

Chapter II

I am the Best (Pride)

The LORD detests all the proud of heart. Be sure of this: They will not go unpunished. (Prov. 16:5)

Once on the feast of St. Lawrence the Lord showed St. Margaret of Cortona in ecstasy, a magnificent throne in heaven. It was so magnificent she could hardly describe it. On it she saw St. Francis of Assisi sitting. The Lord said to her,

Tell your Fathers, the Friars Minor, that the splendid throne which you saw among the angels was that of Lucifer... My elect, Francis is seated there today in resplendent glory.

The Lord told her that Lucifer had lost his place by his sinful pride. It was given to Francis for his great humility.¹

St. Francis built his whole Franciscan Order on humility and poverty. They were to seek the last place in all things, and thus the name of the Order was the Order of Friars Minor.

“Once when Saint Francis was returning from the forest and from prayer, being on the way out of the forest, the one called Friar Masseo wanted to test how humble he was, and encountering him he said almost provocatively: “Why to you, why to you, why to you?” Saint Francis answered: “What is it that you want to say?” Friar Masseo said: “I say why does the whole world follow you, and every person seems to want to see you, to hear you, and to obey you? You are not a good looking man in body, you are not of great learning, you are not noble, why then does everyone want to follow you?” Hearing this, Saint Francis, altogether overjoyed in spirit... turned to Friar Masseo and said: “Do you want to know why me? Do you want to know why me? Do you want to know why the whole world follows me? This I learned that the most holy eyes of God did not see among sinners any one more vile, more insufficient, or a greater sinner than me.”²

¹Hiral, Most Rev. Ange-Marie, OFM, *The Revelations of Margaret of Cortona*, English trans. Raphael Brown, Franciscan Inst. 1952.

²Little Flowers of St. Francis, chapter X.

“I asked myself one day,” wrote Saint Teresa of Ávila, “why the Lord so loves humility and suddenly there came to my mind, without any reflection on my part, that it must be because he is total Truth, and humility is truth.”³ One day St. Catherine of Siena asked, “Tell me, Lord, who am I, what am I? Lord, tell me also, who and what are You? He replied, “Daughter, I am who am. You are, who are not.” This, of course, was God’s way of reminding her of the essence of humility, namely that before God we are nothing. This brings to mind the “nada” doctrine of St. John of the Cross:

To reach satisfaction in everything, desire satisfaction in nothing.

To come to possession of everything, desire the possession of nothing.

To arrive at being all, desire to be nothing.

To come to the knowledge of everything, desire the knowledge of nothing.⁴

The Lord also told St. Catherine of Siena at another time, “[one] proves his humility on a proud man, his faith on an infidel, his true hope on one who despairs, his justice on the unjust, his kindness on the cruel, his gentleness and benignity on the irascible.” In other words, if you can be humble with a proud person, you are truly humble (etc.). St. Francis de Sales had something similar to say: “If, when stung by slander or ill-nature, we wax proud and swell with anger, it is a proof that our gentleness and humility are unreal, and mere artificial show.”

Of course, Jesus had much to say about pride and humility. For example, "The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted." (Mt 23: 11, 12). The Magnificat of Mary is a classic example of humility praised and pride denounced: "...he has scattered the proud in their conceit, he has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly." (Lk 1:51, 52)

Pride is mentioned 138 times in one way or another in Sacred Scripture just about always as something to be avoided as in Proverbs 16:5 above. Humility, humble, humbles, etc. appears 106 times, always as something to strive for.

³St. Teresa of Avila, Interior Castle, VI dim., chapter 10.

⁴Ascent of Mount Carmel, Book One, Chapter 13.

One need not be a Christian or of any religion to know that pride is an evil vice. Just observe how we are repulsed by an athlete or politician (for example) who is always proclaiming how wonderful he or she is.

