

The Virtue of Humility

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Asked to list the four cardinal virtues, St. Bernard of Clairvaux responded: "Humility, humility, humility and humility." St. Vincent de Paul considered humility central to those who would serve God and the poor. The Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission in keeping with this tradition reestablishes the importance of humility along with the other four key virtues: simplicity, meekness, mortification and zeal.

7. – The Congregation, furthermore, tries to express its spirit in five virtues drawn from its own special way of looking at Christ, namely, simplicity, humility, gentleness, mortification, and zeal for souls. Speaking of these five virtues, St. Vincent said: "The Congregation should pay special attention to developing and living up to these five virtues so that they may be, as it were, the faculties of the soul of the whole Congregation, and that everything each one of us does may always be inspired by them" (CR II, 14).

Recent treatments of the Vincentian virtues include Fr. Robert Maloney's excellent presentations that feature the "horizon shifts" necessary to understand and appropriate the virtues from a contemporary perspective. We likewise appreciate other successful attempts to encourage us to live out the virtues today such as Fr. Thomas McKenna's *Praying in the Spirit of Vincent de Paul*. These are two popular presentations available in English and there are others in other languages. This presentation will not explore ground so well covered by these two writers and others. Rather it will be a personal and pastoral reflection with references old and new.

BEGINNING WITH ST. VINCENT

In Chapter XII, 2 of the Common Rules, St. Vincent comments on the importance of humility in the life of a member of the Congregation:

Each one, in every single thing he does, especially in preaching or other ministries of the Congregation, should make an effort

to have, to the best of his ability, as pure an intention as possible of pleasing God alone. We should renew this intention many times. We should be careful above all not to indulge any wish for human approval or self-gratification. Such a wish can infect or spoil the holiest action.

By the time he wrote the Common Rules, St. Vincent was very aware of the failures of confreres and others, especially clergy and those of higher rank, to maintain Christian humility. But he was conscious of his own failure in this regard as well. We know that he had the habit of depreciating himself as an exercise in humility and his conferences are peppered with it. But it is his childhood experience that most touches me in regard to the importance of understanding Vincentian humility. Coste notes that St. Vincent was ashamed of his peasant father (*The Life and Works of St. Vincent de Paul I*, p. 14).

When I was a small boy and my father was taking me with him into the town, I was ashamed to walk with him and have people know that he was my father, because he was badly dressed and a little lame.

I remember that on one occasion in the College where I studied, somebody came to tell me that my father, who was a poor peasant, was asking for me. I refused to go and speak to him and thereby committed a great sin.

Such memories are not easily forgotten especially by a committed Christian dedicated to the care of poor and uncultivated people. Vincent may very well have remembered these incidents of his youth when he made the following well-known observations about poor people.

I should not judge poor peasants, men or women, by their exterior nor by their apparent mental capacities. All the more is this so since very frequently they scarcely seem to have the appearance or intelligence of reasonable beings, so gross and offensive are they. But turn the medal, and you will see by the light of faith that the Son of God, whose will it was to be poor, is represented to us by these people (SV XI, 32).

St. Vincent's memories and observations offer us a profound understanding of the nature of humility and therefore its importance for him and for us. Some definitions, such as the following, stress that humility is about truthfulness.

Humility, generically a candid attitude towards what we really are, an avoidance of humbug at two extremes, namely of inordinate self-esteem which claims too much and of

unwarranted and sometimes hypocritical self-abasement that claims too little (Encyclopedic Dictionary of Religion).

In the pursuit of holiness in accord with gospel values, Vincent discovered the meaning of his priestly vocation and the importance of acquiring the virtues necessary to follow Jesus, the Evangelizer of the Poor who was “meek and humble of heart.” While he tended to put himself down as a means to acquire humility and encourage others to do the same, he nonetheless was generous in congratulating the confreres, Daughters of Charity and others for the good they accomplished and as evidence of the working of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

