

PERSONAL HUMILITY

1. Humility as a moral virtue

Moral virtues are habits that strongly determine the criteria that regulate human tendencies in the person who possesses them, so that acts or impulses proceeding from them neither exceed nor permanently fall short of the measure required by personal and social good.

As sobriety regulates nutritional tendencies, and chastity the sexual one, humility regulates two important individual tendencies: the need to be acknowledged and appreciated by others and the sense of one's value (self-esteem).¹

These two tendencies belong to the human condition: they exist in every person, and cannot or must not be suppressed, as the nutritional or sexual tendencies can. To be trained in them properly is of extreme importance for keeping and growing in one's personal moral balance, and, indirectly, keeping the right order of interpersonal relations: injustice, violence, failed marriages and professional conflict, to mention a few examples, are often the consequences of pride, susceptibility or grudges.

In the relations between God and man, humility plays an important part too: spiritual life presupposes an adequate idea of man's position vis-à-vis God.

Humility has often been misinterpreted, and even considered a negative quality proper to slaves or the result of resentment in the weak. It is perfectly possible to try and pass off non-authentic forms of compensation for one's weaknesses or imbalances as humility; it is also possible to camouflage vicious behaviour as virtues: arrogance as dignity or justice, cowardice as benignity, etc. But none of this has anything to do with humility, which responds to our undeniable need to regulate and educate two fundamental tendencies.

2. Importance and characteristics of humility

It is possible to investigate the vicissitudes of humility outside Christianity both historically as well as analytically. Pagan antiquity, in fact, considered humility more a vice than a virtue, with a few exceptions. But leaving that aside, it is preferable to consider its anthropological roots, before seeing it as a Christian virtue.

The ethical ruling of the two tendencies related to humility consists in adjusting them to the reality of each person, whether considered in himself or as placed in the family, professional and social milieu, without leaving God out. Aristotle writes a propos: "He who deserves little things and expects them, is modest [...] He who judges himself worthy of great things, while being unworthy of them, is vain [...] He who judges himself worth less than what he deserves is pusillanimous, whether what he deserves is much or regular, and thinks

¹ The classical definition of humility was "the virtue that aims to moderate the appetite (desire, tendency) in pursuit of one's excellence". It does not differ from what is said above, because "one's excellence", either reflected in people's judgement or in one's own, is precisely the object of the two tendencies. Aquinas links humility to temperance, because the desires arising from one's excellence need to be checked and moderated, which is characteristic of temperance and its related virtues. Cf. ST THOMAS AQUINAS, *S Th*, II-II, q. 161.

he deserves even less.”² It is important to aspire neither to much nor to little, but to what is in each case reasonable according to a serene and objective appreciation of reality.

Humility is important not so much because it fulfils certain human needs, but because of its specific task: to preserve one’s understanding of knowledge, love, work, etc., from deformations that can demean their real value. The proud man is egocentric, and barely capable of true love. He sees professional work only as a form of self-affirmation, not as a form of self-transcendence that enriches the world by contributing to the common good.

The ability to admire oneself, and anything of value, is natural to man. The perception of one’s value passes through the judgement we deserve from our fellow men (parents, friends etc.). A human being needs to be acknowledged by others, which accounts for the tendency called esteem. With his psychological and moral development the person, even without managing to remain completely indifferent to the reactions that his being or behaviour causes others, acquires the maturity of judgement necessary to form a realistic image of himself (self-esteem), knowing the positive and negative qualities, what one is and what one can become. In the same measure to which the sense of one’s value depends on his objective and realistic judgement, the person can adequately consider his relations with other people (dependence-independence, freedom-authority, etc.).

The lack of a reasonable guide can affect the two tendencies mentioned earlier: the need for acknowledgement, in which the person does not acquire a sufficiently balanced distancing from other people’s judgement; and self-esteem when, even with sufficient independence of judgement, self-esteem is based on a poor perception of one’s value, through excess or defect.

