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Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

May you always be consciously aware of the grace and peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the love and mercy of God the Father, and the communion of the Life-Giving Holy Spirit dwelling within your heart!

THE NATURE OF TRUE HUMILITY

Macarius, along with all the great spiritual teachers of true Christianity, extolled the need for humility. By praying incessantly and being inwardly attentive to the living presence of the Triune God, we come to live in God's real world, a world that gives us the conviction that we are utterly dependent upon God. This produces a profound humility. The "more perfect" a person becomes, the nearer one approaches God's perfection, the more she or he is deeply aware of how little one has truly responded to God's influence and grace in this earthly journey.

"Such true humility combines with an ardent longing for more and more of God: For the sign of Christianity is this, that one be pleasing to God so as to seek to hide oneself from the eyes of men. And even if a person should possess the complete treasures of the King, he should hide them and say continually: 'The treasure is not mine, but another has given it to me as a charge. For I am a beggar and when it pleases him, he can claim it from me. ...And the more they apply themselves to the art of growing in perfection, the more they reckon themselves as poor, as those in great need and possessing nothing. ...This is the sign of Christianity, namely, this very humility.'" (*Pseudo-Macarius; The Fifty Spiritual Homilies and the Great Letter*. Translated, edited and with an Introduction by Fr. George A. Maloney; preface by Kallistos Ware, Homily 15:37).

Would we consider ourselves to be truly humble persons? Our first reaction to such a question would probably be that we really have not given humility much consideration amidst so many other more pleasing matters. We have seen some of the reasons why we turn away from the topic of humility. We thus, in general, entertain little or no enthusiasm to read and meditate on this virtue, which traditionally has been considered as a most essential one, and which Jesus has strongly commanded us to learn from his humble life as found in the gospels.

Realistically, when was the last time you heard a homily on the necessity of humility as the foundation of all other moral virtues, and of the relationships between you and God, between you, your neighbor and the entire created world?

In the mid-nineties, when Fr. George was preparing to write on the topic of humility, he checked a Catholic university that offers a master's degree in theology and Christian spirituality. To his surprise, he found not one book devoted to humility. The librarian told him that there may have been books on humility, but that they were probably donated to seminary libraries in Africa, since the topic would not be too relevant for the twentieth century!

In a word, should we not admit that we are simply not interested in the subject of humility? The main reason is, perhaps, that for a long time we have entertained distorted ideas about humility and have not understood its *real* nature. Thus we have not understood the great need for humility in our relationships with God and neighbor at home, at work, in our parishes and toward our church leaders.

KNOWLEDGE BEYOND REASON

Saint John Climacus of the seventh century cautions us in searching for the nature of humility. We are to avoid any exclusively rational explanation of what humility truly means. This

treasure is of a quality that eludes adequate description: "It carries an inscription of heavenly origin which is therefore incomprehensible, so that anyone seeking words for it is faced with a great and endless task. The inscription on this treasure reads as follows: "Holy Humility."

Climacus goes on to develop the importance of investigating the topic of humility with a reverence and a docile receptivity to God's grace, since it is a gift he gives to the lowly: "humility is a grace in the soul and with a name known only to those who have had experience of it. It is indescribable wealth, a name and a gift from God. 'Learn from Me,' Jesus said; that is not from an angel, not from a human person, not from a book, but 'from me,' that is, from My dwelling within you, from My illumination and action within you, for 'I am gentle and meek of heart' (Matthew 11:29) in thought and in spirit, and your souls will find rest from conflicts and relief from evil thoughts."

Still, we can learn much about the nature of true humility by examining first the etymology of the root concept of the word itself, then its meaning in scripture, and finally the various explanations by theologians and spiritual writers in the Christian tradition.

EARTHLY HUMILITY

The term itself is derived from the Latin word, *humus*, which means the earth or the soil. It refers to our earthly origin from lowly matter. From earthly matter we came forth and into the material earth we will again return. When we apply this term to any person or thing, the word has the connotation of something or someone who is abject, ignoble or a thing that is of poor condition and, therefore, of no great value.

