

HUMILITY ACCORDING TO ST. THOMAS¹

“The Son of man is not come to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a redemption for many.”—*Matthew*, xx, 28.

It is well known that St. Thomas² admits a *specific distinction*, and, indeed, even a *diversity of order*, between the *acquired* moral virtues, which the pagan philosophers describe, and the *infused* moral virtues, of which the Gospel speaks; for example, between acquired and infused prudence. There is, as a matter of fact, a difference of formal object, of regulation, and of end, since the acquired virtue of its very nature is *ordained to a natural end*, while the infused virtue is *ordained to a supernatural end*.

The superior level of the infused moral virtues is brought out with special clarity in St. Thomas' teaching on humility. All Christian tradition has considered this virtue the *foundation of the spiritual life* inasmuch as it eradicates pride, which, according to Holy Scripture, is the beginning of all sin because of the gulf it makes between us and God. Hence humility is often compared to the excavation dug in preparation for building, an excavation whose depth must be exactly proportioned to the height of the structure, deeper as that is to be higher. From this point of view, the two pillars or the two principal walls of the spiritual edifice are faith and hope, the dome of the temple is charity.

Certainly humility should repress pride in all its forms, understanding here by pride both intellectual and spiritual pride. But the proper, principal, indeed the highest, act of humility is not precisely the repression of actual movements of pride. Obviously in Our Lord and in Mary there was never the least

¹ *Editor's Note:* This article is to form part of the forthcoming Volume II of Père Garrigou-Lagrange's learned treatise on ascetical and mystical theology: *Les trois âges de la vie intérieure*, Editions du Cerf, Boulevard La Tour Maubourg, 29, Paris.

² *Summa Theologica*, Ia IIae, q. 63, a. 4.

movement of pride to be repressed; yet they certainly had the virtue of humility and exercised it in an eminent degree. What is then the proper act of humility, first in relation to God and then in relation to neighbor?

HUMILITY TOWARD GOD

The proper act of humility consists in bowing down to earth; hence its name humility from the latin *humus*, or ground. To put aside the metaphor, the proper act of humility consists in *abasing oneself before God* and before that which is of God in every creature. To abase oneself before the Most High is to recognize, not only speculatively but practically, our inferiority, our littleness, our indigence; all of which is manifest in us even though we be innocent; much more than this, after sin has been committed, it is necessary to recognize our misery.

Humility, then, is closely united to obedience and to religion, yet it differs from both: obedience looks to the authority of God and his precepts; religion regards the excellence of God and the worship which is his due; humility, in bending us down to earth, has made recognition of our littleness, of our poverty, and thus in its own manner glorifies the grandeur of God. Humility chants his glory as did the Archangel Michael in his question: *Quis ut Deus?* "Who is like God?" The interior soul experiences a holy joy in annihilating itself in some way before God for the sake of recognizing practically that God alone is great and that in comparison with his divine greatness all human greatness is as empty of truth as a lie.

Humility so conceived is founded upon truth, especially upon this truth: there is an infinite distance between the Creator and the creature. The more vividly and concretely this distance is perceived, the greater the humility. However high the creature may be, this abyss is infinite; the higher one climbs in true progress, the more evident becomes the infinite character of this chasm. In this sense, the highest is the most humble, because he is more enlightened: the Virgin Mary is more humble than all the saints, and Our Lord is yet much more humble than his Holy Mother.

The affinity of humility to the theological virtues can be readily seen in an examination of its *double dogmatic foundation*, an aspect of humility of which the pagans were ignorant. For there are two dogmas at the root of humility.

Humility is based first on the *mystery of creation* (*creatio ex nihilo*), a truth which the philosophers of antiquity did not know, at least explicitly, but which reason, by its natural powers can know. We were *created from nothing*, this is the foundation of humility in the light of natural reason.³

Humility is also based⁴ on the *mystery of grace* and of the necessity of *actual grace* for placing the least salutary act. This mystery surpasses the natural forces of reason; it is known by faith and finds explicit expression in the words of the Saviour: "Without me you can do nothing" in the order of salvation.⁵

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These two principles involve four consequences relative to: God the creator, to his providence, and to his goodness, which is the source both of grace and of the remission of sin.

First of all, in relation to God the creator, we *must recognize*, not only in a speculative way but *practically* and concretely, that *we of ourselves are nothing*: "My substance is as nothing before thee,"⁶ "What have we that we have not received?"⁷ We have been created from nothing by the sovereignly free *fiat* of God—by his benevolent love which conserves us in existence and without which we should be instantly annihilated.

