

Humility

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Introduction

Humility is one of the most prominent themes in the Rule of Benedict. It may well be the most difficult to understand. This discussion will discuss Benedict's teaching, move to a theological definition and discussion, and finally conclude with some personal reflections.

The Rule of Benedict

The teaching of the Rule of Benedict regarding humility is very complex. Perhaps the best contemporary expositor of that teaching is the Australian Trappist, Michael Casey.¹

Humility is Truth

He points out the humility is not a popular idea right now, though vanity is not prized either. He points out that ideas that seem irrelevant or trivial are often those that call one's framework of thought into question. He also says that whereas we think of humility in psychological terms, in Benedict's time it was more a matter of objective behavior. Once again, humility is truth: conformity of created reality with the intention of its Maker. Humble people are satisfied with the possibilities of human life. Humble people depend on God and recognize in themselves a space that only God can fill. They know they are sinners with a personal history of meanness and broken relationships, burdened with liabilities and limits which result from their personal history, and so in need of grace and acceptance of God's providence and the challenges and opportunities it brings."

Humility joins us to the rest of the human race. We share their lot. Our gifts are held in trust for them.

The fruit of humility is naturalness, being ourselves in grace.

St. Benedict's Steps and their Sources

St. Benedict's teaching on the steps of humility derives from the Institutes of John Cassian (4.39), who listed ten signs of humility. The Rule of the Master, written not long before Benedict's Rule, was his immediate source. The Rule of the Master transformed Cassian's ten signs into twelve steps. Perhaps Casey's most important observation is that Benedict's ladder of humility is not prescriptive, but descriptive. He is describing the way that humility will manifest itself over a lifetime in the monastery. They don't cause progress, but measure it. In fact, Benedict doesn't call humility a virtue.

Benedict begins by citing the biblical paradox of the exaltation of the humble. Thus, the monk ascends by way of humility and discipline. His twelve steps are:

(1) Fear of the Lord

- (2) Renunciation of self-will
- (3) Obedience to the superior in imitation of Christ
- (4) Patience and equanimity in difficulties
- (5) Self-revelation
- (6) Contentment with the least
- (7) Awareness of one's own liabilities
- (8) Avoidance of individualistic and self-seeking behavior
- (9) Radical restraint of speech
- (10) Avoidance of laughter
- (11) Gravity of speech
- (12) Humility manifest in all facets of life

As one grows in humility one grows in love that ultimately casts out fear, and acts humbly from habit and with delight.

Thus humility is not a way of diminishment, but a road to freedom, self-transcendence and the capacity to receive grace. Benedict begins with the inner attitudes then deals with outward behavior. One needs to work with both at once.

Seriousness: Fear of the Lord (the first degree)

One component of fear of the Lord is mindfulness, the opposite of mindless extroversion or blind following of instinct. Fear of the Lord involves a call from the Lord to conversion, to weed out evil in our good deeds. Desires are controlled by an awareness of the dangers they involve.

Doing God's Will (second and third degrees)

Becoming responsive to God requires freeing oneself from alien powers: from sub-personal forces of sin. The choice is not between autonomy and submission, but to what one will submit. Often we see what commanded or drove us only in retrospect. Hence the list of deadly sins helps us identify where we are needful. The goal is not self-help but freedom to follow Christ. We can't root out desires, but we can channel them and interpose discretion between desire and action. Obedience to the human superior is a means to the end of doing God's will. The aim of religious obedience is not efficiency or the imposition of the superior's will, but finding God's will. Superior has to adapt to personal differences of monks, not vice versa (RB 2.31-32). Obedience should be ready, confident and cheerful.

Patience (fourth degree)

Obedying can lead to failure, unfairness. Hence one needs patience as an antidote to anger or sadness. Patience is acceptance, in union with Christ, of whatever pain life brings. The heart of patience is quieting feelings and thoughts which arise. Aelred of Rievaulx distinguished six steps in attaining internal peace: reject world standards in favor of Christian/monastic ones; don't make excessive demands; be honest about internal factors and sensitivities which work against our peace; from experience learn one's limitations; restrain taking frustration out on others or talking

just to reinforce one's own point of view; stillness: stay put to avoid avoidance and do some work to break from over-intense self-scrutiny.

Radical Self-Honesty (fifth degree)

The routine of monastic (and non-monastic!) life can lead to discovery of internal factors at variance with one's external practice. This can lead to a crisis. Then one needs to talk to someone with wisdom in order to clarify one's understanding and to find support and a new perspective.

Abasement (sixth to eighth degrees)

If one is tempted by tendencies of domination, acquisition and social approval one antidote is to accept inferior status. The dignity of a human being does not require stripes on one's sleeve. However, monasteries tend to reward the compliant who are satisfied with status quo. These three degrees aim at contentment and equilibrium. The goal is harmony, not passivity, conformity or uniformity.

Restraint in Speech (ninth to eleventh degrees)

Silence is humility in word. Benedict is concerned with human speech, not environmental noise. "Taciturnitas" is a quality acquired by personal discipline, not an external asset. The aim of restraint in speech is to promote prayer. It includes absence of noise, disturbance, frivolity, and mental restlessness. Humor has a place, but playing the buffoon and vacuous chitchat do not. Benedict is describing a wise old man and suggests the young imitate him. For the most part, one will only be able to do that when one has done a lot of living.

