SELF-SACRIFICE IN VIETNAMESE WOMEN: A VIRTUE OR VICE?

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INTRODUCTION

In Vietnamese culture, self-sacrifice is an honored virtue, especially for women. Self-sacrifice can be the characteristic that defines an ideal Vietnamese woman, one who will sacrifice herself for the sake of her husband, family, and her children. However, in the context of Vietnam, a collective culture influenced mainly by Confucianism, self-sacrifice can become a "tool of social inequality and sexist discrimination that does oppose women's flourishing."[1] The collectivism in Vietnamese culture often becomes a driving force leading Vietnamese women to suppress their personal desires and interests for the sake of others. I contend that the collective culture in Vietnam, as both hierarchical and sexist, is an unjust structure, often exploiting and dehumanizing women by imposing the burden of total self-sacrifice on them and leading them to the loss of self.

Social structures of the society in which we live, whether we are aware of them or not, have a great influence on the conscience of an individual moral agent because human beings internalize these structures and are influenced by the surrounding social environment. One of the most important ways in which we learn values, virtues, and vices is through and in society. In this way, social structures and culture influence the way we think, behave and relate to one another. Therefore, by living and working under the influence of social structures, either good or bad, we also help to maintain them and their effects on others.

To address social issues and unjust structures, the Catholic Church recently developed the concept of social sin to demonstrate the negative impacts that unjust structures have on individuals and communities. At their second general conference in Medellín, Colombia in 1968, the Latin American bishops spoke of "sinful situations" and institutionalized violence as constitutive of the

[1] Erin Lothes Biviano, *The Paradox of Christian Sacrifice: The Loss of Self, the Gift of Self* (New York: Herder & Herder, 2007), 79.

reality of their peoples.[2] Margaret Pfeil noted that when the Latin American bishops tried to articulate the reality of sin, they did not intend to undermine the importance of personal sin, but they wanted to draw a "connection between human sinfulness and the pervasive webs of structural injustice enveloping their countries."[3]

The discussion on the unjust structure or social dimension of sin should not paralyze people, but rather help us to become conscious of the present condition of human life and motivates persons gradually to recognize structural injustice in society, their participation in it, and their moral obligation to do whatever is in their power to avoid, eliminate, or act against it as far as possible.

Unfortunately, moral formation in the Vietnamese Church as practiced in seminaries and religious institutions still aims primarily on helping future priests exercise their confessional or pastoral ministry. In other words, the focus of the formation is almost exclusively on personal sin and helps priests to judge the wrong actions of others. This approach has an act-oriented focus and seems to neglect the social dimension of sin. As a consequence, moral formation in the Vietnamese Church fails to help their future priest to reflect and be aware of the impact of unjust structures in which people live. Personally, as a priest who received his theological formation in Vietnam, I did not have much awareness and understanding of the social dimension of sin and I would never imagine that in an unjust structure, an honored virtue – namely self-sacrifice – could become a vice which can be used to exploit our mothers and sisters.

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[2] "Peace," Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops. The Church in the Present-Day Transformation. Volume II: Conclusions, official English edition, ed. Louis M. Colonnese (Washington, DC/Bogotä: USCC/CELAM, 1968) paragraph 16. The text quotes *Populorum progressio*, 30.

[3] Pfeil, Margaret, "Doctrinal Implications of Magisterial Use of the Language of Social Sin," *Louvain Studies*, no. 2 (2002): 137.

Therefore, this thesis attempts to prove that in the unjust social structures and cultures in Vietnam, the virtue of self-sacrifice among Vietnamese women can become a vice. I believe that the emphasis on unjust social structures and social evils could help Vietnamese people be more aware of the sinful situations for which they are partly responsible and they can work for some real social transformation.

My thesis is developed in three chapters. The first chapter explores how self-sacrifice is understood and practiced in Vietnamese culture and society. Vietnamese culture, at its core, is mainly Confucian. Confucianism was imposed on Vietnam during the Chinese domination for more than a thousand years, from the third century AD. Therefore, Confucian values dominate all aspects of Vietnamese life, particularly family and social relations. It is important to explore how Confucianism has influenced the concept of self-sacrifice in Vietnamese culture.

In addition, the Christian tradition often gives a special emphasis upon self-regard or self-love as a sin of selfishness and promotes self-denial or self-sacrifice as a great virtue. For centuries, Christian love has usually been defined by self-sacrificial love which requires a good Christian to surrender herself without hesitation or limitation for other's needs. This emphasis reinforces Vietnamese women's traditional duty of self-sacrifice and self-denial. As a result, Catholic Vietnamese girls, who are raised up and educated in this context, see themselves as having a role and function, not as an identity or person.

Chapter Two attempts to evaluate the practice of self-sacrifice of Vietnamese women amidst unjust structures and cultures. It will explain and answer some questions: in which way do structures and cultures negatively impact individuals and communities? How can structures and cultures be sinful or cause evil? How can we understand personal responsibility in those structures and cultures? Therefore, the second chapter first presents an overview of critical realism's account

of "structure" and "culture" which can serve to deepen the notion of "social sin." Then it continues with a brief historical development of Catholic social teaching on "social sin." Finally, it concludes with an evaluation of the practice of self-sacrifice among Vietnamese women making use of critical realism's understanding of structure and culture. Sexism, collectivism, and unjust policies consistently constrain Vietnamese women from recognizing and promoting their normative dignity, well-being, and happiness. The virtue of self-sacrifice amidst these unjust structures often lacks a crucial link with justice, thus it can become a vice and harm Vietnamese women.

Chapter Three proposes some virtues which can assist Vietnamese women so that self-sacrifice can be practiced as a virtue and not become a vice. Moreover, these virtues can help Vietnamese people to create a more just social structure and culture in which everyone can live with their own identity and flourish in their lives. Obviously, Vietnamese women need to cultivate and develop the virtue of self-love. Self-love is not selfish, nor is it contradictory of self-sacrifice (as Vietnamese people believe), but, rather, it is a condition for the love of neighbor. Secondly, the Vietnamese need justice. Without justice, the virtue of self-sacrifice is suspicious and problematic. Most Vietnamese women do not understand the necessity of self-love in a virtuous life. As a result, they are fair or just with everyone but themselves. They need to give to each their due including their own selves. Therefore, they need to practice self-care or self-love. Thirdly, Vietnamese women really need to develop the virtue of prudence which directs them as to when, where, and to what extent they should practice their self-sacrifice and care for their loved ones.

Chapter 1: SELF-SACRIFICE AND THE CONCEPT OF WOMANHOOD IN VIETNAMESE CULTURE

Culture shapes and affects attitudes toward family, time, relationships, gender, and many other aspects of daily life for all of us. Differences of family background, religion, ethnicity, and race influence every aspect of a person's perspective and worldview. Every culture also has its own descriptions of what it regards as virtues and vices. William C. Spohn says that "virtues take different meaning in various cultural contexts."[4] For Vietnamese culture,[5] sacrifice is considered as a necessary virtue in any effective relationships and a primary mode of conflict solution.

In this chapter, I will explore how Confucianism and Christianity have influenced the concept of self-sacrifice in Vietnamese culture and society. To be more concrete, I will examine how self-sacrifice is taught, understood, and received in personal practices and relational dynamics among the Vietnamese. It should be noted that the Vietnamese do not have their own literary and philosophical canon concerning their worldview. Instead, it is expressed primarily in oral folksongs, proverbs, poetry, myths, legends, in ethical and religious practices. To describe some aspects of Vietnamese culture, I will use some proverbs and folksongs which all Vietnamese have learned by heart from a very early age.

1. The Teaching of Confucianism on Human Relationship

Vietnamese culture is a mixture of Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, and multiple other religions.[6] Exploring this mixture and its influences is beyond the scope of this thesis, instead, the

[4] William C. Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 1999), 32–33.
[5] In this thesis, I am using "Vietnamese culture" to refer to the Kinh or Viet ethnic group who makes up 85 percent of the current population of Vietnam. Besides the Kinh group, there are fifty-three other ethnic groups with distinct cultures and practices.
[6] Peter C. Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics* (New York: Paulist Press, 2005), 34–49.

focus will be on Confucian teachings on human relationships that influence the dynamics of Vietnamese family relationships.

Confucianism was imposed on Vietnam during the Chinese domination for more than a thousand years, beginning from the third century AD. Even after Vietnam regained independence (939 C.E.,) Confucianism continued to dominate all aspects of Vietnamese life, particularly family and social relations. Confucianism, especially under the Le and Nguyen dynasties (1428-1883 C.E.,) became the main teaching of the country when the Confucian Five Classics (*The Books of Poetry, Rites, History, Spring and Autumn, and Changes*) and the Four books (*Mencius, Great Learning, Doctrine of the Mean, and the Analects*) were officially used as standard texts for the education of the whole country.[7]

Ngo Duc Ke, a scholarly, anti-colonialist intellectual, contends that the essence of Vietnamese culture is Confucian:

> In our country of Vietnam, for several thousand years, we have studied Chinese characters and followed Confucianism. Chinese literature is the national literature: although the rivers and the mountains change, dynasties change several tens of times, dangerous rebellions have been many, this current of orthodox learning still has not declined. The benevolence of the people, the customs, the morality, politics all derive from it. Government and lineage, in a similar manner, find stability in it.[8]

Ngo Duc Ke remarks that in spite of many changes, the Vietnamese have been strongly influenced by Confucian values and teachings. Even though the rituals and Confucian texts were simplified or abolished in Vietnam at the beginning of the twentieth century, Confucian values still firmly dominate in forming the very moral framework of contemporary Vietnamese family and society. Peter Phan, a Vietnamese-American theologian, rightly asserts: "Confucianism … is still deeply influential among Vietnamese whose 'Confucian DNA' remains permanent in spite of

[7] Phan, 39.
[8] Ngo Duc Ke, "Luan Ve Chanh Hoc Cung Ta Thuyet Quoc Van" (A Discussion of Correct and Heterodox Teachings in the National Literature.) *Huu Thanh Journal* 21, (1924): 33–34.

the political, social, and religious changes that have taken place in their country."[9] It can be said that Confucianism has profoundly shaped Vietnamese identity and the blood of Confucianism flows in every Vietnamese. Therefore, one must understand the influence of Confucian thought in Vietnamese culture in order to understand the Vietnamese traditional culture and its practice of self-sacrifice on behalf of others.

Confucianism emphasizes the centrality of humanity and human values, affirms the goodness of human nature, and promotes an established social order. The fundamental virtue is *Nhan* (the virtue of humanity or *Jen*), a universal virtue underlying all interpersonal relationships regarding the five moral bonds: ruler-subject, father-son, husband-wife, elders and younger brothers, and friend and friend.[10] According to Julia Ching, a Chinese scholar of comparative religion, *Jen* is always concerned with the relationship between one human being and another . It is associated with loyalty (*Chung*) – loyalty to one's own heart and conscience – and reciprocity (*Shu*) – respect of, and consideration for others and forgiveness to others (Analects 4: 15.)[11] In order to achieve *Nhan* (*Jen,*) one has to know the will of Heaven, and since Heaven acts in history, one can discover Heaven's will by studying the past embodied in traditions, rites, and literature. Besides that, one must know one's position and responsibility in the family and society so that one can achieve human perfection and harmony in an ordered society.[12]

Confucianism, with its primary focus on human relationships, regards human society in terms of a network of interpersonal relationships and ethical responsibilities resulting from such relationships.[13] In the Confucian tradition, the Vietnamese divide the five essential moral bonds

[9] Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 40.
[10] Phan, 39.
[11] Julia Ching, *Confucianism and Christianity: A Comparative Study*, 1st ed.. (Tokyo ; New York: Kodansha International, 1977), 94.
[12] Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 40.
[13] Ching, *Confucianism and Christianity*, 96.

into three bonds (*Tam Cuong):* between ruler and subject, between husband and wife, and between parent and child. Later, these relationships are expanded to include those between siblings and between friends. These bonds must be respected and honored because they form the core commitments of a person to her family which is the model for all relationships, social organization, and government. Each bond requires necessary virtues and proper obligations to perform toward the other. The responsibilities ensuing from these relationships are reciprocal and mutual duties. However, the duties and obligations are focused more on the subordinate member, rather than the superior one. Peter Phan affirms that "each member of the pair in the relationship has his or her proper obligation to perform toward other, even though in practice the duty of the superior member is often presumed, and more emphasis is laid on that of the subordinate member."[14] The duty of loyalty must be practiced by the subject toward the ruler, the duty of submission by the wife toward the husband, and piety by the children toward their parents. These relationships form the basis of Confucian principles with regard to the duties and obligations of each individual within the society and family. In order to achieve harmony, each must fulfill one's duties according to one's position.

In summary, harmony will be achieved in oneself, with one's family, superiors, and fellows when one performs fully his or her obligations and duties following from his or her social and family position. There are five interpersonal relationships with their respective obligations that form the core of Vietnamese ethics and serve as the code of Vietnamese culture. Among these five relationships, the two most important are parent-child (filial piety), and husband-wife (gender roles). Both of these relationships require submission, obedience, and self-sacrifice, especially from the subordinate members. In the following chapter, we will explore the hierarchical dynamics

[14] Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 31.

in the Vietnamese family, then examine these two relationships to see how self-sacrifce is understood and practiced in the family context.

a. Hierarchical Dynamics in the Vietnamese Family

The ancient Vietnamese family was matriarchal with women ruling over the clan. However, having been influenced by Chinese culture during nearly a thousand years of domination, the Vietnamese began to favor the male and depreciate the female.[15] There is a particular proverb concerning progeny: "*Nhất nam viết hữu, thập nữ viết vô",* which means "If you have a son, you can say you have a descendent. But you cannot say so even if you have ten daughters." Within a household hierarchy, authority rests with the oldest male head of the family, then by his eldest son. He has the ultimate responsibility and authority and acts as a leader, delegating tasks, and involving others in decision-making. He makes the final decision in all important matters while the others are expected to obey.

In Vietnamese culture, family interests are always prioritized over individual desires and needs. The most important function of family members is to maintain and preserve harmony among its members. In order to do so, one must perform faithfully the duties of one's relationships with others. The wife has to submit to her husband, and a child has to respect and obey his parents. In other words, males dominate females, and elders dominate younger members. Because hierarchy is inherent in the Vietnamese society, every member must accept the cost of sacrificing when necessary as a condition for belonging and preserving the harmony of the family and community.

[15] Phan, 32.

1) Hierarchy as seen in language

Hierarchy is reflected linguistically in the Vietnamese language. The Vietnamese have a complicated system of personal reference which includes personal pronouns and common nouns to express the degree of intimacy, social status, and appropriate moods. It is extremely important for Vietnamese to correctly address one's relationship toward others. Strictly speaking, there are no personal pronouns in the Vietnamese language that do not express one's relationships with the addressee. In English, "I" and "you" can be used for all kinds of subjects and objects regardless of their relationships. A husband or a son addresses his wife or his mother as "you" and uses "I" to refer to himself. By only hearing "I" and "you," one could not know how they relate to each other. In contrast, the Vietnamese have to determine one's gender, age, rank, social relationships, the appropriate degree of intimacy and respect, then use the correct pronoun of self-reference and the addressee in order to express one's proper position and relationship to that person. In addition, the Vietnamese use different pronouns both for self-reference and for the addressee, even for the same person, depending on the emotional context, love or anger . Peter Phan writes about the complex system of the Vietnamese language:

> The Vietnamese language is extremely complicated not only in its morphology and grammar but in the correct use of forms of address, for which there are no fixed rules since they express one's ever-changing personal relationships with the people one converses with.[16]

Moreover, calling an adult by her or his first name can make the person feel uncomfortable or even offended and insulted. Instead, the Vietnamese address the older by their proper titles, such as "Professor James," "Father Paul," or "Teacher Dung." Besides using honorific titles to show respect for the seniors, people have to add "*vâng*," "*dạ*," "*thưa*" or "*ạ*" before and after any conversation. These words have no particular meaning except as a sign of showing respect. Still

[16] Phan, 30.

another example: when a young person greets a senior, she has to fold her hands and bow slightly while vocalizing the respect article "*ạ*."[17] These terms and gestures reflect the fact that Vietnamese community functions according to a rigid hierarchy based on age or status.

2) Hierarchy as seen in table manners

The hierarchy in the Vietnamese community also can be seen through a party in a village where there are many tables for eating, each ordered from high to low. The highest is for elderly men, men of high social status, and oldest sons. The middle-range tables are for young men who have sons, and the tables of lowest rank are for women, children, and men who do not have sons. If the main room does not have enough space, women and children have to sit in the kitchen.[18]

At most meals of a Vietnamese family, members of the family will sit in a particular position which is allocated for each person based on the age difference. The oldest person will sit first. At the beginning of the meal, children and young adults have to invite the elders in the correct order of hierarchy, starting from the eldest. While eating, the young family members also give the best part of the food to the elders to show their respect, caring, and politeness. A Vietnamese proverb says: "Ăn trông nồi, ngồi trông hướng" which literally means: one must look at the bottom of the pan before eating. Therefore, the younger has to make sure that the oldest person is the first eater. These are just some examples of how hierarchy is practiced within the Vietnamese family and community.

[17] Merav Shohet. "Everyday Sacrifice and Language Socialization in Vietnam: The Power of a Respect Particle: Everyday Sacrifice and Language Socialization in Vietnam." *American Anthropologist* 115, no. 2 (2013): 207-208.
[18] Quynh Thi Nhu Nguyen. "The Vietnamese Values System: A Blend of Oriental, Western and Socialist Values." *International Education Studies* 9, no. 12 (November 28, 2016): 35-36.

3) Hiding is virtuous

Because Vietnamese culture emphasizes hierarchy which can bring harmony within oneself, within family members, and ordered society, perspectives and judgments of individual are strongly influenced by the opinions of others, especially parents and elders in the family. If younger members make a decision based on their own judgments and preferences, they will be considered selfish. When they want to make a decision, they need to prioritize the family's desires and interests. Consequently, they have to sacrifice their needs and desires if that is what is required for the sake of their family members. This is especially true in the case of Vietnamese women, they are supposed to sacrifice themselves as well as their personal needs, desires, and accomplishments as the expected cost of maintaining the harmony of the family. Within a hierarchical culture, hiding or suppressing one's inner thoughts and feelings is considered virtuous for Vietnamese. Instead of pouring out their feelings and opinions, Vietnamese will rather absorb inwardly and sometimes will mourn quietly for themselves. For example, children should never give opinions freely to a senior, especially when they have different moral opinions or perspective from the older. They should keep these thoughts and opinions to themselves. Free expression of feelings, thoughts, or needs is often seen as rude or aggressive. It can be said that the hierarchical structure in Vietnam rewards people who suppress their values and withhold from stating their true thoughts and feelings in the name of respect, humility, and harmony.

In summary, Vietnamese culture places a high value on the interests of the family or community rather than that of the individual. An individual is expected to function according to his or her defined role and position in a family, based on hierarchy, age, and social status. Moreover, in order to maintain harmony in the family, an individual is supposed to sacrifice his or her own needs, desires, and accomplishments. In the hierarchical culture, self-sacrifice is necessary

or compulsory and is praised by surrounding people. The remainder of this section will explore how self-sacrifice is believed and practiced in the parent-child and husband-wife relationships.

b. Filial Piety in the Parent-Child relationship.

One of the most important teachings of Confucianism is the requirement that children have to obedient to their parents. In Vietnam, filial piety is the highest principle and the primary moral lesson of the parent-child relationship which one is taught in life. Filial piety requires respect, attentive care, reverence for and obedience to their parents and elders when they are still alive, especially in their sickness and old age. One must always put their family first which is reflected in the use of the family name. When writing one's name, the family name must be put first, followed by one's given name.

