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The Charism of Charity in East Asian Culture: Reinterpretation of the Spirit Of Simplicity, Humility, and Charity

BY

SUNG-HAE KIM, S.C.

Introduction

When I joined the Sisters of Charity in 1965, one week after my college graduation, the community was tiny with six American Sisters, all who worked in a countryside school located at the southwest-ern tip of the Korean peninsula. The initial team of four came to South Korea from Greensburg in 1960 by the request of the late Archbishop Harold Henry, a Columban heading the archdiocese of Kwangju. Now after thirty-seven years the Korean Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill have grown into a province with 199 members which include: eighty-two finally professed (among whom three Sisters are Americans), fifty-nine temporary professed, and fifty-eight in novitiate training. The apostolate extends to forty-one houses, encompassing twenty-nine parishes, two schools for the handicapped, two high schools, four daycare centers for children, two welfare centers, three retreat centers, and outreach programs in Chicago and Changchun, China.

This outward growth is surely the fruit of God's blessing, for which we are very grateful. However, today I am obliged to examine the inner life of the Korean community: how we are inheriting the charism of charity from Mother Seton and Saints Vincent and Louise. In order to secure an objective vantage point I carried out a simple questionnaire on "The Practice of Mother Seton's Charism" during the provincial assembly in 21 August 1996. One hundred six Sisters having first vows and above answered the questionnaire, which has been analyzed and interpreted by a social anthropologist, Professor Okla Cho of Sogang University. She analyzed not only the hard data, but the thirteen pages of comments written by the Sisters. I carried out several interviews to confirm the analysis and interpretation.

To the question "How do you feel about living the charism of Mother Seton as a Korean residing in East Asia?" 72.6% answered that "Since Mother Seton's spirituality is universal, it fits well with our culture." 4.7% answered that "Sometimes I feel the gap coming from the different cultural background." 12.3% answered that "It has been and has to be continually reinterpreted to overcome the cultural difference." 10.3% either did not think about it or did not answer. According to cross tabulation of this question and the age of respondents, 25.1% of those in their twenties felt a cultural gap and the need of reinterpretation. As the age grows older this need decreases to 16.2% (thirties) and 12.6% (forties).

To another question, "Among the three virtues, charity, humility, simplicity, and the presence of God, which item is closest to your heart?" The hard data is fairly distributed. But the analytic interpretation of soft data (comments) reveals a lot more complexity. Professor Cho sent me a written report that the strong point by which the Sisters find strength in their daily life is the presence of God. Through prayers and holy communion the Sisters confirm the divine presence, and there is concrete recognition of that presence. She continued that the Sisters' understanding of charity is rather abstract, and they perceive simplicity mainly in the line of living poorly materially. Consequently, the perception that simplicity is living what is most essential is generally lacking, and so the recognition that humility is accepting one's own limitation and weakness is not so apparent. Professor Cho's conclusion is that charism is understood in a somewhat abstract manner, and it might be the reason why the Sisters themselves expressed a need for re-education.

I was consoled to know that there is a lively awareness of the presence of God in the daily life of the Sisters. Probably there has been a happy convergence between Korean traditional faith in Heaven's encompassing presence and Mother Seton's fervent devotion to God's presence among us especially expressed in the Eucharist. Then, why do not the Korean Sisters of Charity feel that they have fully embodied the spirit of charity, humility, and simplicity in spite of their lively apostolates and rapid growth of membership? Perhaps it is a healthy sign that the Sisters feel they need to deepen their charism because the charism is a living thing, always growing, changing, developing. It is interesting that many lay people and religious with whom they minister feel that they have embodied the charism of charity very well.

Various reasons for this discrepancy between how they feel and how others feel about them can be given, such as the short period of experience in religious life (average ten years), contemporary tendency weighing on the side of works, the scarcity of written material and educational seminars in Korean, etc. But I feel that perhaps the critical factor is a cultural one: we have been very open and eager in respecting and incorporating the expressions of Korean culture such as house arrangement, customs, courtesy, and hospitality. But we might not put enough effort into exploring the deeper level of spirituality. Actually this tendency is shared by every facet of the Korean Church, and I would not be surprised if similar findings emerged if other religious communities or lay spirituality were analyzed. Recently, Koreans in general have been so busy chasing after development, that our humanity, ethical integrity, and spiritual depth were set aside. Before I go into the possible ways of bridging the cultural gap between the Vincentian and Setonian charism and the East Asian spirituality, I would like to mention three interviews which I carried out in other parts of East Asia. Taking advantage of inter-religious conferences which I was attending, I met three Daughters of Charity in Thailand, Taiwan, and Japan. During one-to-two hours' interviews I posed the following four questions:

1. What does Mother Seton mean to you?
2. How does her charism affect your apostolate?
3. How does her charism affect your community in Asia?
4. Is her charism still effective in our contemporary society?