When it is used strictly for a person, humility refers to the afflictions and miseries which may happen to an individual from some outside agents, as for example when someone humiliates a person by afflicting sufferings upon the other.

In a more ethical sense humility could refer to the modest esteem individuals might have for themselves, shown by a humble attitude of submission toward others. The dominant stress in the Greek, classical sense of humility, *tapeinos*, is on our human creaturehood, as given to us by God. Thus we did not always exist as necessary without a beginning and end, like the supreme source of all being, God.

HUMILITY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

From the very first pages in the Book of Genesis, Yahweh is presented as the gratuitous Creator of all the material world of created beings. Nothing of matter has eternal, independent existence, but is willed into being by God's continued and conserving command: "Let there be..." but after the entire sub-human cosmos has come into being, God as a We-Community changes from the imperative, "Let there be..." to the indicative: "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness....And so God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:26-27).

Yahweh freely chooses the Israelites as his elect people and promises to protect them against their enemies, as he will always be faithful to the covenant he has made with them, if they will humbly obey his statutes and commands.

Humility and obedient submission is seen as the fitting relation on the part of his people, who should always do God's will and never forget that they are God's sheer gifts, "emptied receptacles to be filled with God's goodness," in the words of Saint Irenaeus of the second century.

The Book of Job summarizes this attitude of God's chosen people toward their Creator: "When men are cast down, then you will say, 'There is a lifting up; and he shall save the humble person'" (Job 22:29). The psalms abound with God's promise to lift up the humble:

“The meek will he guide in judgment; and the meek will he teach his way” (Psalm 25:9). “For the Lord takes pleasure in his people; he will beautify the meek with salvation” (Psalm 149:4).

In the sapiential literature of the Old Testament we see humility and lowliness of spirit as a sign of wisdom before God: “When pride comes, then there comes shame; but with the lowly is wisdom” (Proverbs 11:2). “The fear of the Lord is the instruction of wisdom; and before honor is humility” (Proverbs 15:33). “By humility and the fear of the Lord are riches, and honor and life” (Proverbs 22:4). “Let the rich and noble and poor take pride in fearing the Lord” (Ecclesiasticus 10:25).

HUMILITY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The fundamental teaching that Jesus and his disciples repeat to us over and over is that to receive the kingdom of God we need to convert and become humble like children. “Father, Lord of heaven and earth! I thank you because you have shown to the unlearned what you have hidden from the wise and learned. Yes, Father, this was how you were pleased to have it happen” (Luke 10:21). “I assure you that unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. The greatest in the kingdom of heaven is the one who humbles himself and becomes like this child” (Matthew 18:3-4).

Thus we see a different sign of greatness in God’s kingdom. God exalts the lowly (Luke 1:52). “If one of you wants to be great, he must be the servant of the rest; and if one of you wants to be first, he must be your slave, like the Son of man, who did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life to redeem many people” (Matthew 20:26-28).

God will consider as truly justified only the humble who are aware of their nothingness before him because of their personal sinfulness. This is what Jesus taught us in his parable of the Pharisee and the publican. He concludes this parable, again stressing the importance of humility to receive forgiveness of sins: “For everyone who makes himself great will be humbled, and everyone who humbles himself will be made great” (Luke 18:14).

A HUMBLE SERVANT

Jesus brings about a revolution in the concept of humility that was not even stressed in the Old Testament. It is only because he himself, eternally one with the Father (Philippians 2:6), did not hold on to his dignity as truly divine by nature, but “emptied himself,” becoming even more humble by being obedient unto death, death on the cross. He came to become humble love by becoming the suffering servant of Yahweh (Isaiah 52:53), serving each of us by suffering on our behalf so that we might share in his divine life through grace.

In his gospel John presents us with the powerful, symbolic action of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples. This symbolic act is a summary not only of the way Jesus lived in loving service for the poor and broken ones, but also of the way the Trinity lives in self-emptying love for us. “I your Lord and Teacher, have just washed your feet. You, then, should wash one another’s feet. I have set an example for you, so that you will do just what I have done for you” (John 13:14-15).

