

## HUMILITY

(Talk given at St. Anselm's Abbey School faculty in-service day, Jan. 6, 2014)

You have probably heard that in the Middle Ages, certain prominent teachers were given titles such as *doctor angelicus* or angelic doctor, ascribed to St. Thomas Aquinas, or *doctor subtilis*, granted to Blessed Duns Scotus because of the subtle and penetrating nature of his thought. Our own patron, St. Benedict, lived long before such titles were regularly bestowed on influential writers, but if any were to be given him, I think *doctor humilis* or perhaps *doctor humilitatis*, teacher of humility, would be the most appropriate, not least because chapter seven of his monastic rule, the chapter on humility, is the longest of all. Humility is rightly seen as one of the distinctive marks of Benedictine spirituality, but it would be entirely wrong to think that there is something altogether original in what Benedict writes. Unlike later religious founders like St. Francis of Assisi, St. Dominic, or St. Ignatius of Loyola, Benedict did not initiate some new path. He was much more a transmitter than an innovator, someone who simply wanted to pass on to his own generation the wisdom that he found in the monastic tradition of the preceding two and a half centuries and, even more basically, the wisdom he found in Scripture itself. Indeed, if we wanted to call anyone the *doctor humilitatis*, the title would best be applied to the one who tells us in the Gospel, “Learn of me, for I am meek and humble of heart” and whose parables often end with the phrase, “Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, while whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”

Indeed, Jesus' teaching about humility was often referred to by some of the early monks and nuns of the Egyptian desert whose teaching greatly influenced Benedict. One of those desert women, Amma Syncletica, left us this precious saying: “Because humility is good and salutary, the Lord clothed himself in it while fulfilling the work of salvation of humanity, for he says,

‘Learn from me, for I am [meek] and humble of heart.’ Notice who it is who is speaking. Learn his lesson perfectly. Let humility become for you the beginning and end of virtues. He means a humble heart, for he refers not to appearance alone, but to the inner person.”<sup>1</sup> There is also much about humility in the man who is often called the father of Christian monasticism, St. Anthony of Egypt. What is attributed to him in the life written by St. Athanasius may not be exact quotations, but we also have some letters written by Anthony himself, in one of which he writes these striking words: “Except through humility in your whole heart and mind and spirit and soul and body, you will not be able to inherit the Kingdom of God.”<sup>2</sup> Jesus’ teaching was also referred to by that very influential fifth-century monastic author John Cassian, some of whose lengthy reflections about humility were taken over verbatim by Benedict.

Against this background we can more easily understand why Benedict wrote so much about humility in his Rule, saying at one point that it is only through this virtue that we will attain eternal union with God, that heavenly exaltation, *exaltationem caelestem*, that ought to be the aim of every human being. What, then, is humility, why it is necessary, how is it best acquired, and what are its most important effects? These are the four questions around which I will order the rest of my reflections this morning.

The best short definition of humility, as noted by St. Teresa of Avila and other spiritual masters, is that it is truth, that is, accepting the truth about ourselves. I think this can best be put in terms of ever-increasing maturity. It doesn’t take a child psychologist to tell us that an infant inevitably thinks that the whole world revolves around himself or herself. After all, all the infant has to do is cry and it gets fed, or gets its diaper changed, or gets comforted by mommy after a fall. There’s nothing wrong with such a feeling in the very young, but genuine maturity means coming to terms with the fact that the world does not revolve around oneself, that other people

have similar needs and feelings, and that the noblest people, the ones whom we honor generation after generation, are those who were precisely the least self-centered, those who truly tried to serve others, whether that be in the realm of religion or politics or education or any other field of human endeavor. To recognize our true standing, with all of our strengths and weaknesses, and to acknowledge that the good within us ultimately comes from God, is genuine humility. That's why St. Teresa and others could briefly define humility as truth. This should readily elicit from us a desire to surrender ourselves to God and so allow God to reform in us whatever we may have done to efface the divine image according to which we were created. This, then, is the short answer: humility is truth.

A somewhat longer answer, expanding on this, comes from a remarkable Benedictine of the nineteenth century, William Bernard Ullathorne, whose autobiographical reflections have been our table reading for the past couple of months. In addition to that book, titled *From Cabin Boy to Archbishop*, Ullathorne also wrote a book called *The Groundwork of the Christian Virtues*, a work entirely on the subject of humility. In it he gave this longer definition of humility: "Humility is the interior, spiritual, sacrificial action through which, with the profoundest veneration and gratitude, we offer to God the being and life we have received from Him, with the desire and the prayer that we may die to ourselves and live to Him; that we may be wholly changed and transformed into His likeness ...."<sup>3</sup>

This raises, however, the question of what to make of something like St. Benedict's seventh step of humility, which, he says, "is that one not only admits with his tongue but is also convinced in his heart that he is inferior to all and of less value, humbling himself and saying with the Prophet: 'I am truly a worm, not a man, scorned by men and despised by the people.'" It cannot be denied that a number of persons whom we revere as great saints made statements

along these lines, calling themselves the worst of sinners. This is usually—and probably correctly—explained by saying that the closer the great saints came to recognize the holiness of God, the greater their own failings and shortcomings seemed to be. If one can readily make such a statement about oneself, fine, but I think there is a danger in striving to feel that way. Far more wholesome, in my opinion, is something once written Fr. Edward Leen, a fine spiritual writer in the first half of the last century, who said that humility “has nothing to do with self-depreciation. It is not thinking little of oneself, it is rather not thinking of oneself at all.”<sup>4</sup> I like that a lot. Among other things, it means that we ought not go around comparing ourselves with others at all, not thinking of ourselves as better than some or worse than others. As we read in the Letter to the Hebrews, let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith (Heb 12:2).