It should be noted, of course, that pride can be good in one sense, as in a person taking pride in his work, or pride in her daughter. It is satisfaction or pleasure about doing something well or the accomplishment of a friend or family member. When you say of your daughter who has done something good, “I’m proud of you,” is not the sin of pride but the virtue of encouragement. When you say, “I take pride in serving my customers,” that is not sinful pride but satisfaction in doing something good for others. And as Cardinal Newman taught, Christians want to serve: “It is the Christian’s excellence to be... willing to serve, and to rejoice in permission to do so; to be content to view himself in a subordinate place; to love to sit in the dust.”⁵

St. Francis of Assisi spoke of the humility of God: “O sublime humility! O humble sublimity, that the Lord of the universe, God and Son of God, so humiliates himself as to hide himself for our salvation, under the little appearance of bread! Look, brothers, at the humility of God and open your hearts before Him.”⁶ And, of course, in order to love us Jesus took the “form of a slave”

...Though he was in the form of God,
[Jesus] did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:6-8)

⁵Cardinal Newman, *Synthesis*, Ignatius Press, 1997, p. 278.

⁶Francis of Assisi, *Letter to the Whole Order*.

Anyone who has ever sought a love relationship should know that one must place oneself beneath the beloved to achieve oneness. We offer our love and hope it is returned.

Mohandi Gandhi wrote that humility is an indispensable virtue to find the truth: “The seeker after truth should be humbler than the dust. The world crushes the dust under its feet, but the seeker after truth should so humble himself that even the dust could crush him.”⁷

St. John of The Cross wrote, “...all the visions, revelations and feelings from heaven, or whatever else one may desire to think upon, are not worth as much as the least act of humility.”⁸ Another St. John, John Vianney taught, “Humility is to the various virtues what the chain is to a rosary. Take away the chain and the beads are scattered; remove humility and all virtues vanish.”

St. Maria Faustina, the Divine Mercy saint, wrote, “O Jesus, when I am in the last place, lower than the postulants, even the youngest of them, then I feel that I am in my proper place. I did not know that the Lord had put so much happiness in these drab little corners.”⁹

St. Francis de Sales remarked that humility, "drives away Satan and keeps the graces and gifts of the Holy Spirit safe within us." It is a very elusive virtue. You may pray and pray for humility and strive to live this virtue and you may say, “At last I am humble,” and you have lost it. Francis de Sales wrote along this same line, “Professions of humility are the very cream, the very essence of pride; the really humble person wishes to be, and not to appear so. Humility is timorous, and starts at her shadow; and so delicate that if she hears her name pronounced it endangers her existence.” And pride is so pervasive that Francis de Sales declared, “Pride dies twenty minutes after death.”

Even displeasure at our own behavior can be a matter of pride. “Fits of anger, vexation, and bitterness against ourselves tend to pride and they spring from no other source than self-love, which is disturbed and upset at seeing that it is imperfect.”¹⁰

What are some of the forms our pride takes? haughtiness over our knowledge; over our

⁷Mohandas Gandhi, *An Autobiography - The Story of My Experiments With Truth*, 1993 p. 7.

⁸John of Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. by Kieran Kavanaugh, OCD and Otilio Rodríguez, Washington, DC, ICS Publications, 1979, p. 227.

⁹St. Maria Faustina, *Diary: Divine Mercy in My Soul*, Marian Press, 2005, p 106.

¹⁰Francis de Sales, *Introduction to The Devout Life*, trans. by John K. Ryan, Image Books, 1986, p. 249.

intelligence (intellectual pride); over our gifts (be they physical, athletic, or skills); over our accomplishments; even over our spiritual progress in devotion (spiritual pride). It also comes out in our driving aggressively, impatiently or competitively—this is a most popular expression of pride (to which I have succumbed too often).

Of course, one needs to be humble enough to say, “I have a problem. I have thoughts or ideas which are sinful.” If we can’t say that we can’t benefit from a book on “Overcoming Sinful Thoughts.”