Sister Myrna Porto, a Filipino Daughter of Charity working in the Asian Bishops' Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs in Thailand, told me that Mother Seton's word, "Be the daughters of the Church" has always been the guiding light for her.¹ With this light she could reach far beyond her congregation and the Catholic Church. The Daughters of Charity in Thailand (thirty-two Sisters, including nine Thais, with twenty-five years of history) are positively exploring ways to live and work in a predominantly Buddhist culture. Sister Myrna told me that the Asian notion of charity is 'interconnectedness' which forms a strong sense of community. According to her, the Seton legacy complements well with that of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise who gave us the core insight of our service, "Seeing Christ in the poor."

¹ Sister Myrna Porto, D.C., interview by author, Pattaya, 25 April 1994.

I met Sister Emma Lee, a Chinese daughter of Charity in Taipei.² She has been working networking personnel between different dioceses of Taiwan as well as some parts of mainland China. She frankly told me that Mother Seton does not mean as much as Saint Vincent and Saint Louise to her, for her community (forty Sisters including one-third Chinese since 1958) originated from Spain and only later some Filipino and American Sisters joined them. Even though she agreed that we should bring together the good values of both the East and West, it is clearly the option for the poor as a prophetic voice today that attracted her. It seemed to me that she was trying to overcome the stagnant image of the Catholic Church, generally held by the Taiwanese today, by activating Christian commitment to the poor which has been challenged by Buddhist activities.

The third person whom I interviewed was Sister Mary Moran, a Daughter of Charity from Saint Louis, living in Japan since 1954.³ Twenty years earlier in 1933, however, six daughters of Charity were sent to Japan from Paris, and the two groups were united in 1963. Now Japan is a province with eighty-seven Sisters (eighty-two Japanese and five missionaries). Sister Mary emphasized the burning zeal of Japanese Daughters of Charity for the poor, whether they are socially alienated Burakumin, or street people in the largest Japanese slum in Osaka. Except for a small number of Sisters who had the chance to visit Emmitsburg, most Japanese Sisters go to Paris for retreats and seminars and accept Saint Vincent and Saint Louise as the founders of their charism. She does not seem to have noticed any cultural gap. She said that it is the service of the poor that unites all peoples and cultures. I had a lingering thought after the interview, however, that one of the major reasons why Christianity has not gained more than 1% of the Japanese population is that it is still perceived as a foreign religion.

After the above three interviews, I came to realize that it is only through human contact that charism is transmitted and that for the Daughters of Charity in East Asia, Mother Seton is only one of the examples who embodied Vincentian spirituality, while for Korean Sisters of Charity Mother Seton is the fountainhead through which Vincen-tian spirituality flows in and out. At the end, however, both Saint Vin-cent and Mother Seton wanted us to focus our vision on Jesus instead of on them, who are inspiring companions on our journey to God.

² Sister Emma Lee, D.C., interview by author, 20 April 1996.

³ Sister Mary Moran, D.C., interview by author, Kyoto, 13 January 1997.

I. The Spirit of Charity, Humility, and Simplicity in Saint Vincent's Conferences

Saint Vincent started his conferences to the Daughters of Charity in 1634 in order to explain the meaning of the regulations by which they should live. But it was in 1653 when he (at the age of seventy-two) clearly defined the spirit of the company as the soul which animates the body. It took almost twenty years for Saint Vincent to point to the core, the life force, the particular gift of God which energizes this community of women. It has been pointed out that it was even later in 1658 just two years before his death, that he stressed the significance of the network of the five virtues: simplicity, humility, gentleness, mortification, and zeal for souls for the male Congregation of the Mission.⁴

In February 1653 he gave three conferences which dealt with the spirit of the Company (2.2., 2.9., 2.24.).

