Today, Dec. 2, is a holy day for Maryknollers. Today we remember the martyrs: lay missioner Jean Donovan, and Srs. Maura Clarke, Ita Ford, and Dorothy Kazel.

Sarah, Theresa, TT, and Kathy, I assume some people have wondered about your adventurousness, audacity, risk-taking, and blatant craziness. They *should* wonder, and so should you.

When I speak about wonder I mean to say that it is fitting you and others should have feelings of surprise mixed with admiration for the unusual and perhaps inexplicable thing you are doing today. I hope you and others who are wondering about your covenanting and sending will ask what your choice today means.

You are choosing to be an outsider who entrusts herself to another culture’s insiders. You are choosing to be a stranger who entrusts herself to other strangers.

You are choosing to put yourself out there in a culture in which you will never fully participate, no matter how well acculturated you become. You are choosing to communicate in a language that will probably reduce you to baby talk and humiliate you. All those deep thoughts you have, all those profound insights you have will probably never be spoken.

But you are more than an outsider, a stranger. You are becoming an intercultural missionary disciple, someone who chooses to intensify her experience of humanity’s deep, perennial, universal, everyday problem. What is that problem? Seeing a shared humanity in another.

We are not doing well with seeing humanity in others. That is one reason Maryknoll is here in El Paso.

We are not doing well with seeing humanity in others. The brutal evidence is compelling here in El Paso. The Holy Land. Sudan. The eastern DRC. The Mediterranean Sea. And in camps for refugees and displaced persons around the world.

We are not doing well with seeing humanity in another. The brutal evidence is compelling in our national prison system. We criminalize and incarcerate more of our own people than anyone else and inflict that harm primarily on the most vulnerable among us: poor people of color, Black and Latino.

I imagine that you are saying to yourself: as an intercultural missionary disciple, I will try really hard to see humanity in the people I will meet. Why? Because that is the revelation at the heart of mission, God’s mission, our mission, the Church’s mission.

As you head off to what Maryknollers call “the field afar,” I offer you a paradoxical way of mission, a paradoxical way to the revelation of humanity in another. This paradoxical way of mission comes from Simone Weil.

Simone was a French thinker, educator, political activist, and perhaps a mystic of Jewish descent. I turn to Simone on this mission covenanting/sending day because she was a consummate outsider. She never fit in anywhere. Although she came from a highly secularized, agnostic family and social milieu, she was deeply attracted to world religions, especially the Catholic Church. As far as we know, she never received baptism because, so she said, of “the love of those things that are outside Christianity.”

Simone chose to remain a liminal person, one at the portal of the church. Like you, Sarah, Theresa, TT, and Kathy she chose to be an outsider, a border person.

I would never claim that I understand what Simone is talking about. But I know that she is a border person, an outsider, a liminal person with an illuminating sensitivity to our human problem of seeing humanity in another.

What does Simone have to say to us today, on this martyrs’ day, this covenanting-sending-renewal day? Something paradoxical.

Do not seek to see shared humanity in the other. Do not tense up and strive. Do not work at it. Just wait to see her, him. It can only happen to you. You cannot make it happen.

Simone says that attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity. To give one’s attention to someone else is a very rare and difficult thing. It is almost a miracle; it is a miracle. So, too, is seeing a shared humanity in another.

Sarah, Theresa, TT, and Kathy, that is why I said you and others should wonder about what you are doing today. You are hoping to experience a miracle. Wonder about that.

Simone says that to be attentive to another entails far more than thinking about or even feeling for that person. Attention is a faculty that does not latch onto the other, but instead remains still and open.

We do not see another human being when we stare at her, think about him, or commiserate with her. Seeing the other comes only when I let go of myself and allow the other to hold my full attention.

So, for the reality of the other person to fully invest me, I must first divest myself of the Me that consumes and blinds me. If I am detached, empty, and ready to allow the other in, then maybe, *maybe*, I will see her, and see her reverentially. Respect her, value her, understand her. Not hold onto her, but just let her shine, just as she is, all on her own.

That self-emptying or kenosis is, I believe, the ascetic, contemplative, kenotic way of mission.

I believe that self-emptying is the way to be attentive to another, the way to respond to the deepest human desire to be deeply seen and accepted.

Simone believed that if we turn our heart to the good, little by little the whole human soul will necessarily be attracted to the good in spite of itself.

If I turn my heart to the other, little by little my whole maladjusted, befuddled, confused soul, all of me, will be reverentially attentive to the other, in spite of myself.

Such turning of the heart to the other is surely a grace, an unmerited gift.

So, with unmerited grace, how might I turn my heart to another? How might I become attentive to another, that rarest and purest form of generosity?

The asceticism of mission involves some small, concrete actions infused with grace.

One small graced step in mission self-emptying is to let myself be carried away by the truth that Jesus Christ loved this other person so much that he chose death for her. Christ loved her and gave himself up for her. Imagine seeing in that way. Imagine being seen in that way.

Another small graced step in mission self-emptying is just being around, hanging out. Just be around in case someone needs you. That is a way of being other-centered, waiting to be reverentially attentive to another, waiting for the miracle of attention.

Another small graced step in mission self-emptying: Vocalize as you listen, even if you’re not sure what the other person said. When I was in Egypt, if I understood one-fourth of what was being said to me in a conversation, that would be an extravagantly generous assessment of my understanding. But I would keep saying, *sa*, and *aywa*, and *ya salaam*, and *mesh kidda*. Like I knew what was going on. Most of my interlocutors seemed to enjoy having a listener.

I have experienced the same thing in Kenya, where I have had long conversations in which all I said was a grunted *eeey*—a simple acknowledgement that the other person was talking and I was listening and at the disposal of another.

If, by unmerited grace, I turn my heart to the other, little by little my whole maladjusted, befuddled, confused soul, all of me, will be reverentially attentive to the other in spite of myself and I may see someone who — as Bishop James Edward Walsh said—drew the Son of God from heaven to smooth and bless our weary anxieties and our puzzled brows.

I could offer other small steps in the asceticism of mission that I have learned, but I have said enough.

Sarah, Theresa, TT, and Kathy, many blessings upon you on this holy day of the martyrs Jean, Maura, Ita, and Dorothy. Through the intercession of Simone Weil may you be graced with the miracle of attention. For to give one’s attention to someone else is a very rare and difficult thing. It is almost a miracle; it is a miracle.