Confucius taught that parents and children should maintain a mutual attitude of benevolence, love, and gentleness.[19] Parents and elders have the responsibility to provide material and educational care and love so that they may have the appropriate cultivation. In return, children should obey and respect them out of attentive love and appreciation.[20] However, the responsibilities and obligations have been given as to how the younger must obey and respect the senior. Filial piety, as applied to the Vietnamese culture and family, is compulsory and requires children's absolute obedience and respect for parents and other adults. The Vietnamese believe in the saying: "The fish without salt must be rotten and a child who does not obey his parents must be a bad one." Moreover, all Vietnamese children have a deep sense of how much they are indebted to their parents because of the immense sacrifices the parents have made for them. The following

[19] Chul Woo Son, *The Motives of Self-Sacrifice in Korean American Culture, Family, and Marriage: From Filial Piety to Familial Integrity* (Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2013), 14.
[20] Nguyen Thi Tho, "Confucius's Notion of 'Filialness' and Its Significance on Filial Education in Vietnam Nowadays," *Journal of Educational and Social Research* 5. No.1 (2015): 308.

folksong, which is embedded in Vietnamese children from the time of their infancy, conveys the idea:

> The labor of the father is like Thai Son mountain,
> The righteousness of the mother is like water of an eternal spring.
> Worshiping mother and respect for father with one's totally devoted heart
> Doing these things wholeheartedly so as to fulfill the child's filial piety.

As the song teaches, children have the sacred obligation to respect, obey, and love their parents in return. They are obligated to support and care for their aging parents, with the eldest son living with his parents in the same house. The eldest son is expected to provide all material needs and loving care for his parents in their old age. Another sacred duty is to provide their parents with progeny, especially males, so that the family name and lineage may be perpetuated.[21] In addition, filial piety requires that children not only take care of their parents and support them when they are alive but also after they died. Since "the father's merit is as high as Heaven and the mother's love is as deep as the waters of an eternal spring," Vietnamese children have an impossible duty to repay their debt to their parents: "Not until the samlet becomes a dragon, will you repay in full your parents' loving care for you." Because a full repayment cannot be fulfilled during the parents' lifetimes, children must continue to respect and "repay the debts" for their parents after their deaths in the form of ancestor veneration. This part of filial piety is based on the idea that a family unit transcends time and space. Children must organize the funeral and mourning when their parents have died, and arrange for the anniversaries of the deceased and ceremonies of veneration.[22]

It is important to note that filial piety is beautiful and honorable in Vietnamese family dynamics. Filial piety is giving respect and support to their parents, especially when they get old. It also helps in maintaining harmony and care between siblings and family members. As stated

[21] Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 32.
[22] Phan, 32.

above, the concept of duties and obligations originally applied to the parents as well as children. However, filial piety in Vietnamese families and culture now seems to be a one-sided game. The children are expected to sacrifice totally and wholeheartedly for their parents without question. Consequently, filial piety in a hierarchical family context brings many negative effects on the development of children. Children may feel pressure in choosing their careers and professions because they are expected to sacrifice and give up their own desires and goals for their parents' needs and wish under the name of the duties of filial piety. The social expectation of filial children puts a heavy burden on children's shoulders and makes it difficult for them to truly and freely choose to sacrifice. Instead of supporting and caring for their parents with genuine love and voluntary sacrifice, it becomes compulsive and obligatory duties which weighs on them heavily.

In summary, filial piety in Vietnamese culture is not an abstract category but becomes the moral principle of human relationships especially in family dynamics. Filial piety means that children must respect and obey their parents at all times, serve and take care of their parents when they are old or sick, and must organize the funeral and venerate their parents when they have passed away. Filial piety should be the result of love, gratitude, and respect from children who deeply feel their parents' love and care, and the immense sacrifices, parents have made for them. However, filial piety in practice requires absolute obedience to their parents and demands children to unilaterally sacrifice for their parents. Consequently, filial piety can become an obstacle for the development of children who have to sacrifice their appropriate desires, needs, talents, and wishes in order to make their parents happy and to maintain harmony in the family.

c. Roles and status of Vietnamese women

The status and position of women in Vietnamese society are closely related to the degree to which Confucianism has permitted Vietnam.[23] As mentioned earlier, the ancient Vietnamese family system was most likely matriarchal and women's status was quite high. There were distinctive female leaders such as the *Trung* sisters who rose in revolt against Chinese rule in the middle of the first century.[24] Even though they were defeated, the *Trung* sisters are respected even today as great heroines in Vietnamese history. Besides female leaders like the *Trung* sisters, there are many folksongs which show that Vietnamese women used to have a more important role than men. One of the folksongs says:

> A bunch of men is only worth three coins.
> Put them in a pen and they only amount to ant food.
> One woman is worth three hundred coins.
> One should place a luxurious cushion in the place where she sits.

Or even:

> However much it costs to get a man
> I have enough to purchase one.

However, with the influence of Confucianism, the authority and domination of father and son over wives and daughters were legally exalted especially under the Le and Nguyen dynasties (1428-1883 C.E.,) and the unequal treatment of women became normative and natural. The submission of wives to husbands and daughters to male members of the family, the unjust marriage law, the unequal educational chances, and the preferential regard for sons are examples and proofs of gender inequality. Only sons can glorify the family by prolonging the family name to the next generations through the clan lineage which acknowledges only through the male line.[25] In addition,

[23] Yu Insun, "Women's Social Status in the Lê Period Vietnam (1428-1788)," *The Journal of Northeast Asian History* Vol 7, No.1 (2010): 41–66.
[24] Keith Weller Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 29–33.
[25] Son, *The Motives of Self-Sacrifice in Korean American Culture, Family, and Marriage*, 24.

it is the sons, the sole performers of the ancestral veneration ceremonies, who are responsible for the welfare of their departed parents. So Vietnamese women, from the first day of their marriages, are under great pressure to conceive a son. When a mother conceives and brings forth a son, she generally feels relief, joy, and happiness with the belief that she has just fulfilled her essential duty to her parents-in-law. In contrast, when a daughter is born, she could feel upset or disappointed and consoles herself with the hope that she will bear a son next time. Thanks to increasing education, experiences in cultural changes, and recognition of different values, the importance of the son has diminished significantly. However, Vietnamese still prefer sons over daughters.

Vietnamese women, who live in a hierarchical system, find their destiny as moral guardians of the domestic sphere and providers for the physical needs of their families. They were raised and educated to be good girls with the sole goal of being married into a good family, being a self-sacrificing daughter in law, an obedient and good wife, and a caring and skillful mother. As Wendy Duong, the first Vietnamese-American judge, rightly observes that despite many political changes and social transformations in Vietnamese society during past centuries, "the primary role of women in Vietnam is still seen as caring for the home and family."[26]

Typically, a Vietnamese woman's identity is depicted as minister of the interior while the husband is in charge of foreign relations or business of the family. According to this tradition, the woman is expected to shoulder the majority of the housework and responsible for raising children. The wife holds the key to the family and makes decisions regarding the management of the home. Wendy Duong explains,

> Culturally, housework means more than housekeeping and being barefoot and pregnant. Vietnamese women are expected to be the 'interior marshal' (*noi tuong*) or the 'hand to lock the key and open the drawer of treasury for family. This '*noi tuong"* or 'key-locking' job involves managing all aspects of family affairs so that her

[26] Wendy N Duong, "Gender Equality and Women's Issues in Vietnam: The Vietnamese Woman-Warrior and Poet," *Pacific Rim Law & Policy Journal* 10, no. 2 (2001): 227.

> husband can be free to pursue other 'noble' things, such as poetry or other cultural activities.[27]

Being "interior marshal," she has to take care of cooking, cleaning and maintaining the home, managing the family budget, and buying goods for the need of the family. She is expected to keep the essential role for family harmony. In addition, the mother also takes care of her children, especially teaching her daughter how to be a good girl such as proper etiquette for a young women. For example, girls should not shake hands or have any physical contact with men.

However, being an "interior marshal" doesn't mean that she has authority to make decisions for everything in the house. The husband is the head of the family and he has ultimate authority in making important decisions in all matters. Nguyen Tu Chi, a Vietnamese sociologist professor, underlines:

> Vietnamese women do, as the metaphor suggests, handle most of the domestic chores, but it also indicates that wives have little decision-making power, even in the home. They can make routine decisions relations related to cooking and child-rearing, but their husbands make the big decisions.[28]

Vietnamese women are expected to endure hardships and fulfill the interests of the family. From very early on in their lives, Vietnamese girls have to learn how to take care of family affairs. They were taught domestic skills such as cooking, sewing, and weaving so that they can run the house. There are many expressions, which all Vietnamese children learn by heart from very early on in their lives, that reflect the emphasis on women's caring and nurturing skills such as "A woman is not a woman if her rice is burned and her pickles are too sour" or "A naughty child is the mother's fault, a naughty grandchild is the grandmother's."

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[27] Duong, 227–28.

[28] Nguyễn Từ Chi, "Nhận xét bước đầu về gia đình của người Việt" [Preliminary Observations Concerning the Vietnamese Family], in *Những nghiên cứu xã hội học về gia đình Việt Nam* [Social Science Research on the Vietnamese Family], ed. Rita Liljestrom and Tương Lai (Hà Nội: Khoa học Xã hội, 1991), 67.

Therefore, a respectable Vietnamese woman has to follow the traditional codes of female conduct that are the Four Virtues (*Tu Duc*): *Cong* (to perform the domestic work); *Dung* (to be modest and humble in appearance); *Ngon* (to be gentle and moderate in speech); and *Hanh* (to be faithful and chaste).[29] She is considered "virtuous" if she is a good homemaker who knows how to cook, care for her husband, and teach her children. Second, she must be charming and soft-spoken. Third, she should never lose her temper and speak ill of her family. Last, but not least, she needs to have good moral conduct.[30]

A well-known poem called "Song of Family Education," a work attributed to Nguyen Trai, a high-ranking Mandarin in the fifteenth century, mentions these Four Virtues for women:

> Be sure to listen to the old stories.
> Observe how the virtuous daughters-in-law of the past behaved.
> Follow the four virtues: appearance, work, correct speech, and proper behavior.
> Work means cooking rice and cakes.
> How neatly the virtuous woman sews and mends!
> Appearance means a pretty face and dignified demeanor.
> Not careless and sloppy, everything in place.
> Correct speech is to know how to use the polite phrases;
> Proper behavior means to be loyal, filially pious, respectful and trustworthy.
> Proper in appearance, work, speech, and behavior rise above their earthly existence.[31]

These guidelines indicate that the place for women is the kitchen; their time and energy is for taking care of parents, husband, and children. Devotion to the family is what is expected of women in the Vietnamese culture. Besides these four virtues, Vietnamese women have to follow the Confucian code of three obediences: obedience toward their father, their husbands, and their sons. The three obediences require that woman obeys her parents when she is young and still lives with her family before marriage, her husband when she is married, and her sons after her husband

[29] Mina Roces and Louise P. Edwards, eds., *Women's Movements in Asia: Feminisms and Transnational Activism* (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2010), 127.
[30] Toàn Ánh, *Nếp Cũ Con Người Việt Nam* [The Old Traits of Vietnamese People] (Ho Chi Minh: Nha Xuat Ban Tre, 2005), 204.
[31] Nguyên Trai. *Gia Huan Ca [*Song of Family Education], (Vietnam, Ha Noi: Sach Giao Khoa, Tân Việt 1952,) 26.

has died. An ideal of the traditional Vietnamese woman is in following a man, not leading, whether he is her father, husband, or son. Wendy Duong concludes the image of Vietnamese women:

> She has as guidance the rule of three obedience according to which she was to obey three masters in her life: father, husband, and son. The rationale for her subjugation was the conventional belief in the inferior nature of her sex: she was weak, ignorant, and prone to mistakes, thus she had to constantly depend on men's wisdom to conduct herself… To help the woman play well her designated roles, she was reminded to cultivate the four feminine virtues: diligence in housework, attractiveness in person, reticence in speech, and modesty and politeness in behavior.[32]

It can be said that the whole life of a Vietnamese woman is to live for others, explicitly her father, her husband, and her son. Devotion to the family is a key to defining feminine identity in Vietnamese culture. The domestic role, implying the self-sacrifice and hardships of their lives without complaint, is associated as natural according to their gender. In my judgment, the practice of self-sacrifice among Vietnamese women is a product of sexism and unjust cultural practices. It is deeply rooted in Vietnamese culture focusing on hierarchical structure and preventing Vietnamese women from living a flourishing life. This ideology is somehow reinforced by the emphasis of self-sacrifice within Christianity which was introduced to Vietnam in the middle of the seventeenth century.

2. Christian Teaching Self-Sacrifice and Vietnamese women

a. Christianity in Vietnam: A Church steeped in blood and developed in persecution

Historically, Christianity came to Vietnam for the first time in the sixteenth century with the Portuguese Franciscan missionaries, followed by Spanish Dominicans, the Portuguese and Italians Jesuits.[33] Because of the complicated political situation of the time, these missionaries met great difficulties, and the Church was steeped in blood because of suspicion from authorities and

[32] Duong, "Gender Equality and Women's Issues in Vietnam: The Vietnamese Woman-Warrior and Poet," 210.
[33] Phan Phát Huôn, *History of The Catholic Church in Vietnam: Tome 1*, 1st edition (Long Beach, Calif: Vietnamese Redemptorist Mission, 2002), 37.

it suffered great persecution. At that time, Vietnam was divided into the North, under the hands of the Trinh clan, and the South with the Nguyen clan. The conflict between the North and the South put all missionaries under the suspicion and they were accused of being spies for the other clan. Although the missionaries never collaborated with colonial powers, the religion they preached was associated with their imperialistic countries.[34] Another source of Christian persecution resulted from the issue of rites of ancestral veneration. By forbidding ancestral rites, the Catholic Church seemed to Vietnamese to be connected with Western barbarian invasions.[35] Phan Phat Huon, a Vietnamese church historian, asserts:

> The kings in Vietnam prohibited Catholicism not because they were fanatic, but because they wanted to preserve the unity of the country, maintaining the national spirit and political stability. The Catholics' denial of ancestral worshipping had degraded the efforts of such a unity.[36]

Christianity was perceived as a threat to the unity of the Vietnamese which put the infant Church under several persecutions by Vietnamese rulers. There were about 130,000 Catholics who were killed for their faith during the last four decades of the nineteenth century. In 1988, Pope John Paul II canonized 117 of these as holy martyrs.[37]

After nearly 300 years of constant persecution and oppression, the Vietnamese Church experienced a peaceful period for nearly 66 years (1888 - 1954,) as a colony of France. The Church was extremely developed at this time. The scattered Catholics were regrouped, Masses were publicly celebrated everywhere, Catholic schools and hospitals were opened, and conversion to Catholicism increased intensively.[38] However, the 1954 Geneva Accords divided Vietnam into South and North. Under the communist regime with Ho Chi Minh and his followers, the North

[34] Peter C Phan, *Christianities in Asia* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 134.
[35] Phan, 134–35.
[36] Huôn, *History of The Catholic Church in Vietnam*, 375.
[37] Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 375.
[38] Huôn, *History of The Catholic Church in Vietnam*, 771.

Vietnamese Catholic Church was quickly suppressed and persecuted. When communist North Vietnam conquered the South, the whole Vietnamese church suffered from the confiscation of all educational and social institutions, incarceration of priests, and the shutting down of churches. Nowadays, the Vietnamese Church receives very limited freedom and is under the watchful eye of the government.

Having experienced much bloodshed and developing through persecution, it is not a surprise that Vietnamese Church leaders and laity strongly emphasize sacrifice as a special way to follow Christ. Sacrifice, suffering, torture, and even death became the normal cost of discipleship for many Vietnamese Christians. They believed that their sacrifice and suffering was the way they carried the cross of Jesus and proved their love and commitment toward God on earth. They knew that their faithfulness would be rewarded with eternal happiness which far exceeds all present sufferings and difficulties. Vietnamese Christians gradually believed that Christian love as self-sacrifice and self-denial was a natural way for them to come closer to God and to follow Jesus' footsteps. For centuries, Vietnamese church leaders encouraged the faithful to accept their suffering and persecution just as Christ suffered on the cross. Therefore, Christian love as self-sacrificial love is one of the most common themes which helped the Vietnamese faithful to endure and stand firm in their faith.

Christian love as self-sacrificial love has a long history in the Christian tradition. The cross is the most fundamental and powerful symbol of sacrifice, a symbol of a willingness to die to oneself – totally, completely, and entirely. As Erin Lothes Biviano points out: "The symbol of sacrifice…includes the visible sign of the cross, the Passion narratives, the gospels command to take up one's cross, subsequent theological reflection on the meaning of self-gift, and the

metaphorical expression of dedication and self-giving as 'sacrifice.'"[39] Christian love as self-sacrificial love is a pervasive theme throughout the Christian theological tradition. For the purposes of the topic of this paper, I will explore an overview of the notion of Christian love based on Anders Nygren and Reinhold Niebuhr.

b. Christian love as self-sacrificial love

1) Ander Nygren on agape as sacrificial love

Anders Nygren has had a great influence on the understanding of the notion of Christian love as self-sacrificial love. As Gene Outka notes with regard to Anders Nygren and his treatise on love, "he so effectively posed issues about love that they have had a prominence in theology and ethics they never had before."[40] Outka sees Nygren and "his work as the beginning of the modern treatment of the subject." In the same manner, Moe-Lobeda points out that "in Agape and Eros, Nygren asserted that God is agape, holds self-sacrifice as the pinnacle of Christian love and explicitly negates self-love. 'Christianity does not recognize self-love as a legitimate form of love' he writes. 'Christian love moves in two directions: toward God and toward its neighbor, and in self-love it finds its chief adversary which must be fought and conquered.'"[41] For Nygren, Christian love is agape, which means that it is an expression of God's limitless love. For Christians, God's agape is revealed in the definitive way in Christ, particularly in the event of the cross. He writes, "Apart from the Cross, we should never have known God's love and learnt its depths of meaning; and apart from Agape Christ's path would not have led him to the Cross." On the cross, God reveals His love in the form of the willingness of Christ to empty himself to sacrifice his good, including the good of life itself, on behalf of sinful humanity. The cross says that God's love is

[39] Biviano, *The Paradox of Christian Sacrifice*, 4.
[40] Gene H. Outka, *Agape: An Ethical Analysis* (New Haven: Yale publications in religion, 1972), 1.
[41] Cynthia D Moe-Lobeda, *Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological and Economic Transformation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013), 173.

self-giving, self-sacrificial love. For Nygren, Christ's sacrifice on the cross is the perfect expression of God's agape. Christ "is by nature one with the Father and in Him nothing less than God Himself meets us. The self-offering of Christ is God's own Agape."[42] Jesus Christ is God and by dying on the cross for the sake of humanity, God revealed the ideal of self-sacrificial love.

Nygren defines agape as love in contrast to eros. Agape is God's sacrificial love while erotic love is essentially and fatally "egocentric love. Everything centers on the individual self."[43] Edward Collins Vacek, S.J., clearly stresses the opposition between agape and eros in the thought of Nygren. Vaceck states that "what is …important is that the opposition between agape and eros is diametric. Nygren moves rationalistically, arguing that what one love has the other must not have."[44] Because "Eros begins with self-love,"[45] therefore, "Agape has no place for self-love. Christianity does not recognize self-love as Christian…Self-love is the real enemy which must be overcome."[46]

In summary, Nygren claims that agape is God's own gracious sacrificial love which means that the one who loves with agape is willing to suffer loss or harm of oneself for the sake of the beloved. Jesus Christ's death on the cross is the paradigm of agape. The willingness to suffer even death implies that there are no limits to the sacrifices that Christians may be called to follow the ideal of Christian love. As a consequence, to live according to the call of Christ, Christians are called to willing disregard their own needs and interests without limit for the sake of others.

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[42] Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros: Part I-a Study of the Christian Idea of Love, and Part II-The History of the Christian Idea of Love*, trans. Philip S. Watson (SPCK, 1954), 239.
[43] Nygren, 179.
[44] Edward Collins Vacek, *Love, Human and Divine: The Heart of Christian Ethics* (Georgetown University Press, 1994), 160.
[45] Nygren, *Agape and Eros: Part I-a Study of the Christian Idea of Love, and Part II-The History of the Christian Idea of Love*, 216.
[46] Nygren, 217.

Christian love must be the essential movement of self-emptying and self-sacrifice on behalf of the neighbor.