Moreover, though after the creation there were more beings, there was not more of reality, more of perfection, more of wisdom, nor more of love; for before all creation there already existed the infinite plenitude of divine perfection; therefore in comparison with God, we are not. Indeed, if from the very best of our free acts we take away that which comes from God,

³ It is from this point of view that the conception of acquired humility proceeds.

⁴ The precise question here is of infused humility.

⁵ John, xv, 5.

⁶ Ps. xxxviii, 6.

⁷ I Cor., iv, 7.

there is literally nothing left. It is not as though one part of these acts came from us and another from God; the *whole and entire act* comes from God as its first cause, the whole and entire act comes from us as its second cause. In the same way the fruit of a tree is entirely from God as the first cause, entirely from the tree as the second cause.

We must recognize, and in a practical manner, this truth: without God, the creator and conservator of all things, we are nothing.

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Likewise without God, the *supreme source of order*, without his providence, which *directs* all things, our life is totally lacking in direction. To gain eternal life, we must then humbly receive from him the general direction of the precepts, and that particular direction which the Most High, from all eternity, has chosen for each one of us. This particular direction is manifested to us by our superiors, who are the intermediaries between ourselves and God, by the counsels to which we should have recourse, by the events of life, by the inspirations of the Holy Ghost. In the same way we should humbly accept the place, perhaps an extremely modest place, which the good God has willed for each of us from all eternity. So it is that in the religious life some should be as the branches of the tree, others as its blossoms, still others as its root hidden under the earth. But it is very useful, this root which draws up from the soil the material that constitutes the sap necessary for the sustenance of the tree. Indeed if all the roots are cut the tree will die; but it does not die even though stripped of all its branches and all of its blossoms. In a christian, in a religious, the humility which moves him to accept willingly an obscure place is most fruitful not only for the individual himself, but also for others. The Saviour, in his passion, very humbly chose the last place, the place where Barrabas was preferred to him, the shame of the Cross; and it is in this way that he became the cornerstone in the temple of the kingdom of God: "*The stone which*

the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner. By the Lord this has been done; and it is wonderful in our eyes."⁸ St. Paul wrote to the Ephesians: "Now therefore you are no more strangers . . . but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and the domestics of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner-stone."⁹

Such is the very solid virtue of humility, marvellously fruitful, which even in the most hidden places sings forth the glory of God. It is necessary, then, to receive humbly from God the special direction that he has chosen for us, even if it should lead us to a profound immolation: "The Lord killeth and maketh alive, he bringeth to every extremity and bringeth back alive."¹⁰ This is one of the most beautiful themes of the Holy Scriptures.

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Further, we cannot take the least step forward in this special direction chosen for us by God, nor place the slightest salutary and meritorious act, without the *help of an actual grace*; particularly have we need of actual grace to persevere even to the end. This grace must be humbly asked.

Even if we should have a high degree of sanctifying grace and charity, full ten talents, we should still have need of actual grace for the least salutary act, and especially should we need, for a good death, the great gift of final perseverance, which should be asked for with humility and confidence each day in the Hail Mary.

Christian humility confesses joyfully with St. Paul: "Not that we are sufficient to think anything of value to salvation of ourselves, as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is from God."¹¹ "No man can say Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost."¹²

In short, humility should recognize, practically and a little

⁸ Matt., xxi, 42.

⁹ Eph., ii, 19, 20.

¹⁰ I Kings, ii, 6.

¹¹ II Cor., iii, 5.

¹² I Cor., xii, 3.

better each day, the greatness of God the creator, the governor of all things and the author of grace.

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This humility, which recognizes our insufficiency, should be in all the just; it would, indeed, have been found in man in the state of innocence. But *after sin*, we must recognize practically not only our indigence but also our misery: the miseries of our narrow, egotistic heart, of our fickle will, of our unbalanced, violent, capricious character; miseries of our soul with its unpardonable omissions and the contradictions into which it falls, contradictions that could and should have been avoided; the misery of pride, of greed, which leads to indifference to the glory of God and the salvation of souls. This misery is inferior to nothingness itself, for it is a disorder and it puts our soul in a state of truly contemptible vileness.

