

# My Name is Sacrifice: An Interpretation of Power in Saint Faustina

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*Abstract:* Nineteenth century phenomenologist Gerardus van der Leeuw studied human phenomena as it relates to power. He identified gift giving in sacrificial traditions as the locus of power; donor and recipient are bound to each other, giving of themselves, and enabling the continual flow of power. This essay applies van der Leeuw's schema to consider the case of the Christian mystic, Saint Faustina (1905-1938), whose life was characterized by sacrifice. Faustina mimicked Christ as *sacerdos et hostia* through the embodiment of self-sacrifice. Through van der Leeuw's understanding of the sacrificial, Faustina is re-conceptualized from a figure of humility and meekness to an individual of great power; subject and object become blurred as Faustina and God participate in an exchange of power, leaving Faustina powerful, but ultimately without agency and locked into a life of servitude.

## *Introduction*

The late nineteenth century Phenomenologist Gerardus van der Leeuw argued that power, subject, and object motivated the sacrificial act of gift giving.<sup>1</sup> I apply van der Leeuw's concept of sacrificial gift giving, including its motivations, when examining the case of St. Faustina (1905-1938) whose mystical connections led her to endure great suffering and sacrifice.<sup>2</sup> It is important to examine how van der Leeuw's phenomenological treatment of sacrifice as a powerful gift addresses self-sacrifice in the context

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<sup>1</sup> Van der Leeuw described his ideas in a two volume work entitled, *Religion and Manifestation*, which is a central text used in this research. Gerardus van der Leeuw. 1967. *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, ed. Peter Smith. London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd.

<sup>2</sup> Not only was Faustina rejected numerous times from joining a convent, her diaries were also banned for two decades. Pope John Paul II beatified Faustina in 1993 and canonized her in April of 2000. John Allen. 2002 August 30. "Divine Mercy Pope's Mantra during Poland Visit: a Saint despite Vatican Reservations." *National Catholic Reporter*, World section, 5.

of St. Faustina who, as a Christian mystic, literally *embodied* sacrifice. In applying van der Leeuw's theory within the broader context of the Christian mystic, I will re-conceptualize St. Faustina as an empowered woman who lacked agency, and consider whether her self-sacrifice can be understood as the *gift of oneself* – the embodied medium representing the ultimate sacrificial act of gift giving.

### *Gerardus Van der Leeuw's Phenomenological Approach*

Central to van der Leeuw's philosophy was his interpretation of phenomenology, which is traditionally known to seek out the essential and elemental of religion.<sup>3</sup> His attitude towards phenomenology was in part due to fellow Phenomenologist Chantepie de la Saussaye.<sup>4</sup> Like Saussaye, van der Leeuw attempted to “comprehend the objective appearances of religion in light of subjective processes”<sup>5</sup>. Unlike others, van der Leeuw did not strive to maintain a purely objective approach; instead, he suggested the impossibility of analyzing ultimate experiences and emotionally charged events from a perspective dominated by what he termed “pure intellectual restraint”.<sup>6</sup> For van der Leeuw, the horizontal plain is inadequate; the essence of religion can only be understood from above, beginning with God.<sup>7</sup> There is a *necessary* existential attitude toward religion, creating a bias *for* religion. Van der Leeuw criticized those who denied the influence of their own beliefs on the way they observed and understood the world. According to van der Leeuw, this denial is

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<sup>3</sup> George A. James. 1985. Phenomenology and the Study of Religion: The Archaeology of an Approach. *The Journal of Religion*: 329-330.

<sup>4</sup> P.D. Chantepie de la Saussaye. 1981. *Manual of the Science of Religion*, trans. Beatrice S. Colyer Fergusson. New York: Longmans, Green & Co.

<sup>5</sup> Van der Leeuw, 694.

<sup>6</sup> Van der Leeuw, 646.

<sup>7</sup> Van der Leeuw, 679.

“fatal”<sup>8</sup> because it attempts to separate oneself from one’s beliefs. The attempt to distance ourselves from our beliefs for the purpose of avoiding prejudices or more subjective interpretations becomes futile. Van der Leeuw used Husserl’s term *epoche*<sup>9</sup> in his search for a balance between objectivity and subjectivity. Van der Leeuw defined *epoche* as an attempt to avoid prejudicial assessments by using a measure of objectivity. Although van der Leeuw did not discount the necessity of academic objectivity, his research was conducted from the position of self-surrendering love, where he sought meaning and understanding above all else.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, in staying true to phenomenology, van der Leeuw did not consider theological proclamations as data; instead, meaning was found in the way people *responded* to revelations – it was in this moment that one could see the reflection of the divine on the faces of individuals.<sup>11</sup> Although, van der Leeuw conducted his research as a Christian, his approach to phenomenology stood apart from his theological tradition. He acknowledged the need to separate phenomenology from theology, as both are methods in their own right; however, he did not deny his own background as a Christian.

