

This article is called Humility, Part 2b because last week's article, which focused on St Frances Cabrini, was, in part, also an article on humility as exemplified by this saint.

After the first article on humility, a parishioner sent me a couple of quotes from a book of saint quotes that they are using for daily meditation. One of the quotes was from St Rose Philippine Duchesne, a French nun who came to the U.S. in the early 1800's and settled in the area of St Charles, MO, and whose memorial was this past Monday. The quote was: **"Humility is the virtue that requires the greatest effort."** *Humility* is the virtue that requires the greatest effort – not chastity, which often requires a great struggle, or charity, or any other virtue, but humility. It's true that each individual person will have their own particular struggles – some might struggle more with wrath, others more with purity – but humility is a fundamental struggle for all.

This quote from St Rose Philippine is helpful in a couple of ways. It's telling us, for one thing, that it *is* a real struggle *for* those who actually make it to Heaven – not just for some people, not for those whom you might look upon as being sinful, but for those who are the friends of God. It is saying that growth in virtue doesn't just happen, you're not just born this way, it's not cheap, easy, and automatic, you can't just assume it and look past it – it requires conscious, intentional effort, an actual decision in everyday life to live it out, real self-denial. The path to hell is marked by those who dismiss this and set it aside with a wave of the hand. To dismiss this point will result in a never-ending, intense, desperate suffering. Reject the prideful temptation to take it lightly, to set it aside. It is not the example of those who made it.

This quote from St Rose Philippine is also very encouraging. With all of the failures – even repeated failures – backsliding, and so on, that I fall into, it can be easy to think it's no use, this is not for me, I might as well give up, I'm not like the saints. The saints, the earthly experts, the ones who have been "successful" say NO, it was a struggle for me too. Don't expect otherwise, that's the way it is. Put your head down and keep going. It's the nature of the beast. If you want to know how to be successful in business would you not turn to those who were successful in business? So it is in material things, so it is in the highest venture of life – the spiritual life.

Let us draw one last thing out of St Rose Philippine's quote: humility requires great effort. It refocuses our mind on the essential question of: what is that effort? The answer depends on the question: what is humility? To hit a target, what the target is has to be clear. You can't aim for the target until you know what it is. So we now return to this question: what is humility, and what isn't it? What we're aiming for has to be clear.

The question of what a virtue is, is generally answered by what it does. This is probably not so surprising because a thing is often defined or described by what it does. If someone saw a car for the first time and asked what it is, you would almost certainly respond by saying what it does – it's for transportation. Consider another simple analogy from human nutrition. Vitamin C is one "element" to make the human body work like it's supposed to. Another way to further understand Vitamin C is to say: what happens if you don't have Vitamin C or not enough of it, what ill-condition results from a lack of Vitamin C (remember, this is only an analogy – not a complete lesson on the effects of Vit C!). Well, we might say, it results in scurvy. So what is Vitamin C? Another part of the answer as to what Vitamin C is, could be: it's that which opposes scurvy.

This is how virtue is generally defined: it's that which makes the soul as it is supposed to be (makes man what he is meant to be) and each virtue opposes some particular vice (or vices) – like Vit C opposes scurvy.

What does humility do, what adverse condition does it oppose or counter? There are 3 main "components" to the human soul: the intellect, free-will, and the passions (feelings, emotions, desires, however you want to put it – things like fear, anger, pleasure). Virtues are the "things" that make these components like they are meant to be – they are the Vitamin C for each of these different "parts." So for example, prudence is one of the virtues for the intellect. Each virtue also "opposes" some vice (or more than one vice), the scurvy that comes up if the virtue isn't there. Now all of these powers or capacities or components of the soul were damaged or disordered by original sin. A given virtue is what makes it like it is meant to be. Lack of virtue in the soul is like a broken arm for the body – it's not like it's supposed to be and it causes great harm.