You should know then, my dear Sisters, that the Spirit of your Company consists of three things: to love Our Lord and serve Him in a spirit of humility and simplicity. As long as charity, humility and simplicity exist amongst you, one may say: 'The Company of Charity is still alive,' but when these virtues are no longer to be seen, then one may say: 'The poor Company of Charity is dead.' ... Just as the soul is the life of the body, the day on which charity, humility and simplicity are no longer to be seen in the Company, the poor Company of charity will be dead; yes, it will be dead.⁵

In this famous talk Saint Vincent interchangeably used the terms 'spirit' and 'virtues.' The spirit is the soul that gives life to the body, which animates, nourishes, and guides all of our decisions and actions. Virtues are moral qualities acquired by a person through constant habits. Charism, on the other hand, has a strong connotation of a gift freely bestowed from high above for the benefit of others. In other words, simplicity, humility and charity are originally charisms, for they are gifts from God; but once given to a human being they form the animating spirit or soul that vivifies our life; when this charism is preserved as a living spirit of a person for a certain period of time,

⁴ W. Barry Moriarty, "Virtues of the Congregation of the Mission," *Vincentian Heritage* 15 (1994): 2.

⁵ Joseph Leonard, C.M., trans., *The Conferences of St. Vincent De Paul to the Sisters of Charity*, vol. 2 (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1952), 206.

virtues are formed in our personality and so they become visible symbols that identify us both personally and communally. These three notions are interlinked closely, for charism, though a free gift of God, cannot be transmitted unless it is embodied in concrete human beings as their spirit and virtues.

Therefore, at the end of this conference Saint Vincent prayed to God in the manner of Jesus' farewell prayer for his disciples: "Make them Thy instruments, O my God, and give them and me, wretched sinner that I am, the grace to carry out all our actions through charity, humility and simplicity for the assistance of our neighbor."⁶

What strikes me in these conferences on the spirit of the company is that Saint Vincent was not only convinced that the spirit of charity, humility, and simplicity is a sign of life and death for the company, but he did not hesitate to use a persuasive rhetorical hermeneutics that this happened all in God's eternal plan: "Yes, my Savior, Thou hast waited until now to fashion a Company which carries on the work Thou didst begin."⁷ He even suggested that although all Christians have to practice these three virtues, Daughters of Charity are destined to be more attentive to put them into practice. He also brought up another question, whether the Daughters are bound to practice all the other virtues as well. Then he concluded that "but you are bound to practice these three especially; heaven and earth call on you to do so."⁸ The practice of charity, humility, and simplicity is the matter of life and death for the individual Sister and the company as a whole, for it has a cosmic value mandated by heaven and earth.

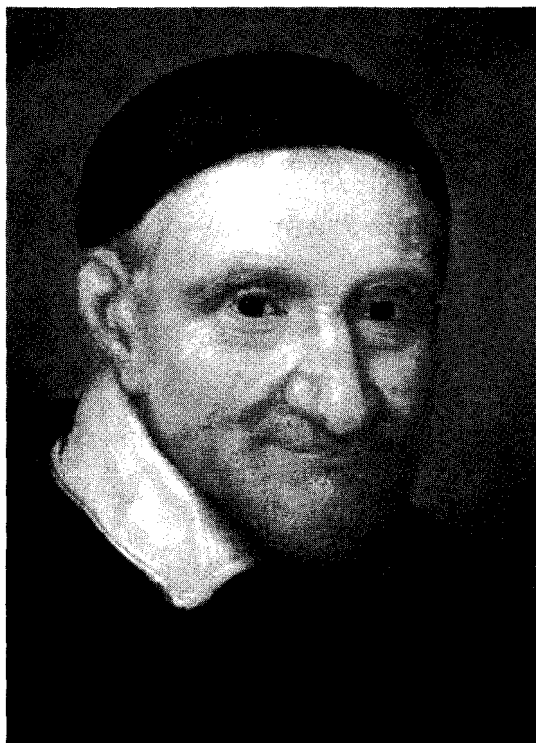
Then, Saint Vincent came to single out each virtue and add more explanation. First he divided the virtue of charity into affective and effective; the affective aspect of charity comes out as tenderness toward our Lord, the poor, and one another; effective charity serves the poor both in body and soul by care and instruction. A love of lowliness safeguards the true practice of charity. Saint Vincent understood simplicity as mutual honesty and sincerity: "I repeat, if it is necessary to make a statement to our superiors, give an account of things just as they are, conceal nothing; you are under an obligation to be simple with one another, and sisters who are not so are double dealing."⁹ It seems to me

⁶ *Ibid.*, 208.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 205.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 207.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 216.