### *St. Faustina as Helena Kowalska*

Saint Mary Faustina Kowalska, first known as Helena Kowalska, was born August 25, 1905 in Glogowiec, Poland. She was the third of ten children born of a poor peasant family. Her obedience, affinity for prayer, strong work ethic, and compassion

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<sup>8</sup> Van der Leeuw, 645. This certainly does not uphold the standards of objectivity we hold in such high esteem today. It is, however, refreshingly honest. Van der Leeuw asserted his perspective. We can only recognize his assertion and continue to search for meaning in his scholarship on its own terms.

<sup>9</sup> See Edmund Husserl. 1973. *The Idea of Phenomenology*, trans. William P. Alston and George Nakhnikian. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

<sup>10</sup> Van der Leeuw, 684. Van der Leeuw was not suggesting that objectivity be unnecessary. He was simply suggesting the impossibility of putting one’s faith aside. Van der Leeuw would always remain a Christian, and it was inevitable that his faith influence his scholarship.

<sup>11</sup> James, 329.

for the poor marked her from an early age. By age seven, Helena Kowalska felt compelled to pursue a religious vocation. She attended school for several years before leaving home to work as a housekeeper. Upon gaining her independence, Helena made several attempts to join a convent, though her attempts would prove unsuccessful on account of her inability to furnish the required dowry. Finally, on August 1, 1925 Helena joined Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy, and was initiated April 30, 1926 as Sister Faustina of the Blessed Sacrament. Faustina remained with Our Lady of Mercy working as a cook, gardener, and porter until her death on October 5, 1938 in Krakow, Poland, of tuberculosis.<sup>12</sup> On the surface, nothing in her life appeared out of the ordinary. But for Faustina, her days were filled with communication with God and the Blessed Mother, as well as Angels, Saints, and souls in Purgatory.<sup>13</sup> As described in her Vatican biography and personal diaries, Faustina experienced “revelations, visions, hidden stigmata, she participated in the Passion of the Lord, had the gift of bilocation, the reading of human souls, the gift of prophesy and the rare gift of mystical engagement and marriage”<sup>14</sup>. Her diaries offer firsthand accounts of her mystical encounters and private musings.<sup>15</sup> Faustina’s message is one of trust and mercy: the mercy of God and mercy towards our

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<sup>12</sup> Allen, 6.

<sup>13</sup> Faustina had her first vision in 1931. Matthew Schmalz. 2008. “Tender Mercies: Suffering meets Consolation in the Chaplet of Divine Mercy.” *Practicing Catholic*, 37.

<sup>14</sup> Faustina, 1107.

<sup>15</sup> Faustina, 1693: “Secretary of My most profound mystery – the Lord Jesus said to Sister Faustina – know that your task is to write down everything that I make known to you about My mercy, for the benefit of those who by reading these things will be comforted in their souls and will have the courage to approach Me.”

Schmalz, 37: Pope John Paul II made the comment that Faustina was chosen to be Jesus’ secretary.

neighbours.<sup>16</sup> Today, millions of people around the world are involved in Faustina's vision under the title of Divine Mercy. Although Faustina is remembered as a pious messenger in mainstream Catholicism, current research focuses on her powerful position as a woman of strength and ability; one who chose to give up her will and agency.<sup>17</sup> Faustina's obedience began with her parents, eventually shifting towards her order by relinquishing her autonomy in pursuit of God. In finding God, Faustina was faced with a complete annihilation of the will. Her enduring pain for God led the poorly educated, impoverished, and suffering woman once known as Helena to offer her very soul to become a secretary for Jesus.<sup>18</sup>

Sacrifice is a founding element of Catholicism, with Christ's death at the cross representing the ultimate form of suffering and sacrifice.<sup>19</sup> Faustina belonged to a long line of female Christian mystics who took pleasure in suffering for Christ; where pain took on the role of sacrament.<sup>20</sup> Faustina welcomed sacrifice and perceived suffering as an opportunity for spiritual growth by receiving the sins of others through her own emotional and physical pain. At times, she was "seized with violent pain", losing consciousness as a result.<sup>21</sup> Faustina was taught by her order to welcome pain with love; in fact, she believed love *was* suffering and sacrifice. Ultimately this self

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<sup>16</sup> Faustina was also entrusted with three tasks. The first was to remind the world of God's merciful love towards all humans. The second was entreating God's mercy for sinners through new devotions, for example, performing the Chaplet to Divine Mercy at the Hour of Mercy – 3 pm. The last was to start the apostolic movement to proclaim and entreat Mercy and to strive for 'Christian perfection.'

