

The Humility of Mind, Heart and Body. Spiritual Humility¹

St. Peter Julian Eymard to the Servants of the Blessed Sacrament
Paris, Monday, September 3, 1860

My Sisters, I think you were attentive to your short meditation this morning – it fits you well. **Humility is your dowry as spouses of Jesus Christ, to be Servants of the Most Blessed Sacrament.** You have no other. If the Good Lord asked you for another dowry, you could not give it to him. Examine all the virtues, and you'll find them impossible. You may practice them a little, but their perfection is impossible for you. It's the same with the virtues of the mind, those that come from the working of your mind, like prudence, wisdom, prayer. All this is beyond you, even if you are intelligent.

Very few people are truly wise and prudent or have **the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit.** Notice that almost all these gifts refer to the intellect. Wisdom consists in judging things rightly, in making the wisest choice; intelligence comes from the mind, and counsel is true charity – there are very few who give good advice. Fortitude does not seem to refer to the mind, but that is its source. A person with a weak mind has a weak character; strength is in the mind more than in the hands. If a person is weak, he allows himself to be led; a truly strong character lives by his intellect. Knowledge also comes from the mind. There remain only piety and the fear of God, the last two gifts that flow from the heart; the other five stem from the intellect. And so, my good Daughters, we should not expect much on this level.

You cannot practice **the major evangelical virtues**; the Good Lord does not ask this of you. Evangelical poverty, such as the followers of St. Francis and others practiced it, could probably not be practiced by you even if the Good Lord asked you as he did for the great saints. Mortification as practiced by many saints is something you could not do with your poor health; and it does not seem to be your particular virtue. What else? All the evangelical and Christian virtues are very difficult. The Good Lord is asking from you only humility. You already carry it within you; you have two things: nothingness and sin. That's enough to be humble. The most perfect humility does not result from sin. The Blessed Virgin had no sin, yet no one had greater humility. She understood her nothingness and referred everything to God. She was always aware that he was her source and her end, and all she did flowed from this principle.

Your dowry is humility. The dowry of a spouse is imperishable, protected by law. The spouse must always be aware and mindful of it. This is your only dowry; so, be very humble. Our Lord requires this of you; it is the condition of your contract. Do you want to receive not only his grace of perfection, but of love? God gives it only to humility: the more a soul is humble, the more graces she receives. Do you want water? Dig deeply and you will have an inexhaustible flow. If you are deeply humble you will have an inexhaustible treasure of grace. God has committed himself to fill the void that you make. That is why the Blessed Virgin was raised so high. She said: **God has looked upon the lowliness of his handmaid; behold, all ages will call me blessed; God has looked upon me with kindness** (cf. Lk 1:48). God has made humility the measure of grace and glory. We can already know this by ourselves, but if someone knew the degree of our humility, he would know the degree of our glory.

Concerning our Lord, St. Paul said: he *emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. Because of this, God greatly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, of those in heaven and on*

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earth and under the earth (cf. Phil 2:7-10). Thus, the glory of Jesus Christ flows from his humility on earth. He is not crowned as God – he does not need it – he is the crown of the elect; but as man, he is crowned for his works, for his humility, as St. Paul says explicitly. He is king of the humble.

Our glory will be equal to our humility. Jesus Christ made humility the condition of his favors. He cannot be good and loving to those who are proud – this would be a contradiction. Love is a gift and union; it cannot unite itself with proud persons. When the Lord speaks about someone on whom he would cast eyes of love, he says through the prophet [Isaiah]: *On the humble poor -- Pauperculum et humilis corde – on the poorest and on the contrite heart* (cf. Is 66:2) – the humble, therefore. Our Lord had preferences only for one group – for children. He touched them, placed them on his knees. He found such simplicity and humility in them that his own love became small like theirs. His apostles were scandalized, and he told them: ***Let the children come to me*** (cf. Mt 19:14) – childhood is the image of simplicity and humility. Therefore, my poor Daughters, work at becoming humble – you’ll never have the simplicity of children; have the simplicity of virtue.

You might ask: how can I become humble? There are several kinds of humility. The humility of the mind consists in recognizing that we don’t deserve affection and favors, because of our state. Nothingness deserves nothing. Do we love something that is nothing, and do we grant it favors? No, because it is only nothingness. St. Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, said: *I have toiled harder than all the other apostles, I am only nothingness -- Nihil sum* (cf. 1 Cor 15:10). If he who has done so much can say this, what about us? To attain conversion we must grasp humility of the mind. We see this through experience and by an act of faith, since God told us. Humility of the mind goes further. A guilty person must always be humiliated: that’s his state – the law humiliates him. Now, I am guilty: I have offended God mortally and venially – as such, I deserve humiliation: that’s my reward, my lot. The greater my offense, the more I deserve disgrace. I should not get angry over this – it is my condition as a sinner.