Excessive dependence on other people’s judgement causes such things as eagerness for notoriety, vanity, stubbornness and rigidity, isolation, simulation of illness, etc. All these make the person suffer, as well as other people. Eagerness for notoriety is proper to a weak immature personality, which needs constant approval. It tries to satisfy this need by all means: making use of one’s goods, using one’s knowledge and work to acquire prestige and public acknowledgement, or intentionally provoking reactions by striking or absurd behaviour; or else seeking group approval by accepting prevailing ideas or habits, even if contrary to one’s deepest convictions. Otherwise one opts for vanity, i.e. showing what one is not, adopting false or unauthentic behaviour. When having to work under authority or in close collaboration with others, he attracts attention by his stubbornness, intransigence or rigidity. In extreme cases, affection or care are sought from others by simulating sickness, being conscious of the deception or even losing awareness of it (hysterical phenomena). The one who suffers such deformations ends up impoverishing his social relations as well as his sensitivity to objective values. Such a person is constantly occupied with self, because disordered desire for self-esteem is insatiable. It would be unjust, on the other hand, for a person not to be sufficiently sensitive to the reactions provoked in others. This would lead to a continuous lack of attention, respect or good manners.

The second problem stems from an insufficiently realistic assessment of one’s value. There arises an irrational sense of inferiority and insecurity at one extreme, and of pride and self-sufficiency at the other. The personality of the proud differs from that conditioned by eagerness for notoriety. Behind the latter, despite the appearances, there hides a fragile and needy personality, torturing himself with invidious comparisons.

The proud man, on the other hand, is a hard personality, a source of conflict, frequently aggressive or violent; he judges everything and everyone (critical spirit), thinks he is always right, perhaps “rewards” the one who submits to him, but hardly loves and gives himself to others; he can hardly be loved, but he can be feared. He admires and respects only himself, and tends to narcissism.

The proud man is frequently touchy or arrogant. He clashes with others and with reality

² ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, IV, 3:1123 b 5 ss.

itself, because his level of aspiration is higher than his capacities. At times his capacities are high, but he lacks the prudence to direct them, thus avoiding their “going to his head”.

This brief description shows the importance of humility for personal balance and development, as well as the difficulty. Humility directs basic personal intentions towards values and love, without which even what appears as virtue is not so in reality.

Humility is difficult because the tendencies that it regulates cannot be suppressed or oppressed by an act of the will. They are to be educated, i.e. adjusted to reality and opened up to participation, to service and to love. It is impossible to omit looking at the self completely, but one can do it with a mixture of realism and sense of humour, above all without hiding from the reality of what is outside and above ourselves, for in this way what we are and what we are not make sense.

3. The Christian virtue of humility

It is not possible to study in detail the many aspects of humility which appear in the Old Testament. The prevailing idea is linked to the profession of faith in Yahweh, who, on intervening in history, topples the proud while choosing and redeeming the humble and those who have been humiliated. The same idea appears in the Canticle of Jesus’ Mother in the *Magnificat*: *He has laid his eyes on his humble servant.*³

But the basic reason for the teachings of the New Testament on humility rests on Jesus Christ’s going along the pathway of humility, which He himself gives as an example saying *learn from me who am meek and humble of heart.*⁴ But the background reasons for the teaching of the New Testament on humility are to be found in pathway of humility which Jesus followed. He offers himself as an example when he says: *Learn from me for I am meek and humble of heart*, an idea which also appears in the First Letter of St Peter and that of St James.⁵ St Paul illustrates the same thing in the hymn of the Letter to the Philippians.⁶ The dynamics of humiliation and exaltation inspires the teachings of the Lord when he invites us not to choose the place of honour for oneself,⁷ in the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican,⁸ in the exhortation to be like children,⁹ in various polemical exchanges with the chiefs of the people,¹⁰ and the exhortation to serve others, and not to let oneself be served by them.¹¹

Truth continues to be the criterion according to which the Christian virtue of humility regulates the aforementioned tendencies. Humility does not tolerate falsehood about one’s qualities, whether positive or negative. But in the light of the Lord’s teachings it is possible to understand more exactly our true position before God and the others.

