

11. Humility

To enter into communion with God in prayer is to respond to God's loving invitation. If our basic attitude must be to want what God wants, we will need to listen to Jesus as he says: 'Come to me ... learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart' (Matthew 11:28-29). Humility is essential, for in the words of Teresa of Jesus: 'Humility is nothing else than walking in the truth' (*Interior Castle*, VI.10).

Let us begin by reflecting on the ways in which we human beings are inclined to get puffed up ideas about ourselves. We fail to appreciate who we really are and try to emulate others or pretend to them and to ourselves that we are other than our real selves. The advertising media is but one of the clear signs in our public culture that appearance and image are often valued more than truth. One form of pride is that based on externals like beauty, wealth, status, honours, or reputation. Self-adulation and vanity based on such things is quite foolish, as most people see through it, and any adulation they may offer is usually a pretense. This form of pride is widespread, but it is not as dangerous as the forms we are about to describe.

A more dangerous form of pride is that associated with power. Such pride can lead to a refusal to submit to appropriate authority, an exaggerated self-confidence, a false sense of independence, and at times a dominating ambition that over-rides others. Common life-experiences (ultimately the break-down of health and the process of dying) usually expose the error in self-sufficiency and the folly of self-complacency. Everything we are and everything we have is gift, so what on earth are we doing abusing our power to put others down and exalt ourselves? God is the creator; we are creatures. In the words of Jesus: 'I am the vine, you are the branches ... without me you can do nothing' (John 15:5). Paul writes: 'What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?' (1 Corinthians 4:7).

Even worse is intellectual pride: the pride of refusing to accept or trust anything that fails to make sense to one's own over-rated intellect. Such a failure to recognise the limits of reason itself and of one's own reason in particular is an indication of a profound blindness and stupidity, but such is the power of the ego that we can fall victim to such folly without recognising it. An important safeguard against this kind of pride is to form the habit of checking our opinion against that of others, and of seeking advice and not making the mistake of thinking we always know best. Teresa of Jesus warns us: 'There is no poison in the world which is so fatal to perfection as having a too high opinion of oneself' (*Way*, 12).

Likewise John of the Cross:

'A humble person does not dare deal with God independently, nor can he be completely satisfied without human counsel and direction. God is desirous of this, for to declare and strengthen truth on the basis of natural reason, he draws near to those who come together in order to know it' (*Ascent II*, 22,11).

The worst form of pride, and the most difficult to ferret out and overcome, is pride in what a person considers to be his or her 'spiritual achievements'. Thanks to the wonderful gifts God has given us through our family, our education, the opportunities that have come our way, and especially the people who have loved us, our lives have been enriched in so many ways. God's grace gives us a certain refinement and attraction and deepens our capacity to give and receive love. If you would care to recall some very special moments of grace you will remember that you received them with humility and gratitude. When the moment of grace passed its effects remained and we found ourselves immensely enriched.

Marie-Eugène reminds us that it is then that temptation comes. He writes:

'Temptation comes, subtle and unawares. It comes almost necessarily, so tenacious is pride. We use these spiritual riches to exalt self and to attract notice, to serve a need for affection

or for domination, or simply to make our personal ideas triumph. One's personality, idolatrous of itself, is substituted for God; and what is received to be used as an instrument and a means, it uses to impose itself' (*I want to see God*, page 399).

In his treatise on the twelve steps of humility and pride, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, a twelfth century Cistercian, warns against failing to guard the heart, being careless about examining one's behaviour, and the presumption of thinking that we are not like others, and that we have what we think of as a broader view than the church. He warns against being enamoured of our own excellence; focusing attention on where we appear good, and either forgetting our faults or presuming they are forgiven. He warns against enjoying others thinking well of us because we say good things, drawing attention to ourselves, and being pleased to seem better. He warns against really thinking we are better than others, justifying our wrong-doing, and hiding our real faults by appearing to be humble and open while exaggerating unreal faults to take attention away from our real faults. He warns particularly against spiritual pride – the 'fraudulent twist' of thanking God while in our heart 'attributing to ourselves some of the glory and honour that belongs to God. This constitutes a habitual temptation in the lives of religious and spiritual persons' (Sermon 13:3, *Song of Songs*).

