

Odds are, especially if you are from Minnesota, you may have said things like “don’t worry about it” or “it’s no big deal” or “it was nothing at all” or “that’s nice.” These can be our way of avoiding things like saying “I really don’t mind so long as you give me some recognition and let others know it came from me too” or “who do you think you are to tell me that” or “now what will you do for me?” Perhaps a bit more common in the Midwest where we can sometimes avoid direct confrontation, but truth be told something common in humanity, too, called fake humility.

But what about true humility? What if we spoke the truth about our feelings, or didn’t get defensive when challenged, or took a page from Jesus at the Last Supper and made the washing of the feet a way of life, or loved without any precondition? If we embraced these things, the paradox is we’d become far more powerful spiritually and better prepared for sainthood.

In sharing a story about how she came to realize this that she called “empowering humiliation”, Diana Bauder talks about her experience with a neighbor.

Her neighbor Sandy phoned one day and asked if Angie, her daughter could come over to play with Mary.

Diana asked her six year old who said “I don’t want to go, Mom.”

Diana spoke into the phone. “Thanks for inviting her, but right now isn’t a good time.”

Sandy persisted. “Mary is bored. Why don’t you just send her down so the girls can play, just for a little while?”

“Well, I don’t think..” Diana continued.

Sandy interrupted her. “The girls can help me make cookies. Ask her again, please?”

Diana said “OK” and put her hand over the receiver and whispered to her daughter with urgency in her voice this time. “Sandy said you and Mary can help make cookies. Please, why don’t you just go down there for a little bit?”

Her daughter got big tears in her eyes. “But I don’t want to, Mama!”

“Alright, fine” Diana growled.

She got back on the phone and said something like “I’m really sorry, but she just doesn’t feel well right now.” The fib sounded a little nicer than “She really doesn’t want to come to your house!”

Sandy wasn’t happy. That was clear in her abrupt reply. “Well, alright then, bye.”

Diana felt tormented in side as she hung up, but couldn’t figure out why.

She nagged her little one again, her voice tight and harsh, “I don’t know why you couldn’t just go play with Mary!”

Angie looked up at her mom, and her huge eyes reflected her own stress. She looked into her sweet and worried face, and something suddenly broke inside her.

What are you doing to your child? She’s only six! That voice of truth screamed from a very deep place within her. It jolted her to the core.

She held back her sobs long enough to say “No, no honey. I’m sorry. It’s okay if you don’t want to go over there. You don’t have to.”

Diana escaped to another room, and the dam broke. She’d known for a while that she had a serious people-pleasing problem. She had some sort of ridiculous fear of making anyone upset. It was so very difficult for her to say “no” to anyone. Yet in that moment of pressure, she’d put that same burden on her innocent child’s shoulders.

Diana was overwhelmed with shame, confusion and despair.

It was one of the best, most life changing moments of her life.

She remembers another transformation time during that same year. Her sister dropped by unannounced with her two young children. She asked Diana if she could babysit them while she went to work that evening.

Her response was “Well, I really have a lot to do tonight.” She said that she’d been called in to cover someone else’s shift, and she really needed the money.

She could feel the conflict rising up inside of her. She had two young children of her own. She gave into short-notice babysitting for her on a regular basis. She was very tired too.

Reluctantly, Diana said “well, okay.”

Her sister said to visit a while before leaving for work. She was trying to be pleasant, but she was wearing her resentment like a thick blanket around her shoulders.

Her sister asked, “What’s wrong?”

She hesitated, but then the truth blurted out. “You put me on the spot like this all the time! It sure would be nice if you’d ask me in advance.”

Her sister looked her in the eye. “This is your own fault. If you didn’t want to do it, you should’ve said no. You can’t agree to do something, and then blame me. Blame yourself!”

Diana wasn't happy with her sister for saying it, but it was the hard truth she had to hear. That happened a number of years prior to her story, and she's reminded herself of it a number of times since then.

She wonders how she could have been so blind? Why did she almost always go into automatic "yes" and keep-the-peace-at-all-costs mode?

She had to find answers and get help to learn how to stop.

She realized her empowerment had to start with her humiliation. It seemed odd, for humility and power seem like opposites she reasoned.

But, she says, that's the ironic beauty of all this. She had to hit the floor, sobbing on her knees, to realize she needed help to change her life.

