesus, the forerunner of the new human, we see both the will and the way. "Though he was in the form of God, he did not think equality with God something to be grasped (NIV, Jerusalem, RSV), exploited (NRSV). Rather he emptied himself (NRSV), made himself nothing (NIV), becoming as all humans are, (weak, dependent, small) and then, he became humbler yet, obediently accepting death on a cross. But God raised him high, making of him a fountain of life-giving water, welling up for God's glory. To this water, Jean Pierre Medaille and our first sisters beckon every woman called by God to this humble, little institute to come. And so we have come --- to bathe in the waters of life --- the text of Philippians through the lens of our charism. We have let those streams merge within and flow through us, inviting us deeper into Holy Mystery, the Great Peaceful Sea of self-emptied love where Deep calls to deep: Come --- lose yourself in Me." I close by letting this old Sufi tale lead us to a stream, as teacher, one final time.

A stream was working its way across the country on its way to the open sea. The stream experienced little difficulty as it flowed around the rocks and through the mountains. But then it arrived at a desert. Just as it had made it through every other barrier, the little stream tried to cross the desert, but it found that as soon as it met the sand, its waters dried and disappeared. After many attempts at success, the stream became discouraged. It appeared that there was no way the stream could continue its journey to the sea.

Then a voice came from the wind: "If you stay the way you are, you will never cross the desert. You cannot become more than a quagmire. To go further, you will have to lose yourself." "But if I lose myself," the stream cried, "I will never know what I'm supposed to be." "Oh, on the contrary," said the voice. "If you lose yourself, you will become more than you ever dreamed you would be." So the stream surrendered to the drying sun. And the clouds into which the stream was formed were carried by the raging winds for many miles. Once the stream crossed the desert, it poured down from the skies, fresh and clean and full of the energy that comes from storms, whose waters flowed into the waiting arms of the wide, open sea.

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