We are all too familiar with the crass and subtle ways in which our ego seeks to flatter itself. It is the virtue of humility that rescues us from pride or protects us from succumbing to it. So what is humility? Anthony Bloom writes:

'The word humility comes from "humus" - fertile soil ... capable of making good use of the rubbish we tip into it, capable of transforming our refuse into wealth, of accepting every seed, giving it body, life, growth, to become fully itself without denaturing it ... Like the rich silent, creative earth, we should offer ourselves to the Other' (*Courage to pray*, page 11).

A good way to understand humility is to reflect on Psalm 131:

'O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvellous for me. But I have calmed my soul [The Greek version reads: 'I think humbly of myself'] and have quieted my soul like a weaned child with its mother; my soul is like the weaned child that is with me. O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time on and forevermore.'

To picture humility, we are to look at a two-year old - vulnerable, needy, dependent, but cuddled up against its mother's breast, knowing that everything is okay because of the mother's love. The child knows, however unconsciously, that it is not self-reliant. It needs its mother - but she is there and so there is no need for fear. This is humility. It fits beautifully with the following scene from the Gospels:

'The disciples came to Jesus and asked, 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?' He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, 'Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven, Whoever lowers himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me' (Matthew 18:1-5).

The last remark makes it clear that Jesus identifies with the child. He is among the disciples, showing them how to rely on the God he calls 'Abba' ('my dear Father'). Disciples are to share this absolute and total trust, for being in the kingdom of heaven means accepting God as a loving Father, a loving Mother.

When Saint Paul reflected on the humility of Jesus, he could find no word in the Greek language that was able to express what he wanted to say, not even in the Greek version of the Hebrew

Bible. He had to coin a new word [*tapeinophrosyne*] build up from a verb that he found in the Greek version of Psalm 131. Paul invites his fellow Christians to share in the humility of Jesus:

‘In *humility* regard others as better than yourselves ... Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus’ (Philippians 2:3, 5; see Acts 20:19).

‘I beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all *humility* and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace’ (Ephesians 4:1-3).

‘As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, *humility*, meekness, and patience’ (Colossians 3:12).

We can reach a certain level of humility by growing in self-knowledge and by being honest about who we really are: that all we are and have is a gift; that we are dependent upon God for everything; that of ourselves we can do nothing. Life teaches us how small we are in the scheme of things. We see the limitations of our good qualities, and we see our faults. We also see how little control we have over things that really matter. The humiliation of sinning has a role here as well. Listen to Teresa:

‘Any good thing we do has its source, not in ourselves, but rather in that spring where this tree, which you are, is planted, and in that sun which sheds its radiance on our works’ (*Interior Castle* I.2.5).

John of the Cross used to say: ‘To be humble is to hide in your own nothingness and to know how to abandon yourself to God’ (*Other Counsels* n.5).

In a similar vein, Johannes Tauler:

‘Above all we must enter our own nothingness. If we were to reach the very pinnacle of all perfection, then it would be even more important that we should sink into the deepest ground, to the very roots of humility. For as the height of a tree depends on the depth of its roots, in the same way the heights we attain in this life are only as great as our humility is deep’ (*Sermon* 48).

Catherine of Siena heard Jesus say to her:

‘The source of humility is a person’s true knowledge of herself and of my goodness. Only when discernment is rooted in humility is it virtuous, producing life-giving fruit and willingly yielding what is due to everyone’ (*Dialogue: The Way of Perfection*, chapter 9, page 40).

In her spiritual autobiography, Therese of Lisieux writes:

‘I prefer to own in all simplicity that God who is mighty has done great things for me (Luke 1:49) – including showing me my littleness and how incapable I am of anything good.’ Also: ‘In the evening of this life, I shall appear before You with empty hands’.

Ruth Burrows writes:

‘Humility is acceptance of the truth about ourselves, not an effort to work up humble sentiments in spite of our obvious excellence! It is seeing and accepting the truth that we are not noble, good and spiritual’ (*Ascent to Love*, page 58).

