

**22d SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – C (August 29, 2010)**  
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If pride—putting oneself before everyone else including God—is the worst of the seven deadly sins, then humility would naturally be a virtue of special importance. In fact, St. Bernard (whose feast we celebrated on August 20) spoke of humility as ‘the mother of salvation’. This virtue is the obvious focus of our readings today. The author of Sirach, which is part of the Old Testament wisdom literature, urges us to conduct our affairs with humility and to humble ourselves the more, the greater we are, so as to find favor with God. And in the gospel we just heard Jesus offer the parable of the guests at the wedding banquet and how they should not seek for themselves the places of honor lest they be forced to go to a lower place. Jesus then gives one of the great spiritual lessons: “everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

So what is humility? This important virtue is still too often misunderstood. The humble person is not the one who says “oh, I’m no good—I’m worthless and can’t do anything right.” Some people seem unable to accept a sincerely-offered compliment in the mistaken belief that it is the sin of pride to acknowledge their own talents or their basic worth, goodness and dignity. Then there is what one might call the opposite temptation: focusing so much on one’s own humility that it becomes a perverse sort of pride. This would be the one, for example, who says “I’m really proud of my humility” or “yes, humility is one of my greater virtues.” One of my priest friends takes that one step further in saying “gee, I wish everyone was as humble as I am!” Don’t worry—he says that with tongue firmly in cheek!

True humility, of course, is nothing like that. We get a better sense of what humility really is from the Latin root of that word—it comes from the word for ‘ground’, the dirt and earth we live on. Think of the word ‘humus’—the organic part of the soil—and you see its close relation with the word ‘humility’. So humility means to be grounded on something real, solid and strong; ultimately, humility is what grounds us in truth and reality and the way things really are. In the spiritual and moral realm, humility is the virtue that recognizes God as he truly is (in the words of Pope Benedict XVI) and that recognizes who and what we truly are in relation to God. The truth is that we are creatures who are made in the image and likeness of God, and therefore there is a basic, fundamental goodness, worth and dignity in every single one of us and in every person who ever lived or will live. That is why the truly humble person will simply and honestly acknowledge that all the good they have or do ultimately comes from God who is the source and cause of all that is good.

The other and necessary side of this humility, this truth and honesty, is to acknowledge that God is the one who is God, and we are not. We are therefore challenged to avoid the temptation to play God, a temptation to which we are especially prone in our days of ever-advancing scientific and technological know-how. The author of Sirach (our first reading), who wrote a couple of centuries before Christ, has some very wise words for us who now live some 2200 years later: “What is too sublime for you, seek not, into things beyond your strength search not.” By no means does this mean we should cease our pursuit of knowledge; God certainly does expect us to use the brains and the talents he has given us.

But it does mean that we must be careful not to reject or ignore what God has already established as the boundaries between right and wrong, between good and evil. That is how sin entered into the world, after all. Recall from chapter three of Genesis how the serpent tempted Eve to eat the forbidden fruit—he told her that eating it would make her and Adam “like gods who know what is good and what is bad.” Well, they said ‘yes’ to that temptation; they thought they could be as wise as God and declare for themselves what is good or evil...and ever since then the human race (with the exception of Jesus and his Blessed Mother) has given itself to sin.

Our own 21<sup>st</sup> century has given us some rather dramatic and all-too-relevant examples of what happens when we reject Sirach's advice to search not into things beyond our strength and, I might add, beyond God's wisdom and truth. Earlier this year, an OB-GYN doctor in Florida who also performed later-term abortions lost his medical license. One of his patients had been carrying twins—a boy who had some medical problems and a healthy girl. The woman wanted only the girl and so went to the doctor who was supposed to abort the unborn baby boy. You might guess what happened: the doctor aborted the little girl by mistake. The woman sued the doctor for aborting the 'wrong' fetus; a second procedure aborted the 'right' one. So the woman ended up childless, while the doctor was so filled with remorse that he threatened to take his own life and had to be involuntarily hospitalized. This actually happened, and it is nothing but complete tragedy from beginning to end. God has made it perfectly clear through his word and through his Church that human life is his gift to us, and that every person has the right to life from conception to natural death. When we think we can override the wisdom and the truth of God and determine for ourselves who lives and who dies, as our nation and world have recently done ever more brazenly, then we can only expect more and more of these kinds of horror stories.

Another example, one that you may have read or heard about: last year there was a high school senior girl in Ohio who allowed her boyfriend to take a nude picture of her on his cell phone. He then sent that picture to lots of other kids at that high school; you can readily imagine the taunting, the bullying, the ridicule, and the name-calling endured by that girl. She felt such extreme shame and humiliation that she ended up taking her own life. A similar situation occurred in Florida later last year where a middle-school girl sent a similar picture of herself to a boy she liked; he spread it all around, she faced the same humiliation and also took her own life. It just makes you want to weep in sheer frustration and utter sadness, doesn't it? God made us male and female; we are made in the image and likeness of God and are to be treated with dignity and reverence—including the gift of our physical body and our sexuality. When those gifts are turned into objects to satisfy one's lust or other selfish desires, the damage and indeed the destruction is all too real and on every level: physical, emotional and spiritual. The tragedy of these two teenagers demonstrates all too directly the wisdom and the warning we heard in Sirach: "What is too sublime for you, seek not, into things beyond your strength search not."

Genuine humility, once again, is the virtue that reminds us that all that we have and all that we are comes from almighty God. It cautions us against exalting ourselves so much that we forget that God is God and we are not. Archbishop Fulton Sheen said it well about humility that it "is not self-contempt but the truth about ourselves coupled with a reverence for others; it is self-surrender to the highest goal." And that highest goal is eternal union with the Triune God; remember what St. Bernard said about humility being the 'mother of salvation'. May we always grow in humble gratitude to God for what he has given us and done for us; may we humbly and gratefully accept and live the gospel in its fullness that his Son Jesus has revealed to us and for our salvation.