Besides Ander Nygren, Reinhold Niebuhr is also a very important voice in the discussion about sacrificial love. In the judgment of Outka, Reinhold Niebuhr is "perhaps the figure who has taken up most explicitly and influentially self-sacrifice as the quintessence of agape."[47]

2) Reinhold Niebuhr on agape as sacrificial love

Reinhold Niebuhr considers human love in term of harmonic relationship and unity when he states, "real love between person and person is … a relationship in which spirit meets spirit in a dimension in which both the uniformities and the differences of nature, which bind men together and separate them, are transcended."[48] This kind of relationship is possible to the extent that the lovers share "their common relationship with God"[49] Niebuhr emphasizes the character of love as harmony when he clearly affirms that love is realized when "all inner contradictions within the self, and all conflicts and tensions between the self and the other are overcome by the complete obedience of all wills to the will of God."[50] According to Niebuhr, one must put the interests of the other prior to one's own interest as the condition for the possibility of love as harmony: "Love meets in the needs of the neighbor, without careful weighing and comparing his needs with those of self."[51]

Reinhold Niebuhr agrees with Nygren that the ideal of Christian love is sacrificial love, definitively demonstrated in Christ's death on the cross. The sacrificial love of Christ is the

[47] Outka, *Agape: An Ethical Analysis*, 24.
[48] Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man, Volume I: Human Nature* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 294.
[49] Niebuhr, 294.
[50] Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man, Volume II: Human Destiny* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 246.
[51] Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, Later prt. edition (Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 57.

ultimate and final harmony of life with life. On the cross, Christ sought conformity with God's will, transcending his human interest in avoiding pain and the loss of itself.[52] Therefore, the cross is the perfection of sacrificial love that transcends all particular norms of justice and mutuality in history.[53] As Jaeyeon Lucy Chung concludes, "Niebuhr presents sacrificial love as the highest norm of Christianity, and finds the final perfection of sacrificial love in Jesus' death as the second Adam."[54] Believers are commanded to love in accordance with God's will, they have to set aside their own interests and desires for the sake of the neighbor. However, the ability to follow the commandment of love is weakened by sin which is "defined as rebellion against God…Sin is occasioned precisely by the fact that man refuses to admit his "creatureliness" and to acknowledge himself as merely a member of a total unity of life. He pretends to be more than he is."[55] One commits sin when one denies one's "finitude through pride or denies freedom through sensuality."[56] Niebuhr associates pride with self-love when "man loves himself inordinately."[57] To love others with a sacrificial love in accordance with the love command, one has to transcend one's own self-interest. Niebuhr calls this an impossible possibility. It is impossible because people are surrounded by others who are anxious about their finitude and love themselves inordinately. However, Niebuhr contends that grace is a response to the sin of pride. According to him, grace is understood as the power of God over man and as a pardon for sin. As Chung observes, "Grace involves both 'the power of God within the life of man,' shattering sinful pride and self-love and making for newness of live, and 'the power of God over man,' granting forgiveness for sin which

[52] Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol. II*, 74.
[53] Jaeyeon Lucy Chung, *Korean Women, Self-Esteem, and Practical Theology: Transformative Care*, 1st edition, 14781 (New York: Springer Science+Business Media, 2017), 51.
[54] Chung, 51.
[55] Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man, Volume 1*, 16.
[56] Chung, *Korean Women, Self-Esteem, and Practical Theology*, 50.
[57] Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man, Volume 1*, 203.

is never entirely overcome."[58] In Niebuhr's words, "self-love has been destroyed in principle in your life. See to it now that the new principle of devotion to God in Christ is actualized in your life."[59] Therefore, the new principle of sacrificial love is the fruit of grace.

Both Nygren and Niebuhr define Christian love as sacrificial love that denies any kind of self-love or self-centeredness. Nygren puts agape as sacrificial love totally in contrast with ego and all forms of self-love. Christian love moves only in two directions, towards God and towards neighbor; self-love must be fought and conquered. For Niebuhr, sacrificial love is also the core of Christian love; which is perfectly revealed in the life and death of Jesus. Agape is pure disinterested love wherein one transcends one's own self-interests and desires. One is willing to sacrifice one's self for the sake of others. Both Nygren and Niebuhr agree that the self-sacrificial love of Christ on the cross is the ideal love and ideal model for Christians to follow. For Nygren and Niebuhr, Christian love is sacrificial love.

This definition of Christian love has received many critiques, especially from recent feminist theologians who question the identification of sacrificial love as the essence of Christian love. Ann Swindler contends that "self-sacrifice which once seemed the ultimate proof of love, now seems suspect"[60] because it will lead to the loss of self. Sharing the same concerns, Erin Lothes Biviano argues that "When Christian language sanctions the passivity, suffering, and violence involved in Jesus' death, the Christian ideal of sacrifice can encourage the loss of self and erosion of identity."[61] Is Christian love a self-sacrificial love that excludes self-love? Should we love others more than ourselves? How can we find a balance between self-love and the love of

[58] Jaeyeon Lucy Chung, *Korean Women, Self-Esteem, and Practical Theology: Transformative Care*, 50.
[59] Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol. II*, 102.
[60] Ann Swindler, "Love and Adulthood in American Culture," in *Individualism and Commitment in American Life: Readings on the Themes of Habits of the Heart*, Robert N. Bellah et al., eds. (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 118.
[61] Biviano, *The Paradox of Christian Sacrifice*, 73.

neighbor? In chapter 3, I will use the order of charity according to Thomas Aquinas to argue that Christian love does not exclude self-love. In fact, self-love is a condition for the love of neighbor.

c. The negative effects of Christian sacrificial love on Vietnamese women.

Christian tradition has emphasized self-sacrifice and self-denial as the ideal goal of a Christian, an imitator of Christ who obeyed, submitted, suffered, and gave his own life for the sake of others. This teaching stresses the centrality of sacrifice as spiritual power and means of salvation and it encourages people to take not only their own suffering but also that of others by giving themselves away totally, completely, entirely. Given the preconditioning of Vietnamese women with Confucian ideals, the Christian notion of self-sacrifices becomes an added burden. By equating Christian love with self-sacrifice and self-denial, many Vietnamese women believe that their self-sacrifice or suffering is the means by which they carry their cross to follow Christ and to come closer to God. They also believe that obedience, submission, self-denial, and, self-sacrifice, and perseverance are ransom in order to receive forgiveness and the reward of God.

Within the Vietnamese patriarchal and hierarchical culture, this teaching of self-sacrifice and self-abnegation gives more reasons for women to passively accept their suffering and victimization which can lead to renunciation and depression. Ivone Gebara, a Brazilian Catholic nun, philosopher, and feminist theologian, asserts that "the ideology of sacrifice, imposed by patriarchal culture, has developed in women a training in renunciation. They must give up their pleasure, thoughts, dreams, and desires in order to put themselves at the service of others or to live as others think they should."[62] To put it in another way, a misunderstanding of the Christian teaching of self-sacrifice requires denunciation of her own needs, desires, interests, and opportunities for the good of others. Consequently, this teaching can contribute to depression

[62] Ivone Gebara, *Out of the Depths: Women's Experience of Evil and Salvation*, First Printing edition (Minneapolis: Augsburg Books, 2002), 88.

caused by suppressed anger or bitterness and hinder women from their self-development and self-realization. In addition, the ideology of sacrifice induces fear, fear of not being able to live up to the ideal deportment demanded by the culture, fear of not being accepted by men and recognized by surrounding people.[63] As a result, this fear leads Vietnamese women to alienation from oneself. Under the heavy expectations of the patriarchal culture and the Christian community, a Vietnamese woman does not become the person she should be. She loses a sense of self without knowing it and tries to conform herself in accordance with the expectations of the culture. What Ivone Gebara notes from women from Latin America and Africa is very true with Vietnamese women: "It is astonishing to hear women from Latin America and Africa say that in their countries women are brought up primarily 'for men.'"[64]

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have explored how self-sacrifice is practiced in Vietnamese culture and specifically in family dynamics under the influences of Confucianism and Christianity. For Vietnamese, self-sacrifice is considered a natural product of a hierarchical culture influenced by Confucianism which stresses an interdependent harmony within family and society. According to this tradition, self-sacrifice is necessary and compulsory in order to maintain harmony in an ordered family and community. It usually comes from duties and obligations associated with the functions or roles of an individual. For Vietnamese, the interest of the family always comes first and sacrifice for members of the family is not only demanded but is an inevitable part of their lives.

This ideology of self-sacrifice is encouraged and reinforced by the teaching of Christian love as self-sacrificial love. The Christian tradition often gives special emphasis to self-sacrifice

[63] Gebara, 89.
[64] Gebara, 89.

and self-denial as great virtues and a special way of following Jesus Christ who sacrifices himself to the death on the cross. In the Vietnamese Church, a church steeped in the blood of martyrs and developed in persecution, self-sacrifice becomes the natural and obvious cost of discipleship.

However, a demanding and compulsive sacrifice out of duty and obligation is not a true self-sacrifice. Without reciprocating respect and care, obligatory self-sacrifice is unhealthy because it will destroy human relationships and put individuals at the risk of loss of self. Therefore, in the Vietnamese context, the ideology of self-sacrifice is often not healthy, unjust, and dangerous for women. I contend that the collective culture in Vietnam as hierarchical and sexist is an unjust structure, exploiting and dehumanizing women by imposing the burden of self-sacrifice on them and leading them to the loss of self. In the next chapter, by articulating the concept of social sin, this thesis attempts to name unjust cultural practices and evil structures that may impact negatively Vietnamese women.

Chapter 2: SELF-SACRIFICE IN UNJUST STRUCTURES: A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF THE SELF-SACRIFICE OF VIETNAMESE WOMEN

1. Introduction

Virtue takes on a particular color and meaning in a specific social context.[65] As we have discovered in the previous chapter about the virtue of self-sacrifice in the Vietnamese context, the virtue of self-sacrifice becomes suspicious when it does not result in flourishing lives for its practitioners. This kind of suspicion of a virtue that is exalted and praised by society has been discussed by many scholars.

Monica Jalandoni-Nalputa asserts that since the Philippine concept of fortitude lacks a crucial link with justice, it can be considered a deficient and imperfect virtue. In the Philippines, the virtue of fortitude is rooted in the Thomistic notion that emphasizes endurance, perseverance after the example of the passion of Christ and the suffering endured by the early Christian martyrs. Filipinos feel a deep affinity with Christ's suffering. They feel that Christ is with them in their own suffering. She points out that there are times when Filipino fortitude is properly ordered towards justice by standing firm and preserving in a fight for justice and the common good of all. However, she laments that: "there are many times when Filipinos display a disregard for justice, so that corruption has become endemic to basic structures and institutions."[66] In Philippine society, the language of virtue is used to promote resilience in order to endure tremendous hardship caused by constant natural disasters. But within an unjust society, fortitude is used to promote passive suffering and endurance which paves the way for injustice to flourish. She concludes: "Fortitude

[65] Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise*, 32–33.
[66] Monica Jalandoni Nalupta, "Suspicious of the Filipino Social Virtue of Fortitude," *Perspectives in the Arts and Humanities Asia* 6, no. 1 (2016): 56–57.

in an unjust society remains an imperfect virtue because it functions to maintain corruption and an unjust sociopolitical system."[67]

Similarly, Karen Lebaqcz and Shirley Macemon point to the case of pastors at First Church who scandalously underpay their staff claiming that their employees must be patient. The authors argue that patience is an auxiliary virtue of justice and if there is no justice, then patience is a vice. Patience is a way of enduring, a component of fortitude. They note that "Fortitude – the strength to work for the good no matter the cost – encompasses both attack and endurance. When evil can be eradicated, it is to be attacked; when it cannot be eradicated, it is to be endured."[68] Patient endurance requires a spirit that continues the struggle for justice and fighting back against suffering and oppression. They assert that "patience is rightly powerful within a system of virtues where justice is primary."[69] When a virtue lacks crucial link with justice, it can be a dangerous and "virtues become vices."[70]

These cases of the Filipinos and staffs of First Church are very similar to Vietnamese society where the virtue of self-sacrifice is practiced in an unjust society. Following Jalandoni-Nalputa, I contend that when the virtue of self-sacrifice of Vietnamese women lacks a crucial link with justice, then it can become a vice and has negative impact on Vietnamese women.

The Catholic Church has recently begun to recognize the negative impact that unjust structures have on individuals and communities. It uses the concept of "social sin" or "structures of sin" to describe situations in which structures act adversely on the integral development of an individual. The language of social sin emerges in the period following the Second Vatican Council

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[67] Nalupta, 64.
[68] Karen Lebacqz and Shirley Macemon, "Vicious Virtue? Patience, Justice, and Salaries in the Church," in *Practice What You Preach: Virtues, Ethics, and Power in the Lives of Pastoral Ministers and Their Congregations*, ed. James F. Keenan and Joseph J. Kotva (Franklin, WI: Sheed & Ward, 1999), 284.
[69] Lebacqz and Macemon, 284.
[70] Lebacqz and Macemon, 282.

and it has faced significant theological difficulties. Theodora Hawksley observes that the traditional Catholic moral theology considers a sin as "an act offensive to or contrary to the laws of God, committed with knowledge …and committed freely in that knowledge. Sin is always a particular something for which someone is responsible: it is always personal."[71] Because sin is always personal, it always pertains to individuals and not groups, communities, or structures. Moreover, sin implies a certain level of knowledge and freedom. If a person's action is not free or conscious due to social constraints or impediments, the person is not culpable. As a consequence, the more emphasis is put on the impact of social structure and culture as moral agents, the less individual moral responsibility is taken into account. In Hawksley's words: "the more like sin it becomes – involving individually identifiable acts committed in freedom and knowledge – the less clearly its social and systemic dimensions appear."[72]

In the judgments of many ethicists such as David Cloutier, Theodora Hawksley, Daniel K. Finn, and Daniel J. Daly, critical realism can help to bridge the gap between "social" and "sin."[73] In other words, critical realism helps to describe how moral evil takes social shape, how social structures affect moral agency without violating or dismissing human freedom, and how evil structures causally contribute to evil.

This chapter attempts to understand in what way social sin negatively impacts individuals and communities and what is the extent of personal responsibility in a sinful structure or culture. But what is "structure" and "culture," and how does a structure or culture affect moral agents? In this chapter, I first present an overview of critical realism's account of the terms "structure" and

[71] Theodora Hawksley, "How Critical Realism Can Help Catholic Social Teaching," in *Moral Agency within Social Structures and Culture: A Primer on Critical Realism for Christian Ethics*, ed. Daniel K. Finn (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2020), 13.
[72] Hawksley, 13.
[73] See Daniel K. Finn, "Social Structures," in *Moral Agency within Social Structures and Culture: A Primer on Critical Realism for Christian Ethics*, ed. Daniel K. Finn (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2020), 29–41.

"culture" which can serve to deepen the notion of social sin. Then in the second part I will discuss Catholic social teaching on social sin. Finally, I will evaluate the practice of self-sacrifice among Vietnamese women making use of critical realism's understanding of structure and culture.

2. Critical Realism on Social Structure and Culture

a. Critical realism and social structure.

Critical realism, as an alternative to individualism and collectivism, is a theory that concerns the understanding of human community and, more specifically, the relationship of human agents and the social structure in which they live.

Based on the work "Four Concepts of Social Structure"[74] of Douglas V. Porpora, Daniel K. Finn first considers what individualism brings to the discussion. He argues that individualism views social structures simply as a "patterns of aggregate behavior"[75] and has no direct causal impact on individuals. Social life is no more than the interaction of individual persons trying to achieve their goals. A moral agent has absolute freedom and can make rational choices regardless of the influence of social structures – for good or ill – on them. Individualism emphasizes the primacy of individual rights and is highly suspicious of any law or institution that might restrict individual freedom. However, as opposed to these claims, law and structure in the Catholic view, Finn asserts, "when properly constituted, are not threats to human freedom but actually enable and enhance it."[76]

Collectivism, on the other hand, views structure as "law-like regularities that govern the behavior of social facts."[77] According to this theory, structure overshadows and conditions

[74] Douglas V. Porpora, "Four Concepts of Social Structure," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 19, no. 2 (June 1989): 195–211.
[75] Daniel K. Finn, "What Is a Sinful Social Structure?," *Theological Studies* 77, no. 1 (March 2016): 144–45.
[76] Finn, 144.
[77] Finn, 146.

relations and interactions among human beings through a pattern of law-like regularities. Human agents embody structures to the point that structures effectively exist within persons. Agency and structure can be symbolized as two sides of the same coin.[78] Because social structures so deeply penetrate the agent, they operate "mechanically and naturalistically over the heads of individual actors."[79] As a result, the agent does not have sufficient freedom to decide, and thus they are not responsible – whether directly or indirectly – for their actions.

Both the approaches of collectivism and individualism cannot be appropriated by Christian theology which both respects the moral freedom of human persons on the one hand, and, on the other hand, recognizes the powerful causal impact that structures can have on the choices of persons who act within them. In Daniel K. Finn's judgment, critical realism provides an insightfully precise way to understand how it is that social structures have a causal impact on the decisions of individuals without canceling their individual freedom.[80]

Critical realism views social structure as something that we cannot see but which really exists and affects human action. Finn quotes Porpora's words, "Social structures are systems of human relations among social positions."[81] In a university, for example, the fundamental relation is between the position of student and the position of professor in the classroom. Besides that, there are many other kinds of social relations such as between the student and her classmates, the professor and the department chair, the professor and the tenure committee, the university president and the employee, and so on. Even so simple an institution as a Jesuit community is constituted by the relation between member and members, member and rector, rector and minister,

[78] Daniel J. Daly, *The Structures of Virtue and Vice* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2021), 72.
[79] Porpora, "Four Concepts of Social Structure," 198.
[80] Daniel K. Finn, "Social Structure," in *Moral Agency within Social Structures and Culture: A Primer on Critical Realism for Christian Ethics*, ed. Daniel K. Finn (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2020), 40.
[81] Finn, "Social Structures," 30.

and so on. These social positions between member and rector have existed long before the current rector, Michael, or I first entered into them.

In addition, critical realism recognizes that social structures "emerge from the interaction of individual persons, often existing far longer than a human lifetime,"[82] and they are ontologically real. Finn uses the example of the emergence of water which is composed of hydrogen and oxygen to illustrate the emergence of a new and higher level of existence.[83] As a higher level of individual persons, social structures have "causal impact in the lives of those persons through, as Archer describes it, the restrictions, enablements, and incentives which structures present to the individuals who operate within them."[84] Living within social structures, human agents retain their freedom; however, their freedom is constrained by the restrictions, enablements, and incentives of the positions they take and the relations they enter. Human agents can choose to resist but then they have to face negative consequences. As Daniel J. Daly asserts "Social relations enable, facilitate, and reward specific activities while they constrain, discourage, and penalize others, punishing those who 'mal-practice' the position."[85] Hence, social structures have a causal effect on the choices of individual persons who live within them. Of course, only human agents are conscious and free but their freedom is exercised within constraints by restrictions, opportunities, and incentives of the structure in which they live. For example, a novice given his position relationship to the novice master, is constrained from taking vacation whenever he wants. He could freely do this; however, he knows that he will be reprimanded or punished due to his position as a novice relative to the position of the novice master. At the same time, the position of novice master

[82] Finn, "What Is a Sinful Social Structure?" 151.
[83] Finn, 149.
[84] Finn, 151.
[85] Daniel J. Daly, "Critical Realism, Virtue Ethics, and Moral Agency," in *Moral Agency within Social Structures and Culture: A Primer on Critical Realism for Christian Ethics*, ed. Daniel K. Finn (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2020), 93.

automatically assumes that he has responsibility to take care of the novice by teaching, guiding, accompanying, and assigning the novice to apostolic works.

