I. Introduction

It is important for those who are involved in helping others that they must be concerned with their own development, have come in contact with their own emotions, and should be allowed to strive from their own happiness. For this reason, Eugen Drewermann vigorously attacks a traditional Christian spirituality of permanent self-sacrifice, self-hatred, self-emptying and self-abasement. He holds such Christianity of masochistic self-denial mainly responsible for the neurotic personality structure that is characteristic of large numbers of Catholic clergy.¹) He continues to report from his clients that strict obedience to the authoritarian structures of their communities has alienated many members of religious orders from their true feelings, has undermined their self-regard, and stifled their personal growth.²) This kind of self-denial

²) Ibid., 20.
and self-sacrifice can sap their strength, keep them from taking
responsibility for their lives and suffocate their attempts to grow in
freedom and authenticity. There is no life for others as long as one
has not learned to live oneself.

Carol Lakey Hess argues that Christian theology that promotes
self-sacrifice and self-denial can inhibit the growth of the
individual, especially women. The Christian tradition frequently
has put a special emphasis upon pride as human sinfulness and
denunciation of self as a human virtue. Within this Christian
teaching, women consistently are exhorted to submit to their
husbands or the appropriate authority, to care for other’s needs,
and to sacrifice themselves for others. Especially, in the community
of faith, women’s self-sacrifice and self-denial are reinforced as
admirable and considered rewarding. As a result, women raised in
a Christian home or church often do not know how to love
themselves and do not know how to find themselves. They do not
have their true identity, not knowing who they really are.

Then, if women do not know and love themselves, how can
they be forced to love others? If the women do not know who they
are and what they need, how can they see other’s needs? It is very
ironical for women to be forced to please other’s needs without
knowing their own needs. In this sense, it is possible that Christian
teaching conveys a dangerous and potentially destructive message
for women’s self-development in many ways.

The church’s emphasis on the virtue of self-denial and self-
sacrifice can be a harmful obstacle to spiritual growth for women.

3) Carol Lakey Hess, Caretakers of Our Common House: Women’s Development in
Communities of Faith (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1997), 55.