BIBLICAL FOUNDATION

The word “humility” is related to the term “humus,” dirt or earth. To be humble, then, is to accept that one is “from the earth.” To be humble is to stand with one’s feet on the ground in touch with the deepest truth of one’s self. The Bible begins with the truth of human origins. *“The Lord God formed man out of the clay of the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and so man became a living being”* (Gn 2:7). “The man” and, subsequently, “the woman” are provided with a paradise to cultivate and enjoy. But one of the animals that God had created, “the serpent” cunningly tempts the woman and, in turn, she tempts the man into eating of the forbidden fruit. They fall into the trap of believing that being human is not good enough but by eating of the fruit they would *“be like gods who know what is good and what is bad.”* Because of this lie, God curses the serpent, then curses the man and the woman for believing it and finally curses the ground itself. *“By the sweat of your face shall you get bread to eat, until you return to the ground, from which you were taken; for you are dirt, and to dirt you shall return”* (Gn 3:19). We are familiar with all that follows this root sin of our ancestors: brother kills brother and humans think they can build a mountain of their own making. All of this results in alienation and chaos and then a flood that almost destroys everything and everybody. But God, ever faithful and merciful, renews the face of the earth.

The rest of Holy Scripture portrays both God’s fidelity amid human infidelity. Various covenants are struck to reestablish a bond between God and his chosen people. Along the way we hear of those who struggle and fail and others who struggle but remain faithful. The final solution, from the Christian perspective, is the story of redemption that culminates in the paschal mystery of Jesus and one final covenant. God’s way to harmony, peace and fulfillment is the only way. A dramatic example of this struggle to live in truth and freedom is the story of Job, the *“blameless and upright man who feared God and avoided evil.”* But he was equally blessed with a

multitude of children and material wealth. Once again Satan, the tempter, enters into this blissful scene. God allows the temptation to take place but Job remains steadfast in humility and faith even though he is stripped of every blessing. He remains clear that he is a human being made and blessed by God who owes him nothing.

Then Job cast himself prostrate upon the ground, and said, "Naked I came forth from my mother's womb, and naked shall I go back again. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed by the name of the Lord!" In all this Job did not sin, nor did he say anything disrespectful of God (Jb 1:20b-22).

This well known expression of Job's humility occurs early on in the story. He struggles mightily to hold on to it in the midst of woe upon woe and profound grief. But he perseveres and sets the stage for the story of Jesus who will likewise remain faithful to his trust and love of God in the midst of temptation, suffering, grief and death. Job is rewarded with the restoration of his lost blessings. In the story of Jesus earthly blessings are transformed. The story of Jesus is again about humility — that God alone is good and all is grace.

The story of Jesus begins in Luke's gospel with Mary. She will be the ground in which the incarnation of God in Christ takes shape — with her balanced confidence in God and security in her humanity. Seeking nothing greater than what her ordinary life will bring to her, she allows God to do marvels through her. *"My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my savior. For he has looked upon his handmaid's lowliness; behold, from now on will all ages call me blessed"* (Lk 1:46-48). After Jesus had expelled a demon from a mute person, a woman in the crowd yelled out, *"Blessed is the womb that carried you and the breasts at which you nursed."* But Jesus replied, *"Rather, blessed are those who hear the word of God and observe it"* (Lk 11:27b-28). Mary listened to God and so was able to respond humbly and truthfully. She, along with her husband, Joseph, would provide Jesus with a firm human ground transformed by grace, the foundation necessary *"to advance in wisdom and age and favor before God and man"* (Lk 2:52).

The gospel stories teem with references to the humility of Jesus and its importance in following him as disciple. One of the most significant occurs in the parable of the Lost Son (Lk 15:11-32). Jesus was being criticized by the Pharisees and the scribes for associating with the wrong element of society. *"This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."* Jesus not only finds such people worthy of his time and attention but socializes with them. He is one with them by joining them in a meal. He responds to his detractors with three parables. After describing the joy of bringing back a lost sheep in one parable and finding a lost coin in another, Jesus describes the joy of

the recovery of a lost son. It is a story of God's justice encompassing his mercy, patience, love and warmth. But the reaction and response of the elder son to his wayward younger brother demonstrates the danger of pride. For all of his affirmation of fidelity, the older brother reveals how far he is from a life-giving relationship to his father. When told that that his brother had returned and that his father had organized a big party for him and his friends, the older brother erupts in anger at his father and absolutely refuses to be a part of any such celebration. *"Look, all these years I served you and not once did I disobey your orders; yet you never gave me even a young goat to feast on with my friends. But when your son returns who swallowed up your property with prostitutes, for him you slaughter the fattened calf."*

What a story! The faithful son is filled with anger, bitterness, resentment and profound disappointment while the disrespectful, greedy and lustful son is overwhelmed with his father's euphoria. The truth is that both boys had wandered away from their father's home and love.

