

22nd SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – C (August 28, 2022)

Today is one of those days when it is relatively easy to summarize the readings in one word; in this case, the word is ‘humility’. The first reading from Sirach urges us to ‘conduct [our] affairs with humility’, while Jesus in the gospel reminds us that the one who humbles himself will be exalted. And if there was a contest for determining which of all the virtues is the most misunderstood, there’s a very good chance that humility would come out on top.

I say that because many seem to believe that humility means thinking poorly about oneself: “oh, I can’t do anything right; I’m not good at anything.” Or if someone tries to compliment or thank such a person for some act of kindness or generosity, that person might say “no, I really messed up on that.” That kind of attitude is not humility. Genuine humility is all about recognizing the basic truth that God is the ultimate source of all that we are and all that we have. The Catechism describes humility as ‘the virtue by which one acknowledges God is the author of all good’.

One author makes the same general point in saying that ‘humility does not consist in denying our good qualities, but in recognizing that these are a pure gift of God.’ And so if you are a good cook and someone compliments you on a delicious meal you prepared...or if you are a talented musician or athlete and someone congratulates you on a great performance, humility does not mean rejecting those compliments or thinking of yourself as good-for-nothing. Whatever talents you or I may have, they come first of all from God, and they are his unmerited gifts to us. And so a much better response to such a compliment would be along the lines of ‘thank you very much; how kind of you, and how good God is who gives us everything we have!’

But we can go farther in understanding and living this very important virtue of humility, and we can do so by reflecting on the humility of Jesus and trying to follow his example. That may sound strange at first: if humility is based on remembering that everything we are and all that we have come from the loving providence and generosity of God, then how can Jesus—he who, after all, is God the Son—how can he be humble?

And yet the New Testament clearly affirms this truth:

- Jesus himself said: “Take my yoke upon your shoulder and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart, and you will find rest for yourselves” (Matt. 11:29).
- St. Paul tells us how Jesus “emptied himself...He was known to be of human estate and it was thus that he humbled himself, obediently accepting even death—death on a cross” (Phil. 2:7a,8)

How can Jesus be humble? Remember what was said earlier—that humility is that virtue by which we acknowledge that God is the first and truest origin of absolutely everything. And Jesus, God the Son, certainly did acknowledge and praise his (and our) heavenly Father for all that the Father is and does.

Jesus prayed regularly to his Father; he knew his need for prayer, and he greatly desired this kind of prayer. And that helps us know how we can imitate the humility of Jesus—by praying as he prayed. Now of course, we are not God the Son. And unlike Jesus, we are not always successful in our struggle against sin and temptation. But we do not and cannot let that excuse us from the resolve and the effort to engage in prayer as Jesus did.

We can think of at least three ways that Jesus prayed, and thus how to follow his example:

- Jesus prayed in praise and thanksgiving. He thanked the Father for revealing himself to the childlike—those who know their dependence on God who loved them into existence and to know the eternal perfection of his joy. How often do we thank God for the gift of every day of life he gives us? For the talents he has given us by which we provide for ourselves and our families? For the beauty and the love that surrounds us on every side? God is the first origin of all that is, including each one of us. The humble person, in imitation of Jesus, can and will always be thanking God for all blessings and grace, great and small.
- Jesus prayed in need and even in distress. Remember how he prayed in the Garden the night before he died: “Father, let this cup pass from me...”. And on the Cross he cried out in agony “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” The humble person, in imitation of Jesus, can and will always bring his pain, fear, and frustrations to the Father and will do so honestly and without hesitation.
- And Jesus prayed most intently by making the total gift of himself to the Father. In the garden, after pleading with his Father to take the cup of suffering away from him, he then prayed: “...and yet not my will, but your will be done”. On the Cross, he prayed the last words before he died: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” When push comes to shove, the humble person, in imitation of Jesus, will make the total gift of himself—the good and the bad, the joys and the pains--to the Father. We do so, remembering in trust and gratitude, that the Father raised his Son from the dead to reign forever in the perfect joy and peace of his kingdom...and that he desires that we share in that joyful eternity.

Bishop Fulton Sheen once said that humility is not self-contempt but the truth about ourselves...it is self-surrender to the highest good.” That is very well said; that ‘highest good’, of course, is almighty God himself. Jesus, the meek and humble one, made that total gift of himself to the Father. God grant that we all pray and live in imitation of Jesus and of his humility in doing the same.