Finn summarizes the approach of critical realism to social structures in this way: first, social structures are systems of social relations that emerge from the actions of individuals and are ontologically real even though not sense-perceptible; second, restrictions, enablements, and incentives have a causal impact on the persons taking on social positions, but this occurs through the exercise of individual agency and not in a deterministic way; third, the causal impact of a social structure can be morally right or morally wrong.

b. Critical realism and culture

Now we will turn to the notion of "culture" according to critical realists. Focusing on the work of Margaret S. Archer, Matthew A. Shadle points out that critical realism distinguishes culture and structure. However, the insights of understanding how structure operates could help to understand how culture functions. Structures are social relations among social positions. Meanwhile, culture refers to the "world of ideas" that are available to social group at a given time.[86]

According to Daniel J. Daly, Elder-Vass provides a more appropriate understanding of culture than does Margaret Archer. He starts by asserting that Archer perceives of culture as the "full corpus of ideas available at any one time."[87] For Archer, "culture is whatever is contained in libraries, the internet, and in the world of existing ideas."[88] Daly points out that Elder-Vass has drawn on some aspects of Archer's account, but he argues that culture is not just a pure objective set of ideas, practices, and understandings. Culture needs to be shared and lived among members of a group or a norm circle. Books on a library shelf or beliefs or ideas that are not shared, endorsed,

[86] Matthew A. Shadle, "Culture," in *Moral Agency within Social Structures and Culture: A Primer on Critical Realism for Christian Ethics*, ed. Daniel K. Finn (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2020), 47.
[87] Daly, *The Structures of Virtue and Vice*, 81.
[88] Daly, 81–82.

or enforced by the community, are not culture at all.[89] Therefore, "culture refers to practices, rituals, institutions and material artifacts, as well as texts, ideas, and images", and they need to be shared by "a group of people committed to endorsing and enforcing a particular standard of behavior."[90] Culture, like structure, emerges from the interaction among many people in a social group or a norm circle, the most basic kind of social structure. The beliefs and values of a culture emerge from within the relationship of social position.[91] Existing as a "higher level," culture exists ontologically and has causal impact on the life of human agents living within the culture. It enables and constrains what people within that culture think or publicly profess. If, for example, a diocese has a strong culture of clericalism, it will be difficult to critique the immoral acts of clergymen or listen to the voices of victims. If a university has a strong culture of sports, it will be difficult for a faculty member to show up on campus and argue that sports are unimportant. The faculty member is restrained to talk about this topic and in doing so, he would pay a price, e.g., the criticism or lack of respect from students and other faculty members.

Thus far I have pointed out that structure is system of social relations that exists among social positions and culture is a set of practices, beliefs, or understandings that is shared by a social group. Both have causal impact on a human agent. Individuals are still free to choose but they are constrained by restrictions, opportunities, and incentives of the culture and structure in which they live. With these insights of critical realism on how structure and culture operate and influence human agency, now we turn to the notion of social sin according to Catholic teaching in order to understand how a culture or a structure can be sinful or vicious.

[89] Daly, 82–83.
[90] Margaret S. Archer and Dave Elder-Vass, "Cultural System or Norm Circles? An Exchange," *European Journal of Social Theory* 15, no. 1 (February 2012): 48, https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431011423592.
[91] Daly, *The Structures of Virtue and Vice*, 83.

3. Social Sin in the Teachings of the Catholic Church

a. The concept of Social Sin

The concept of social sin has been developed in the period following the Second Vatican Council, especially under the pontificate of Pope John Paul II and within the context of liberation theology from Latin America. The documents of the Vatican II themselves do not invoke the language of social sin. Margaret Pleil notes that some of the Council fathers attempted to avoid the use of the phrase "social sin" in *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy), article 109.[92] However, the Council did mention, although sporadically, the moral influence of society on human action and character.[93] *Gaudium et spes* goes further and emphasizes, as Daniel J. Daly notes, that "society had the potential to both strengthen authentically human qualities and the potential to induce persons to sin."[94] *Gaudium et spes* par. 25 affirms that humans

> are often diverted from doing good and spurred toward evil by the social circumstances in which they live and are immersed from their birth…When structure of affairs is flawed by the consequences of sin, man, already born with a bent toward evil, finds there new inducements to sin, which cannot be overcome without strenuous efforts and the assistance of grace.

Vatican II makes a move toward moral analysis of social structures and acknowledges its influence on the moral character of the person. But it does not explicitly use the language of social sin and only speaks of the "consequences of sin."

The language of social sin was officially introduced into magisterial teaching by the Latin American bishops in their meetings at Medellín, Colombia (1968) and Puebla, Mexico (1979.) At Medellín, the bishops condemned "sinful situations" and institutionalized violence: "To all of this must be added the lack solidarity which, on the individual and social levels, leads to the committing

[92] Pfeil, Margaret, "Doctrinal Implications of Magisterial Use of the Language of Social Sin," 134.
[93] Daniel J. Daly, "Structures of Virtue and Vice," *New Blackfriars* 92, no. 1039 (May 2011): 342–43.
[94] Daly, 343.

of serious sins, evident in the unjust structures which characterize the Lain American situation."[95] Margaret Pfeil notes that when the Latin American bishops tried to articulate the reality of sin, they did not intend to undermine the importance of personal sin, but they wanted to draw a "connection between human sinfulness and the pervasive webs of structural injustice enveloping their countries."[96]

The Third General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate at Puebla made another significant development of the concept of social sin. Daly observes that the bishops "argued that the structurally rooted materialism of Latin America was sinful because it created and sustained poverty and injustice…sin was both personal and structural."[97] The bishops contended that structural sin profoundly influenced personal moral development: "Culture is continually shaped and reshaped by the ongoing life and historical experience of peoples; and it is transmitted by tradition from generation to generation."[98]

Pope John Paul II played an important role in the development of the concept of social sin. In his closing address at Puebla, the pope spoke of "social sin" or "structural sin" but stated that one can speak only of "social" or "structural" sin in an analogical sense because the pope was afraid that the emphasis on social sin would undermine individual moral responsibility. The pope developed his treatment of the concept in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Reconciliatio et Poenitentia* (1983,) the social encyclical *Solicitudo Rei Socialis (1987,) and Evangelium vitae (1995*.)

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[95] Conferencia General del Episcopado Latinoamericano, *The Church in the Present-Day Transformation of Latin America in the Light of the Council: Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops, Bogotá, 24 August, Medellin, 26 August-6 September, Colombia, 1968* (Bogota: General Secretariat of CELAM, 1970) I: 2.
[96] Pfeil, Margaret, "Doctrinal Implications of Magisterial Use of the Language of Social Sin," 137.
[97] Daly, "Structures of Virtue and Vice," 345.
[98] CELAM, "Third General Congress at Puebla de los Angeles, Mexico, 1979," in New Directions in Mission and Evangelization 1: Basic Statements 1974-1991, eds. James A. Scherer and Stephen B. Bevans (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), par. 392, p. 101.

In paragraph sixteen of *Reconciliatio et Poenitentia*, the Pope confirmed that all sin was always personal. Only a moral agent who was conscious and had free will, could be the subject of moral acts. A moral agent could be influenced by powerful external factors, but she was still a free moral agent. Therefore, responsibility for sinful action rested with the person, not the social structures, systems, or other people.[99]

The document then goes on to discuss three permissible meanings of the term. First of all, social sin can refer to the way in which every personal sin affects others because of the mysterious solidarity among the members of the Mystical Body: "a soul that lowers itself through sin drags down with itself the church and, in some way, the whole world" (no. 16). Secondly, social sin can also mean any acts that harm one's neighbor, including sins against justice, and common good. The third meaning of social sin refers to the relationships among various human communities that are not "in accordance with the plan of God." The pope named blocs of nations and social classes as the principal actors here. These collectives function analogically as agents; therefore, their "social sins" are likewise analogical.[100] Then the pope concluded paragraph #16 with a condemnation of any definition of social sin that contrasts it with personal sin. He noted that such a dichotomy could abolish the concept of personal sin, and recognize only of social guilt and responsibilities. Rather, he stated that "social sin is the result of the accumulation and concentration of many personal sins…The real responsibility, then, lies with individuals." For John Paul II, social sin remained fundamentally personal because social structures or institutions are not the subject of moral acts.

[99] John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia,* 1894, no. 16. http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_02121984_reconciliatio-et-paenitentia.html (accessed December 10, 2020).
[100] Daly, "Structures of Virtue and Vice," 347.

In *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, the pope clearly stated that the situation of the contemporary world cannot be properly analyzed without reference to "structures of sin." Then he defined structures of sin as "the sum total of the negative factors working against a true awareness of the universal common good, and the need to further it, gives the impression of creating, in persons and institutions, an obstacle which is difficult to overcome."[101] For the pope, structures of sin were rooted in an individual's personal sins which "created both culturally normative modes of being and acting and impersonal social institutions that subsequently influenced the actions of other moral agents."[102] Therefore, the pope held the individual morally accountable, while stressing the extensive social antecedents and consequences of personal action.

The 1995 encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* provides John Paull's final significant development on his account of social sin or structures of sins.[103] Contrasting the cultures of life and death, he gave particular attention to the structural dimensions of sin that underlies abortion. Considering categories of moral agents involved in a decision of abortion, he wrote:

> It is a question, above all, of the individual conscience, as it stands before God in its singleness and uniqueness. But it is also a question, in a certain sense, of the "moral conscience" of society: in a way it too is responsible, not only because it tolerates or fosters behavior contrary to life, but also because it encourages the "culture of death", creating and consolidating actual "structure of sin" which go against life.[104]

Daniel J. Daly notes that this was the first time the pope applied the concept of moral conscience to society, a non-moral agent. The pope indicated that certain societies created structures that fostered and encouraged the "culture of death," thus they had responsibility. Daly explains: "insofar as a society freely created these structures, it functions like a moral agent, and

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[101] John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 1987, no. 36. http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.html (accessed December 10, 2020).
[102] Daly, "Structures of Virtue and Vice," 348.
[103] Daly, 349.
[104] John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae,* 1995, no. 24. http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html (accessed December 10, 2020).

therefore, has a kind of moral responsibility."[105] The pope explicitly acknowledged the role of social structures in forming the consciences of individual moral agents. In other words, the individual conscience could not be fully understood apart from the conscience of society. However, as Daly notes, the pope did not elaborate on how and to what extent social structures operated and had moral responsibility for moral evils that occur in society.

So far, we have pointed out that social sin or structures of sin, according to Catholic teaching, is the "fruit of many individual sins" or the result of the "accumulation and concentration of many personal sins." This definition has the advantage of safeguarding the dignity and moral freedom of the human person. However, there are two problems that lurk in the background, Theodora Hawksley asserts. The first is that "the implied relationship between individuals and the social is one of part and whole" as though facts in the society could be fully explained by the actions of individuals comprising them. The second problem is "the implied relationship between individuals and social is one of cause and effect."[106] In trying to avoid collectivism – a view that the social produces individuals, thus undermining individual moral responsibility – the Church leans toward the view that individuals straightforwardly produce the social. As stated above, critical realism could provide a more adequate understanding of the relationship between individuals and the social structure. We will discuss this relationship in the following part.

b. How Do Evil Structures Causally Contribute to Evil?

Recall that, according to critical realism, social structures emerge from the interaction of individual persons in a social group. Existing as a "higher level," structures exist ontologically and have causal impact on the life of human agents through the restrictions, enablements, and incentives. Living within social structures, human agents retain their freedom; however, their

[105] Daly, "Structures of Virtue and Vice," 351.
[106] Hawksley, "How Critical Realism Can Help Catholic Social Teaching," 14.

freedom is constrained by the restrictions, enablements, and incentives of the positions they take. Human agents can choose to resist but they have to face negative consequences.

Social structures do not move individuals in a direct or physical way. Instead, the causal power of social structures works through human relations to direct their decisions and activities. Daly asserts that "structures exercise their causal power through the kinds of actions that they either constrain or enable."[107] Because social structures are relations among social position, a person finds that her action is both enabled and constrained when she enters a social relation. A professor is enabled and expected to perform as a professor: teaching, grading, writing, and publishing articles. Meanwhile, she faces restrictions generated by university requirements and student expectations. She must give grades on time, assign readings, hold office hours, and provide answers to students' questions. Therefore, structures enable and constrain human action through the social positions people inhabit, and the expectations that those positions impose on people. Structures encourage and reward certain actions and discourage and punish other actions.

Living within a preexisting structure, the agent's character is formed and shaped by her social structure and culture through its restrictions, opportunities, and incentives. Personal character can be shaped by the structure in which she lives in two ways. First, the given structure endorses and directs specific actions and modes of relations which regularly can become new habits. Second, social positions influence not only the actions and dispositions of moral agents, but also their beliefs about what is real and good. When a person assumes a position, the person's set of values can be shaped by that position.[108] In an unjust structure such as slavery, a slave owner repeatedly comes to slave auction houses and observes other slave owners treating enslaved persons cruelly, so he comes to share the cultural belief that black persons are less valuable and

[107] Daly, *The Structures of Virtue and Vice*, 89.
[108] Daly, 179–80.

intellectually inferior to whites. By participating in these patterns of actions and beliefs, he sustains and perpetuates the unjust structure of slavery.

Therefore, it can be said that a vicious circle is at work. Because social structures have causal impact on moral decisions and actions of individuals who live within them, unjust structures have the capacity to systematically promote injustice and undermine the dignity of others, especially the poor and marginalized. In turn, by entering into the positions and relations of the unjust structures to pursue their goals, human agents help to sustain and perpetuate those unjust structures.

In summary, social sin can be defined, according to Daniel K. Finn, as unjust structures which encourage morally evil actions through their restrictions, enablements, and incentives.[109] In the same vein, Daniel J. Daly prefers the language of "structures of vice" which are "webs of relations that consistently harm normative personal dignity, human well-being, and happiness, especially that of the vulnerable. Also, vicious structures promote social injustice and undermine the common good."[110]

Because unjust social structures pre-exist individuals and are beyond the choices or any actions of moral agents, *how can anyone be held responsible for the unjust structure? And to what degree does a moral agent hold responsibility for what one is not free to do or not do?* People are born into a given social structure that exists at a higher level and which continues to operate without their conscious choosing.[111] Through its restrictions, opportunities, and incentives, a given unjust structure influences and induces persons to lives of sin and vice. It is true that individuals

[109] Finn, "What Is a Sinful Social Structure?," 155.
[110] Finn, 169.
[111] Mark O'Keefe, *What Are They Saying about Social Sin?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 50.

may not be responsible for the existence of the given unjust structure, but they are still accountable for it insofar as they maintain and perpetuate the structure.

However, being accountable for maintaining and perpetuating the unjust structure does not automatically mean they are morally culpable for it. Kenneth R. Himes in his article "Social Sin and the Role of the Individual" distinguishes responsibility for unjust structures with three categories: causal, liable, and culpable.[112] Causal responsibility pertains to those agents whose actions actually cause harm to a certain degree.[113] Causal responsibility may or may not be blameworthy depending on the level of knowledge and freedom on the part of the agent. Children or people with psychological sickness can be responsible for the harm they cause, but they are usually not considered blameworthy for the harm.

Then Himes distinguishes causal responsibility from liable responsibility. A person can be liable for damage or harm even if he does not cause it. For example, an employer can be reliable for his employee's harmful actions. He did not cause the harm or play a causal role in the wrong actions of his employee, but he still can be liable to the one injured. Therefore, a person can be liable for an act which he did not play a causal role and he is not blameworthy or morally responsible for it.

Finally, culpability applies to the agents who are to blame for the harm or injustice. Culpability requires causal responsibility[114] and free moral agency.[115] The Christian theological tradition requires that a personally and morally culpable act be based on consciousness, knowledge, and intent to cause harm. Moral condemnation for a personally wrongful act attaches

[112] Kenneth R. Himes, "Social Sin and the Role of The Individual:," *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 6 (1986): 188–91.
[113] Himes, 190.
[114] Himes, 190.
[115] Himes, 188.

only to liable injuries. Himes asserts that "sin is evil done, maintained, permitted with freedom, intent, knowledge. Only acts performed under those conditions legitimate talk of culpability or blameworthiness."[116] Thus, the culpable person is the one who is both causally responsible and morally blameworthy. Himes concludes these distinctions by asserting that: one "can be responsible for something without being blameworthy."[117]

Living in a given structure and culture, a person often gets so caught up in that worldview and system to the point where he cannot see clearly the unjust practices and beliefs he is practicing. As a result, his moral sensitivity to right and wrong becomes dark. His blindness and ignorance consequently limit his culpability or moral responsibility for the social sin. Therefore, Himes suggests that in order to assist individuals to respond to social sin or unjust structures at this level, two things ought to be kept in mind. Firstly, they must become aware of the social evil, sensitized to its deleterious effects and consequences. Secondly, once they are aware of the social evil, they need to "see how their active, or even passive, support for a given institution, societal attitude or cultural value helps to maintain social sin."[118]

Moreover, there are individuals who benefit from an unjust structure and often intentionally perpetuate it with knowledge of its harmful effects on the poor and the vulnerable. In the words of Mark O'Keefe, unjust structures continue to exist precisely when "the individuals deliberately chooses to seek their advantage at the expense of others, or by acting with complicity or indifference in the face of evil."[119] Thus, in a given unjust structure, those intentionally perpetuating it may not hold causal responsible for its existence, but they may be blameworthy for their harmful actions. For example, Vietnamese men may not be responsible for the existence of

[116] Himes, 188.
[117] Himes, 190.
[118] Himes, 192–93.
[119] O'Keefe, *What Are They Saying about Social Sin?*, 69.

the present unjust structures and cultures, but by intentionally forcing women to stay at home and serve them, they holds both causal and culpable responsibility for their forcing actions.

Moving from blameworthiness or culpable responsibility to remedial or liable responsibility, Himes asks: "Why should a person not be expected to do something to oppose a perceived injustice?"[120] He suggests that the liability to make reparation for a cultural and structural injustice attaches to everyone in the culture, particularly to those who benefit most or who unconsciously encourage its presence through a variety of familiar conventions and social institutions.[121] Therefore, those who have benefitted from and are privileged by reason of the given unjust structures have responsibility to strive to assist those who have been disadvantaged. Those who have unconsciously contributed to and perpetuated the unjust structures need to remove their blindness and ignorance so that they can become aware of the social structures which influence their lives for the worse and be more attentive to the consequences of their decisions and actions. In brief, regardless of whether one caused injustice in the first place, he is liable for ameliorating structural harms and reconstituting the interpersonal justice and common good. As a member of society, by participating in unjust structures or vicious structures, passively or actively, each person holds a level of responsibility for evils and vices of that unjust social structure.

Just as agents sustain the given social structure, so too, they should work for the transformation of the structure. However, transformation is an emergent process in which many aspects of social life combine to produce an emergent reality – a social structure. It does not occur quickly or is easily predicted.[122] Christian Smith emphasizes that many factors of social life can

[120] Himes, "Social Sin and the Role of The Individual," 205.
[121] Himes, 211.
[122] Christian Smith, *What Is a Person?: Rethinking Humanity, Social Life, and the Moral Good from the Person Up* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 178.

cause structural transformation,[123] and "no social structure is transformed without some purposive human action intending change."[124] The most important step for any social transformation is to identify what is wrong or unjust in the given structure. In Finn's words: "what are the operative restrictions and opportunities facing different groups in any particular social structure?"[125] The more precise we name certain restrictions and opportunities of the unjust structure, the more hopeful we can have for social transformation.

In the light of what we have discussed above, we now turn to examine how self-sacrifice among Vietnamese women is practiced in a society that has many unjust structures. I contend that the virtue of self-sacrifice, when practiced in the midst of unjust structures, could become a vice. The following section is an attempt to name some vicious properties of Vietnamese society that are unjust, unequal, discriminatory, and prevents Vietnamese women from living a flourishing life.

4. The Practice of Self-Sacrifice Amidst Unjust Structures

a. Sexism

As I mentioned in the first chapter, Vietnamese society is heavily influenced by Confucianism, a hierarchical system, focusing on the harmony and relationships of members within the family, group, and society. In family relationships, everyone is expected to carry out one's defined role and position within the hierarchical system. An ideal Vietnamese woman is one who follows a man, no matter if he is her father, her husband, or her son. The main role of a Vietnamese woman is to be the "interior marshal," taking care of housework and nursing children. To fulfill this obligation, she has to put aside her own desires and needs for the needs of the family.

[123] Smith, 369-78. These factors include: (1) establishing new or terminating old relations between groups, (2) alterations in the basic cognitive categories that constitute structures, (3) change sustaining material recourses, (4) change the moral and normative beliefs, (5) weakening of sanctioning noncompliance and rebellion, (6) decreases in the intractability of dispersed interaction processes, and disruptions of normal reiterated body practices and collective activity currents.
[124] Smith, *What Is a Person?*, 378.
[125] Finn, "Social Structures," 38.