*Not only did the younger son, who left home to look for freedom and happiness in a distant country, get lost, but the one who stayed home also became a lost man. Exterioerly he did all the things a good son is supposed to do, but, interiorly, he wandered away from his father. He did his duty, worked hard every day, and fulfilled all his obligations but became increasingly unhappy and unfree (HENRI NOUWEN, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*).*

The older son is not disposed to imitate his father's greatness of soul because he is filled with pride and anger; the younger son, repentant and overwhelmed by his father's joy and relief at his return, is disposed to humility, gratitude, and wisdom.

In the gospels we find reflected our own story of the struggle to be satisfied with a loving relationship with the Father and through him with others as the greatest gift one can have. To know Jesus and to learn from him is the way we come to know the Father and to live in his love. Many of Jesus' listeners did not make this connection because they were not humble enough to do so. But some did.

I give praise to you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for although you have hidden these things from the wise and the learned you have revealed them to the childlike. Yes, Father, such has been your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to who the Son wishes to reveal him. Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from, for I am meek and humble of

heart; and you will find rest for yourselves. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light (Mt11:25-30).

The gospels also highlight the difficulties of Jesus' disciples to learn humility and set the right priorities. Mark's gospel, in particular, shows them to be very slow learners indeed. Having given them yet a third prediction of his passion, death and resurrection, they remain deaf and preoccupied with themselves.

Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him and said, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." He replied, "What do you wish me to do for you?" They answered, "Grant that in your glory we may sit one at your right and the other at your left." Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking" (Mk 10:35-38a).

The coming of the Holy Spirit after Jesus' death and resurrection will make the difference for the apostles and many of the other disciples of Jesus. They will discover the truth of Jesus and the truth about themselves. They will know that even if they had denied him, abandoned him or even persecuted him, that he loved them and believed in them. The Acts of the Apostles and the remainder of the New Testament scriptures all touch on the conversion that Christian life entails.

Human priorities and aspirations all have to be transformed. Humility is a major stepping stone in the following of Christ and is not easily acquired. St. Paul in particular emphasizes it.

If there is any encouragement in Christ, any solace in love, and participation in the Spirit, any compassion and mercy, complete my joy be being of the same mind, with the same love, united in heart, thinking one thing. Do nothing out of selfishness or out of vainglory; rather, humbly regard others as more important than yourselves, each looking out not for his own interests, but everyone for those of others.

Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. Because of this, God greatly exalted him and bestowed upon him the name that is above every name... (Phil 2:1-9).

St. Paul's observations about Jesus' humility are followed observations on his own journey to self understanding.

If anyone else thinks he can be confident in flesh, all the more can I. Circumcised on the eighth day, of the race of Israel, of

the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrew parentage, in observance of the law a Pharisee, in zeal I persecuted the church, in righteousness based on the law I was blameless.

But whatever gains I had, these I have come to consider a loss because of Christ. More than that, I even consider everything as a loss because of the supreme good of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have accepted the loss of all things and I consider them so much rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having any righteousness of my own based on the law but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God, depending on faith to know him and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his suffering by being conformed to his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead (Phil 3:5-11).

Furthermore, Paul asserts that his spiritual development is dynamic and ongoing. A humble person can never say that he has acquired this virtue.

It is not that I have already taken hold of it or have already attained perfect maturity, but I continue my pursuit in hope that I may possess it, since I have indeed been taken possession of by Christ Jesus. Brothers, I for my part do not consider myself to have taken possession. Just one thing: forgetting what lies behind but straining forward to what lies ahead, I continue my pursuit toward the goal, the prize of God's upward calling, in Christ Jesus. Let us, then who are "perfectly mature" adopt this attitude. And if you have a different attitude, this too God will reveal to you. Only, with regard to what we have attained, continue on the same course (Phil 3:12-16).