Integration and Transformation (twelfth degree)

The outcome of a life of humility is the restoration of God's likeness, the elimination of inner conflict, acceptance of one's lowliness. This is where the whole ladder started, but not it is effortless and abiding. The authentic self is all that is left. Then, Benedict says, when one arrives at perfect love that casts out fear, one acts effortlessly out of love for Christ, good habit and delight in virtue. All this the Holy Spirit manifests in his worker now cleansed of sin and vices.

Reflections

1. Fear of the Lord is probably the nodal point of the spirituality in the Rule of Benedict. God sees all; we are responsible for every second of our lives; we will be judged (RB 7.10; 7.26; 4.44-45; 19.1). This one needs "to keep in mind." The purpose of the monastic environment and monastic practices is to help us keep in mind God's presence. Recognition of the infinite difference between God and us is where humility and fear of the Lord meet.

2. The eighth step of humility is the most communal. It asks the monk to fit himself into the community, to respect the practice of the elders. Ultimately, learning to be at ease in community,

neither neurotic about conforming nor feeling a need to not conform is a sign of maturity and humility.

3. This discussion of humility has emphasized the contrast between God's infinite perfection and our own limits. It has not spoken much about comparing oneself with others. The gospels and Benedict's Rule both speak of counting oneself the least. This doesn't mean you should think of yourself as worthless. Rather it means that you know that everything you have is a gift. Knowing that, you can both accept a compliment and give what you have away. It also means that you give the other the benefit of the doubt, since you don't know their inner disposition, their constraints and the blessings with which the other works. You do know yours, and you are ready to serve others, just as Christ was.

A Theological Definition

Karl Rahner formulated the following definition of humility:

The disposition of the human being who, conscious of his radical distance from God, who is perfect Being, has gratefully and courageously taken to himself God's self-emptying in his Son (Phil 2.2-8) and the transformation (elevation) therein revealed of the little and the weak of this world into the great of the kingdom of God (Mt 18.4 and parallel passages). This humble self-acceptance is expressed particularly in acceptance (forgiveness, endurance) of the weakness of one's fellow man and in readiness to serve him and God.³

This definition merits some commentary. Humility is a disposition, a virtue or habit of heart that permeates one's whole outlook. It is an outlook of human beings. Humility is related to the Latin word "humus," which means earth or ground. The word "human" comes from the same root. Humility is to recognize both the earthiness of human existence. Humility recognizes that we are created to be with all natural things and all people, in an interconnected web of life. Our ultimate ground is God, who is radically distant, but nevertheless present wherever God's creative power is at work. This God who is utterly transcendent and imminent brings human beings and all else into existence; otherwise they are not. God is—all else is brought to be by God. Our greatness and our fragility and limits spring from the same source. One might even say they are ultimately identical. We are something, somebody, but derivatively, by the gift of Another.

However, historically⁴ and theologically, humility is rooted primarily not in the human beings status as limited created beings, but in the example and teaching of the Son of God "who emptied himself" (Phil 2.7). Jesus, the incarnate Son, was meek and humble of heart (Mt 11.29). He taught that those who are last shall be first, that those who welcome children with childlike openness and who make themselves the servants of all are the great in the Kingdom of God.

Another dimension of our limitation and imperfection is not simply given but comes from sin, bad habit, bad example, and the failure of human beings to nurture one another. St. Bernard says that "Humility has two feet: appreciation of divine power and consciousness of personal weakness." The Cloud of Unknowing echoes this: "There are two causes of this meekness: one is the

foulness, wretchedness and weakness into which a man has fallen by sin.... The other is the superabundant love and worthiness of God himself."

The humble person gratefully and courageously takes to himself Christ's humility. If we really recognize all that we are is God's gift, then we will be thankful. That gratitude will show itself in the courage to follow Christ in his self-emptying on behalf of others. Humility is not a virtue of the fearful, but of the courageous. Self-emptying is glorification. Those who are "little and weak" by worldly measures are "great" in God eyes.

Humility is acceptance of our status as human beings, dust from dust, but redeemed and ennobled by the Son of God. Hence, humility is truth. One who is humble does need to resort to deception to bolster his self-esteem; or does he need to compete or envy others. The humble person accepts both her gifts and her limitations.

This self-acceptance is expressed particularly in acceptance, forgiveness and patience for others and in readiness to serve other and God. To serve here means to be at their disposal, to be ready to perform any task on their behalf.

Conclusions

1. Healthy humility is not the result of having never accomplished anything, but a readiness to let go of what one has accomplished. Humility is having a self, but being ready to give it away.
2. To reiterate a point already made: humility, clear-sighted avowal of one's fragility and weakness opens us to compassion for others sufferings and limitations.
3. Yves Congar somewhere wrote that medieval authors find two motivations for prayer: God's mercy (*miseriordia*) and human misery (*miseria*). Recognizing one's own sinfulness leads one to entrust oneself to the divine mercy. St. Bernard distinguished cold humility that is a matter of severe truth, and humility inspired by charity toward God and others. Christ's humble service was inspired solely by love.⁵