Saint Vincent de Paul (1581-1660)

Elizabeth Ann Seton adopted a modified version of the *Common Rules of the Daughters of Charity* for her community.

that Saint Vincent had a special attraction toward simplicity so much so that he called it 'my gospel': "As for myself, I don't know, but God has given me such a high esteem of simplicity that I call it my Gospel. I have a particular devotion to, and a special consolation in, saying things just as they are."¹⁰

Saint Vincent advised Sisters to pray for these virtues to God as often as they can, for as gifts from God they are the very life of their soul. At the same time everyone also has to strive to acquire these virtues: "Well now, my dear Sisters, let us resolve to be perfect, at no matter what cost, and let us say every day: 'I desire to be charitable, humble and simple.'"¹¹ According to the vision of Saint Vincent, the perfection of a Sister of Charity is a transparency through which the love of Jesus shines forth in humble simplicity.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 217.

II. The Spirit of Charity, Humility and Simplicity in Mother Seton

Interestingly enough, Mother Seton did not speak of the three virtues together as the soul which animates the community, she never used a persuasive hermeneutics as Saint Vincent did. They come out naturally in her reflections and prayers as virtues practiced by Jesus and the Blessed Mother: "Assumption, Blessed Lord, grant me that humility and love which has crowned her for eternity"; "Oh my Jesus! ...Let me mount to Thee on the steps of humility, on which Thou camest down to me."¹² It is primarily through following Jesus that Mother Seton learned to be humble and loving. I think this is very important for us to remember in our practice of charism.

Mother Seton knew that we have to sacrifice in order to love and find joy in life. So she prayed that "The corrupt heart begs as Thy greatest mercy to let it bleed and suffer anything, everything, only fit it for Thyself; place only Thy love there, and let humility keep watch."¹³ She believed that charity is the gift of God bestowed in the human heart, and so as the soul comes nearer to God, its sensitivity toward the whole of creation increases.

Mother Seton did not give up natural affection in order to foster supernatural love; rather she acquired a wisdom to strengthen the bond of nature by the bond of grace. Mother Seton expresses this two-fold bond with Anna, her oldest daughter with whom she went through sickness, hardship and death: "In the multitude of Thy mercies I have again entered Thy house, and worshiped in Thy holy temple. Receive the longing desire of my soul. Merciful Lord! What a privilege! And my dearest Anna too: the bonds of nature and grace all twined together... the parent offers the child, the child her parent; and both are united in the source of their being, and rest together on redeeming love."¹⁴ We know how hard it was for Mother Seton to accept Anna's death, especially just after she was exhausted with the struggle with Father David on the nature of the community and on the critical issue of her own vocation as a mother and a religious. But as time passed, she encompassed her wounds and weaknesses, melting them into love of others.

¹² Msgr. Joseph B. Code, ed., *Daily Thoughts of Mother Seton* (Baltimore: The Chandler Printing Co., 1960), 8.15; 9.12.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 6.7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.21.

Mother Seton understood that humility was a virtue which preserves charity. Therefore she repeatedly prayed to God to give her the spirit of penance, humility and meekness.¹⁵ Her resolutions include "To be gentle to the children and humble to everybody."¹⁶ This humility, however, was pregnant with strength which fulfilled the work of God, as she received financial help from friends so graciously and resisted when the welfare of the community was at stake.¹⁷ Because she was humble, she could nurture so many people around her.