Having said something about what humility is, I turn next to its necessity. This is something that I don't think could be proven by strictly rational means. If a person is incurably self-centered, as a few sports stars or media personalities or tycoons seem to be, it may be unpleasant to be around them, but nothing I could say would likely convince them to live in a different way. But if someone is already intent on living in accord with God's will, then there are some striking things that have been said by holy men and women that could well strengthen our desire to be humble and dampen our pride. Within the Catholic tradition, you are no doubt aware that it usually takes a good many years before anyone could be officially declared a saint. A number of steps are involved, detailed in a fascinating book called *Making Saints* by Kenneth Woodward, the former religion editor of *Newsweek* magazine. In the early Christian centuries, saints were usually determined by acclamation, spontaneously expressed by those who knew the person while he or she was alive. Most recently, we saw this at the funeral of Pope John Paul II,

when the large crowd started shouting *Santo subito*: sainthood right away. However, even in that case, the canonical procedures were generally followed, ones that date back to the time of the eighteenth century pope Benedict XIV. In his great work on the canonization of saints, that pope specified that the very first step to be taken in investigating the virtues of the person proposed for canonization is this: whether humility had been practiced in a heroic degree, for if that is lacking, he said that everything else must fail as a matter of course.

In earlier times, other important teachers made a similar point. One of the great monastic legislators who preceded St. Benedict was St. Basil the Great, whose ascetical writings are still the basic rule for monks and nuns of the Eastern Orthodox Church. In one of his sermons, Basil said that of all God's precepts, "the first is humility, the parent of every virtue, giving birth to all good things in abundance."<sup>5</sup> His contemporary St. Jerome, whom we honor for his skillful translation of much of the Bible into Latin, said in one of his letters, "Hold nothing more excellent than humility, nothing more lovely. It is the preserver and chief guardian of all the virtues. Nothing else whatsoever can be so pleasing to God, or even to humans, than to be great in merit of life and little through one's humility."<sup>6</sup> Jerome's contemporary and occasional antagonist, St. Augustine of Hippo, said point blank: "No one reaches the kingdom of heaven except by humility,"<sup>7</sup> while the theologian who, after St. Paul and St. Augustine, has surely had the greatest influence on the Western Church, St. Thomas Aquinas, wrote in his *Summa Theologiae* that humility is the foundational virtue for a spiritual life inasmuch as it is the counterweight to pride, the most basic sin. In Thomas's words, "In other sins, one turns from God through ignorance or weakness or the desire of some other good, but pride has an aversion to God from unwillingness to be subject to God or to his rule. As Boethius says, 'All vices fly

from God, but pride alone rises in opposition to God. For this reason, [as we read in the Letter of James], God resists the proud [but gives grace to the humble’].”<sup>8</sup>

If you now have a general understanding of what humility is and if you agree that it is necessary, you will be interested in my third question: How is it to be acquired? St. Basil once wrote that merely thinking about it or any other virtue is not enough. In his words, “[Humility] is gained [not only] by reflecting in the first place on the Lord’s command, ‘Learn of me, for I am meek and humble of heart,’ ... [but also by] giving yourself with a steady and determined will to the exercise of humility in whatever you are doing. For what is true of the arts is true of this virtue: thinking will not gain it without practice.”<sup>9</sup> Such practice might well mean that whenever we feel slighted, whenever some embarrassing or humiliating thing happens to us, we really try not to feel resentful, being convinced that even if such things are not positively willed by God, they are nevertheless permitted to happen to us, leaving us the freedom to react in a spirit of either acceptance or resentment. Only the former spirit would be a sign of true humility.

In addition, I like something that one of Cardinal Newman’s contemporaries, Frederick Faber, once wrote. Although Faber was in many respects far inferior to Newman as a thinker, he did have many good things to say, including his point that the interconnection among various virtues means that practicing one that can be exercised in a rather specific, obvious way will simultaneously increase another that might not be so easily practiced in and of itself. Here is what he said in one of his spiritual conferences: “It would be foolish to say that humility is an easy virtue. The very lowest degree of it is a difficult height to climb. But this much may be said for kindness, that it is the easiest road to humility, and infallible as well as easy: and is not humility just what we want, ... just what will break down barriers and give us free course on our way to God?”<sup>10</sup>