She got a book and took a class about healthy boundaries. She got good counseling. And over 20 years, she's grown as a person. And it's caused her to have honest, better relationships with others without inner turmoil or resentment or false guilt. But she says she's still learning and receiving help and growing as a person, and she knows where her power and freedom are.

None of that growth though would have happened without a bit of humility.

Humility is front and center in our readings this week. Sirach says we are to conduct our affairs with humility and "humble yourself the more, the greater you are." In the Gospel, we are told to not seek the place of honor but a lower place at a banquet so we won't be embarrassed by being replaced by a more distinguished guest. Jesus knows a thing or two about humility, for God did the most humble thing imaginable, He became human. He humbles himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a Cross as Paul says in Philipians. His selfless reward secured salvation for all who accept it.

Jesus gives us this example through His life, but also through His actions of love and service, seen most visibly in washing the feet of the 12 on Holy Thursday. What then can we do to embrace humility as a way of life for true growth?

As a starting point, humility needs to be authentic and not fake. So we want to ask ourselves do we ever fake humility? Sometimes we can say something wanting something in return secretly. Other times we can have what Diana had, namely an honesty problem. Now to be clear, we all should do acts of charity and sacrifice is a part of our faith; so say you go to a wedding you don't want to be at, or to a meeting or help somebody with some home repairs and part of you is thinking gee I'd rather be on the golf course or movies or doing something else, that's just being a human being and doing acts of charity. The problem can creep in though when we aren't honest and people start taking advantage of us, or we don't want to grow a friendship or relationship because we feel we might hurt someone's feelings so we always say, go where they want to go or do what they want to do. In Diana's case were I her spiritual director or

confessor I'd say if her sister really needed help one night and needed to work an act of charity would be to help her out that one time, but to have a conversation with her too about scheduling babysitting in advance and what she can realistically do and not do. The point is that while we need to do acts of service out of love, that can become a problem if people take advantage of us or we are never honest about how we really feel. It'll lead to resentment and bitterness - and if we really love a person, we should be honest with them.

Here's that thing though with sacrifice. There's a lot of things in life we are called to do with love to help one another, and we shouldn't do them just to get something back. So just as we can sometimes not be honest with someone, sometimes we can fall into a habit of "I do this for you but I'll get this in return." If we are going to do something for someone, it needs to be done out of love and charity with our only goal making this person better and doing what God asks us to do. What we find is that even if we don't get recognition, all the actions of love we do will have made an incredible difference in someone's life, or in our church and world - and God will amaze us with what we've done by showing it to us when we stand with Him in heaven.

Humility also entails growing as a person. As kids we are used to being told what to do. We often deal with it on the job too as we grow up. But we have to ask ourselves too can we be humbled to become strong like Diana did? Her sister told her the truth and what she needed to hear, not just what she wanted to hear. We have to ask ourselves can people in our household or our circle of friends give it to us straight? If we get defensive, why is that? Do we listen to what others say to us and really think about it? Do we listen to our conscience when it says "you've done something wrong?" Can we apologize for things? Are we willing to accept the fact that we are sinners still on the journey to sainthood and God puts prophets in our lives? Do we ask for honest feedback? Getting honest and constructive advice and criticism can do so much to help us grow.

Lastly, humility entails a letting go too. We have to let go of things in life and remember the big mission, to grow into saints and to help evangelize others and help them to grow too. Sometimes when ego and pride get in the way, we can't let go. A parent becomes a helicopter parent and micromanages a growing child's schedule and life; a long-time committee members needs to be on the committee because they can't see others can do the job better; a business can't grow because people are stuck in "old ways." Again, we always have to remember it's not about us. We aren't the puppet master. God is in control. So through prayer and introspection, we can listen to our heart and conscience and the voice of God and learn when we have to let go of things and people and remember life and life circumstances always change.

Recently I was talking to a priest friend about Saint Joseph's and was sharing with him how lucky I was to be at our parish, largely in part to the great health I see here in that there are so few turf wars. People really love the parish, and you just don't run into people who want to throw their weight around or be seen as in control or doing things for themselves. No one here wants a hall named after them in 20 years. Rather, what I

really see day in and day out are people who just want the parish to thrive and point the way to God, not themselves. And that's the attitude we all have to embrace day in and day out. Because, as John the Baptist said so beautifully, He must Increase, I must decrease. Let us decrease our ego, and increase our humility so we can be guided by God and one another, and point the way to Jesus through words and actions with no strings attached.