In the divine office we frequently recall these great truths in the *Miserere*: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to thy goodness. And according to thy great mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me completely from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. . . . Against thee only have I sinned, I have done that which is evil in thy eyes . . . purify me. Wash me and I shall be made whiter than snow. . . . Turn away thy face from my sins. . . . Create a pure heart in me, O God, and a firm spirit. . . . Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation. . . ." "Who can know his sins? From sins of which I am ignorant, cleanse me, O Lord."¹³

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How much this abasement of true humility differs from the pusillanimity that is born of human respect or spiritual laziness! Pusillanimity, the contrary of magnanimity, refuses necessary labor! Humility, far from being opposed to greatness of soul is rather bound to it in ties of unity; the true christian should strive towards great things, things worthy of great honors, but

¹³ Ps., xviii, 13.

he should do so humbly and, if it be necessary, even by the way of great humiliation.¹⁴ He should learn to say frequently: "*Non nobis, Domine, non nobis, sed nomini tuo da gloriam.*" Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to thy name be the glory."

The pusillanimous person is he who refuses to do the things he can and should do; and he can sin mortally when he refuses to do what is of grave obligation. On the contrary, humility bows a man down before the Most High, that he may find his true place. It abases us before God to allow him to operate more freely in us. Far from being discouraged, the humble soul puts himself in the hands of God, and if the Saviour does great works through him, he is no more puffed up with his own greatness than is the axe in the hands of the woodsman or the harp in the hands of the musician. He says with the Blessed Virgin Mary: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done unto me according to thy word."

THE RELATION OF HUMILITY TO NEIGHBOUR

In a way as simple as it is profound, St. Thomas says of this matter: "Every man should recognize that in what he has of himself he is inferior to that which is of God in every other person."¹⁵ In fact each man, considering that of himself he is nothing, that what comes from himself is only his insufficiency, his defectibility, his deficiencies, should recognize, not only in a speculative but also in a practical way, that what he has from himself, as from himself, is inferior to what every other man has from God, both in the order of nature and in the order of grace.

¹⁴ Confer St. Thomas, *Summa*, Ia IIae, a. 1: "Humilitas reprimat appetitum, ne tendat ad magna praeter rationem rectam. Magnanimitas autem animum ad magna impellit secundum rationem rectam." Item, Ib. a. 2 ad 3um, et q. 129, a. 3 ad 4um. These two virtues are complimentary, like the two halves of an arched window. The virtues from the fact of their connection, increase together like the five fingers of the hand, so that one cannot have a profound humility without true nobility of soul or magnanimity.

¹⁵ "Quilibet homo secundum quod suum est, debet se cuilibet proximo subjicere quantum ad id quod est Dei in ipso." Ia IIae, q. 161, a. 3

The angelic doctor adds, in substance: ¹⁶ "The truly humble man considers himself inferior to others not only with an eye to external acts, but because he fears lest even the good that he does be done from a secret pride. This is why the Psalmist says: "*Ab occultis meis munda me, Domine. From my hidden faults, purify me, Lord.*" St. Augustine too says: "Esteem some your superiors internally whom you surpass in things external."¹⁷

It must also be said with the same Augustine: "There is no sin committed by another man but which I could commit by reason of my own weakness, and if I have not committed it, it is only because God in his mercy has not permitted it and has conserved me in goodness."¹⁸ It is he to whom the glory of it must be given and to whom we must say with the Scriptures: "Create in me, O Lord, a pure heart, a right spirit. Turn me to thyself and I shall be converted. Have pity on me a sinner, for I am poor and weak."

As St. Thomas says in Ia, q. 20, a. 3: "Since God's love for us is the cause of all good, no one would be better than another if he were not loved more by God. 'What hast thou that thou hast not received?' "¹⁹ It was this that led the saints, seeing a criminal being brought out to execution, to say: "If this man had received the same graces I have for so many years, perhaps he would be less faithless than I am; and if God had permitted in my life the faults which he has permitted in this man's, I should be in his place and he in mine.—'What hast thou that thou hast not received?' " This is the true foundation of Christian humility. All pride should shatter itself against the divine word.

Thus the humility of the saints became always more profound, for they knew better and better their own weakness in contrast with the greatness and goodness of God. To this humility of the saints we must strive, refraining from using their

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, a. 6 ad lum.

¹⁷ "Existimate aliquos in occulto superiores, quibus estis in manifesto meliores." *De Virginitate*, ch. LII.

¹⁸ This is said in substance in the *Confessions*, Book II, ch. vii.

¹⁹ I Cor., iv, 7.

terms and formulas so long as we are not profoundly convinced that these are true; otherwise, these would evidently be from false humility, which, compared to the true, is as a glass trinket compared to a genuine diamond.

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Humility toward our neighbour, thus defined by St. Thomas, differs immensely from human respect and from pusillanimity. Human respect (*timor mundanus*) is fear of the judgment and the anger of the wicked that turns us away from God. Pusillanimity refuses to do the necessary work, runs away from the great things that could have been accomplished and inclines towards the least things. But humility bows us down before God and before what is of God in our neighbour, in a noble gesture. The humble man does not bow down before the power of the wicked; therein says St. Thomas he differs from the ambitious man who abases himself much more than he should in order to obtain that which he desires, and becomes a cringing knave to gain power.