So what does humility do? Aquinas points out that in the face of a something good that is difficult to achieve we need 2 things – one is something to compel us on so that we don't give up or despair and the other is something that restrains us from trying to go beyond what we are. Humility pertains to the second part. A good example of what that means is the first temptation, original sin. The tempter said to Eve: "you will be like gods" – you can be a god unto yourself, independent of the one true God, all-powerful unto yourself with no one over you. It was a temptation to go beyond what they were. It was a lie, it's trying to compel Adam & Eve beyond what they are capable of. It's like saying: birds can fly, why shouldn't I, and then going and jumping off of a tall building. Something should have been present to restrain the person from going beyond what they are, their true capacities, from jumping off of the tall building. Quoting St Isidore of Seville, Aquinas defines pride as: wishing to appear above what a person really is; he who wishes to overstep beyond what he is, is proud. Humility, then, is opposed to – is the counter to – the destructive force of pride.

Notice that humility deals with truth, pride with falsehood. The truth is that God does call us to great things, to great and difficult work, but to things that we are made capable of by His grace. Humility does not mean denying that. The saints (e.g., St Bernard) do say that humility is the virtue by which a person esteems themselves little. But that is too often taken to mean sitting around saying something like: I can't do anything. That's not humility. Humility is meant to act in conjunction with the virtue of magnanimity, which means striving for great things. Magnanimity says: become like you are meant to be, become like Christ, strive for Heaven, become the son or daughter you are meant to be – this is hard, go forward with all your strength, get after it, strive for that great thing. Now this can (and rather easily at that) result in a person thinking of themselves (falsely) as something like superman. So there has to be something that restrains that inclination and that something is humility. "Magnanimity" without humility is no longer virtue, it is the vice of pride.

But what does that mean – don't try to go beyond what you are meant to be? One example has already been given – you will be like gods. The Litany of Humility also helps here. Nonetheless, what humility means needs more flushing out with additional details and examples. We will begin with a writing from St Bernard of Clairvaux, a Cistercian monk who, in his instruction on humility, followed St Benedict.

St Bernard laid out what he called the 12 steps of humility and the 12 steps of pride. He presented this in terms of a ladder, saying that we are always on one rung of the ladder. Notice that this means that there is a *progression* in this virtue, which also means that we are generally a mixture of the two. St Bernard's presentation of the 12 steps of humility were heavily focused on the practice of this virtue in a monastic setting – i.e., for monks. While this could be *fairly* easily generalized to apply to everyone, his 12 steps of pride are directly applicable to everyone, without hardly any additional effort to generalize them so these steps of pride will be presented here. What is it that humility does? One way to characterize it is: it opposes pride. Thus seeing the steps of pride helps to see what humility is/does, what it means to practice it. These steps are a great aid in self-examination. The steps of pride laid out by St Bernard are as follows: 1) Curiosity; when the eyes and other senses attend to what is not one's concern; 2) Levity of mind, known by words the bespeak unreasonable joy and sadness; 3) Silly mirth, with over-much laughing; 4) Boasting and too much talking; 5) Singularity, proud esteem of one's own ways; 6) Self-assertion; believing one is holier than others; 7) Presumption, meddling with everything; 8) Defending one's sins; 9) Hypocritical confession; 10) Rebellion against superiors and brothers; 11) Freedom in sinning; 12) The habit of sin.

What is humility = what does it do? It opposes (or is the opposite of) these things. Just take the last 2 for now. Are these not common in the world today? Satan was the first to engage in pride. As you think about these steps of a more and more hardened pride and how they are becoming more and more prevalent in the world today, it is not hard to see the hand of Satan. Yes, the world is bowing down, with great eagerness, more and more to the Satanic through the vice of pride. The 1st and 7th steps are basically saying: sticking my nose where it doesn't belong. How easy it is to slide into that, how often it is done. The 8th step is also becoming common practice, sometimes even in the Sacrament of Confession. How easy it is to rationalize, excuse, and even glorify one's sins. Perhaps next week we will continue this topic with additional examples of humility.

God bless you, Fr Kuhn.