

## Humus, Humilis

The word humility comes from the Latin *humilis* (humble), which in turn has its roots - no pun intended - in the word *humus* (the ground). Someone who is humble is therefore lowly, modest, meek – but not, we'd have to say, grovellingly so like that loathsome Dickens character Uriah Heep who was constantly reminding everyone that he was “ever so 'umble”, a humility that was patently false, pretentious and manipulative.

The old “penny catechism” put humility at the top of the list of virtues, standing contrary to pride which topped the list of vices. Our current Catechism speaks of humility as ‘poverty of spirit’: standing empty-handed before God, acknowledging our dependence on his providence, subjecting ourselves to his will and the guidance of his Spirit.

There's a story of a man clinging desperately to the roof of his house as the rain pours down and the flood waters are rising around him, and he prays to God to save him. A man comes by in a rowboat and offers to take him to a place of safety but he shouts back, “No thanks, it's OK, I've prayed to God and I know he'll help me”. So the boat passes by and the rain keeps on pouring. Next a helicopter arrives and is preparing to lower a rope to him but he shouts back, “No thanks, it's OK, I've prayed to God and I know he'll help me”. The helicopter flies off and the rain keeps pouring. Finally the house disappears underwater and the man drowns. Up in heaven he says to God: “I kept praying to you to save me, what happened?” God answers, first I sent you a guy in a rowboat and then I sent a helicopter. What more did you expect?” *Humus, humilis.*

Whenever we project our expectations onto God, or expect *him* to fit into *our* image and likeness rather than the other way round, it is essentially a sin of pride, a sin against humility. It's like Naaman, commander of the king's army, in chapter five of the first book of the Kings, who had contracted leprosy and was advised to visit the prophet Elisha who could cure him. But Naaman is so full of his own importance that he refuses to carry out the simple act of bathing seven times in the Jordan because he had expected some great ritual act of cleansing on Elisha's part so everyone would see that God had favoured him with healing. It's only when he shows some humility and does as the prophet asks that he is cured. So too with Jonah who originally tried to run away from the task God gave him to preach repentance to the people of Nineveh, but who then blamed God for wasting his time when the people did in fact repent and their destruction was averted. So also the scribes and Pharisees throughout the gospels who had their own faith agenda and resented Our Lord undermining their authority. Their answer was to get rid of the messenger rather than listen to the message. *Humus – humilis.*

We are called to a poverty of spirit which shows itself in an openness to God's action in our life – letting God be God. We need to reflect regularly on the story of St Peter being called out onto the water by Jesus, being asked to do something he knew to be

impossible but learning, as a result, that with God all things are possible. He walked on water – or least for as long as he kept his eyes on Christ who had asked Peter to trust him and try.

When priests ask people to consider becoming, for example, ministers of the word or of holy communion, the answer is often “I’m not worthy”. Of course they’re not, and neither are priests to do what they do, but we keep our eyes fixed on Christ who calls us out onto the water and we trust him to make us worthy and able – otherwise why would he have invited us? Our response calls for humility, a poverty of spirit that admits that by ourselves we can’t walk on water but we are willing to trust in God who calls us to try. Otherwise we are saying that God is wrong, and we can’t do that. It also calls for a generosity of heart to use the gifts we have received in service of our faith community.

Someone may say: ‘Ah, but it wasn’t God who asked me to become a minister, it was the priest.’ Well yes, but the invitation doesn’t always have to come directly from God, especially if no one is listening when he calls. Then he gets someone else to do the inviting instead. I know this from personal experience.

I had been thinking about the priesthood on and off for years, but by 1987 I had possibly stopped listening to that “still small voice” and so God decided to step up the volume. My parish priest at the time asked me to come round for a cuppa during the course of which he said he felt a vocation could come to someone through other people just as strongly and certainly as it might ordinarily come directly from God. He explained that a significant number of people in the parish, people who had known me since I first began experiencing the possibility of a vocation, had been asking him where I was these days in that process. As a result, he felt very strongly that I should once again give some serious thought and prayer to the possibility of the priesthood. A year later, I was accepted into the seminary and here we are.

We expect so much of God, but what can he expect – what does he expect - of us? There’s an interesting lesson in the Old Testament book of the prophet Malachi (1 v 8). God sends the people, and specifically the priests, a warning through the prophet:

When you bring blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you bring the lame and the diseased, is that not wrong? Try offering them to your high commissioner, and see if he is pleased or receives you graciously.