The Christian knows only too well that he has received everything free from God, being and life no less than justice and grace. With his doctrine on justification, St Paul states that seeing things in all their depth, there is no true justification in us, except in God himself

³ Cf. Lk 1:48-51-52

⁴ Cf. Mt 11:19

⁵ Cf. 1 Pet 5:5 and Jas 4:6

⁶ Cf. Phil 2:5-11: *Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

⁷ Cf. Lk 14:7-11

⁸ Cf. Lk 18:9-14

⁹ Cf. Lk 18:16-17

¹⁰ Cf. Mt 23

¹¹ Cf. Mt 20:24-28

making us just through Jesus Christ. We have nothing that we have not received.¹² We can glory only in the Cross of Christ. Whatever our deeds, before God we ought to assume an attitude of deep adoration and loving gratitude. Only thanks to the free saving action in Christ can we be accepted. Any conceited, self-sufficient attitude would deprive us of his grace, leaving us locked within our miserable state. Humility thus becomes the other face of our love of God, or charity. The proud person neither loves God nor succeeds in accepting the love that God gives him. *Deo omnis gloria*: all glory to God means that we have nothing good that does not originate from God, Truth and subsistent Love.

Humility as taught by the Lord is also the other face of charity towards our neighbour. He who is conscious of being nothing before God's majesty, avoids pride and the ill-will of his neighbour, and knows how to understand others, with their errors. Only the one who thinks he has never erred is horrified at the errors of others (if the others were like me, things wouldn't be that bad).

In any case humility is truth, true knowledge of self; hence it finds no difficulty in acknowledging one's good qualities, but does not forget that they have been received from God as gifts to be generously placed at the service of others.

The Lord condemns the false humility of the one who hides the talent he has received,¹³ which had to bear fruit in the service of God and others. Fruitfulness comes through spiritual direction, where the Holy Spirit moulds the soul *sicut lutum in manu figuli*, like clay in the potter's hand. The teachings of St Paul on the strong and weak in the faith and knowledge¹⁴ eloquently show that one's qualities, including the precious gift of Christian freedom, ought to be seen not as a protective shield before the demands of others, but as a resource willingly placed at their service. Christ took upon himself the burden of our sins, giving his life for us, in a further example of humility of heart.

In practice humility has multiple manifestations, impossible to spell out here in detail. The Fathers of the Church, the Saints and those who have inquired into spiritual theology have written things of great value about it. To conclude these reflexions we shall limit ourselves to quote a page from St Josemaría Escrivá: its eloquence renders any comment superfluous.

Allow me to remind you that among other evident signs of a lack of humility are:

- Thinking that what you do or say is better than what others do or say;*
- Always wanting to get your own way;*
- Arguing when you are not right or – when you are – insisting stubbornly or with bad manners;*
- Giving your opinion without being asked for it, when charity does not require you to do so;*
- Despising the point of view of others;*
- Not being aware that all the gifts and qualities you have are on loan;*
- Not acknowledging that you are unworthy of all honour or esteem, even the ground you are treading on or the things you own;*
- Mentioning yourself as an example in conversation;*
- Speaking badly about yourself, so that they may form a good opinion of you, or contradict you;*
- Making excuses when rebuked;*
- Hiding some humiliating faults from your director, so that he may not lose the good opinion he has of you;*
- Hearing praise with satisfaction, or being glad that others have spoken well of you;*
- Being hurt that others are held in greater esteem than you;*
- Refusing to carry out menial tasks;*

¹² Cf. 1 Cor 4:4 & Rom 3:27-28

¹³ Cf. Mt 25:24-28

¹⁴ Cf.. Rom 14 & 1 Cor 8

- Seeking or wanting to be singled out;*
- Letting drop words of self-praise in conversation, or words that might show your honesty, your wit or skill, your professional prestige...;*
- Being ashamed of not having certain possessions.*¹⁵

A. Rodríguez Luño
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¹⁵ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Furrow*, 263.