Examples of The Saints

St. John Vianney showed his humility once when he received (by mistake) a petition circulated by his fellow priests accusing him of “sensationalism, ignorance, and [showy] poverty.” He signed it, and sent it on to the diocese. At one point he said, “I thought a time would come when people would run me out of Ars with sticks, when the bishop would suspend me, and I should end my days in prison. I see, however, that I am not worthy of such a grace.”¹¹

In 1841 Vianney got a letter from a fellow priest, Abbé Borjon, age 32 (John was 54 at the time) which began, "Monsieur le Curé, when a man knows as little theology as you he ought never to enter a confessional..." He went on to insult John all sorts of ways. John wrote him back, saying,

How many reasons I have to love you my dear and honored co-worker. You are the only person who really knows me. Since you are so good and charitable to take an interest in my poor soul, help me to obtain the grace I have asked for so long—that of being replaced in a position I am unworthy to fulfill because of my ignorance—so that I may be able to retire into some corner, there to weep over my poor life... How much penance I must do, how many tears to shed!

Borjon got John's reply, walked to Ars where he "threw himself" at John's feet to ask

¹¹Abbé Francis Trochu, *The Curé d'Ars*, Rockford, IL: Tan Books and Publishers, 1977, pp. 178,174.

forgiveness.¹²

Near the end of his life St. John of the Cross developed an inflammation in his foot which caused him to have a fever. The prior thought of sending him to Baeza where he could be treated by doctors, and where he was highly thought of. But John asked to be sent to Ubeda where he would not be treated with great respect.

The prior at Úbeda was Francisco Crisóstomo a harsh man who had no use for those considered to be holy. Furthermore, he had never forgiven John for having corrected him years earlier for long absences from the priory for preaching. So, he gave John the most miserable room in the priory. And, when John was kept by his illness from being able to get to the dining room one day, Crisóstomo demanded John come to him whereupon he humiliated him by publicly scolding him.

Crisóstomo complained that the special food prescribed by the doctors was eating into the priory's finances, even though most of the food was donated by the people in the town. He would go each day to John's room and scold the sick man for his defects. And, he would mock John for having corrected him years before. The prior would not allow anyone to visit John without his permission, and his final insult was to take away the friar taking care of him. The young friars were so scandalized by this that one of them reported Crisóstomo's cruelty to the provincial. He came and scolded Crisóstomo for his shameful behavior. And, he stayed a few days to make sure John got better treatment.

Meanwhile the doctor who dressed John's wound became convinced John was a saint and saved the bandages as relics. A sweet-smelling aroma emanating from the bandages confirmed the doctor's opinion.

John got worse and worse, and it became clear that he was nearing his death. At about this time when Crisóstomo came to see him John humbly requested pardon of the prior for being a burden to him. The prior was filled with guilt and self-reproach and asked forgiveness for treating him badly. He muttered that the monastery didn't have much money. John answered, "Father, I have been treated far better than I deserve. But do not be distressed by the poverty of the house for if you have faith in the Lord it will soon be relieved." (And it was.) As he left

¹²Alfred Monnin, *The Curé of Ars*, translated by Bertram Wolferstam, S. J., St. Louis, MO: Herder Book Co., 1924, pp. 206, 207.

John's room, the prior could not hold back his tears.

From that day Crisóstomo was a changed man. He returned later and begged on his knees to have John's breviary when he died. John replied, "I have nothing that belongs to me that I can give Your Reverence; everything is yours for you are my superior."¹³

Shortly thereafter John died. Hundreds upon hundreds attended his funeral. Parts of his body were cut off and brought to various parts of Spain. Many miracles occurred for those who touched them.

David

Have you ever wondered how King David became a key figure in the Old Testament. After all, he was an adulterer and a murderer. Yet he was told that his son would have a firm kingdom and his throne would last forever:

Thus says the Lord of hosts... When your days have been completed and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, sprung from your loins, and I will establish his kingdom. He it is who shall build a house for my name, and I will establish his royal throne forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me... Your house and your kingdom are firm forever before me; your throne shall be firmly established forever.(2 Sam 7:12-14a, 16)

How did he qualify for that honor, in light of his sins? Because of his *humility*. When Nathan accused David with a blistering account of his sins, he replied, "I have sinned against the Lord" (2 Sam. 12:13). Psalm 51 is said to be David's humble prayer for mercy before God:

For the leader. A psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came to him after he had gone in to Bathsheba.