Devoting all her energy, time, and effort to her family is the key to maintaining the harmony and well-being of the family. She is taught and raised to be a good girl who can manage the house chores so that she will become a good wife. Due to the impact of this structure, Vietnamese women internalize their role as "internal marshal" imposed by the structure. They culturally believe that they must sacrifice all their personalities, emotions, and desires for family, more specifically, for men. Within her own family, she cannot pursue or fulfill her personal needs because she has to pay attention to her husband's thoughts and feelings with the fear of ruining the peace of the house. If she refuses to sacrifice for the family and ruins the harmony of the family, she is condemned by the surrounding people. Therefore, self-sacrifice is not only a part of the culture in which Vietnamese women live but it is also regarded as a necessary virtue to keep the harmony and peace of the family structure.

The ideology of self-sacrifice is reinforced by the language of virtue. Through stories and moral lessons, from a very early age, Vietnamese children are taught that self-sacrifice is an honored virtue that they should cultivate. From the example of her mother, a girl comes to know that her family is more important than herself. Ivone Gebara contends that "through the education they receive and pass on, mothers imitate conduct that reinforces their superiority over others. To gain societal acceptance, it is not enough simply to be a mother; one has to be a mother who follows the rules established by those in power."[126] To put it another way, to become a good girl and an exemplary mother, a woman must conform herself in accordance with the rules established by the social values that are prevalent in the culture. She must be ready to surrender herself, her desires, and her opportunities for the good of others.

[126] Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 99.

It is obvious that the structure and culture of the Vietnamese family and society, as described above, is sinful and harmful because it endorses and enforces the subordinate state of women and promotes the devaluing of women based on their gender. The subordinate state of Vietnamese women can be seen clearly in daily language. The Vietnamese language uses a complex system of pronouns to distinguish gender as well as relationship. In Vietnam, if a person views himself or herself as subordinate or junior in status within a relationship, that person will call himself or herself with the pronoun "*Em."* Within the family framework, women structurally use the pronoun "em" to address themselves in relationship with her husband. Wendy Duong asserts, "When 'em' is used by a woman to refer to herself, the connotation may automatically affirm the man's social and sexual power."[127] Women somehow were trained to refer to themselves in the first persons as "em" because of their subordinate place.

Besides that, the unjust structure based on gender in Vietnam leads women to the loss of a sense of self. Vietnamese women are identified by their positions relative to men rather than their own identity as individual persons. When she is young and lives with her father, she will be called her father's daughter; when she is married, her husband's wife; and her son's mother. These practices so condition women that they lose their sense of their own identity. Their identity is always associated with the men in their lives. Brita L. Gill-Austern asserts that "women develop their sense of self, not by separating out from relationships as male, but through the process of building on affiliations, creating increasingly complex webs of relationship."[128]

As a consequence, this sinful structure harms the well-being of Vietnamese women and prevents them from having a flourishing life. Erin Lothes Biviano points out that "sacrifice is a

[127] Duong, "Gender Equality and Women's Issues in Vietnam: The Vietnamese Woman-Warrior and Poet," 206.
[128] Brita L. Gill-Austern, "Love Understood as Self-Sacrifice and Self-Denial: What Does It Do to Women?," in *Through the Eyes of Women: Insights for Pastoral Care*, ed. Jeanne Stevenson Moessner (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 305.

tool of social inequality and sexist discrimination that does oppose women's flourishing.[129] Under the impact of structural sexism, Vietnamese women are enabled to sacrifice themselves for the sake of others. This is extremely harmful for their flourishing. First of all, the virtue of self-sacrifice, when it becomes a dangerous ideology of sacrifice, causes Vietnamese women to lose touch with their own needs and desires. For the sake of family, they are constrained from having enough time to take rest or regular sleeping, reading books for their enrichments, pursuing education, learning new skills, or fostering supportive relationships. Their subordination to men means that they become silent about their own personal needs. As a consequence, they lose a sense of self. They are constrained from following their own pleasures, thoughts, dreams, and desires in order to put themselves at the service of others or to live as others think they should.[130] By subordinating themselves as self-sacrificing women, they are rewarded with applause and respect from others as "ideal" women. This unjust culture encourages and enables Vietnamese men to dominate the family and society. Secondly, this dangerous ideology of self-sacrifice induces fear, fear of not being able to live up to the ideal deportment encouraged by the structure and culture, fear of not being accepted by men and other people.[131] Under the expectations and impacts of society, Vietnamese women are enforced to repress negative feelings and thoughts that might threaten the harmony of relationships in the family. Thirdly, by trying to satisfy the needs, feelings, and thoughts of others, Vietnamese women lose a sense of self-esteem and a sense of their own direction.[132] They are constrained from opportunities to develop their own potential and to become fully themselves.

[129] Biviano, *The Paradox of Christian Sacrifice*, 79.
[130] Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 88.
[131] Gebara, 89.
[132] Gill-Austern, "Love Understood as Self-Sacrifice and Self-Denial: What Does It Do to Women?," 312.

In conclusion, the practice of self-sacrifice of Vietnamese women in a society marked by sexism could become a structural vice when it constrains Vietnamese women to recognize and promote their normative dignity, well-being, and happiness. Because of sexism, women are consistently encouraged and expected to fulfill their "heavenly mandate roles" such as giving birth, teaching children, caring for members of the family, doing chores at home, and end up losing their sense of self. In such context, the affirmation of John Paul II on the dignity of women since 1988 in his Apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* is necessary and urgent for Vietnamese people. He affirms that the dignity of women is rooted in the Bible and needs to be protected and promoted: "the dignity belonging to women from the very 'beginning' on an equal footing with men"[133] because "both man and woman are human beings to an equal degree, both are created in God's image."[134]

b. Collectivism

Collectivity is evident in Vietnamese culture due to the influence of Confucian values. In family relationships, the Vietnamese place a strong emphasis on harmony and interest of the family. According to Pham Van Bich, the Vietnamese community is "highlighted by the absolutely dominant influence of the family as a whole vis-à-vis everyone of its component members. ... In the Vietnamese family the *raison d'être* of each individual member is to continue, maintain, and serve the family, and first of all people of the older generations."[135] Each members of the family is formed and expected to subordinate his/her personal interests to those of the family. This culture strongly impacts on Vietnamese women's self-understanding and the way they practice self-sacrifice.

[133] John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem: On the Dignity and Vocation of Women,* 1988, no. 25.
[134] Paul II, no. 6.
[135] Pham Van Bich, *The Vietnamese Family in Change: The Case of the Red River Delta*, 1st edition (Richmond: Routledge, 1998), 18.

Growing up in a collectivist culture, Vietnamese women are conditioned to believe that in order to remain connected and maintain harmonic relationship, they must sacrifice their needs, desires, and feelings. They learn to ignore their own desires if these desires bring them into conflict with others. As a consequence, when their own needs and desires are not seen as valued, they learn to silence their inner selves: "the real self, the authentic 'I' goes into hiding."[136] Because of concern for the harmony of their family, they are enforced to deny their own rights to take care of themselves or to pursue their own happiness and fulfill their potential talents. Within a such collectivist culture, self-sacrifice for family and others is not only encouraged but it becomes a cultural and structural part of a woman's life. For Vietnamese women self-sacrifice is something that cannot be questioned and is everywhere enforced.

Moreover, this attitude is reinforced by the lack of critical thinking which is greatly restricted in a collective culture. The collective culture in Vietnam does not give an individual a context in which she can question what is going on around her. In a family, it is not customary for decisions to be discussed and decided by all the members. Normally, women and children are strongly constrained to participate in the process of discussion and decision-making in the businesses of their families. In such a culture, children, especially girls, are supposed to obey rather than discuss or argue for their opinions. The same thing happens in the academic environment. In most Vietnamese schools and universities, a culture of personal initiative is not encouraged. If it exists at all, it is very limited. Students have little or no opportunity for critical discussions and asking questions or engaging in debate with their instructors and colleagues. They are rewarded for being as polite students when they keep silent and learn by heart whatever the professors or teachers teach them. They are prevented from developing the habit of critical thinking by asking

[136] Bich, 306.

or raising different perspectives. When they to do so, they would pay a price, e.g.., criticism or lack of respect from professors and other students. Catholic moral theologian and medical doctor, Y-Lan Tran observes that education in Vietnam "tends to foster passivity in students who receive uncritically without questioning what the professor hands down as the 'truth'."[137] As a result, the collective culture limits their ability to ask critical questions, to make their own decisions, and to take responsibility for their happiness. This culture encourages them to passively accepts burdens of self-sacrifice on behalf of the family's reputation and harmony. It can be said that the collective culture endorses the uncritical acceptance of traditional virtues and practices regardless of whether these practices are good for the development and flourishing of the individuals. As a result, Vietnamese girls and women lack the possibility of questioning the unjust practice imposed on them and a chance to fight for their rights. At the same time, many Vietnamese boys and men are not able recognize that the advantages and privileges, coming from this unjust culture, are given them at the expense of the happiness and well-being of their beloved mothers and sisters. Personally, I used to enjoy these privileges of a man who has many people to sacrifice for my development or for my comfortable life. Like many Vietnamese men, I thought that self-sacrifice on the part of women is always a praiseworthy virtue and natural duty for them.

In conclusion, the virtue of self-sacrifice is misunderstood and abused in Vietnamese collective culture because it is being used to support an unjust hierarchical structure. Within a collective culture, self-sacrifice becomes compulsive and culturally destructive for everyone, especially for Vietnamese women. Self-sacrifice for the needs of others is a necessary virtue to keep the harmony of family, but it needs to come from freedom, not obligation or duty, and it must be done by both men and women. Unfortunately, Vietnamese culture considers self-sacrifice to be

[137] Y-Lan Tran, "Vietnam in Transition: Theological and Ethical Challenges," in *Transformative Theological Ethics: East Asian Contexts,* ed. Agnes M. Y Brazal (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2010), 55.

the cultural expectation and structural duty of women. The uncritical acceptance of this mentality by both men and women somehow contributes to perpetuate the unjust practice of self-sacrifice and unjust structures in Vietnamese society.

c. Unjust laws and public policies

Laws and public policies play an important role in consistently promoting normative personal dignity, human well-being, social justice, and the common good when they are just. At the same time, they can consistently constrain individuals from recognizing and promoting human dignity, thus, they could foster social injustice and undermine the common good.[138] In Vietnam, I contend that there are unjust laws and public policies regarding gender inequality that constrain Vietnamese women's opportunities and foster their subordinate status and economic dependence on men. Brita L. Gill-Austern asserts that women's economic and social dependence is one of the main reasons which motivate self-sacrifice among women. She writes: "A fear for their children's financial well-being and their own financial survival is one motivation that keeps many women in abusive relationships"[139]

1) Affirmative action for men

The Constitution of Vietnam in 2013 affirms the equality of women and men: "Male and female citizens have equal rights in all fields," and "sex discrimination is strictly prohibited."[140] It grants both sexes the right to vote and the opportunity to run for office.[141] However, the constitutional charter itself contains gender inequality by using exclusive language. The Constitution contains a linguistic ambiguity that may be construed as inequity in favor of men.

[138] Daly, *The Structures of Virtue and Vice*, 169.
[139] Gill-Austern, "Love Understood as Self-Sacrifice and Self-Denial: What Does It Do to Women?," 306.
[140] The 2013 Constitution of the Republic of Vietnam, 2013, art. 26. https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/ELECTRONIC/94490/114946/F114201808/VNM94490%20Eng.pdf.
[141] The 2013 Constitution, art. 28.

Article 37 provides that "young men" (*thanh nien*) shall receive affirmative action from the state, the family, and society to be trained and educated, to work and play, and to develop their physique, intellect, and ethics. As shown in the previous chapter, the Vietnamese language is extremely complicated not only in its morphology and grammar but in the correct use of forms of address. The word "*thanh nien*" does not include "*thieu nu*" or "young women." The Vietnamese usually use "*thanh nien – thieu nu*" (young men and women) or the unisex term "youth" to indicate both sexes. Sometimes the term "*thanh nien*" can be used for both sexes but it reflects the patriarchal attitude and son preference: "a son is said to be worth ten daughters."[142] Therefore, the use of this language stands in contrast to the affirmative statement on the equality of men and women, fosters the subordinate status of women, and constrains their assumption of powerful social positions.

2) Limited professional skills and education

The Labour Code in 2019 also denies any kinds of gender-based discrimination, but at the same time, it contains a vague "equal work/ equal remuneration" provision, which states that "Employers shall ensure the equal remuneration, without gender-based discrimination against employees performing equal work."[143] The term "equal work" is of concern because a Vietnamese woman is constrained and prevented from reaching the level where she can perform "equal work" and be entitled to equal pay unless social changes are first implemented to create more educational opportunities for women.[144] Indeed, the lack of education and professional skills consistently constrains women from entering the social positions such as university students as easily as men. Together with the traditional thinking about women being "interior marshals," discrimination in

[142] Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 32.
[143] The Labor Code 2019 - Effective Jan 01, 2021, art. 90 accessed January 6, 2021, http://nhankiet.vn/vi/r2579/The-Labor-Code-2019--Effective-Jan-01-2021.html.
[144] Wendy N Duong, "Gender Equality and Women's Issues in Vietnam: The Vietnamese Woman-Warrior and Poet" 10, no. 2 (2001): 238.

education becomes one of the structural barriers which enables women at home and constrains them from getting a higher position in their careers, especially in political decision-making roles.

In her research "Women's Leadership in Vietnam: Opportunities and Challenges," Truong Thi Thuy Hang pointed out that the draft version of the Law on Gender Equality in Vietnam (2006) included clause 11.5, which proposed a women's quota of 30 percent to ensure the presence of female deputies in the National Assembly, people's councils, and key leadership posts in state organizations.[145] However, this clause was defeated by objections from some deputies. In the words of National Assembly Deputy Nguyen Duc Dung, "If these percentages are defined in the law, then it forces us to implement them, but these women deputies' abilities and standards are not sufficient, so the cadre quality will be affected".[146] But by blaming women's lack of ability for their absence from key decision-making roles, Truong asserted, "the argument masks structural barriers to their advancement, such as discrimination in education and employment, inequitable divisions of labor in the family, and lack of training and advancement opportunities for women."[147]

3) Retirement age regulations

Vietnam has different mandatory retirement ages for women (age 55) and for men (age 60).[148] Many people believe that the lower retirement age for women is a privilege that benefits women. Instead, this differential in retirement age disadvantages women and produces harmful effects in several ways: shorter working life and period for advancement, less chance of promotion, overall smaller income, and limited ability to contribute effectively as they are forced to retire when they are potentially at the height of their careers.[149] Many women who are forced to retire at

[145] Thi Thuy Hang Truong, "Women's Leadership in Vietnam: Opportunities and Challenges," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 34, no. 1 (September 2008): 18.
[146] Truong, 18.
[147] Truong, 18.
[148] The Labor Code 2019 - Effective Jan 01, 2021, art. 169.
[149] Jean Munro, "Women Representation in Leadership in Vietnam" (Vietnam: United Nations Development Programme, 2012), 14,

age 55 still need to earn a living, but they can no longer do so. They face economic insecurity for their future and they must depend on their husbands or sons. Furthermore, limited to shorter working careers, women also face discrimination from employers who prefer to hire men because they will spend more years in labor force. In terms of training, men could receive more chances than women because men's working period is five years longer than that of women's, even shorter if they take breaks for maternity leave.[150]

In conclusion, these unjust law and policies are structural barriers which limit Vietnamese women when it comes to opportunities for their own development in society and politics. These structural barriers also constrain their influence on the scope of opportunities that they can offer for their daughters.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have seen that when the virtue of self-sacrifice in Vietnamese women is not linked with justice, then it can become a vice and with injurious results for Vietnamese women. More concretely, we have attempted to understand the ways in which moral evils have entered societal culture and structure preventing the flourishing of Vietnamese women.

Catholic social teaching uses the concept of "social sin" to describe situations in which structures function adversely on the development of an individual. Social sin is understood as the "fruit of many individual sins" or the result of the "accumulation and concentration of many personal sins." Understood in this way, social sin is fundamentally personal and individuals can be held accountable for social sin in society and the world. This approach safeguards the dignity and moral freedom of the human person. However, it does not provide an adequate understanding

https://www.undp.org/content/dam/vietnam/docs/Publications/31204_Women_s_Representation_in_Leadership_in_Viet_Nam.pdf.

[150] Jean Munro, 15.

of the nature of structure and the relationship between individuals and society. Critical realism can offer a more accurate explanation of the social reality.

According to critical realism, structure is system of social relations that exists among social positions and culture is a set of practices, beliefs, or understandings that is shared by a social group. Both exist at a higher level than that of individuals, they exist ontologically and have causal impact on the life of human agents through restrictions, enablements, and incentives. Individuals are still free to choose but they are influenced by the restrictions, opportunities, and incentives of the culture and structure in which they live. Human agents can choose to resist but they have to face negative consequences.

Insights drawn from critical realism's account of culture and structure can help us to evaluate the practice of self-sacrifice of Vietnamese women in the midst of unjust structures and cultures that often make the virtue of self-sacrifice a vice. There are unjust laws and public policies regarding gender inequality that restrict the opportunities for Vietnamese women and contribute to their subordinate status and economic dependence on men. Sexism is a structural vice and it constrains Vietnamese women from rising to a social level where they can pursue education, professional skills, and other opportunities for advancement. Unjust laws and public policies constrain women from attaining social positions that would promote their normative dignity, and these same structural policies keep Vietnamese women at home and of service only to the family.

In addition to these structural barriers mandated by law, Vietnamese women also are enabled to bear on their shoulders the burdens of a "heavenly mandate" placed on them by a Confucianist tradition. As discussed in the first chapter, Vietnamese women are expected to give birth, teach children, care for husbands, elderly relatives, maintain the harmony and reputation of the family, and perform other unpaid "heavenly" mandate roles. At the same time, the influence

of Communism encourages women to work outside the home. Therefore, women are doubly burdened with domestic duties in addition to their full-time employment. Consequently, it can be said that Vietnamese women are treated as a means for the sake of their family. Society and people reward by praising their total and complete self-sacrifice on behalf of interests of their family and society in mass media, books, and schools. They do not realize that self-sacrifice among Vietnamese women in the present situation harms their normative dignity, opposes their flourishing, and promotes social injustice and sexist discrimination.

By naming unjust elements of the Vietnam society that negatively impact on Vietnamese women, I have explained how the practice of self-sacrifice of Vietnamese women in the society could become a vice when it constrains them from recognizing and promoting their normative dignity, well-being, and happiness. Unjust structures have a casual impact on human agents through restrictions, enablements, and incentives and it is not easy to change. However, David Cloutier notes that "structures change over time, …and this change is caused by agents."[151] In a slightly different way, Christian Smith emphasizes that "no social structure is transformed without some purposive human action intending change."[152] I now turn in the next chapter to virtue ethics to propose some virtues which can assist Vietnamese women so that self-sacrifice can be practiced as a virtue and not become a vice. The virtues I propose are: the virtue of justice, the virtue of self-love, and the virtue of prudence. All Vietnamese people need to practice these virtues in the hope of a more just society where self-sacrifice can be sacrifice can be practiced freely and without constraint.

[151] David Cloutier, "Critical Realism and Climate Change," in *Moral Agency within Social Structures and Culture: A Primer on Critical Realism for Christian Ethics*, ed. Daniel K. Finn (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2020), 62.
[152] Smith, *What Is a Person?*, 378.

Chapter 3: HELPFUL VIRTUES FOR VIETNAMESE WOMEN

Self-sacrifice is an honorable and beautiful virtue of Vietnamese people when people give attentive care for one another, offer respect and support for others, and foster harmonic relationships among members of family and society. Practical theologian, Don Browning, observes that sacrificial love has an "unavoidable role in Christian life and Christian families."[153] Similarly, ethicist Dawn Nothwehr affirms that self-sacrifice has an important place in loving relationships, but "only when one chooses self-denial toward a goal of greater mutuality (or of mutual love) is sacrifice healthy."[154] In other words, Nothwehr notes not all self-sacrifice is good and moral. In the case of Vietnamese women, self-sacrifice at all times and in all situations could lead to the loss of self. Therefore, in this chapter, I am going to address how Vietnamese women might practice the virtue of self-sacrifice in the way that leads to their flourishing.

