

COLUMNISTS

Didn't Jesus care for himself, too?

I was preparing for class the other day and came across a passage from an article that I always use in my courses. The article was first published in *The Journal of Religion* in April 1960. Its author, Valerie Saiving, spent much of her career teaching at Hobart and-William Smith Colleges in Geneva. The article is titled "The Human Situation." Living in an age that values all things new, you might wonder about someone still pushing a 40-year-old article on her graduate theology students. I do that because I think the article was essential in helping to change the entire field of theology. Furthermore, despite a need to translate some of the language into more inclusive terms, I think the article contains some of the best ideas ever written. I marvel all the more to think about the independence of thought evidenced in these pages. Very few people thought or wrote in these terms in those days.

The passage that caught my attention this time around is this one: "A mother who rejoices in her maternal role — and most mothers do most of the time — knows the profound experience of self-transcending love. But she knows, too, that it is not the whole meaning of life. For she learns not only that it is impossible to sustain a perpetual I-Thou relationship but that the attempt to do so can be deadly. The moments, hours, and days of self-giving must be balanced by moments, hours, and days of withdrawal into, and enrichment of, her individual selfhood if she is to remain a whole person. She learns, too, that a woman can give too much of herself, so that



the moral life

By Patricia Schoelles, S.S.J.

nothing remains of her own uniqueness; she can become merely an emptiness, almost a zero, without value to herself, to her fellow men, or, perhaps, even to God."

When I read passages like this I find myself somewhat perplexed. This confusion might be partly the result of the religious language and imagery that has been part of my training. I find myself thinking, "gosh, Jesus died on the cross and gave his 'all' for humanity. Surely we are all called to self-sacrifice and some 'dying to self' for the sake of the other. Certainly moms as well as dads, people in helping professions, church ministers, all adults, really, must be called to total self-giving to the other." I find myself wondering what this "legitimate" sense of self-enrichment is.

I keep wondering, too, what this sense is of "giving too much of oneself." How could it be that someone would be so inattentive to her own needs that "nothing would remain of one's own uniqueness"? How could it be that someone could become "a zero, without value to herself"? There is a whole stream of

Christian spirituality that would object, I think, to the idea that people need "moments, hours, days of withdrawal into and enrichment of the self." In some sense the idea of enrichment of the self seems like a major contradiction to Christianity.

Still, there seems to be genuine wisdom in the words of Valerie Saiving.

One part of her truth would appear to be her awareness that societies and communities can tend to classify some members as "the self-givers." This happens to women all the time. I think we have all been nurtured with a range of fantasies and romantic notions about the role of mothers, and women generally. Many of these promote the idea that those who nurture children and others are somehow capable of infinite selfless action with little or no attention paid to their own growth or well-being. An ideal promoting this is often constructed as well, so that mothers find themselves feeling guilty about any "moments, hours or days of withdrawal" directed at self-enrichment.

The same thing happens to others in a whole variety of roles and professions. We cast them into roles of endless service, and they end up trying to respond to an infinite stream of expectations. I recently heard a parishioner lamenting her pastor's unavailability for one day each week. She ended by exclaiming, "Jesus never behaved like that. Jesus didn't have a day off. Jesus even died for the sake of others."

Au contraire, I thought. Aren't there quite a few passages in the Gospels de-

scribing Jesus going away from the crowds to pray? I don't know about a day off for him, but I would dispute any notion that "Jesus never behaved like that." In fact, I think he did behave like that!

I agree that Jesus died for others, and I think that should make a huge difference in the way we understand our own self-giving. Jesus' death came about as the result of his remaining true to his mission of revealing God's love to us. Jesus did not intend by his death to "multiply crucifixions," as if dying that way were a good idea. Rather, I think Jesus intended to open the way for human beings to enter into a new love relationship with God. The idea at the heart of this mystery is not that one party should do all the giving while the other party should do all the taking. Rather, at the heart of the new covenant is God's invitation to "love God back." The idea is that everyone will enter into the "give and take" that love is. God acting in Jesus wasn't meant as primarily an act of self-denial. It was much more a call to become a self capable of entering into the patterns of give and take that true love entails.

In every relationship we have, we are called to some giving and some taking. Even mothers, I think, spend years of selfless giving intending that their efforts will bring about something better later on. Surely all mothers wait for the day when their children will "love them back" in a kind of mature give-and-take. Valerie Saiving does us a great service in pointing out the fallacy of thinking otherwise.

Sister Schoelles is president of St. Bernard's Institute.

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9:00 a.m. Registration & Coffee
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10:00-11:30 **Moral Theology for the New Millennium: Who Are the Players? What Are the Issues?** (Patricia Schoelles, S.S.J., Ph.D.)
11:30-1:00 Lunch - on your own
1:00-2:30 **What's New In Pastoral Care & Counseling?** (Roslyn Karaban, Ph.D.)
2:30-3:00 Break
3:00-4:30 **Ministry in Transition: Living on Mt. Nebo** (Rev. John Colacino, STD)
4:45 Evening Prayer
5:30 Dinner & Celebration of Institute Graduates

July 12, 2000:

8:45 a.m. Registration & Coffee
9:00 Prayer
9:15-10:45 **The Changing Face of Hebrew Bible Studies** (Devadasan Premnath, Th.D.)
11:00-12:30 **New Directions in New Testament Studies** (Rev. Sebastian Falcone)
12:30-1:30 Lunch - on your own
1:30-3:00 **The Questions of Jesus & Non-Christian Religions** (Nancy Hawkins, IHM, Ph.D.)
3:00-3:30 Break
3:30-5:00 **Contemporary Trends in Sacramental Theology & Liturgical Practice** (Rev. Robert Kennedy)

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