<sup>17</sup>John Allen, 5.

<sup>18</sup> Faustina, 1693.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Orsi. 2003. *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars who study them*. Princeton University Press: New Jersey, 27.

<sup>20</sup> Ellen Ross. 1993. "She Wept and Cried Right Loud for Sorrow and for Pain: Suffering, the Spiritual Journey and Women's Experience in Late Medieval Mysticism," in *Maps of Flesh and Light the Experience of Medieval Women Mystics*, ed. Ulrike Wiethaus. 45-59. New York: Syracuse University.

<sup>21</sup> Faustina, 1276.

denial was understood as self fulfilment.<sup>22</sup> William James claims: “In the religious life... surrender and sacrifice are positively espoused, even unnecessary giving-ups are added in order that happiness may increase.”<sup>23</sup> Faustina’s sacrifice and suffering was her gift to God and in exchange for her suffering God gave her power. During a period of mystical communication Faustina was approached by God about the prospect of her becoming a *victim offering*. In her diary she explained her fate by saying, “My name is to be: *sacrifice*.”<sup>24</sup> It was of her own free will and consent that Faustina became a living sacrifice.<sup>25</sup> Interestingly, Faustina’s experiences closely resembled those of Catholic philosopher, Blaise Pascal, who, after his own secret mystical experience, was ready for the “struggles and hardships of the Way – the deliberate pain and sacrifice of love.”<sup>26</sup>

*Gerardus van der Leeuw: The Role of Power and Sacrifice*

Faustina mentioned sacrifice one hundred and twelve times in her six notebooks. Clearly it is outside the scope of this paper to analyze every one of these instances, though I have chosen a apt selection from her writings<sup>27</sup> to examine her thoughts on the

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<sup>22</sup> Evelyn Underhill. 2002. *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 65.

<sup>23</sup> William James. 2002. *Varieties of Religious Experience* (London: Routledge, 77.

<sup>24</sup> ‘Victim soul’ or ‘victim offering’ is defined by its use in Catholic theology. It represents an individual who undergoes great suffering in union with, and using the example of, Christ’s own suffering. This is done on behalf of the world. Catherine O’Dell. 1998. *Faustina: Apostle of Divine Mercy*. Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing, 67. This occurred in the autumn or winter of 1932.

<sup>25</sup> Faustina followed in Christ’s footsteps once more by choosing to suffer for others. A more in depth analysis would reveal great similarities between Faustina and Christ.

<sup>26</sup> Underhill, 379.

<sup>27</sup> Faustina’s notebooks have been published under the title of: *Divine Mercy in my Soul*. Mary Faustina Kowalska. “Divine Mercy In My Soul,” Stockbridge: Congregation of Marians of the Immaculate Conception, <http://www.saint-faustina.com/Diary/DMIMS1.shtml> (accessed October 7, 2009).

matter, and to consider her role within van der Leeuw's concept of sacrifice.

Van der Leeuw characterized phenomenology as a study in "how man conducts himself in his relation to power."<sup>28</sup> Power can be conceived in innumerable ways, though all power is ultimately of the same substance, creating a single power that 'overflows into all things.'<sup>29</sup> Everything has the potential for power. When objects are in close proximity to power, they can become infected with its potency.<sup>30</sup> People authenticate power. Moreover, the meaning people bestow onto things (symbols) authenticates power; it is all made possible through a process of recognition and application.<sup>31</sup> Thus, power is highly influential and transformative, and although Faustina's power is largely hidden, it goes beyond the power of everyday Christians as she is in direct communication with God. Van der Leeuw also argued that the power conferred onto people and objects denotes sacredness.<sup>32</sup> For example, when communicating with the sacred we become involved with it, and are ultimately touched by its power.<sup>33</sup> This phenomenon clearly occurs in Faustina's relationship to God. Thus, power forms the basis of religion and is the primary concern of nature. It awakens a sense of awe in the human soul, which can be manifested as fear and attraction, terror and love.<sup>34</sup> However, according to van der Leeuw's scheme, Faustina's power would be rendered less effectual because her devotion opens sources of greater power, increasing her dependency on God who is also bound, though maintains

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<sup>28</sup> Van der Leeuw, 191.

