

Selflessness

Selflessness is an ambiguous noun with rich connotations. On the one hand the term seems to suggest a condition in which to imagine an individual or condition without a self. (What could this be?) On the other hand, what we find, as we track the historical development of this term, is that the absence of self here equates to a space for giving, a generosity within the self-less person, which can make of the selfless person a veritable prince of generosity.

In the notion of selflessness, therefore, we seem directed toward the principal trait of a person who gives minimum attention to his/her self, and maximum attention to what he/she can give forth to others from his/her emptied self. The virtue put into construction, in the unfolding of the noun *selflessness*, is arguably—take it as you like— the most Christlike action available to the believer inside the Christian community.

It takes no arguing to see why selflessness is no treasured virtue in a capital-industrial culture. (Probably selflessness, at its extreme, is best seen as the working ground of mystics like Theresa of Avila, who sought to obliterate all barriers like selfhood, which got in the way of her direct relationship to her Savior.) In Capitalism, as it grew into the shaping social doctrine of the modern industrial world, the criteria that counted were material success and predominance of personal power. While the Church has made sustained efforts to reconcile sanctity with well-being, the origins of the Christian cult in pain and giving, have stuck to it like glue.