Humility does not fly great deeds; on the contrary it strengthens magnanimity in making us tend to sublime actions humbly. These two are complementary virtues, supporting one another like the wings of an arch.

These two virtues appear splendidly in our Lord when he says: "The Son of man is come not to be ministered to, but to minister (his humility) and to give his life for the redemption of many (his magnanimity, with his zeal for the glory of God and the salvation of souls)." ²⁰ Our Saviour could not have moved towards greater things, nor moved more humbly: He wished to give us eternal life and to give that gift by the medium of the humiliations of his Passion and of the Cross. In like manner, keeping a just proportion of the human to the divine, do these two apparently contrary virtues unite in the saints. The humble John the Baptist did not fear the anger of Herod but said to him: "What you are doing is not lawful";

²⁰ Matt., xx, 28.

the Apostles in their humility had no fear of the opposition of men; they were magnanimous to the point of martyrdom. There is something of the same thing in all the saints, and the more humble they are, the more courageous they are, the less do they fear human opinions however formidable they may be; such was the humble Vincent de Paul, intrepid before jansenistic pride, which he recognized and denounced that he might save for souls the privilege of frequent communion.

In practise what must be done to arrive at the perfection of humility, without which we cannot reach the perfection of charity? To this end it is above all necessary that we behave well both in the face of praise and of blame.

As for praise, *we must not praise ourselves*; that would be to dishonour ourselves, as the Italian proverb has it: "*chi si loda, s'imbroda*"; they praise themselves who find they are not praised by others.—Further, *we must not look for praise*; indeed that would be to render oneself ridiculous and to lose the merit of one's good actions.—Finally, *we must not take pleasure in praises* that are given; this would be to lose, if not the merit of our good actions, at least the full flower of that merit.

But we must climb a few degrees still higher to meet reproaches as we should. *Merited reproofs must be accepted patiently*, especially when they are given by superiors who have the right and the duty to correct; sulkiness will cause the loss of the benefit of these corrections. *It is sometimes fitting to accept a rebuke that has been little merited, or that is even undeserved*. Thus St. Thomas, while still a novice, was reprimanded for a supposed mistake in his reading of latin in the refectory; he made the suggested correction and continued with the reading; later, in recreation, his astonished brethren said: "You were not mistaken, you read correctly; why did you allow yourself to be corrected?" "It is better in the eyes of God," he answered, "to be guilty of a grammatical error than to be lacking in obedience and humility." Finally, it is fitting to petition for a *love of contempt*, calling to mind the examples of the saints. St. John of the Cross, responding to our Lord's

question "What reward do you wish?" answered: "To be despised and to suffer for love of you"; his request was granted a few days later and in a most painful manner; he was looked on as an unworthy religious and mistreated in an almost incredible way. In the same way St. Francis of Assisi said to brother Leo: "If, when we arrive this evening at the door of the convent, the brother porter takes us for robbers and refuses to let us in, giving us blows and leaving us out the whole night in the rain and the cold, that will be the time to say: *santa latizia*: what joy, O Lord, to suffer for you and to become a little like you." The saints have climbed even as high as this.

St. Anselm²¹ has admirably described the degrees of humility: "1. To know that from some aspects one is worthy of contempt; 2. to endure contempt; 3. to declare that one is contemptible; 4. to wish that one's neighbour believe it; 5. to sustain patiently the remarks that are made; 6. to accept being actually treated as one worthy of contempt; 7. to love to be so treated."

These higher degrees are given in all pious books, but, as St. Theresa says, "These are pure gifts of God, they are supernatural,"²² they presuppose a certain infused contemplation of the humility of the Saviour crucified for us and an ardent desire to become like him.

It is of course proper to strive for this high perfection; those who arrive at such heights are rare; but before reaching them, the interior soul has many an occasion to recall the words of Jesus, simple, profound words that we are truly able to imitate in our own way; "The Son of man is come, not to be ministered to, but to minister and to give his life for the redemption of many."²³ Here is the most profound humility united to the most sublime grandeur of soul.

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²¹ *Lib. de similitudinibus*, ch. CI-CIX, cited by St. Thomas Ia IIae, q. 161, a. 6 ad 3um.

²² *Vie*, ch. XXXI, *Obras*, t. I, p. 257. *Chemin de la perfection*, ch. XII, *Obras*, t. III, p. 61.

²³ *Matt.*, xx, 28.