Mary, A Model of Humility

Tomorrow, we celebrate the feast of the Immaculate Conception, and while not an obligatory Holy Day as it would have fallen on Sunday this year, Mary and the feast gives us quite a bit to think about, in particular humility - something important to ponder as we remember it's not about ourselves, but about living a life pointing the way to God.

The Gospel reading for the day is always the story of the Annunciation, which also comes up later in Advent, and one of the themes that stands out is that of humility. God humbles Himself to be born through a human being, and is born in a manger. And in the reading from the feast day, we will hear how Mary puts her trust into God, saying ""Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word." When Jesus grows older and prepares today, one of His last acts is to wash the feet of His disciples and He tells them to do the same for one another. Humility is something we see in Mary, Jesus, and in all of the the saints, and it's important for us to have it as well.

A few years back, I came across some suggestions on how to be humble from a web site called "The Catholic Gentleman," which is a blog geared towards Catholic men. Humility though isn't just for the Catholic man, it's for all people. So how can we embrace it? Sam Guzman, the author, has a very helpful list.

He suggests 6 methods; much of these are his own words, but I do add a few too.

1. **Prayer.** It is safe to say that no virtue is ever formed in our souls except by frequent prayer. If you truly desire to be humble, pray every day for this grace, asking God to help you overcome your self-love. "We should daily ask God with our whole hearts for humility," teaches St. John Vianney, "for the grace to know that we are nothing of ourselves, and that our corporal as well as our spiritual welfare proceeds from him alone.

2. **Accept humiliations** Perhaps the most painful, but also the most effective, way to learn humility is by accepting humiliating and embarrassing circumstances. Fr. Gabriel of St. Mary Magdalene (a Carmelite priest, confessor and spiritual director of the mid 20th century) explains: "*Many souls would like to be humble, but few desire humiliation; many ask God to make them humble and fervently pray for this, but very few want to be humiliated. Yet it is impossible to gain humility without humiliations; for just as studying is the way to acquire knowledge, so it is by the way of humiliation that we attain to humility."* In our lives, people may mock and laugh at us for doing the right thing, but they did the same thing to Christ.

3. **Obey legitimate superiors.** One of the clearest manifestations of pride is disobedience (ironically, disobedience and rebellion are hailed as virtues in modern Western society). Satan fell through his proud, Non serviam, "I will not serve." On the other hand, humility is always manifested by obedience to legitimate authority, whether it be your boss or the government. As St. Benedict says, "The first degree

of humility is prompt obedience." We need to trust the Church to guide us, but also have humility to recognize in life when other people are giving us sound advice

4. **Distrust yourself.** The saints tell us that every sin we commit is due to our pride and self-reliance. If we completely distrusted ourselves and relied only upon God, they say, we would never sin. Dom Lorenzo Scpuoli (a 16th century Catholic writer) went so far as to say that, "Distrust of self is so absolutely requisite in the spiritual combat that without this virtue we cannot expect to defeat our weakest passions, much less gain a complete victory." Now of course we should trust ourself to a certain extent by listening to our conscience and our heart, but the problem can be if it turns into pride where we trust only ourselves and not God and other people. It's important to have a balance.

5. **Acknowledge your nothingness.** Another highly effective way of cultivating humility is to meditate on the grandeur and greatness of God, while simultaneously acknowledging your own nothingness in relation to him. St. John Vianney puts it this way: *"Who can contemplate the immensity of a God without humbling himself into the dust at the thought that God created heaven out of nothing, and that with one word he could turn heaven and earth into nothing again? A God who is so great, and whose power is boundless; a God filled with every perfection; a God with his never-ending eternity, his great justice, his providence, who rules everything so wisely, and looks after everything with such care, and we a mere nothing!"*

6. **Think better of others than of yourself.** When we are proud, we inevitably think we are better than others. We pray like the Pharisee, "Lord, I thank you that I am not like other men." This self-righteousness is incredibly harmful to our souls, and it is detestable to God. Scripture and the saints both affirm that the only safe path is considering everyone as better than ourselves. "Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves," says St. Paul (Phil. 2:3).

You also might consider the Litany of Humility. It was written by Rafael Cardinal Merry del Va, the Secretary of State for Saint Pius X. Not a bad thing to tuck into your Bible or favorite prayer book:

O Jesus! meek and humble of heart, Hear me.
From the desire of being esteemed,
Deliver me, Jesus. (repeat after each line)
From the desire of being loved,
From the desire of being extolled,
From the desire of being honored,
From the desire of being praised,
From the desire of being preferred to others,
From the desire of being consulted,
From the desire of being approved,
From the fear of being humiliated,
From the fear of being despised,

From the fear of suffering rebukes,
From the fear of being calumniated,
From the fear of being forgotten,
From the fear of being ridiculed,
From the fear of being wronged,
From the fear of being suspected,
That others may be loved more than I,
Jesus, grant me the grace to desire it. (repeat after each line)
That others may be esteemed more than I ,
That, in the opinion of the world,
others may increase and I may decrease,
That others may be chosen and I set aside,
That others may be praised and I unnoticed,
That others may be preferred to me in everything,
That others may become holier than I, provided that I may become as holy as I should…

There's nothing wrong with believing in our abilities, taking pride in a job well down, and celebrating our accomplishments. But the season of Advent invites us to think about why we need a Savior in the first place and how much we are loved by our God. May we never forget we need God daily, and strive to grow in holiness and love, taking a page from Saint John the Baptist whom we'll hear next week in our Gospel say: "One mightier than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop and loosen the thongs of his sandals." We are indeed not worthy to either, but God has created us and redeemed us out of love. Like Mary, like Jesus, like Saint John the Baptist, may we embrace humility too, remembering we may not be perfect, but God will show us how to become so if only we trust in Him and realize on our own, we are lost. Thankfully He shows us the way to perfection - like Saint John the Baptist, may we show others the way to Him.

Have a very blessed Advent,

Fr. Paul