TEACHINGS OF THEOLOGIANS AND WRITERS

In the Christian tradition we find a continued and long line of theologians and spiritual writers, who present us with a unified analysis of the nature of authentic Christian humility. Reflecting on Holy Scripture and especially on Jesus’ New Testament teachings and his humble lifestyle, these thinkers agree that charity is the culmination of all perfection, without which nothing else has any value (1 Corinthians 13:1-13). But they are also unanimous in

teaching that humility and self-denial are the foundation of perfection and the condition of any real progress.

Saint John Cassian of the fourth century brings the teachings of the Fathers and Mothers of the desert into Western spirituality, especially into the monasticism of Benedict. He writes in his *Institutes*: “It is plain to see, then, that no advance in perfection and purity of life can be made except through real humility, which is to be shown first towards the brethren and also to God in the depths of the heart.”

Saint Gregory the Great writes: “Since humility is the very source of virtue, it follows that a virtue will spring up and endure if it is rooted in humility, but if it is cut off from its root, it will wither away because it lacks the life-giving sap of charity.”

In his *Twelve Degrees of Humility*, Bernard defines humility as “the virtue by which a person recognizes his own unworthiness because he really knows himself.” Thomas Aquinas brought his systematic thinking to an acute analysis of the nature of humility in opposition to pride, the source of all moral evil. Using categories from Aristotelian philosophy, Thomas defines humility both negatively and positively and demonstrates its unique importance as a “moderating” foundation for all other virtues. “Humility restrains the appetite from aiming at great things against right reason; while magnanimity urges the mind to great things in accord with right reason. Hence it is clear that magnanimity is not opposed to humility: indeed they concur in this that each is according to right reason.”

Humility is placed in the power of our human will as are all virtues. There can be no humility, according to Thomas, without true self-knowledge, which necessitates that we do not regard ourselves to be more than what we are before God. Our will holds in restrain any exalting of ourselves above our objective gifts---gifts understood as given to our nothingness by God for his greater glory. What seems to be a negative self-abasement can be seen positively as a true manifestation of our metaphysical relationship with God, the source of all being. “Hence the fact that humility is caused by reverence for God does not prevent it from being a part of modesty or temperance.”

I AM THE GREATEST SINNER

This is the logical place to briefly consider the oft-repeated statement of many great saints, who were convinced that of all human beings they were the greatest sinners.

Saint Paul writing to Timothy: “It is a trustworthy saying and worthy of all acceptance that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief” (1 Timothy 1:15).

“I believe O Lord, and confess, that You are truly the Christ, Son of the Living God, Who came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the first” (**Communion Prayer; Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom**).

How could they respect and prefer others, even those who possessed lesser spiritual gifts, without doing an injustice to God, who poured out so many natural and supernatural gifts onto these great athletes of the spiritual life?

Humility, as charity, focuses upon our double relationship with God and neighbor. As regards our relationship with God, we consider humility as the virtue that acknowledges him as the supreme giver of all gifts, even the gift of our own created being. We can thus honestly affirm that we are nothing outside of God’s uncreated energies of divine love.

Regarding the relationship with our neighbors, humility does not require us to esteem our God-given gifts and graces less than similar ones found in others. As Saint Paul directs us, “We have received the Spirit sent by God, so that we may know all that God has given us” (1 Corinthians 2:12). There is a God-given inner tendency to rightly esteem ourselves as the recipients of God’s participated perfections, as we strive to become unique persons by God’s grace. There is room for true self-esteem. But does it contradict the advice of the saints to

despise ourselves? It does not when we see both true self-esteem and the desire to despise ourselves as the least of all human beings from different points of view.