It would seem that people were bringing defective animals to the temple for the priest to sacrifice, animals which were therefore cheap to buy or which they could afford to lose from their herds. (In today’s terms, it would be like people off-loading their foreign currency, or a torn banknote, in the Sunday collection – which they do!) Presumably they thought God wouldn’t notice, but more importantly it was symptomatic of their cutting corners, or not fully investing themselves, in their relationship with God.

Considering the root meaning of the word humility - *humus*, the ground - another sense in which I would use the word is in the need to be “grounded” in our faith, to have a knowledge and an awareness of the fundamentals of what we believe.

**W**e now have at least two generations of Catholics who have been subjected to the political correctness of a national curriculum that required them to learn at least as much about other religions as they were allowed to learn about their own. With all due respect to other faiths, Catholic pupils attending Catholic schools should be learning about their own faith as a priority – that’s what our Catholic schools are for. But if the Catholic faith is only one of many theologies being presented to them, it’s no wonder pupils don’t really know one from another. It’s like being taught all about tennis and tiddly-winks and then being expected to play football!

**I** also have to say that I think the Church has paid a high price for allowing the old “penny catechism” to be phased out. That system of question and answer rote learning may not fit with today’s educational methods, but it served the Church well for many generations. Those of us who used that catechism grew up knowing the basics of our faith – a solid foundation on which we could build throughout our life and one which we could refer back to as a source of what was right and wrong. Critics may say it was very legalistic, but that was the whole point: the catechism set out the basic rules and regulations, it grounded us in our faith. You can’t send twenty-two football players onto the field and expect them to make up the rules as they go along – indeed, how would you know that twenty-two was a workable number of players in the first place? Similarly you wouldn’t let someone get behind the wheel of a car without first having them learn the rules of the road and how to drive.

**W**hat we now have are two or three generations of young Catholics who seem to have been taught little other than the fact that Jesus loves them, and his forgiving love then becomes an excuse for doing whatever they want, making up the rules (if at all) as they go along. God makes the rules, they are called the commandments, and the Church he founded supplements them with a few of its own – actually, therefore, his also. They are not optional. The consequence of doing our own thing is likely to be sinful but no one wants to be reminded about sin, especially mortal sin, and so they pretend it doesn’t really exist. It does. We have a saying that where ignorance is bliss, ‘tis folly to be wise, but that won’t wash as an excuse with God with whom wisdom is bliss and ignorance is folly.

**T**his is why there is so much emphasis these days on catechetics and adult formation in parishes because it is clear that there are a lot of holes in people’s faith-knowledge that need to be filled. And yet it is typical of parishes everywhere that whenever courses or programmes are organised, only a handful of people come. Even for those who received a good Catholic education that process didn’t end when they left school. We are never fully formed as Christians, we can’t ever say we know it all or even that we know enough. Things change, we change, the world around us changes. And surely we’re not too busy to come to courses and meetings occasionally? What other commitments could we possibly have that are so important that they take precedence? *Humus, humilis.*

**W**e need to know our place before God. He isn't just another authority figure that we can challenge or ignore as happens with authority figures in society. He is our God; he is our life and our salvation; he is our rock and the foundation of our life. He is closer to us than we are to ourselves and so we can never run away or pretend he isn't there. In the person of his Son he has left us an example that we should follow in his steps (1Peter 2 v 21). He washes our feet and then he asks us to wash others', to serve others. "He helps us in our troubles so we are then able to help others using the same help that we received" (2Cor 1 v 3-4). *Humus, humilis.*

**B**eing grounded in our faith is vital to our relationship with God. Humility, poverty of spirit, calls us to stand before God conscious that we are nothing without him. What he asks of us must take priority, all else is secondary. There are no days off in our following of Christ – but then why would we want days off? We were baptised for life not just for Sundays.

**W**hy are our churches so empty? Why are our confessionals so unused? Why is baptism the "Bermuda Triangle" of the sacraments with people vanishing without trace immediately afterwards? What is the point of *first* holy communion when it is all too often also the last? What was the commitment of confirmation all about if we are doing no more now than before?

**H**opefully our faith hasn't become a burden that was loaded onto us by our parents and teachers and which we are now trying to unload and run away from like spiritual fly-tippers! It's who we are; it's what we became at our baptism. We can never be un-baptised. We can never "not know" Christ or the difference his presence makes in our life. In the words of John the Baptist: 'He (Jesus) must grow greater, I must grow smaller'. *Humus, humilis.*

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