<sup>29</sup> Van der Leeuw, 34.

<sup>30</sup> Van der Leeuw, 37.

<sup>31</sup> Van der Leeuw, 27-28.

<sup>32</sup> Van der Leeuw, 28.

<sup>33</sup> Van der Leeuw, 191.

<sup>34</sup> Van der Leeuw, 23-24. Otto describes this feeling of dependence as a creature feeling, making us acutely aware of our "creature-hood" in the face of something greater. Rudolf Otto. 1977. *The Idea of the Holy: an inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational*. London: Oxford University Press.

authority.<sup>35</sup> The flow of power continues between them, although the balance of power is largely uneven, thus rendering her power less effectual.

Van der Leeuw identified the gift and gift giving as the most significant aspect of sacrifice. It acts as a conduit for power, binding donor and recipient. A gift may be offered to a person, God, community, or perhaps to no one in particular, and it must be accepted to maintain the flow of power.<sup>36</sup> The recipient is under the power of the giver and a gift is expected in return<sup>37</sup>; communion is established through gift giving for the mystical power of the gift establishes *communio*.<sup>38</sup> Sacrifice, then, belongs to the community, and the community is strengthened through the process of power and exchange.<sup>39</sup> Van der Leeuw claims that the classical conceptualization involving gods and sacrifice, *Du-et-des*, or, *I give that thou mayest give*, breaks down and challenges the idea that gods must be present in sacrifice.<sup>40</sup> He revises the *du-et-des* into “*do et possis dare*, I give in order that thou mayest be able to give: I give thee power so that thou mayest have power and that life may not stagnate because of any lack of potency.”<sup>41</sup> As we give, a part of ourselves is externalized and we vicariously give of ourselves.<sup>42</sup>

Faustina conceptualized sacrifice as a gift to Jesus and hoped to perfect her own self-sacrifice, thus presenting herself to

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<sup>35</sup> God revealed that even the missionaries cannot produce the same positive results as compared to Faustina; truly she was given great authority and power.

<sup>36</sup> Van der Leeuw described the transition of sacrificing oneself to the eventual sacrificing of only part of oneself, which led to the sacrificing of someone else, and finally the sacrificing an animal or a cake.

<sup>37</sup> Van der Leeuw, 351.

<sup>38</sup> Van der Leeuw, 352.

<sup>39</sup> Van der Leeuw, 358. One could speculate that Faustina’s community is human souls; the power she receives from sacrifice is used for their benefit, freeing them from purgatory (for instance) and strengthening the community.

<sup>40</sup> Van der Leeuw sided with Smith on the idea of a communal meal where God is a participant.

<sup>41</sup> Van der Leeuw, 354.

<sup>42</sup> Van der Leeuw, 355.

Jesus as the ultimate offering. Faustina claimed that Jesus told her both love and sacrifice sustained the world; he took pleasure in her sacrifice and told Faustina of its power.<sup>43</sup> God gave Faustina strength so she might continue to suffer for lost souls while following in the footsteps of Christ: “My sacrifice is nothing in itself, but when I join it to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, it becomes all-powerful and has the power to appease divine wrath.”<sup>44</sup> Her sacrificial gift was a live burnt offering. Faustina claims God came to her and said: “I demand of you a perfect and whole-burnt offering; an offering of the will. No other sacrifice can compare with this one. I myself am directing your life and arranging things in such a way that you will be for me a continual sacrifice and will always do My will.”<sup>45</sup> In the style of the Old Testament, Faustina was not only a sacrifice; she was also a perpetual, perfect, and incomparable sacrifice, giving up her free will for God. God said to her:

You must be annihilated, destroyed, living as if you were dead in the most secret depths of your being. You must be destroyed in that secret depth where the human eye has never penetrated; then will I find in you a pleasing sacrifice, a holocaust full of sweetness and fragrance. And great will be your power for whomever you intercede.<sup>46</sup>

Faustina refused herself – she was totally destroyed and dead to herself so that she might be remade as a sweet and pleasing sacrifice. This is a common theme for mystics whose motto, “*I am nothing, I have nothing, I desire nothing*”, compliments extreme denial, humility, and submission before the All.<sup>47</sup> This

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<sup>43</sup> Faustina, 904.

<sup>44</sup> Faustina, 482.

<sup>45</sup> Faustina, 1937 February 7, 923.

<sup>46</sup> Faustina, 1767. God refers to a holocaust of sweetness and fragrance. In the Old Testament the Lord is pleased by the smell of the burnt offerings, now the offerings are internalized, though just as sweet. These are interesting points for theological analysis. This may be compared with section 923 where Faustina is a whole burnt offering.

