



HUMILITY

embracing the truth that leads to freedom

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Humility as a virtue and a way of life has been highly-prized and much sought-after in Christianity. Both the Old and New Testaments praise it; Jesus models it, teaches it, and urges his disciples to seek it; and St Paul frequently commends it to the early Christian communities. Humility has been especially valued in the Christian monastic tradition: monastic writers have seen it as a necessary condition for a right relationship with God and with others.

But the virtue of humility has gotten 'bad press' in the modern era. Too often it has been associated with passivity, complacency, and unquestioning submission to those in authority. When we think of humility, we are likely to conjure up images of persons with low self-esteem; people with fawning, weak personalities; or people who are afraid to assert themselves. Modern Western culture is rightly suspicious of that kind of 'humility' because it denies our intrinsic worth as human beings.

But true humility, as Jesus taught and modeled it, is something other than the distorted image of humility that has been scorned in modern times. *True* humility maintains a healthy balance between a proper self-esteem – based on the knowledge that we are beloved children of God who are made in God's own image – and an honest awareness and acceptance of our limitations, weaknesses and faults. Authentic humility encourages us to take our rightful place in relationship to God our Creator, to our fellow creatures, and to the earth on which we all live. Authentic humility, because it is grounded in *truth*, will lead us to freedom: "The *truth* shall set you

free" (Jn 8:32). Jesus is prepared to teach us this humility: "Learn from me," he says, "for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Mt 11:29).

What can we learn about humility from Jesus? Consider the humility with which he came to us, how he "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death..." (Phil 2:7-8). Consider his words and his example: "Whoever becomes *humble* like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 18:4); "When you are invited (to a banquet), go and sit down at the lowest place..." (Lk 14:7-11); "If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example..." (Jn 13:1-17). "The humility of Jesus," writes John Mugabgab, editor of *Weavings* magazine, "is far from resigned submission to an imposed authority. He is humble in his heart, the core of his being, and his humility is a free offering of himself to the One he lovingly calls 'Abba.'"

The desert fathers and mothers of the 4th and 5th centuries valued humility above all other virtues. Humility was a way of finding one's place in right relation to God and neighbor, without being swayed by the need for attention or praise or honor or power. Humility was necessary to attain purity of heart, which alone enables one to see God (Mt 5:8). Furthermore, it was also the only thing that could defeat the forces of evil. St Anthony of Egypt said, "I saw the enemy spread out over the world and I said, groaning, 'What can get through such snares?' Then I heard a voice saying to me, 'Humility.'"

For those in the desert tradition, humility meant having a right opinion of oneself before God and living peacefully and gently with others. Its two chief characteristics were *a willingness to learn from others*, especially those of low estate, and *a refusal to judge others*. Abba Poemen once said to Abba Joseph, "Tell me how to become a monk." He said, "If you want to find rest below, and hereafter, in all circumstances, say 'Who am I?' and do not judge anyone."

For Christian monastics, the key to humility was (and is) *the recognition of our indebtedness to God in all things*. Even when we recognize that we are making progress in the life of virtue, we are not to credit ourselves or our own efforts, but God alone. One of the early desert fathers, John

Cassian, writes, "...we shall be able to avoid the snares of this most wicked spirit (i.e. pride) if, in the case of each virtue where we have felt that we have made progress, we shall speak the words of the Apostle (Paul): '*Not I, but the grace of God within me.*' And '*by the grace of God I am what I am...*' For '*every good gift and every perfect benefit is from above, coming down from the Father of lights.*' '*For what do you have that you have not received?*'"

"Humility is the constant forgetfulness of one's achievements," wrote St John Climacus a century later. It is the opposite of pride and self-aggrandizement. Humility is shown in loving God above all else, in the willingness to submit to another's wisdom, in an acceptance (without shame) of our fragility, in our cooperation with others, in learning to listen rather than to speak, in treating others with gentleness and respect. Humility holds these two truths in balance: (1) I am a child of God, made in the image of God, and therefore worthy of dignity and honor, and (2) I am a human being, like every other human being, with weaknesses, limitations and faults. At times I will need to be reminded of the first truth; at other times, of the second. Humility lives in the balance, in the truth that each of us is both good and evil, strong and weak. From this balanced perspective we see the truth about ourselves and about everyone else.

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QUOTES *to ponder*

"The sure road that leads to God is first humility, next humility, and lastly humility. Ask me the question as often as you may, my answer will always be the same. There are other precepts in God's law, but unless humility precede and follow our good works and also accompany them...unless we hold fast to it and repress pride and all vain self-conceit, our good deeds will be snatched out of our hands... Pride lurks even in our good actions and must be guarded against lest it rob us of our merit."

– *Augustine of Hippo (354-430)*

"A humble man is not disturbed by praise. Since he is no longer concerned with himself, and since he knows where the good that is in him comes from, he does not refuse praise, because it belongs to the God he loves, and in receiving it he keeps nothing for himself, but gives it all, with great joy, to his God."

– *Thomas Merton (1915-1968)*

"True humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less."

– *C.S. Lewis (1898-1963)*

"If I accept myself as ordinary, weak, frail, in other words, totally human and totally dependent upon God, then I am stripped of any sense of being in some way set apart, different, superior. It is then that the genuine, real self may begin to emerge."

– *Esther deWaal*

PRACTICES *to try*

Put yourself in the position of a learner. Ask an elderly person to tell you what is most important in life, what they have learned over the course of a long life.

Carry these two notes in your pockets for a day or a week: In the right pocket, "I am a beloved child of God, worthy of dignity and honor" and in the left pocket, "I am a human being, marked by weakness and limitation, like all human beings." How does it change your experience to have these two reminders held in balance?

QUESTIONS *to consider*

How does *genuine humility* differ from the *false humility* that can find nothing within itself that is worthy of praise?

Is there a *genuine pride* that can rightfully be felt in relationship to our own accomplishments or the accomplishments of those whom we love? What distinguishes this *genuine pride* from *false pride*, that is, a pride that is self-serving and self-aggrandizing?

RESOURCES *to explore*

Michael Casey, OCSO, *A Guide to Living in the Truth: Saint Benedict's Teaching on Humility* (Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 1999, 2001).

Joan Chittister, OSB, *The Rule of Benedict: Insights for the Ages* (New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing, 1993): 61-75.

Bernard of Clairvaux, *The Steps of Humility and Pride* (Trappist, KY: Cistercian Publications, 1973).

A PRAYER *for humility*

Heavenly Father, give us the humility that realizes its ignorance, admits its mistakes, recognizes its need, welcomes advice, accepts rebuke. Help us always to praise rather than to criticize, to sympathize rather than to discourage, to build rather than to destroy, and to think of people at their best rather than at their worst. This we ask for your Name's sake. *Amen.*

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