To do this, I am going to first talk about how the virtues of self-love, justice, and prudence, in that order, are necessary for virtuous living. I will speak about each virtue, especially about the importance of these virtues in Thomas Aquinas. Then I will show how they intersect in the agent and how she can learn more about self-love and self-sacrifice through prudence because it is able to mediate between extremes. As I argued in the earlier two chapters, most Vietnamese women do not understand the necessity of self-love in a virtuous life. As a result, they are fair or just with everyone but themselves. They need to give to each their due including their own selves. Therefore, they need to practice self-care or self-love.

As I demonstrated in the Chapter Two on Critical Realism, social structures and cultures have a causal influence on people. By discussing and introducing these virtues for Vietnamese

[153] Don S Browning, *From Culture Wars to Common Ground: Religion and the American Family Debate* (Louisville (KY): Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 127.
[154] Dawn M Nothwehr, *Mutuality: A Formal Norm for Christian Social Ethics* (Eugene, Or.: Wipf & Stock, 2005), 233.

women, this chapter does not aim to argue that a person can easily cultivate her character on her own, over and against Vietnamese unjust structures and thus change social structures. Individual actions "may play a role in the cultural changes required to alter a structure," but a "positive social change develops only through communal and social action."[155] Given the limits of the complicated situation under the Communist government in Vietnam, exploring all the areas of social life that contribute to the transformation of social structures[156] is beyond the scope of this chapter. Instead, the focus will be on how Vietnamese women can cultivate and practice self-sacrifice in a way that beneficial to others and to themselves. What might be ways to help them realize that self-sacrifice without self-care is generally wrong? What lessons can assist them recognize where their traditional ways of thinking may be deficient? And what might help them to practice prudence?

1. The Virtue of Self-Love

In Vietnamese culture, it is necessary and legitimate for Vietnamese women to accept and consider self-care or self-love as an honored virtue. Traditionally, Vietnamese people confuse self-love with selfishness. Emily Reimer-Barry contends, however, that "Selfishness is grounded in an inability to see one's integral good as related to the good of others. At its core, selfishness is contrary to self-love because the selfish person sees everything and everyone as existing for her benefit alone, for her use and pleasure."[157] Indeed, Thomas Aquinas asserts that self-love is not a selfish act, but it is the basis or the form of the love of neighbor.[158] He discusses this kind of love in his treatise on charity. According to Aquinas, love or charity can be realized most completely in the virtue of friendship.[159] Therefore, we will first look at characteristics of friendship, but then

[155] Daly, *The Structures of Virtue and Vice*, 190.
[156] See Smith, *What Is a Person?*, 169–78.
[157] Emily Reimer-Barry, "Suffering or Flourishing? Marriage and the Imitation of Christ," in *Women, Wisdom, and Witness: Engaging Contexts in Conversation*, ed. Kathleen Dolphin and Rosemary P Carbine (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2012), 141.
[158] Aquinas, ST II-II, 25, 4.
[159] Aquinas, ST II-II, 2, 1.

in the order of loves, we will see that love of God and love of self are the foundations of the love for others.

a. Aquinas on Friendship

A true friendship, for Aquinas, is characterized as benevolence or well-wishing, mutuality, and concord or communion.[160] The first characteristic of friendship is *benevolence*. Aquinas addresses this characteristic as he writes, "According to the Philosopher (Ethic.viii. 2,3), not every love has the character of friendship, but that love which is together with benevolence, when, to wit, we love someone so as to wish good to him."[161] To be someone's friend is to wish what is best for them and to feel happy when they have it. Moreover, a good friend not only wishes the best for them but also works for their well-being. Therefore, true friendship seeks the happiness and well-being of the friend for the sake of the friend. In a true friendship, a friend will wish and seek for his or her friend's good.[162] Aquinas writes, "love of friendship seeks the friend's good. In this respect, a man is said to be zealous on behalf of his friend when he makes a point of repelling whatever may be said or done against the friend's good."[163]

Benevolence is a good start for a friendship, but it is not enough for a true friendship in love. We may want to be someone's friend, but they may refuse. That is why Aquinas says that the benevolence of friendship must be mutual. Therefore, the second characteristic of a true friendship is *mutuality*. He states, "Yet neither does well-wishing suffice for friendship, for a certain mutual love is requisite, since friendship is between friend and friend."[164] We may love someone, wish the best for them, and work for their good, but without mutuality, it is just a

[160] Paul J Wadell, *The Primacy of Love: An Introduction to the Ethics of Thomas Aquinas* (Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1992), 63–78.
[161] Aquinas, ST II-II, 23, 1.
[162] Wadell, *The Primacy of Love*, 65.
[163] Aquinas, ST I-II 25, 4.
[164] Aquinas, ST, II-II, 23, 1.

kindness not a friendship. Moreover, the mutual exchange of love between friends must be realized and perceived. As Bauerschmidt comments, "Beyond well-wishing, friendship also involves mutuality: you cannot be friends with someone who does not consider herself your friend."[165]

The third characteristic is *communion*. The Latin term "*communicatio*" is understood as a possession of a common essential form or sharing something in common.[166] Aquinas argues that a friendship will lead a person to the point where she considers her friend to be her other-self. He stated, "When a man loves another with the love of friendship, he wills good to him, just as he wills good to himself; wherefore, he apprehends him as his other self, in so far, to wit, as he wills good to him as to himself. Hence a friend is called a man's other self."[167] In a friendship, two individuals are bonded and drawn to a relationship that each becomes "another self" for the other. A friend can see oneself in one's friend because both of them are formed and drawn by the same good. The lover does not need to lose herself or to put aside her own desires and interests for the sake of her beloved because, rationally, she knows she shares the same good of the beloved one. There is no contradiction between their interests and desires when they always wish the best for others, and consciously receive their friend's best wishes. Therefore, a true friendship will draw the lover and beloved into union.

According to Aquinas, friendship must be directed toward specific objects. Stephen Pope notes that "Charity, like love, is ordered according to two principles: first, to God and those who are objectively nearer to God (the meliores); and second, to those who are nearer to the agent in

[165] Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, *Holy Teaching: Introducing the Summa Theologiae of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Brazos Press, 2005), 154, fn.7.
[166] Eberhard Schockenhoff, "The Theological Virtue of Charity (IIa IIae, Qq.23-46)," in *The Ethics of Aquinas*, ed. Stephen J Pope (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 247.
[167] Aquinas, ST I-II, 28, 1.

particular ways (the conjunctiores)."[168] Therefore, there are four objects with which Aquinas believed man can be friends, namely God, self, neighbors, and physical bodies.[169]

b. The Order of Charity in Thomas Aquinas

1) Charity as Friendship with God

Aquinas maintains that the end of all charity is fellowship in eternal happiness, a fellowship which may be shared in by all reasonable beings. God, who has in himself eternal beatitude, is the primary object of charity. He claims "Now the friendship of charity is based on the fellowship of happiness, which consists essentially in God as its chief source, as First Principle, whence it flows to all who are capable of happiness."[170] God, as the source of eternal happiness, must be the first object of charity. Charity as friendship with God is the greatest departure from Aristotle in Thomas Aquinas's understanding of friendship. For Aristotle, a friendship - a love (philia) among equal partners - between human beings and God is impossible because God is too transcendent, totally above human beings.[171] However, Thomas' God is the God of love who establishes communion between himself and mankind through the Incarnation. Schockenhoff writes, "The Triune God establishes the foundation upon which the friendship of human beings for God can emerge by bending down to him in God's becoming human, and becoming equal to human beings in the descent of love."[172]

What does it mean to be a friend of God? As Paul J. Wadell[173] describes, firstly, having benevolence for God is to seek what is the best for God or seek and practice what God wants. In

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[168] Stephen J Pope, *The Evolution of Altruism and the Ordering of Love.* (Washington: Georgetown Univ Press, 1995), 59.
[169] For the purpose of this chapter, I will mainly focus on friendship with God, with self, and with neighbor. However, as we will see, the friendship with physical body is discussed at the same time with the self-love.
[170] Aquinas, ST II-II, 26, 2.
[171] Schockenhoff, "The Theological Virtue of Charity (IIa IIae, Qq.23-46)," 247.
[172] Schockenhoff, 248.
[173] Wadell, *The Primacy of Love*, 67–76.

relationship with God, sometimes we think that God is The Good and God needs no well-wishing from us. But, in some way, we can say that God also needs our friendship because God needs us to carry out God's purpose. "To be God's friend is to watch after God in the world, it is to be benevolent to God."[174] Secondly, to be a friend with God is to seek what is in the best interest of God and God seeks what is greatest for ourselves. From our side, to seek God's good is to want and to do God's will. A direct expression of friendship with God is to adore and praise and worship God, to delight in God's goodness, and to find joy in God's love. Thirdly, to be a friend with God is to be of one heart and soul with God, to love what God loves, to cherish what God values. God always wants what is best for us, that is the fulness of life, joy, happiness, and Godself. To be a friend of God is to give God freedom to do with us what God wants, to see with his eyes, to feel with his heart. In other words, we become union with God.

2) Charity as Friendship with Self or Self-love

The next object of friendship in the order of charity is ourselves. Aquinas places love of self within the hierarchy of charity between love of God and love of neighbor. "Man ought, out of charity, to love God, Who is the common good of all, more than himself: since happiness is in God as in the universal and fountain principle of all who are able to have a share of that happiness."[175] In the next article, Aquinas discusses self-love and explicitly claims that we ought to love ourselves in charity more than we love anyone else[176] because unity with ourselves is greater than our union with another. He notes, "A man is not a friend to himself, but something more than a friend…a man is one with himself which is more than being united to another. Hence, just as unity is the principle of union, so the love with which a man loves himself is the form and the root of

[174] Wadell, 67.
[175] Aquinas, ST II-II, 26, 3.
[176] Aquinas, ST II-II, 26, 4.

friendship. For if we have friendship with others it is because we do unto them as we do unto ourselves…the origin of friendly relations with others lies in our relations to ourselves."[177] The self is closer to itself than to another; therefore, constitutes a prior object of love.

If we focus on the object of love, although both the self and the neighbor are loved in charity as partakers in the eternal good, Aquinas argues, "just as unity surpasses union, the fact that man himself has a share of the Divine good, is a more potent reason for loving than that another should be a partner with him in that share."[178] Gérard Gilleman notes that we have to distinguish between "I" and "me," between the source and the object of love. The "I" is responsible for my eternal happiness and plays a unique role in my charity; I accomplish this duty by loving others and myself in an orderly manner. He states, "The 'I' never comes into conflict with others, since it is itself a source of love and, being spiritual, tends to communion."[179] If we focus on the object of love, the reflex-self, or the "me," the intensity of our self-love must always be stronger than our love for others. Gilleman asserts, "We wish…goods even more intensely for ourselves than for our neighbor, for we are 'nearer to ourselves' than he is."[180]

In short, Thomas Aquinas asserts that there is a certain priority to loving ourselves before others. Gerard Gilleman shares the same idea and puts it: "Well-ordered love starts with oneself or charity begins at home."[181] According to Gilleman, the question of the priority between love for self and love for others has already been solved. Moreover, the important thing for Thomas Aquinas is that one has to learn how to love oneself in the right manner. Stephen Pope explains,

[177] Aquinas.
[178] Stephen Pope, "Expressive Individualism and True Self-Love: A Thomistic Perspective," *The Journal of Religion* 71, no. 3 (July 1991): 394.
[179] Gérard Gilleman, *The Primacy of Charity in Moral Theology.* (Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1961), 299.
[180] Gilleman, 300.
[181] Gilleman, 59.

"For Thomas, the key distinction…was not between self-love and love of neighbor …but between proper and improper self-love."[182]

In order to love oneself properly, one must recognize one's "true self," which is the rational part, as the highest part of the self, prior to the sensitive part. Stephen Pope explains it this way, "He describes the impropriety of false self-love in several integrally related ways, all of which amount to a disordered regard for the 'sensitive' above the 'rational part' of the soul, or to taking the 'lower part' of the soul to be the 'highest."[183] The proper self-lover emphasizes the rational element of the soul while the improper self-lover emphasizes appetite. Every agent naturally tends toward what appears good to her, but the difference lies in what is truly good and valuable to her. Thomas maintains that "The good consider their rational nature, or inner man, pre-eminent in themselves, and so in this respect, they consider themselves as they are. But the wicked consider their sensitive and bodily nature, that is the outer man, pre-eminent in themselves. And so, not rightly knowing themselves, they do not truly love themselves, but love that which they think themselves to be."[184]

But how would a person experience her friendship with herself? First of all, she always wishes and does what she thinks is truly good for herself. And because she recognizes that she has to choose in accordance with reason, not sensitive and bodily nature, which things are really good for herself. She will wish the best things for herself, in this case, her fully personal interior life. Aquinas says, "in this way the good love themselves, as to the inward man, because they wish the preservation thereof in its integrity, they desire good things for him, namely spiritual goods."[185] Therefore, she will wish, choose and act for the sake of what is best for her according to the

[182] Pope, *The Evolution of Altruism and the Ordering of Love.*, 59.
[183] Pope, "Expressive Individualism and True Self-Love," 390.
[184] Aquinas, ST II-II, 25, 7.
[185] Aquinas.

intellectual part so that she can perfect herself as a person. She will pursue and try her best to obtain such good. Aquinas states, "in the first place, every friend wishes his friend to be and to live; secondly, he desires good things for him; thirdly, he does good things to him."[186] Because of the emphasis on the rational part of the soul, she can choose and find harmony in her soul. This is why someone can choose to lay down her life or her body for the sake of others. She prefers her moral life and her care for her own spiritual well-being more than her physical existence. Moreover, a true self-lover can find it delightful and pleasant to live with herself when she turns inward to her heart. By reflecting on her right choice and deeds, she can find internal peace and concord. Aquinas says, "they take pleasure in entering into their own hearts, because they find their good thoughts in the present, the memory of past good, and the hope of future good, all of which are sources of pleasure. Likewise, they experience no clashing of wills, since their whole soul tends to one thing."[187]

By contrast, the improper self-lover fail to experience friendship with oneself because she does not know what is really good for herself and loves herself improperly. She loves the lower goods of her nature more than the higher goods, namely her inner life. In that way, she does not have benevolence for herself when she desires and pursues things based on her sensitive pleasure or passions. By pursuing wrong sorts of good, she cannot achieve the goods that will lead her to a flourishing life. At the end, her heart is full of conflict and misery rather than internal peace.[188] This improper self-love cannot build up a friendship with another because if one is not a friend with oneself, one will end up with misery and conflict within oneself and this one will affect others negatively. By focusing only on sensitive and bodily nature, the improper self-lover cannot

[186] Aquinas.
[187] Aquinas.
[188] Aquinas.

recognize what is really good even for oneself, how can one wish the real good for others? Anthony T. Flood explains, "insofar as the other-directedness of his love is conditioned by the direction of his own self-love, he could only will bodily goods for the other... If he is blind to those goods in himself, he will be blind to them in others."[189]

Only proper self-love is the basis of the true friendship with others, because one will do for one's friend just as one does for oneself. Flood concludes "Aquinas's thought seems to be that a person is capable of relating to others only in ways by which he relates to himself. Self-love, then is a sort of template or guide for how to extend love to others."[190] As Aquinas points out, in true friendship, the lover will treat the beloved just as himself. He will unite with his friend to the extent that each will become "another self" for one another. There will be no contradiction of interests and desires between them. Rather than eliminating the self, the love of neighbor builds on and is connected to the fulfillment of others. In Aquinas words, "The beloved is contained in the lover, by being impressed on his heart and thus becoming the object of his complacency. On the other hand, the lover is contained in the beloved, inasmuch as the lover penetrates, so to speak, into the beloved."[191]

Thus far we can conclude that according to Aquinas, proper self-love is not a selfish act, but it is the foundation or the form of love for neighbor. A person will do for her beloved one just as she does for herself. Because she knows what is best for herself and does so, she will know what is best for her husband and family. In true love, she will unite with her beloved ones to the extent that there is no contradiction of interests and desires between her and her beloved ones. A true love relationship will respect one another, considering others to be as important as oneself. Because she

[189] Anthony T. Flood, "Love of Self as the Condition for a Gift of Self in Aquinas," *Studia Gilsoniana*, September 2018, 429.
[190] Flood, 428.
[191] Aquinas, ST I-II, 28, 2.

will love others with a self, her own self, self-love requires that she attends to her own needs and desires.

One question can be raised concerning sacrificing ourselves for the good of others because we should love ourselves more than our neighbors. Should we sacrifice ourselves for others? As I noted above with regard to improper and proper self-love, we also should distinguish between spiritual good and bodily good. Proper self-love, based on the rational part of the soul, can know and choose harmony in one's soul. One who has a proper self-love prefers one's moral life and spiritual well-being to one's physical existence. Therefore, it can be said that a legitimate love for neighbor cannot be a cause that endangers one's spiritual well-being. Pope maintains that "charity gives rise to very important forms of self-denial. Indeed, the welfare of the neighbor's soul takes priority over concern for one's own body, since a neighbor's soul is closer to one's own soul than is one's soul to one's own body."[192] In the same manner, Eberhard Schockenhoff argues that "only love for one's spiritual self, but not just any good for oneself, should be preferred to the love for the neighbor."[193] The good of one's body and physical existence, in general, must be subordinated to the duties of proper love of neighbor. He adds that the harming of the body and even the sacrifice of my own life can be demanded by rightful self-love. Schockenhoff reminds us, however, that individuals may never place the ethical integrity of their selves at risk.[194]

In short, through a true friendship, we unite with our friends to the extent that we see ourselves in our friends and vice versa. In that way, there will be no contradiction of interests and desires between us and our friends. In other words, in a true friendship, we do not have to eliminate ourselves, but by loving others, we become transformed for our fulfillment. Thus self-love,

[192] Pope, *The Evolution of Altruism and the Ordering of Love.*, 61.
[193] Schockenhoff, "The Theological Virtue of Charity (IIa IIae, Qq.23-46)," 254.
[194] Schockenhoff, 254.

according to Aquinas, is the foundation of love for others. It can be said that "in a certain way, self-love is the purest of all modes of love."[195]

In our society where some people do not really take care of themselves, James Keenan asserts that self-care[196] or self-love is necessary for a virtuous life. He proposes that self-care is one of the four cardinal virtues in his new proposal for virtue ethics. Traditionally, the cardinal virtues are prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. They are called "cardinal" because they are the virtues that sufficiently order all the components within us that are engaged in moral acting.[197] He observes that today "the task of moral development is not for an individual to perfect her or his powers, but rather for a person to realize rightly the variety of ways that we are relational."[198] Therefore, the cardinal virtues are the hinges upon which depend the ways we are relational. For Keenan, our identity is relational in three ways: generally, specifically, and uniquely. Each of these relational ways of beings demands a cardinal virtue. As a relational being in general, we need justice; as a relational being specifically, we are called to fidelity; and as a relational being uniquely, we are called to self-care.[199] He contends that "the moral task is to take of oneself" and "we each have a unique responsibility to care for ourselves."[200] For him, among the cardinal virtues, only self-care addresses the unique relationship that one has with virtues. The virtue of self-care seeks the well-being of the totality of ourselves as multidimensional persons –

[195] Harry G. Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2004), 80.
[196] Keenan prefers to avoid calling this virtue "self-love," because of the same confusion about the word "love" (See. James Keenan, "Proposing Cardinal Virtues," *Theological Studies* 56, no. 4 (1995): 709-729.
[197] James F Keenan, *Moral Wisdom: Lessons and Texts from the Catholic Tradition*, Second Edition (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010), 144.
[198] Keenan, 146.
[199] James F Keenan, *Moral Wisdom: Lessons and Texts from the Catholic Tradition*, Second Edition (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010), 146.
[200] James F. Keenan, "Proposing Cardinal Virtues," *Theological Studies* 56, no. 4 (December 1995): 727, https://doi.org/10.1177/004056399505600405.

bodily, intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally. Self-care requires being honest with, accepting, valuing, and forgiving oneself.