St. Vincent believed that he discovered his life's work as a priest when he preached a sermon on general confession to the people of Folleville on the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul. St. Paul was clearly his role model as a man who was given the grace of conversion and then called by Christ to offer the same gift to others. Both St. Paul and St. Vincent modeled themselves after Jesus. What they first learned from him, they then put into practice themselves before preaching to others. This is what St. Vincent proposes in Chapter I of the Common Rules.

We read in sacred scripture that our Lord, Jesus Christ, sent on earth for the salvation of the human race, did not begin by teaching; he began by doing. And what he did was to integrate fully into his life every type of virtue. He then went on to teach, by preaching the good news of salvation to poor people, and by passing on to this apostles and disciples what they needed to

know to become guides for others. Now the little Congregation of the Mission wants, with God's grace, to imitate Christ, the Lord, in so far as that is possible in view of its limitations. It seeks to imitate his virtues as well as what he did for the salvation of others (CR I, 1).

PRACTICAL VIRTUE

St. Vincent was inspired by Jesus, St. Paul, the great saints and some of his contemporaries, like St. Francis de Sales, to put faith into action. He was not interested in a kind of perfectionism that was separated from the great commandment of the love of neighbor as a requirement for the love of God. Humility was the foundation for such effective charity in keeping with biblical teaching:

You have been told, O man, what is good, and what the Lord requires of you: Only to do the right and to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God (Mi 6:8).

We are used to this biblical and religious wisdom but it has contemporary secular expressions as well.

*Humility just might be one of the most overlooked attributes in leadership, but it just might be one of the most important attributes a leader can possess. Humility is a strand between leader and follower that underscores one common element: our humanity. Humility is not taught in management courses or many leadership courses, for that matter. And you can understand why. Organizations want their leaders to be visionary, authoritative, capable and motivational. Nowhere does it say anything about being "humble." Still, most successful leaders understand that a sense of humility is essential to winning hearts and minds. Humility is a visible demonstration of concern and compassion, as well as authenticity. Leaders who are to be followed must be leaders who understand the human condition, especially their own (JOHN BALDONI, "On Leadership Communication," in *Darwin Magazine*).*

These contemporary sentiments dealing with effective management skills that lead to a more successful business reflect those of St. Vincent in the *Common Rules*.

We should make a great effort to learn the following lesson, also taught by Christ: "Learn from me because I am gentle and humble in heart." We should also remember that he himself said that by gentleness we inherit the earth. If we act on this we will win people over so that they will turn to the Lord. That will not happen if we treat people harshly or sharply. And we

should also remember that humility is the route to heaven. A loving acceptance of it when we are humiliated usually raises us up, guiding us, as it were, step by step from one virtue to the next until we reach heaven (CR II, 6).

A “loving acceptance” of humiliations that guides us to acquiring other virtues also has a contemporary spin, but one that offers us sage advice in our ministry of effective evangelization.

*“Turn failures into lessons.” Mistakes give rise to the need for humility. Instead of trying to cover mistakes up, leaders need to publicize them. Not for the sake of retribution, but for the sake of education. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, Eli Lilly, the pharmaceutical company, took a second look at a cancer drug that had failed in human trials. Researchers at Lilly understand that the scientific method involves a degree of trial and error as well as failure analysis. The result is that mistakes can be turned into successes; the failed drug was modified and is now used to treat another form of cancer (BALDONI, *Darwin Magazine*).*

One of the practices of many religious congregations common at the time of St. Vincent and even up to the time of Vatican Council II was the “chapter of faults.” This practice of publicly confessing ones faults (but not ones sins) and having them pointed out by others was understood to be an effective means of developing humility and therefore equipping one for more effective ministry and community life. This practice has probably died out for the most part. Today we would more likely talk about “fraternal correction” or “open and honest communication” with each other. But the underlying idea of honesty with self and others remains an important concept in contemporary life.