On the one hand, God gives us personal dignity to reflect somehow, even though in a limited way, his infinite light, beauty and perfection. He does this by the gratuitous bestowal of gifts upon us, especially in wishing to make us according to his own image and likeness (Genesis 1:26). On the other hand, this desire for self-esteem, recognized not only by ourselves but also by others, must be controlled because of the sinful tendency into which we are all born, namely, to be “biased toward self” without any reference to God the Giver of All Good and Beauty. Saint Paul enjoins upon us Christians: “Do not do anything from selfish ambition or from a cheap desire to boast, but be humble toward one another, always, considering others better than yourselves” (Philippians 2:3).

PREFERRING OTHERS TO OURSELVES

We begin to touch the core of true humility, as we seek to reconcile a proper love of self, of God’s gifts and of his loving merciful forgiveness of our sins, with the proper love of others, to the point of esteeming them better than ourselves. We look at our personal sins and realize how much evil we could still do, if we would not walk humbly before the Lord and rejoice in his forgiving love. With this understanding of our personal esteem before God we can gladly accept slights, humiliations and even contempt and insults from others with an inner peace and joy. The basis for this is the conviction of Francis of Assisi: “I am only what I am before the Lord.” Jesus Christ must increase, and we can honestly desire to decrease as Saint John the Forerunner did (John 3:30).

The Fathers of the Church are unanimous in their teaching of how we can, in Saint Paul’s words, “be humble toward one another, always considering others better than ourselves” (Philippians 2:3). We can esteem the potentially good, either hidden or evident energies in others that perhaps we ourselves do not possess. To keep the balance of true respect for others and proper self esteem for ourselves, we need to call on the Lord to increase our humility. Esteeming our neighbor’s hidden or manifested gifts, and considering our own sins and failings of which others are not as aware as we are, can help us in this. Each of us is unique in our sins, temptations and failures and the depth of evil we are capable of. No one else knows this as well as we do, not even the neighbor we are confronting and below whom we are humbly placing ourselves.

SUMMARY OF THE NATURE OF HUMILITY

Humility, therefore, is the direct opposite of any pride. Pride builds in us a desire of absolute or relative power, leading us to focus upon our false or unspiritual self, by forgetting that separated from God, we do not “count” for much. An abiding awareness of the supremacy of God is the main reference for all the good and beauty we possess. Thus we can say that the fullness of humility can only be found in a personal, faithful encounter with God.

We therefore find three necessary elements constituting true Christian humility. The first is that we become more and more aware of God as the supreme Creator, and that we human beings owe our very existence and all the gifts we possess to God. This shows that humility requires our awareness of this truth.

Humility based on the truth of God’s necessary existence as the supreme source of all other created beings, and on his righteous justice, which seeks to move our will to be aware of God at the center of all our striving, and to render glory and praise to him in all our thoughts, words and deeds.

The second element of authentic humility flows from the sense of God's holiness, goodness and beauty, in all his transcendence and majesty. As we become aware of God in what Rudolph Otto (Eminent German Lutheran theologian and scholar of comparative religion) calls, "*mysterium tremendum*," we also become aware of our brokenness and sinfulness. We not only understand by God's grace how we completely depend upon him and are justly always in his debt, but we realize affectively in our heart the heinousness of our sins and how ungrateful and arrogant we have been, having turned away from God's perfect and eternal love. This becomes therapeutic healing if it is grounded in the beauty and glorious goodness of God, who prevents us from falling into despair, and opens us up to an ardent return of love and joy.

Our awareness of the glory of God develops in us a childlike and joyful abandonment to live only for God. Francis of Assisi's realization becomes our own as we confront the All-ness of God and our own weakness and sinfulness: "My God and my All!" Humility, positively fills us with a liberating spirit of reverence toward God, that brings us inner joy and a newfound sense of our uniqueness in God to whom we constantly seek to render honor and glory, as Saint James writes: "It is all that is good, everything that is perfect, which is given to us from above; it comes down from the Father of all light" (James 1:16-17).

REMEMBERING GOD'S GOODNESS

The third element of true humility is to remember in our brokenness and sinfulness, the supreme goodness of God's eternal plan and his constant fidelity to bring our salvation about with our humble cooperation. We ground our humility on God's free choice to make us human beings, according to his own image and likeness (Genesis 1:26-27).