Mother Seton perceived simplicity as a state of mind which trusts, knows when to be satisfied, and cheerful. Her trust was primarily upon loving God: "He who sits above smiles at the anxious calculating heart, and makes everything easy to the simple and confiding."¹⁸ Because of this trust she was careful not to step forward and take her own cause in her hand; rather it was the providence of God she accepted. It is also because of this simplicity of heart that Mother Seton learned to be satisfied with what she had, not only in a material sense but spiritually as well: "One of the first rules of my happiness is to be satisfied with Good in whatever degree I can attain it."¹⁹

In her later years, therefore, Mother Seton could say that she found the true treasure of being happy and contented in every situation. In her letter to Antonio Filicchi, who first advised her "to take every event gently and quietly and oppose good nature and cheerfulness to every contradiction," Mother Seton confessed the cost of purchasing this pearl: "You know, Filicchi, what it costs to be always humble and satisfied; though really when this disposition is familiarized, it is the true treasure."²⁰ When Mother Seton talked about her treasure, she implied two dimensions according to the context. When she praised God or received the holy communion, she exclaimed that God was "my only treasure" or "infinite treasure."²¹ But she also used the term "treasure" to signify the blessed state of a human heart which is humble and satisfied. This biblical image and notion of a treasure as the kingdom of God which Mother Seton employed and developed in her life can be further explored in the spiritual tradition of East Asia.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.14.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.17.

¹⁷ Annabelle Melville and Ellin Kelly, eds., *Elizabeth Seton: Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 240, 262.

¹⁸ *Daily Thoughts*, 7.31.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.14.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.19.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 7.30.

III. East Asian Interpretation of Charity, Humility, and Simplicity

The two main streams of East Asian spirituality flow from Confucianism and Taoism, which sprang up in the sixth century B.C. in China and spread out across East Asia along with Chinese written characters and chopstick culture. The focus of Confucianism has been on human relationships and social morality based on the endowed goodness of human nature. Mother Seton's spirituality centering on sanctifying natural love and common daily life, which extends to social responsibility, offers rich material that can be freshly interpreted in the light of Confucianism. However, today I am going to focus on Taoistic spirituality because it has a kinship with the spirit of charity, humility and simplicity which Saint Vincent defined as the charism of the company and Mother Seton incarnated it in her own way.

The original insight of Taoism can be found in *Lao Tzu*, which is also called *Tao Te Ching* (the Book of the Way and Its power) which consists of eighty-one short chapters. I will quote *Lao Tzu* chapter sixty-seven in full:

The whole world says that my way is vast and resembles nothing. It is because it is vast that it resembles nothing. If it resembled anything, it would long before now, have become small. I have three treasures which I hold and cherish. The first is known as compassion, the second is known as frugality, the third is known as not daring to take the lead in the empire; Being compassionate one could afford to be courageous, Being frugal one could afford to extend one's territory, Not daring to take the lead in the empire one could afford to be lord over the vessels. Now, to forsake compassion for courage, to forsake frugality for expansion, to forsake the rear for the lead, is sure to end in death. Through compassion, one will triumph in attack and be impregnable in defense. What Heaven succours it protects with the gift of compassion.²²

In the first sentence Lao Tzu says that his way is vast. The Way (*Tao*) is the key concept which Lao Tzu developed in the beginning of his book: "The way that can be spoken of is not the constant way; The name that can be named is not the constant name. The nameless was the beginning of heaven and earth; The named was the mother of the myriad creatures."

²² D.C. Lao, trans., *Tao Te Ching* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1982), chapter 67.



Mother Seton
Corbis/Bettmann-UPI Archive

The Way is nameless because it is the absolute reality which cannot be defined in human language even though it is the origin of heaven and earth. At the same time it has a name as the mother of all things because its power is manifested as the innate nurturing principle of order. In other words, the Tao is the Taoist interpretation of the traditional Chinese notion of High God, Heaven, or the Lord of Heaven, who gave birth to the multitude of people. Since the sage in Lao Tzu always follows the Tao, the three treasures of Lao Tzu are, in fact, the qualities of the Tao.

The first treasure is compassionate love which parents hold toward young children. As the mother of all things, the Tao gives birth, nurtures, and completes. It does not possess them as its own, but rather withdraws when the work is finished. The Taoists call this '*wu-wei*,' literally non-action, but in fact natural rearing without force or unwanted interference. Since it is natural, people who receive this love feel free and spontaneous and say at the end, "I/we did it!" Because of compassionate love the sage can be courageous at the time of crisis and accepts guilt and humiliations for the community.²³ The sage is good to the good but also good to those who are not good, so that he/she gains goodness.²⁴ What the sage is looking for is fair distribution of wealth, both material and spiritual: "Is not the way of Heaven like the stretching of a bow? The high it presses down, the low it lifts up; the excessive it takes from, the deficient it gives to. It is the way of Heaven to take from what has in excess in order to make good what is deficient."²⁵ The compassionate love of the Tao brings about the well-being of all, just as the mercy of God gives the sun and rain without discrimination.