*Humility is admission of humanity, a sense that leader and follower are in this together. That deepens a sense of trust. Better to admit a shortcoming, or a limitation, than to lead blindly onto the unknown (BALDONI, *Darwin Magazine*).*

THE SPIRITUALITY OF IMPERFECTION

Every year on Ash Wednesday we Christians are reminded that we are made of dust and with death will return to that state. We are marked with dust, or ashes, as a reminder of this essential truth. The rest of Lent engages us through prayer and other practices to remember this fundamental fact and then practice the works of mercy, especially almsgiving, as a symbol of our human solidarity. All of us are in need of the loving and saving mercy of God and will always remain so. Saints never think of themselves as beyond the

need of God's mercy. As the saying goes, "A saint is a saint unless he knows that he is one." Ashes worn as an expression of piety is an expression of pride and Lent will get us no further along the path of holiness and discipleship.

Alcoholics Anonymous or "A.A." is an important spiritual movement of the 20th century and has successfully assisted millions of alcoholics discover the way to sobriety and from there the accomplishment of important life goals, even Christian holiness. But it starts out with the recognition that no one is or can be perfect.

*According to the way of life that flows from this insight, it is only by ceasing to play God, by coming to terms with errors and shortcomings, and by accepting the inability to control every aspect of their lives that alcoholics (or any human beings) can find the peace and serenity that alcohol (or other drugs, or sex, money, material possessions, power, or privilege) promise but never deliver (E. KURTZ - K. KETCHAM, *The Spirituality of Imperfection*).*

Those attending A.A. meetings always identify themselves as alcoholics, "My name is John; I'm an alcoholic," even if they have been sober for many years. The history of A.A. notes that this recognition that "once an alcoholic always an alcoholic" was central to maintaining sobriety, no one could refer to himself as an "ex-alcoholic." Rather, one humbly took one day at a time to remain faithful to grace that led him to sobriety.

*The point of Humility is to find a "balance," that place in the middle of life's teeter-totter that allows one foot to reside on the side of "god/saint/angel" and the other side of "worm/sinner/beast."... But Humility connotes not only "balance" but "right ordering"... a choosing of priorities, a putting into practice of "First Things First." And so, in the tradition one accepts "beast" but that does not exclude cherishing and fostering those attitudes and activities that flow from "angel."... Humility's "right ordering," like humility's balance has to do first with oneself.... A humility that begins with the acceptance of self as imperfect will not be interested in judging others: "To be humble is not to make comparisons." And so it is that because Humility chooses to look first, and indeed only, at one's own defects and shortcomings, it serves as the foundation for another powerful spiritual reality: Tolerance (KURTZ - KETCHAM, *The Spirituality of Imperfection*).*

The 19th Century American humorist Mark Twain noted that "I am no more humble than my talents require." Humility is a foundational virtue, both to acquire for one's own spiritual

development as well as to carry on our ministry in service of others. But it cannot be faked.

*One day a rabbi, in a frenzy rushed in before the ark, fell to his knees, and started beating his breast, crying, "I'm nobody! I'm nobody!" The cantor of the synagogue, impressed by this example of spiritual humility, joined the rabbi on his knees, saying: "I'm nobody! I'm nobody!" The shamus (custodian) watching from the corner couldn't restrain himself either. He joined the other two on his knees, calling out, "I'm nobody! I'm nobody!" At which point the rabbi, nudging the cantor with his elbow, pointed at the custodian and said, "Look who thinks he's nobody" (quoted in KURTZ - KETCHAM, *The Spirituality of Imperfection*).*

We can begin each day knowing that there will be many opportunities to grow in humility but only if we are present to the day as we are doing what we do great or small. No one of should think he has to be Jesus, St. Paul or St. Vincent. In the Church and in the Congregation we join together, each contributing his part. Helen Keller, an American sage born deaf, dumb and blind reminds us Vincentians of an important truth that is critical to our vocation as it has been passed on to us from St. Vincent to our own time.

I long to accomplish great and noble tasks, but it is my chief duty to accomplish humble tasks as though they were great and noble. The world is moved along, not only by the mighty shoves of its heroes, but also by the aggregate of the tiny pushes of each honest worker.

St. Paul has sage advice for us in this pursuit — at the beginning of each day of our Vincentian lives in ministry and community life, during each day and at the end of each day.

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another, if one has a grievance against another; as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you also do. And over all these put on love, that is, the bond of perfection. And let the peace of Christ control your hearts, the peace into which you were also called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as in all wisdom you teach and admonish one another, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in work or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Col 3:12-17).