<sup>47</sup> Underhill, 400.

humility, more common of Catholic mystics, was especially emphasized by Faustina, the Secretary of Christ. Faustina did gain great power, though her power was constrained by God. She had the power to live out God's will, but not her own; the power to be an instrument, but not an individual with agency. Faustina was also powerful enough to use her body for others, though this required her to exchange her pain for their wellbeing. She could intercede on behalf of souls, but ultimately God defined the level and direction of her abilities. Ultimately, her power tied her to God; she was bound to God in servitude of his power and he was bound to give her power because of her sacrifice to him.

Van der Leeuw's concept of power did not require the theological notion of God (or gods) as power. The Christian notion of God and the sacrifice of Christ are later additions to his theory of power, but remain interesting additions nonetheless.<sup>48</sup> Van der Leeuw explained: "The idea of the vicarious sacrifice of Christ should therefore be interpreted from this viewpoint ... the sacrifice demanded from man being accomplished by Him who is simultaneously sacrificer and sacrificee, *sacerdos et hostia*."<sup>49</sup> The idea of a gift stream is connected to the Christian concept of a personal God and saviour who embodies sacrifice. The Christian Eucharist is an "intensification of the mystic and primitive idea of *du-et-des*."<sup>50</sup> The same entity can offer and receive itself without contradiction. This is the essence of sacrifice: something can be offered and received at the same time for it "is the essence of all sacrifice that it is simultaneously offered and received."<sup>51</sup> To this extent the sacrificee and sacrificer are exchanging roles. Who is binding whom? Subject and object blur when sacrifice is expressed through gift giving; gift giver and gift can exchange roles in the same manner as sacrificer and sacrificee. Van der Leeuw used Levy Bruhl's

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<sup>48</sup> The application we are addressing in St. Faustina is therefore a later application of sacrifice. Van der Leeuw, 354.

<sup>49</sup> Van der Leeuw, 356.

<sup>50</sup> Van der Leeuw, 359. Van der Leeuw was concerned with the transformation of repetitive sacrifice being made into automatism. Van der Leeuw referred to the Eucharist as the repeated, bloodless, sacrifice of Christ. It "need repeat neither the unique sacrificial deed of Christ nor the making of the thank-offering on the church's part, which is possible only in the concrete situation."

<sup>51</sup> Van der Leeuw, 359.

interpretation of sacrifice as a comparison. Levy Bruhl thought participating in the gift meant both giver and receiver were also participating in one another.<sup>52</sup> Sacrifice as gift giving entails the impossibility of knowing who gives and who receives as each is intimately connected to the same power despite the possible presence of God (or gods).

St. Faustina, along with Christ, belongs to the category of *sacerdos et hostia*. She is both sacrificee and sacrificer, giving and receiving in the same cyclical flow, uniting the subject and the object of sacrifice. Van der Leeuw argued there is a flowing stream between both parties “but without God’s act of volition and also without the church’s gratitude ... [power] is striving with Will and Form.”<sup>53</sup> For better or for worse, then, it was Faustina’s interaction with God and her sacrificial offering of the self that initiated the exchange of power she would experience between herself and God.

### *Conclusion*

Van der Leeuw’s phenomenological schema successfully applies to St. Faustina’s experiences of power in mystic self-sacrifice. Their compatibility is partly due to the Christian framework they both share, though their particular theological understandings of events vary.<sup>54</sup> St. Faustina was traditionally understood as a Saint of mercy and humility, however, a greater understanding of St. Faustina demonstrates her dimensions of power and authority through the gift of self-sacrifice and suffering. St. Faustina rose from a position of powerlessness as a woman without means to a nun who relinquished her life in service, and ultimately she offered her complete self and will before God. By relinquishing her limited degree of autonomy, St. Faustina gained incredible power, though that power would bind her to suffering for others as her conscience dictated. In considering van der Leeuw’s theory of the gift as power we have discovered that the flow of

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<sup>52</sup> Van der Leeuw, 352.

<sup>53</sup> Van der Leeuw, 359.

<sup>54</sup> Van der Leeuw’s perspective that God can be bound in gift exchange, and that power does not come exclusively from God, clashes with Faustina’s understanding and with that of the Catholic Church.

power is not always equivalent on both sides, nor is power freeing. In the case of St. Faustina, power was unequally binding. Thus, the gift stream was transformative, shifting St. Faustina into a field of great power, but ultimately causing her to lose herself and to suffer body and soul in the process.

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