Have mercy on me, God, in your kindness. In your compassion blot out my offense. O

¹³Gerals Brenan, *St. John of the Cross, His Life and Poetry*, London/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1973, pp. 78-80.

wash me more and more from my guilt and cleanse me from my sin. My offenses truly I know them; my sin is always before me. Against you, you alone, have I sinned; what is evil in your sight I have done. That you may be justified when you give sentence and be without reproach when you judge. O see, in guilt was I born, a sinner was I conceived. Indeed you love truth in the heart; then in the secret of my heart teach me wisdom. O purify me, then I shall be clean; O wash me, I shall be whiter than snow. Make me hear rejoicing and gladness, that the bones you have crushed may revive. From my sins turn away your face and blot out all my guilt. A pure heart create for me, O God, put a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, nor deprive me of your holy spirit. Give me again the joy of your help; with a spirit of fervor sustain me, that I may teach transgressors your ways and sinners may return to you. O rescue me, God, my helper, and my tongue shall ring out your goodness. O Lord, open my lips and my mouth shall declare your praise. For in sacrifice you take no delight, burnt offering from me you would refuse; my sacrifice, a contrite spirit. A humbled, contrite heart you will not spurn... (Ps. 51:1-19)

Humility personified. That great humility, even after his mortal sins, is what obtained for David the privilege of being the great, great... grandfather of Jesus. Jesus was often called "Son of David," implying he was the fulfillment of the promise to David, he was the Messiah. In fact, when the crowds called him that in the Temple area the chief priests and scribes were indignant, since they knew they were in effect calling him the Messiah

Our blessed Lord makes it clear in the Gospel of Luke that spiritual pride can bring down a person practicing religion whereas humility can lift up a sinner:

[Jesus] also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather

than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.” (Luke 18:9-14)

What an extraordinary message! The pharisee fasted twice a week and gave ten percent of his income to the poor or the church. Tax collectors were known to extort more taxes than were due, keeping the extra for themselves. It was considered a scandal among the Jews for someone to marry into a family with a tax collector in it. Tax collectors were seen as the scum of the earth. Yet, Jesus said the tax collector was in a sense better off than the pharisee who practiced his faith but fell into spiritual pride. The tax collector’s humility was his saving grace.

I am sure this parable shook the people listening to Jesus. It should shake us as well. God wants no part in our pride, spiritual or otherwise. How vitally important it is to pray for and strive for the preeminent virtue of humility!

Mary

There should be no doubt that the most humble of all the saints was Blessed Mary. St. Alphonsus Ligouri wrote,

"Humility," says St. Bernard, "is the foundation and guardian of virtues;" and with reason, for without it no other virtue can exist in a soul. Should she possess all virtues, all will depart when humility is gone. But, on the other hand, as St. Francis de Sales wrote to St. Jane Frances de Chantal, "God so loves humility, that whenever He sees it, He is immediately drawn there." ...Mary, being the first and most perfect disciple of Jesus Christ in the practice of all virtues, was the first also in that of humility, and by it merited to be exalted above all creatures. It was revealed to St. Matilda that the first virtue in which the Blessed Mother particularly exercised herself, from her very childhood, was that of humility.

...St. Bernardine says, that "after the Son of God, no creature in the world was so exalted as Mary, because no creature in the world ever humbled itself so much as she

did."¹⁴

Prayers for Humility

A litany for humility is attributed (perhaps incorrectly) to Cardinal Merry del Val, Secretary of State for Pope Pius X. What follows is an adaptation of that prayer, shortened to encourage daily recitation:

O Jesus! meek and humble of heart,
make my heart like unto thine.

From the desire to be esteemed,

Deliver me.

From the desire to be honored...

From the desire to be praised...

Teach me to accept humiliation,

contempt, rebukes

being slandered, being ignored,

being insulted, being wronged,

and being belittled.

Jesus, grant me the grace...

that others be admired more than I;

that others be praised and I unnoticed;

that others be preferred to me in everything;

that others be holier than I, provided I become as holy as I should;

that I might imitate the patience and obedience of Your mother, Mary. Amen

¹⁴St. Alphonsus Ligouri, *The Glories of Mary*, Burns and Oates, 1858.

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Humility is the only of his virtues that Jesus invited us to imitate: "...learn from me for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." (Mt. 11:29) Don't leave home without it!