It is important to note that self-knowledge does not necessarily lead to humility. If we focus only on ourselves we are just as likely to end in discouragement, or even despair. A purer and deeper humility comes from contemplation of God. In the light of God’s gracious love, our least imperfection shows up. However, we experience joy at the truth of who we really are, for, with all our limitations and sins, we are loved by God. Here we learn that of ourselves we are nothing,

but we learn this while knowing with a knowledge born of faith that we are not 'of ourselves', but are truly held in existence and constantly graced by a God who loves us unconditionally.

Teresa writes:

'Humility, however deep it be, neither disquiets nor disturbs you; it is accompanied by peace, joy and tranquility. Although we are distressed by our sinfulness, this distress is accompanied by an interior peace and joy of which we should not like to be deprived. Far from disturbing or depressing us, it enlarges us and makes us fit to serve God better' (*Way*, 39.2).

In an essay on humility, Jan van Ruusbroec has this to say:

'To be plunged in humility is to be plunged in God, for God is the bottom of the abyss, above everything and beneath everything, supreme in height and supreme in depth. That is why humility, like charity, is capable of continually increasing ... Humility is so precious that it reaches to things too high to be taught; it attains and possesses what words do not attain.'

Let us listen again to Therese of Lisieux: 'O my only Love, I am happy to feel myself so small, so frail in your sunshine, and I am at peace' (*Story of a Soul*, 11).

With this trust there is no need to inflate our ego by taking pride in external possessions, or anything as passing and fickle as physical beauty or reputation. There is no need to dominate over others or think we are superior to them. There is no need to think we have to know everything or to measure everything by our poor, limited intellect, and we avoid like the plague the awful sin of taking glory in the spiritual gifts with which God has graced us.

For some people an obstacle to grace is their being too dependent on others for their well-being. For many people, however, one of the greatest barriers to grace is a form of self-reliance that blinds us to the presence of God sustaining and guiding us. As adults we have had to learn habits that are, in fact, a barrier to receiving what Jesus is offering. As disciples of Jesus there is much to unlearn, for we cannot earn grace; we cannot make a success of life by our own efforts; we are not meant to achieve by our own effort.

In the context of one who wants to learn to pray, we must know from the start that we cannot control or master prayer. Jesus looked to God as a child looks to a parent, with total trust and a simple expectation of receiving love. To be his disciple, we must learn to do the same. If you have tried to do this you will know that it is not at all easy, for it cuts at the very core of our pride. We like to be independent and self-reliant. We see it as being adult. Jesus says we have to change all this and become like a child. For an adult this requires being 'poor in spirit' (Matthew 5:3).

We are humble to the extent that we know that we are nothing and rejoice in it, recognising that our life and everything in it is a grace of the living God. It is not enough to know this, we should want others to know it and to treat us accordingly, neither valuing us falsely nor honouring us for what is the fruit of grace. Humility is best learned by contemplating the heart of Jesus: 'Learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart' (Matthew 11:29).

If in our journey in prayer we wish to prepare to receive God's gift of contemplation, nothing is of more importance than to respond to God's grace as God enlightens us concerning our own weakness, so long as we do this in the spirit of a child who is confident in being loved. There is no grace God cannot give to a person who has learned humility. Without humility, no grace is safe.

May we learn to accept ourselves simply as we are and open our hands and our hearts to receive love from God, our Mother, our Father, who holds us in existence and who knows us as we really are. Let us believe that God wants to delight in us, and let us relax back from the foolish path of

pride. It is God's love that creates us and holds us in existence. Only God's love can make us truly beautiful with the only beauty that really counts: the beauty of a person who is open to love and who gives love simply and truly. Of such is the kingdom of heaven.

Humility and obedience belong together. Anthony Bloom speaks of prayer as being:

'An attitude of self-surrender which is at the same time extremely active. Self-surrender, because like the earth, humus, we give ourselves without reserve; active, because we are ready to respond to God's every suggestion, every call' (*Courage to pray*, page 12).