Thirdly, I'd like to recount some advice that was once given by a Benedictine monk, Bernard Sause, who was a monk of St. Benedict Abbey in Atchison, Kansas and wrote a number of books in the middle of the last century. What he had to say about humility was directed primarily to fellow monks, but it is also relevant for persons in all walks of life. If at first hearing it sounds a bit dispiriting, I think you'll agree that he speaks the truth, and the truth is always liberating. It goes like this:

[One] need think only of the extremely small contribution [one's] work makes to the life of the Church—even the hundreds of millions in the Church ... today.... In fact, it is not even necessary to tax the imagination with such worldwide reflections. In the relatively brief history of this country, of this diocese, of this abbey, men of learning, zeal, willingness, men whose efforts manifestly enjoyed the blessing of God, men of unusual goodness and talent, have passed to their reward,—and are already forgotten by their followers. But their work is not forgotten before God. A century from now the truly humble work of today's monks will have lost none of its value,—for in being offered to God, it takes on something of the timelessness of all that is of the divine economy.<sup>11</sup>

Fr. Sause's point sounds somewhat similar to that of Shelley's great poem *Ozymandias*, with the huge difference that the poem implies that the work done by that Egyptian pharaoh ultimately went all for naught, while Fr. Sause's point is that even if our good works are forgotten by later generations, they have an eternal value in the eyes of God.

Finally, what are the effects of being truly humble? Some have written that this virtue leads to a felt sense of divine consolation, but I think St. Teresa of Avila put it better when she

wrote the following in her major work, *The Interior Castle*: “When a soul is truly humble, even if God does not bestow consolations, I am persuaded that He will always give it such peace and conformity [to His will] that it will be happier than are others with all their [sensible] joys.”<sup>12</sup> Equally valuable is something I once read in a book by that same Edward Leen whom I mentioned earlier. His point is that a really humble person is could never feel humiliated. That may sound counterintuitive, but it does make sense. Those who are humble, he writes, “look upon nothing that happens to them as undeserved: they look upon it as being the logical outcome of things as they are [in a fallen world]. Pursuing order and justice themselves, they are not bitter when they encounter disorder and injustice in their *milieu*.”<sup>13</sup> And a bit later he adds that “nothing can harm or impair that dignity that belongs to us as children of God. On the contrary, all unjust ill-treatment serves but to enhance [that dignity], for it but serves to develop the divine in us. Hence, if we are really humble, esteeming only what is of God, and not esteeming what is of self, we can never be humiliated. Our Lord suffered untold humiliations but never felt humiliated; in the midst of all He endured, He maintained His divine calm, dignity, and majesty.”<sup>14</sup>

I consider this a very important point. All of us will at times feel we were treated unfairly, and in truly major matters we may well have the right to seek vindication. In many cases, however, it is far better not to make much of the treatment we have received, not to go around complaining or murmuring—a practice that St. Benedict often inveighs against. In a key section of his chapter on humility, Benedict writes: “The fourth step of humility is that in this obedience under difficult, unfavorable, or even unjust conditions, one’s heart quietly embraces suffering and endures it without weakening or seeking escape.... In truth, those who are patient amid hardships and unjust treatment are fulfilling the Lord’s command: ‘When struck on one

check, they turn the other; when deprived of their coat, they offer their cloak also; when pressed into service for one mile, they go two.’ With the Apostle Paul, they bear with ‘false brothers, endure persecution, and bless those who curse them’” (RB 7:35-36a & 42-43). I don’t deny that this is not the way of what the Scriptures often call “the world,” but it is the way of Christ and of the saints, and it ultimately leads to an unshakable peace and joy. It seems appropriate, therefore, to conclude this talk with the traditional short prayer: “Jesus meek and humble of heart, make my heart like unto Thine.”

<sup>1</sup> *Life of Syncretica*, in *Essential Monastic Wisdom: Writings on the Contemplative Life*, ed. Hugh Feiss, OSB (San Francisco: Harper, 1999), 93-94.

<sup>2</sup> Anthony, *Letters*, in *Essential Monastic Wisdom*, 91.

<sup>3</sup> William Bernard Ullathorne, *The Groundwork of the Christian Virtues* (London: Burns & Oates, n.d., dedication dated Apr. 10, 1882), 106.

<sup>4</sup> Edward Leen, C.S.Sp., *In the Likeness of Christ* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1936), 190.

<sup>5</sup> Basil the Great, *Sermon on the Renunciation of the World*.

<sup>6</sup> Jerome, *Letter to Celanus*.

<sup>7</sup> Augustine, *Lib. de Salut.*, ch. 32.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *S.T.*, II-II, q. 162, art. 6.

<sup>9</sup> Basil the Great, *Short Rules*, q. 198.

<sup>10</sup> Frederick Faber, *Spiritual Conferences* (Baltimore: John Murphy Co., n.d., preface dated Dec. 8, 1858), 32.

<sup>11</sup> Bernard Sause, O.S.B., *The School of the Lord's Service*, vol. 1 (St. Meinrad, IN: Grail, 1948), 219.

<sup>12</sup> Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, 3.1.5.

<sup>13</sup> Leen, 189.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.