I contend that this affirmation of self-love or self-care is very important in Vietnamese culture, especially for women. As we saw earlier, Vietnamese culture is highly marked by collective culture in which self-care is not appreciated as a virtue but rather it is considered as a vice. Self-care is considered as selfishness in Vietnam culture where the interests and desires of the family is always prioritized over those of family members. If one makes a decision based on her preferences and desires, she will be considered selfish because she puts herself above the harmony of the family. Whenever a person wants to decide something, she needs to think of the desires and expectations of her family first. An "ideal" Vietnamese woman is expected as a one who devotes all her energy, time, and effort for her husband and children, and accept suffering in marriage without question. She should not spend time for herself because her husband and children always need her. It can be said that Vietnamese culture is confused between self-care with selfishness. Hence, within this culture, the affirmation of the virtue of self-care is very important. Self-care is not a vice but a virtue where a person has responsibility to take care of herself. It allows a Vietnamese woman to cultivate her self-esteem or self-respect in such a way that is necessary for her well-being and for the flourishing of her person.

Furthermore, the virtue of self-care helps Vietnamese women acknowledge their indispensable values. When she cares for her own needs, desires, and potentials, a woman can recognize that she is valuable, worthy, and deserving of happiness. Self-care provides Vietnamese people the opportunity to see themselves completely, to recognize and value their strengths and also their weaknesses. It is crucial for Vietnamese women to acknowledge all these potentials and limitations in order to develop themselves so that they can have a flourishing life. Moreover,

acknowledging their indispensable values will help Vietnamese women to realize that they are valuable just as men. As Darlene Weaver asserts, every person has transcendent value which is inherited in each person simply by the fact that they are human beings.[201] Each and every person is transcendently and equally valuable. As *Dignitas Personae* asserts, "man has unassailable value: *he possesses an eternal vocation* and *is called to share in the trinitarian love of the living God.* This value belongs to all without distinction. By virtue of the simple fact of existing, every human being must be fully respected."[202]

In addition, the understanding and belief that self-care is not selfishness and everyone is transcendently valuable is very important for the hope of social transformation. As Christian Smith points out "social structures are often transformed when the basic cognitive categories that help to constitute and justify them are altered."[203] When Vietnamese people start to believe that everyone is indispensably and equally valuable, they will stop treating their mothers and sisters as a means on behalf of the harmony of their family and community. Moreover, this belief also can change the ideology that defines Vietnamese women as "interior marshals" or "following ones" in Vietnamese culture. By accepting that the virtue of self-care is necessary for human flourishing, Vietnamese women could have more opportunities to develop their talents, potentials, and accomplishments. Briefly, the virtue of self-love or self-care could help Vietnamese people recognize that everyone is valuable, worthy, and deserving of happiness.

Besides the virtue of self-love or self-care, Vietnamese women also need to develop the virtue of justice which directs them as to how to treat others equally, and indirectly teaches them how to be just with themselves.

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[201] Darlene Fozard Weaver, "Christian Anthropology and Health Care" *Health Care Ethics USA* Vol 26 (4), (Fall 2018): 2.
[202] Dignitas Personae, no 8.
[203] Smith, *What Is a Person?*, 370.

2. The Virtue of Justice

a. What Justice is

The virtue of justice, according to Aquinas, is one of the four cardinal virtues and governs one's relationships with others by ensuring that he respects their normative dignity as persons and renders to them their due. Aquinas defines justice as "the constant and perpetual will to render to each one that which is his due."[204] This definition suggests that one would be under no obligation to give anything to anybody if a relationship that created obligations and responsibilities did not already exist. Josef Pieper explains: "If something is due to a man as his own, the fact of its being due to him has not come into existence through justice."[205] In other words, justice does not create a bond between one and others; rather it recognizes a relationship that is already there. Once a person enters the world, she is born into the web of relations. Because of the deep connections that exist between her and everything, she needs to learn how to live in right relationship with God, members of family, friends, community members, and the natural world. A just person is the one who sees these bonds that link all of life together and recognizes the responsibilities and obligations those bonds create. In Pieper's words: "To be just means, then, to owe something and to pay the debt."[206] A just person realizes that he owes something to others and others owe something to him because his life is always intertwined in relationships with inescapable moral demands. Therefore, Aquinas teaches that the proper object of justice is *ius,* or right which "is understood in terms of whatever due to community or to another individual, as established by natural or positive law"[207] Hence, justice "is expressed in actions that observe interpersonal valid

[204] Aquinas, ST II-II, 58, 1.
[205] Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues: Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, Temperance* (New York; Harcourt: Brace & World, 1965), 45.
[206] Pieper, 57.
[207] Jean Porter, "The Virtue of Justice (IIa IIae, Qq.58-122)," in *The Ethics of Aquinas*, ed. Stephen J Pope (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 2; Porter, 277.

criteria for fairness and equity."[208] In a slightly different way, James F. Keenan asserts that "As members of the human race, we are expected to respond to all members in general equally and impartially…In justice, we believe that each person is accorded the same basic fair treatment."[209] The virtue of justice, then, urges the agent to treat all people equally.

Because the proper object of justice, the right, implies a relation between two agents, justice is always directed toward another. It takes shape and operates in the exterior actions of the agent.[210] Justice is ordered toward doing something right, not toward knowing something right, so justice must have an appetitive power as its subject. Moreover, since justice pertains to our dealings with others and our rendering them their due as its proper object, it must reside in the rational appetitive power that is the will. Therefore, Aquinas identifies justice as a virtue of the will.[211] Jean Porter explains that identifying justice as a virtue of the will is important in Thomas Aquinas's treatise on the virtue. First of all, the will is naturally oriented toward actions ad extra, through which the agent enters into relations with others and the world around her. Thus, justice finds its proper sphere of action in external actions, rather than in the proper disposition of the passion. Secondly, the will is a rational appetite that is a human capacity to desire whatever the intellect judges to be good, in contrast to passions which respond to good and bad as perceived through the senses. Therefore, "just action presupposes an evaluative judgment about the relationship between persons, and this judgment can only be made by the intellect."[212] Consequently, the just one "is motivated by a desire to preserve and promote justice, in such a way that she does what is just precisely because it is just, and not out of some other motive, for example fear of punishment."[213]

[208] Porter, "The Virtue of Justice (IIa IIae, Qq.58-122)," 274.
[209] Keenan, *Moral Wisdom*, 147.
[210] Aquinas, ST II-II, 58, 2.
[211] Aquinas, ST II-II, 58, 4.
[212] Porter, "The Virtue of Justice (IIa IIae, Qq.58-122)," 275.
[213] Porter, 275.

In short, the virtue of justice is a habit by which one has the constant and perpetual will to render to everyone what is due to them. For Aquinas, justice is one of the cardinal virtues. It is oriented toward others rather than oneself, and concerns actions rather than passions such as temperance and fortitude. Justice has the will as its subject and observes the *ius* or rights of everyone. In other words, justice is a virtue that controls operations concerning the common good and right relationship. In justice, everyone is urged to treat all people equally.

b. Types of Justice

Since the virtue of justice concerns one's relationships to others, Aquinas divides it into two kinds, general justice, and particular justice. General justice (or many people say today "contributive justice") is a virtue possessed by some persons, enabling them to will and do what is right for the sake of the good of the community. In other words, general justice has the common good of the community as its object.[214] In this sense, justice is a general virtue insofar as it underlines any good action that affects one's relations with others. Jean Porter explains: "Justice is said to be a general virtue because it directs the acts of the other virtues to its own object, the common good, which transcends the good of the individual toward which the other particular virtues are directed."[215] For this reason, general justice is said to be preeminent among moral virtues. Moreover, general justice, with common good as its object, guides the relationship between individuals and the community when it focuses on the responsibility of every community member to contribute to the common good and to work for a more ordered society. The focus of general justice is on what everyone owes the common good. It is the debt every member of community owes the society.[216]

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[214] Aquinas, ST II-II, 58, 5.
[215] Porter, "The Virtue of Justice (IIa IIae, Qq.58-122)," 273.
[216] Paul J. Wadell, *Happiness and the Christian Moral Life: An Introduction to Christian Ethics*, Third Edition (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 244–45.

While general justice directs the agent to will and to do what is right for the sake of the good of a community, particular justice directs the agent to the good of other individuals.[217] In other words, the end of general justice is the common good but in the particular, it is a private good. Particular justice, in turn, can be divided into two kinds, that is, distributive justice and commutative justice.[218] The former concerns the distribution of public goods and is proper to the one who has care of the community; and the latter, commutative justice concerns relations between private individuals.

Commutative justice focuses on what a person owes other persons and what they owe her. It regulates the "give and take" of person with person. Commutative justice is satisfied when one receives something of equal value to what one gives or has taken from her. Theft and robbery are violations of commutative justice when they take what legitimately belongs to another. Lying also violates commutative justice when the liar denies another person her right to know the truth and destroys the trust that is essential for a good relationship. A person who has the virtue of commutative justice will make sure that she is not taking for herself something that is not her own. The unjust person always wants to receive more than her due. Therefore, Aquinas identifies restitution as the act of commutative justice. It is enacted by giving back what is possessed or compensations for unjust actions to the true owner.[219] Therefore, commutative justice "calls for fundamental fairness in all agreements and exchanges between individuals or private social groups. It demands respect for the equal human dignity of all persons in economic transactions, contracts, or promises."[220]

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[217] Aquinas, ST II-II, 58, 8.
[218] Aquinas, ST II-II, 61, 1.
[219] Aquinas, ST II-II, 62.
[220] Catholic Church. *Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Catholic Conference, 1986, #69.

Distributive justice, on the other hand, focuses on the relation of the community to its members. Specifically, distributive justice insists that all persons have a right to some share in the basic goods of the community, goods such as adequate food and housing, education, medical care, a fair wage, and opportunities for advancement.[221] The sort of equality required for fair distribution is not like that of commutative justice where the equality that determines fairness between individuals is arithmetical.[222] Distributive justice demands that the benefits and goods of the community are distributed to individuals according to different standards (virtue, wealth, power, expertise, need, etc.) Aquinas writes that "in distributive justice a person receives all the more of the common goods, according as he holds a more prominent position in the community."[223] Because not all individuals have equal standing in a community, so distributive justice does not demand that the benefits or goods be portioned equally to all individuals. Therefore, a fair share does not necessarily mean an equal share, but it does mean that it is unjust for certain persons or groups to have disproportionate access to the goods and benefits of a community and others have little or none. Moreover, distributive justice also maintains fairness and right other in society by ensuring that everyone can participate in the economic, political, cultural, religious and social institutions of a society.[224]

In summary, according to Thomas Aquinas, justice is primarily a personal virtue by which a person has the constant and perpetual will to render to everyone what is due to him. The virtue of justice urges us to treat each and every person in a community equally. Even though justice is primarily oriented toward others rather than oneself, it is directed to the good of all community members, including the agent. It observes what she owes other persons and community, and what

[221] Wadell, *Happiness and the Christian Moral Life*, 242.
[222] Porter, "The Virtue of Justice (IIa IIae, Qq.58-122)," 278.
[223] Aquinas, ST II-II, 62, 2.
[224] Wadell, *Happiness and the Christian Moral Life*, 243.

they owe her.[225] In other words, justice demands fairness to both parties in any transaction, whether general, distributive, or commutative.

The virtue of justice, then, is very important for Vietnamese people in general and especially necessary for Vietnamese women. Firstly, Vietnamese people need a more just society. Justice insists that society owes to each member and must render to each what is due to them. One of the debts of the Vietnamese society to Vietnamese women is the right to education and to equal status in economic and civic life.[226] As discussed in the second chapter, Vietnamese society has unjust laws and public policies that limit Vietnamese women's opportunities and foster their subordinate status and economic dependence on men. Such unjust laws and policies result in beneficial decisions for men with regard to retirement age, and limitations on professional skills and education. These laws and policies constrain Vietnamese women to opportunities for advancements and powerful social positions. At the same time, these laws encourage Vietnamese women to remain in the sphere of the household. According to the virtue of justice, these obstacles must be abolished and society must create a more just situation in which women are treated equally and enjoy their rights.

Moreover, the virtue of justice, as applied to families, calls their members toward the direction of love as mutuality or equal regard. Everyone is ordered to respect one another's rights and render what is due to them. Both husband and wife need to be attentive to other's needs and share family burdens rather than leaving everything on women's shoulders. In a mutual relationship, a wife respects the dignity and rights of her husband as seriously as she expects her spouse to respect those of her. Every right or need that she attentively gives to her husband is one

[225] Wadell, 242.
[226] The United Nations. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. 1948, art. 22.

that she must allow her husband to make on her, and the reverse is true. She can choose to sacrifice for the sake of her husband and family, but at the same time, her husband needs to do the same for the sake of his wife. In other words, the virtue of justice calls them to enter a caring, sharing, and respectful relationship in which it all can flourish. As Dawn M. Nothwehr asserts, a relationship of mutuality requires "sharing of power with, by, and among all parties in the relationship in a way that recognizes the wholeness and particular experience of each participant toward the end of optimum flourishing of all."[227] It is obviously essential for Vietnamese men to learn, be aware, and practice these requirements of the virtue of justice. But at the same time, the virtue of justice also reminds Vietnamese women of their responsibility to be just to themselves. It requires that they take responsibility to care for their own's self-fulfillment as seriously as they take care for others. In brief, the virtue of justice reminds them to practice self-care or self-love.

Besides the virtues of self-care and justice, it would be helpful for Vietnamese women to develop the virtue of prudence which directs them when, where, to what extent to show care for others, and how to be balanced between caring for herself and caring for others.

3. The Virtue of Prudence

Paul J. Wadell, suggests that a good intention is very important but it is not enough for a virtuous life. We have to know how to find the right means for a good end.[228] As mentioned in the first chapter, Vietnamese women, under the influence of culture, believe that they need to sacrifice totally, completely, and entirely for the sake of their family. However, when they forget to be just with themselves and care for themselves, they lose their own identity and they cannot even know how to love others properly. The virtue of prudence counsels them on how to make good on their intentions in loving others and caring for themselves. Self-sacrifice at all times, in all situations,

[227] Nothwehr, *Mutuality*, 233.
[228] Wadell, *The Primacy of Love*, 131.

as a rule and obligation will not lead women to achieve moral goodness or help them to flourish. In the case of Vietnamese women, self-sacrifice is often the loss of self. It would be beneficial for Vietnamese women to discern what should be done in certain situations and how to do it.

a. The Priority of Prudence

According to Aquinas, "prudence is a virtue most necessary for human life"[229] because it "guides the agent to live a self-directed life that seeks integration."[230] Joseph Pieper contends that prudence is the "cause, root, mother measure, precept guide, and prototype of all ethical virtues, it acts in all of them, perfecting them to their true nature, all participate in it, and by virtue of this participation they are virtues."[231] In other words, prudence functions as the key virtue among the other virtues – justice, fortitude, and temperance – serving to perfect and unify them.[232] It regulates the means by which these virtues operate in pursuit of their ends. It points out which course of action is to be taken and the proper way to go about it in any concrete circumstance. It lights the way and provides the measures with which virtues are exercised. Therefore, it determines the practice of each virtue within the circumstances of time, place, manner. Without prudence, courage in the pursuit of a foolish policy can become a disaster; temperance can sink into fanaticism, and justice into insensibility. In Keenan's words: "Prudence …recognizes the ends of the virtue, appoints the means so that the inclinations can attain their ends, proposes the means to the disposed moral virtues, and directs the right realization of those means."[233]

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[229] Aquinas, ST I-II, 57, 5.
[230] James F Keenan, "The Virtue of Prudence (IIa IIae, Qq.23-56)," in *The Ethics of Aquinas*, ed. Stephen J Pope (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 258.
[231] Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues*, 8.
[232] Anthony T Flood, *The Root of Friendship: Self-Love & Self-Governance in Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2014), 73.
[233] Keenan, "The Virtue of Prudence (IIa IIae, Qq.23-56)," 261.

For Aquinas, there is no possibility of virtue without prudence. No matter how well-intentioned, if one is not prudent, she cannot be virtuous.[234] That is why prudence has a privileged place among the cardinal virtues. James F. Keenan offers a concise summary of the regulating role of prudence:

> Prudence has a privileged among the cardinal virtues: it recognizes the ends to which a person is naturally inclined, it establishes the agenda by which one can pursue those ends, it directs the agent's own performance of the pursued activity, and finally, it measures the rightness of the actions taken.[235]

Thomas Aquinas defines prudence as "right reason applied to action."[236] Prudence has the intellect as its subject when it enables a person to make judgments that are ordered to a proper end.[237] It perfects the intellect to determine and command the best way of attaining an intended end. Besides that, one must know how to realize that intention in the individual act in a given situation. For example, it is not enough for one who wants to care for others to practice self-sacrifice indiscriminately. She must determine beforehand who needs her care, how and when to offer help, when to take care of herself and when to prioritize others. It is the virtue of prudence that performs this function. It measures individual acts in relation to virtuous goals and chooses those acts which best realize the goals.

Thus, prudence is an intellectual virtue but it concerns practical judgment. It determines what is to be done in a particular situation, not simply to know what it is, but to know what ought to be done and how to get the good in the right way. Aquinas writes, "A good life consists in good deeds. In order to do good deeds, it matters not only what a man does, but also how he does it; to wit, that he does it from right choice and not merely from impulse or passion. And, since choice is

[234] Wadell, *The Primacy of Love*, 130.
[235] Keenan, "The Virtue of Prudence (IIa IIae, Qq.23-56)," 259.
[236] Aquinas, ST II-II, 47, 8.
[237] Aquinas, ST I-II, 57, 5.

about things in reference to the end, rectitude of choice requires two things: namely, the due end, and something suitably ordained to that due end."[238] Thus, prudence is not simply about what is the best way of achieving a moral good in a general sense, but rather what is the best way for me to achieve the particular good in a particular situation with suitable means. Each situation calls us to do good, but each situation is different, hence we have to achieve the good in different way.

Josef Pieper captures the essential note of prudence when he describes it as the "perfected ability to make right decisions."[239] Pieper's description indicates that making right decisions may not be as easy as people sometimes think. What should one do if the demands of a job conflict with her responsibilities to her family? Are there times when it is all right to read a book or talk to friends and let her husband to do the house chores? What does it mean to seek the good of each of her friends? To work for what is best for them? The answers to these questions are complex and cannot be the same thing for everyone because all people are unique in needs, talents, worries, and concerns. Moral rules and guidelines could help, but they cannot always tell her precisely what needs to be done. The reason is that moral principles and guidelines are necessarily general in order to apply to a wide variety of situations. However, one's task is to do good not in some general and abstract way, but in the particular and concrete situation which is often complex, messy, and uncertain. A virtuous person is one who can see what a situation requires, enables, and constrains. She knows that it is never enough to know what ought to be done simply by following a rule in a concrete and particular situation.[240] This is why Aquinas contends that the more we consider the particular details of a situation, the more we realize how often general principles admit of exceptions. He writes, "Although there is necessity in the general principles, the more we descend

[238] Aquinas, ST I-II, 57, 5.
[239] Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues*, 6.
[240] Wadell, *The Primacy of Love*, 130.

to matters of detail, the more frequently we encounter defects."[241] Some discernment and wisdom are required, and that is what prudence supplies.[242] As Paul Wadell puts it, "prudence is the moral skill to know what needs to be done in the situation before us and how to do it."[243] A prudent person knows how to find the right means for a good end and how to put ends and means together.

Although prudence concerns how to achieve the good in a particular situation of our everyday behavior, it is not only about the particular action before us. On the contrary, Keenan states, "prudence is the virtue that looks forward to the overall end of life and sets all subsequent agendas for attaining that end and all intermediate ends."[244] Its interest is knowing how to act so that we can accomplish the final end of human life, that is happiness or being friends of God. Prudence knows how to make a particular act serve the overall purpose of human life. Aquinas says that "Prudence is of good counsel about matters regarding a man's life in its entirety, and its last end…. Those only are such who are of good counsel about what concerns the whole of human life" (ST. I-II. 57.4). The virtue of prudence allows one to find proper means for one's own ultimate end. It guides one to read daily reality in the light of eternal happiness and by all relevant information, one would decide how these decisions lead oneself to the ultimate goal of life.

In short, prudence as "practical reason applied to action" is the virtue that perfects the intellect to determine and command the best way of attaining an end. It grasps how to achieve the overall end of life as well as the more immediate goals in all the situations which confront a person here and now. Since prudence deals in particulars, Aquinas identifies a number of intellectual qualities as integral parts of prudence, without which a person cannot discern what needs to be done and how to do it in the given situation.