Lao Tzu's second treasure is frugality, by which one can benefit those in need. However, frugality here signifies much more than material saving or simple way of life; it points to the emptying of selfness. Lao Tzu explains the value of self-emptying by the example of the empty space in a room or in vessels. We look at the solid walls of a room or the beautiful shape of a bowl, but actually it is the empty space inside which benefits us. If the room is filled with bricks without any empty space, it will be useless. Lao Tzu argues that if we do not learn to empty our selfish desires, plans, images and thoughts, we cannot return to the Tao. The simplicity of the uncarved block is used by Lao Tzu as the primal symbol of the Tao: "The nameless uncarved block is but freedom from desire, and if I cease to desire and remain still, the world will be at peace of its own accord."²⁶ In order to attain primal simplicity we have to strip off all artificiality, worldly standards of fame and success, and our attachment to our name, ego, persona itself.

²³ *Tao Te Ching*, 78.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 49.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 77.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 37.

Lao Tzu's third treasure is not daring to take the lead in the world. Taking the lead means unnatural interference which sacrifices the dignity and freedom of other people. The Taoist way of exercising leadership is '*wu-wei*,' the natural flowing or fruition. The ocean is capable of accepting all the streams and rivers, for it stays in the low position. The water, being insignificant, weak and gentle, gives life to all living beings. The great leaders are those of whom people do not feel the weight of their authority. Humility has this quality of leadership which enables people to grow and be united.

I would like to go back to the concluding part of *Lao Tzu* chapter sixty-seven, where he mentions the three treasures. After his cryptic explanation of compassion, frugality, and not daring to take the lead in the world, he summarizes that if any one works with compassionate love either in fighting or in defense, he/she will accomplish the work and Heaven will surely come and protect him/her with compassionate love. In other words, compassionate love here not only encompasses the three treasures but represents attributes of Heaven as well as the sage. It is in the compassionate love of the sage where the human and the divine converge, for originally the virtue of the sage is given from the Tao, the impersonalized Heaven of ancient China. And interestingly enough, in a likewise manner, it is in charity where all the virtues including humility and simplicity converge in Christian tradition.

Conclusion

I have traced Saint Vincent's vision that the spirit of charity, humility and simplicity was given as the charism of God to the Company of Charity in seventeenth century France. Then I depicted how this spirit was present in the person of Mother Seton as the virtues which she aspired for and attained in her later years. Finally, I described the three treasures of Lao Tzu as the counterpart virtues which have been valued in East Asia. It is my conviction that these treasures are still hidden in the heart of Korean Sisters. I say hidden because contemporary Korea is so westernized and materialized that the traditional spiritual values are buried in most cases. We have to unearth the buried treasures and make them shiny and attractive to modern eyes. It is my understanding that it is only when we unite Christian and East Asian spirituality that our grasp of the charism of charity will be complete with concrete life experiences and rootedness.

The active Christian understanding of charity for the poor will be complemented by the Taoist understanding of compassion, which accepts and nurtures without possessing. The two different approaches of action and non-action (*wu-wei*) are not in essence contradictory, but can be balanced in wisdom as motherliness and fatherliness have to be combined in a person. Christian understanding of humility as lowliness and truth will find a strengthening partner in the Taoist notion of humility as a capacity for leadership. Christian emphasis of simplicity as honest and poor life style can be deepened by the Taoist insistence that simplicity is the very nature of the Tao which is most true and beautiful. In fact, Christian kenosis theology goes well with the Taoist understanding that it is emptiness which benefits others and brings life.

This spring, when I gave a similar lecture to the preparation group for the final vows in Korea, I was pleased to see the positive response from the young Korean Sisters of Charity. At the end of the six hour seminar, they told me that the East and the West can communicate and their deepest spiritualities meet each other. They were stimulated to find our spirit in what is near in a natural way. The image of a mother, which they have loved from the example of Mother Seton, can be even deepened by their understanding of the Tao as the mother. Their final word to me was that they are more convinced and proud of our charism of charity. And this is my wish, and I hope all of you will join our journey toward deepening and reincarnating our charism.