True humility allows us to recognize our radical predestination (theosis, divinization) to become participators of God's very own nature (2 Peter 1:4). With the psalmist we can be aware of our inner beauty to reflect as an individual something of God's perfect beauty. "Yet you have made him little less than a god, you have crowned him with glory and honor, made him lord over the works of your hands, set all things under his feet" (Psalm 8:5-6).

The more we receive of God's goodness and respond according to our dignity as a loving child of so loving a Father in Jesus through their Holy Spirit, the more we abandon ourselves to God in each moment, as we trust in him to be our strength when we are weakest. Such childlike faith and trust, are therefore graceful gifts of God's personal love for us, the broken, little ones in his kingdom.

Complete abandonment is our true response to his fidelity. How beautiful Saint Paul describes this self-surrender to God through the humble self-sacrifice of Jesus Christ for love of us: "If God is for us, who can be against us? Certainly not God, who did not even keep back his own Son, but offered him for us all! He gave us his Son---will he not also freely give us all things? Who will accuse God's chosen people? Not Christ Jesus, who died, or rather, who was raised to life and is at the right side of God, pleading with him for us!" There is nothing in all creation that will ever be able to separate us from the love of God, which is ours through Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:31-39).

THE BASIS FOR CHRISTIAN HUMILITY: JESUS CHRIST

We have pointed out that God-Trinity could never possess the human virtue of humility, since God is perfect love without any limitations, without any temptation to be proud. To desire something other than what the Trinity is by its essence would be a contradiction within the

Trinity. God is the fullness of being, God is beyond being, and therefore could never desire to be made more than he always is, the same yesterday, today and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

But in order to communicate God's perfect and eternal love for us, Jesus Christ, God-man, has freely consented to taking upon himself our humanity, with all its inherited limitations, even to the point of submitting himself to be tempted in all things, save sin (Hebrews 4:15). He emptied himself in his great love for us unto his death on the cross (Philippians 2:7-8). Jesus is incarnate humility. There never was, nor ever will be, a greater humility than that of Christ.

He alone is the greatest bridge-builder, the *Pontifex-Maximus*, who is at the same time perfect love as God and perfect humility as man. He unites the greatest virtue of charity with humility, so that by the Holy Spirit's infusion of faith, hope and love into us, we now can not only realize love and humility intellectually but also live it in our hearts. In Jesus these two were never separated, and we learn from him how to be humble, we too will discover that there can be no true love without humility and no true humility without love.

Augustine gives us a fitting summary of the importance of humility without which there can be no salvation, no holiness, no true love of God and neighbor. He writes: "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 ever 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."

Know, beloved, that the valleys shall stand deep in corn and spiritual fruit. This valley is a soul low and humble among the mountains, that is, it is filled with labors and virtues, and always remains lowly and steadfast. David did not say, "I have fasted," "I have kept vigil," or "I have lain on the bare earth," but "I humbled myself, and soon the Lord saved me" (Psalm 115:5) (Saint John Climacus).

All visible things get their light from the sun, and all that is done according to reason gets its force from humility. Where there is not light, everything is dark; where there is no humility, all that we have is rotten (Saint John Climacus).

It is one thing to be humble, another to strive for humility, and another to praise the humble. The first belongs to the perfect, the second to the truly obedient, and the third to all the faithful (Saint John Climacus).

The thing which pre-eminently humbles our mind and disposes us to keep our eyes downcast to the ground is the memory of the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ, if a man goes over it in his memory and remembers it in detail. This also engenders tears. In addition our soul is made truly humble by the great mercies of God toward us personally, if we examine and enumerate them in detail; for our fight is with proud demons (who are ungrateful to God). (Philotheus of Sinai). (*Pilgrimage of the Heart; A Treasury of Eastern Christian Spirituality*: edited, with introduction and epilogue by Fr. George A. Maloney)

Next month (October) we will reflect on Jesus' promise of the "Kingdom of God" which comes only to those who are "Poor in Spirit".

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