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[241] Aquinas, ST I-II, 94, 4.
[242] Wadell, *Happiness and the Christian Moral Life*, 202.
[243] Wadell, *The Primacy of Love*, 130.
[244] Keenan, *Moral Wisdom*, 144.

b. Components of Prudence

Prudence is necessary to lead a good life.[245] It brings ingenuity to our good intentions and intelligence and thoughtfulness to our actions so that the good we aim to attain is actually done. Aquinas notes that such prudence involves three acts: counsel, judgment, and command.

> Prudence is right reason applied to action…hence that which is the chief act of reason in regard to action must needs be the chief act of prudence. Now there are three such acts. The first is to take counsel, which belongs to discovery, for counsel is an act of inquiry…The second act is to judge of what one has discovered, and this is an act of the speculative reason. but the practical reason, which is directed to action, goes further, and its third act is to command, which act consists in applying to action the things counseled and judged.[246]

Therefore, prudence is the virtue whereby a person consults her own moral knowledge, applies that knowledge to the given situation, and then commands the most appropriate action.[247] In his analysis of the virtue, Aquinas identified eight components of prudence, five of which aid in the process of counsel and judgment, and three that pertain to command or putting into action one's judgment.[248]

Aquinas lists *memory*[249] as the first component of prudence because prudence develops from the experience of making either good or bad decisions and learning from them. When we have to determine what we ought to do in a given situation, we usually consider our past to see if we have ever encountered similar situations to get some insight and guidance. Parents recall lessons learned from raising a first child for insight about how to help raising their second child. A woman can return to overwhelming experiences by excessive care for her family and learn to do things differently. That is why memories of past experiences can be helpful when one is

[245] Aquinas, ST I-II, 57, 5.
[246] Aquinas, ST, II-II, 47, 8.
[247] Flood, *The Root of Friendship*, 81.
[248] Flood, 74.
[249] Aquinas, ST, II-II, 49, 1.

struggling to discern what to do now. In Anthony T. Flood's words: "Memory is the chief experiential safeguard against the formation of bad habits through poor choices."[250]

The second component of prudence is *understanding.*[251] Understanding is the capacity to grasp and determine the morally relevant features of a given situation. It can be understood as the ability to see into a situation with both advantages and disadvantages of possible courses of action. Besides that, it is also the capacity of understanding the particular moral principles or rules which have to be applied to the situation. With this second element of prudence, one can grasp what goods and values might be protected as well as what goods and values might be lost in a decision.[252]

Docility, which is the readiness to be receptive to and learn from the counsel of others, especially from the wise, is the third element of prudence.[253] Because the situations one confronts in life are of "infinite variety" and "no one can consider them all sufficiently," one must "carefully, frequently, and reverently" seeks the guidance of the learned and wise.[254] When a person takes the counsel of others, she exercises her prudence in selecting trustworthy and experienced counselors. A prudent person will be willing to learn from others because no one can be expert in all branches of life and all kinds of people.

The fourth element of prudence is the ability to *reason* well or deliberate about what needs to be done. Reasoning well is the ability to infer from the general to the particular and to put facts together. Aquinas explains that "deliberation" requires moving from one point to another,[255] and applies universals to particular matters.[256] In order to arrive at a prudent decision in a complicated

[250] Flood, *The Root of Friendship*, 76.
[251] Aquinas, ST, II-II, 49, 2.
[252] Wadell, *Happiness and the Christian Moral Life*, 203.
[253] Aquinas, ST, II-II, 49, 3.
[254] Aquinas.
[255] Aquinas, ST, II-II, 49, 5 ad 3.
[256] Aquinas, ST, II-II, 49, 5 ad 2.

situation, there is a need of clear and acute reasoning. Clear reasoning is important in as much as it bears on what one understands the given particular situation.

However, sometimes one needs to make a quick decision because she does not have time to go slowly, to seek the counsel of others, or to think about a similar situation from her past. In such cases, one needs shrewdness,[257] an ability to see quickly what are the best means to a given end. In Aquinas's words: "Shrewdness is a habit whereby congruities are discovered rapidly."[258]

All these qualities are concerned with the capacity to sum up a situation and to form a judgment after consideration of the past and of things as they are now. The final three qualities of prudence are concerned with actually putting into action one's judgment. Anthony T. Flood rightly observes that "a person can deliberate about the best course of action, make a judgment concerning what he thinks best, and then fail to act on that judgment"[259] A complete act of prudence, then, involves not only counsel and judgment, but also command which consists in caution, circumspection, and foresight.

Caution summons one to proceed carefully in order to be aware of all things that might hinder the good being done. It is the awareness that concrete situations "in which the false is found with the true, so evil is mingled with good" or "evil has the appearance of good."[260] Caution then helps the person separate the right from the wrong in action in order to be sure that what she finally does is really right, not what only appears to be right.

Moreover, when a person acts, she must be mindful of the consequences of her actions. Aquinas calls it "*foresight*" – the ability to see ahead, to see the possible consequences. A prudent person knows that her actions have consequences, so she looks to these consequences and tries to

[257] Aquinas, ST, II-II, 49, 4.
[258] Aquinas.
[259] Flood, *The Root of Friendship*, 78.
[260] Aquinas, ST, II-II, 49, 8.

discern how they fit into her personal happiness or her goal. Will hiring a helper to take care of the children and elderly parents result in good or bad consequences for herself and her family? As Pieper explains, foresight is an "instinct for the future," the skill of being able to estimate the outcome of an action before taking it.[261]

Finally, a prudent person also has *circumspection*, a capacity to pay careful attention to circumstances.[262] It sees what is suitable here and now in existing circumstances. Circumstances are so important that sometimes an act that might be fitting in one situation may bring harm in another situation. Aquinas himself gives the example of showing love and affection at an appropriate time. Showing affection to loved ones is good, but at the wrong time, it could bring suspicions of one's motives.

Listing all these eight factors that characterize the intellectual virtue of prudence helps us to understand the virtue better. Prudence is complex; it is practical wisdom about what it takes to live a good life overall and how to do what is right and good. Moreover, through prudence, each person puts herself in the best position to pursue and to obtain the good through her own agency. Anthony T. Flood asserts that through prudence, a person "governs his life for the sake of leading and directing himself to the good or happiness."[263] By prudence, a person consults her own moral knowledge, applies that knowledge to the given situation, and then commands the most appropriate action. Some circumstances may require the teaching of others in order to make the best decision, but she practices her prudence in selecting the trustworthy or wise ones as a reliable source of moral knowledge. Thus, prudence helps a person to empower her moral agency by making her own decisions with a critical mind.

[261] Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues*, 18.
[262] Aquinas, ST, II-II, 7.
[263] Flood, *The Root of Friendship*, 81.

Given the collectivist culture in Vietnam, the virtue of prudence is extremely important. Recall that a collectivist culture in Vietnam gives communal assessment as the highest standard according to which people have to modify their behaviors and attitudes. This standard limits their ability to ask critical questions, to make their own decisions, and to take responsibility for their happiness. This culture encourages Vietnamese girls and women to passively accept the burdens of self-sacrifice on behalf of the family's reputation and harmony. With a critical mind, the Vietnamese can be aware of unjust practices imposed on women's shoulders, question them, and have a chance to fight for their rights. They also can make their own decisions in order to pursue and obtain the good – their flourishing or happiness – rather than blindly following the traditional standards of an "ideal Vietnamese woman" as "interior marshal" or "following one." Moreover, the virtue of prudence also calls the Vietnamese people to evaluate their traditional virtues and practices and determine whether these practices are good for the development and flourishing of the individuals.

Furthermore, the virtue of prudence could help Vietnamese women maintains the tension between self-love and self-sacrifice. As discussed in the section on justice, Vietnamese women are just with everyone in so far as they always render what is due to everyone. They often offer more than what is just for their husbands and children but not for themselves. That is why they need to take responsibility to care for their own self-fulfillment as seriously as they take care for others. In other words, they need to practice self-care or self-love. In the following section, we will discuss how they could find a balance between self-care and self-sacrifice through the virtue of prudence so that their self-sacrifice would be practiced in a proper way.

4. Prudence, Self-Love, and Self-Sacrifice of Vietnamese Women.

Love for self and love for others frequently overlap in ordinary life. Within the context of marriage, sometimes one needs to sacrifice her own needs for the needs of others, for example, when a woman chooses a simple and frugal lifestyle in order to save for her children's education, or when she cares for a dying spouse, or when a pregnant woman follows the instructions of a doctor for the sake of her baby. Not all love of neighbor is reciprocal or immediately mutual.

Living in an imperfect world, life sometimes is messy and one can experience conflicting demands among these loves. Prudence as "right reason applied to action" is necessary for a virtuous life. It points out which course of action to follow and the right way to do it in any concrete circumstance. It lights the way and provides the measures with which virtues are exercised. Therefore, it determines for each virtue how it can be practiced within the circumstances of time, place, and manner. As James F. Keenan asserts: "Prudence is always vigilantly looking for the future, trying … to realize the claims of justice, fidelity and self-care in the here and now."[264] In other words, prudence helps each virtue to shape and pursue its end and helps a person to discern where, when, and to what extend that a virtue should be exercised.

Therefore, prudence reminds Vietnamese women about their responsibility to take care of themselves. Self-sacrifice at all times and in all situations could lead them to the loss of sense, then, it would be harmful to their being and flourishing. Vietnamese women, unfortunately, have been encouraged and educated to think that the virtuous wife is the one who gives herself entirely, totally, completely to her spouse and children without care for herself. In my experience, I have met many wonderful Vietnamese women who have devoted all their lives to their husbands, children, and even grandchildren. For the sake of family, they sacrifice all their wishes, dreams,

[264] Keenan, *Moral Wisdom*, 148.

and even their own fulfillment. If we ask them: do you have wishes and dreams for their own lives? They will say that they had had many but because of the sake of family, they even did not dare to think about it because when they do so, they think that they are selfish and are not good women as expected by their family and society. On the contrary, prudence claims that it is legitimate for them to care for themselves. To love others, one needs to be loved and to be transformed by the experience of genuine and true love. The development and direction of self-love shape how a person relates to others, as each person relates to others so she relates to herself.

Moreover, through our own experiences or *memory*, prudence reminds us that it is impossible to do good to everyone at all times. That is why Aquinas establishes three specific criteria for limiting the scope and binding force of the practical requirements of practicing love for others: by reason of place, by reason of time, and by reason of circumstance. He writes, "We ought to consider those chiefly who by reason of place, time, or any other circumstances, by a kind of chance we are more closely united to us."[265] According to Aquinas, love does not oblige us always to sacrifice ourselves for the good of others; it does not require us to provide for the needs of all people. Rather, we ought to love more those who are more closely connected with us, since "the affection of love increases in proportion to the nearness to one."[266] However, circumstances sometimes warrant prioritizing the needs of strangers. Others without a close relationship may have priority when their need is much greater or when they are particularly virtuous.[267] Thus, the virtue of prudence enables us to discern and know when we should prioritize the needs of ourselves, or the needs of our family, or the needs of strangers. Edward Collins Vacek, S.J., rightly claims, "To be sure, we ought to not be mindlessly self-sacrificial. A discerning prudence is called

[265] Aquinas, ST, II-II, 26, 6.
[266] Aquinas.
[267] Aquinas, II, II-II, 32, 9.

for. Not simply the prudence of self-interest, not a prudence that simply calculates costs/benefits, but a prudence that restrains self-sacrifice until it is our time to take up our cross and follow Christ. When that time is, only a lover's heart can say."[268]

In "Love Understood as Self-Sacrifice and Self-Denial: What Does It Do to Women?" Gill-Austern gives two examples showing how to live prudently in a life-giving relationship which I think is very suitable for Vietnamese women. The first example is the Good Samaritan (Lk 10: 25-37) who takes care of the victim but does not cancel his journey. He does not give up his plans or sacrifice his own needs and plans to the need of the victim.[269] Encountering the real need of the victim and his own needs, the virtue of prudence enables him to consider all possible solutions and choose what is the most suitable way to act in this particular occasion. He freely decides to take care of the wounded man he meets on the road, and then he asks the innkeeper to care of the victim. Then he continues on his journey. Both women and men are called to love, but it does not mean a relinquishment of all their own needs or agendas for the sake of the other, nor does it mean that we alone are required to care.[270] The virtue of prudence, then, helps Vietnamese women to consider which need is more important at the present moment and how to do it. It will also help them to find a way to live in a life-giving way and, at the same time, to have a flourishing life.

The second image of a prudent loving relationship is the story of Mary and Martha (Lk 10: 38-42.) In the story, love is not related simply to serving but also to receiving and knowing what is required when. Love requires active doing, but at the same time, it also requires time to sit, to be nurtured, and to receive love. The virtue of prudence determines when is a time to give and

[268] Vacek, *Love, Human and Divine*, 184.
[269] Gill-Austern, "Love Understood as Self-Sacrifice and Self-Denial: What Does It Do to Women?," 316.
[270] Gill-Austern, 317.

when will be the time to receive; when will be a time to serve and a time to be served. As Nodding points out, if love is maintained, the one loving must be maintained.[271]

With the virtue of prudence, Vietnamese women can follow their heart to decide what and in what way they should sacrifice for the good of the beloved; at the same time, they know when and in what way they should care for themselves by healthy eating, regular sleeping, working, learning new skills, setting and pursuing personal goals, and fostering a supportive relationship. Therefore, the virtue of prudence can help Vietnamese women to balance between the love of self and love of others. A prudent woman will know when to take care of herself and when to prioritize her family. She knows when to take a rest, take time to read a book, or follow her interests and desires. In situations that need to prioritize the needs of their husbands and children, prudence can help them to discern and freely choose to do so in a proper way as a free agent rather than doing so simply as a duty or responsibility. It is true that some Vietnamese women voluntarily choose to sacrifice themselves for others because they freely choose it. They do so because they love their husband, children, and family. The virtue of prudence enables them to realize that they need to continue to guard their own self-care, communicate honestly about their own needs, maintain their identity, and establish limits for a loving relationship.[272] It can be said that by maintaining the tension between self-love and love for her family through prudence, she is contributing a true mutual and reciprocal love. Don Browning asserts, "love as equal regard is not something that one individual expresses unilaterally toward another. It is something that people create together…through successive attempts to communicate needs and desires, to listen and to understand, to empathize with, hold and accept, and then to live their mutual agreements."[273]

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[271] Gill-Austern, 317.
[272] Reimer-Barry, "Suffering or Flourishing? Marriage and the Imitation of Christ," 145.
[273] Browning, *From Culture Wars to Common Ground*, 127.

Conclusion

Insights drawn from the analysis of Thomas Aquinas' account of the virtues can help Vietnamese women to realize that not all self-sacrifice is good and moral. Without prudence, self-care, and justice, self-sacrifice could lead them to the loss of their selves. More concretely, Vietnamese women sometimes do not understand the necessity of self-love in a virtuous life. They confuse self-care or self-love with selfishness. In contrast, self-love is the foundation of love for others and one of the cardinal virtues. An emphasis on the virtue of self-care can be of great importance in the Vietnamese context in which there are still many women who must involuntarily sacrifice themselves for the good of others. The virtue of self-care helps a woman to acknowledge her indispensable values and develops them so that she can have a flourishing life. In terms of the language of virtue, a Vietnamese woman can freely choose to sacrifice herself for the good of others. It is also clear that this sacrifice is not only done by women, rather, it should be done by all, both men and women.

Most Vietnamese women do not realize that they have rights and responsibility to care for themselves. They too often think that they must always care and render rights for others. The virtue of justice reminds them that others and society owe something to them too. Every right or need that they attentively give to their husbands is one that they must allow their husbands to make on them. At the same time, justice requires that they take responsibility to care for their own's self-fulfillment as seriously as they take care for others.

Moreover, Vietnamese women often find themselves in situations that require many responsibilities toward husbands, children, and family. In these circumstances, it is important that they learn and practice the virtue of prudence through careful and appropriate discernment. The virtue of prudence can help Vietnamese women to discern and know what should be done in a

given situation; when to prioritize their needs or the needs of others; and how to do it. In other words, prudence can dictate what and in what way one should act for the good of the beloved; at the same time she does not negate her own self. More importantly, prudence can help Vietnamese women to discern and freely choose to sacrifice for their loved ones in a proper way as a free agent rather than doing so simply as a duty or responsibility. Prudence safeguards that sacrifice, if it is to be done, comes from freedom of choice and is a fruit of true love.

"When that time is, only a lover's heart can say!"[274] In the perspective of Vietnamese anthropology, one's heart is not only the faculty of willing but also that of thinking and reasoning. In other words, the Vietnamese believe that one is able to think with one's heart. A lover finds in our imperfect world opportunities to express her love to the beloved and to grow in a loving relationship. For Christians, it is also important to remember that God is the origin of love and to love is to participate in the love of God. As a result, the first and basic movement of Christian love is to open oneself to the love of God that transforms and gives strength so that one can love others in the right manner, at the right time, and with the right reason. Vacek rightly reminds us that "The sacrifice we make for others should not be simply our own autonomous acts of generosity, but must be warranted as ways of participating in God's love. The special love we have for ourselves must likewise be warranted as a way of participating in this love. That is, we have to make choices between our own fulfillment and another's fulfillment, but these choices should be part of handing ourselves over to God in love."[275]

[274] Vacek, *Love, Human and Divine*, 184.
[275] Vacek, 270.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

The aim of this thesis is to argue that an honorable virtue such as self-sacrifice in an unjust structure and culture runs the risk of becoming a vice. By definition, self-sacrifice is a beautiful virtue of Vietnamese people when people give attentive care for one another, offer respect and support for others, and foster relationships of harmony among members of family and society. It can be an essential element of an authentic and mutual love. But it can only be so when it comes from freedom of choice and thus be the fruit of a true love.

A true love has to be mutual love and the person who practices this love must grow in the experience of love. Unfortunately, under the restrictions and incentives of structural sexism and collectivism in Vietnamese society, self-sacrifice becomes a compulsive obligation and duty rather than self-giving or voluntary service which can offer true freedom and mutual benefit to one another.

For Vietnamese women, sacrifice for men, whether father, husband, or son, is an inevitable part of their life. Sacrifice completely, totally, and entirely leads Vietnamese women to the loss of their own needs and desires, which in turn often leads to a loss of a sense of self and opposes their flourishing. For this reason, it is necessary to eliminate or at least reduce the conditions that prevent women from exercising their moral agency and from developing all their potential capacities by which they are able to attain human flourishing. To do so, it is important to insist on the truth that each person has to be respected as a person, not as a means.

True and genuine love is a relationship in which each person finds her own genuine self and flourishing; in the union of love, each is ready to give up herself for the good of others but in this action of the giving, she finds herself in a more genuine and more flourished condition.

Because of restrictions and oppression by unjust structures, somehow, Vietnamese women fail to cultivate and develop certain virtues that they need in order to flourish. Therefore, it is extremely important for them to cultivate the virtues of self-love, justice, and prudence so as to have a flourishing life. The virtue of self-love will enable them to recognize their indispensable and intrinsic value. When they care for their own needs, desires, and accomplishments, they acknowledge that they are valuable, worthy, and deserving of happiness.

Most Vietnamese women do not realize that they have rights and responsibility to care for themselves. They too often think that they must always care and render rights for others. The virtue of justice reminds them that others and society owe something to them too. Finally, the virtue of prudence helps Vietnamese women to claim their sense of self by helping them to discern and freely choose as a free agent. It also enables them to know when and how to take care of themselves and when and how to take care of others.

Moreover, our analysis also demonstrates that virtue takes on a particular color and meaning in a specific social, cultural, and structural context.[276] An evaluation of a virtue needs to be addressed from a broader perspective. In this sense, Catholic social teaching should learn from the insights of other sciences. More precisely, this thesis shows how Critical Realism can help to deepen the account of "social sin" according to Catholic social teaching. Furthermore, given the limits and constraints of the complicated situation under the Communist government in Vietnam, to what extent can the local Vietnamese churches address and apply insights of the Catholic social teaching? Due to constraints and enablements will the Vietnamese church be ready to pay a serious or deadly price in the name of justice and the flourishing of all?

[276] Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise*, 32–33.

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