[...] Penance in this world consists of humility and humiliation. God has forgiven, but that does not erase the fact that I am a prodigal son (cf. Lk 15:11-32).

Amazingly saints who have not offended God are less proud than those who are guilty. Look at children who are pure after being baptized: they have no pride. The saints who are comfortable with God, who have been generous, and mortified have no pride; they can be tempted, but they are striving to become humble. But a sinner, a man without virtue who has only vice and sin – that man is a mountain of pride. We cannot look at him or touch him; he is filled with pride. Besides people in the world, there are many with an infernal pride among Christians, devout persons, and even religious! No one can tell them anything; no one can point out their defects – there would be an explosion, with anger coming from every pore. Self-love is the last defect to be conquered – how sad

People have this proverb: “touchy as a pious person”. Devout persons expect to be respected. Truly they cannot put up with any opposition. If they are religiously active, they grow angry when made to wait or when they don’t receive due respect. They claim to be practicing Christians, but don’t admit their pride. One fine day their piety will crumble. The least breeze will cause such a rotten tree to fall. Who will believe so-called virtuous persons or priests who are venerated by the world? The Good Lord sees them as a sham, a thin veneer. He says, *Those who are praised in this world already have their reward.* (cf. Mt 6:2,5,16) My poor Daughters, you need humility of the mind because pride is tenacious and all-penetrating. Vanity is more delicate; frustrated self-love is not even able to forgive.

My poor Daughters, seek humility of the mind. If you are very convinced of your reality, you will not seek better treatment than you deserve. Even if you committed only one venial sin, you have insulted our Lord. [...]

You need humility of heart: it is your virtue – it is that of Jesus Christ. *Learn from me*, he said, *for I am meek and humble of heart* (Mt 11:29). What is it like to be humble of heart? We can be convinced against our will, accept humility forcibly. Only the heart can give us this beautiful aspect. Humility must pass through the heart to be perfect. To be humble of heart means to accept the condition and consequences of our nothingness: to accept penance and being treated as we deserve. The heart accepts it out of justice; I dare not say with joy, but politely and graciously – as humility increases, even with joy. It is my right. A beggar accepts his rags: Here they are! – Are you happy? – That’s all I have. I found my old jacket and my bag; that’s all I have. With these I travel everywhere.

For a truly humble soul, humiliation is a key to heaven. I will pay my debts – the Good Lord does not give me enough. There was a secret worm. How good is the Good Lord to have pointed it out to me through this person, this prayer, this adoration – lucky discovery! It hurts, and we say: I will no longer be esteemed. I may wince; my heart will feel a little sorrow. For the love of truth, in respect for the justice of God who claims his rights, I must pay the price, although I was not expecting it. Be gracious, even if there are many thorns. This is the cloak of penance – that of glory will come later.

A humble soul respects the truth, and the love of God. At first there is a time of suffering. Two movements follow each other: suffering and whole hearted acceptance. As long as you have not attained humility of heart, your perseverance is not assured. Your virtue will be too violent; it will lack unction. Give it that unction, even if it’s painful, and instinctively the grace of God will enter as self-love exits. You must work at humility of heart. Our Lord received what he did not deserve: did he complain? No. He accepted it as his due, in our name. Humility shows itself through gentleness: it begins there – it is the cloak of humility. **How do you attain humility of heart?** We attain humility of the mind by reasoning, thinking, and seeing – but we attain that of the heart only through prayer. It comes from practice and generosity. We cannot learn it; it merely grows on us.

That kind of humility is not perfect. There is a third kind: we still need humility of the body. Why? Notice, my good Sisters, that most sins end up in our body. It is like the goal of sin. Some stop at pride of esteem, at insensitivity of heart, but there are few like that. In general, it is the body that is fed by pride. To begin with, self-love reigns in our head; we can feel proud: haughty eyes, a despising glance – we can feel these things: an arrogant gesture, a pretentious stance. You need only a short walk in the streets of Paris to see the vanity of women from head to foot. To appear rich, people who have nothing wear beautiful things – oftentimes these are on credit. They call these debts “memos”, and they have to pay the interest. Four years ago, I was told of a woman who owed forty thousand francs and who paid an interest of two thousand francs --, at death the memos were found. It’s foolish vanity.

Some people want the reputation of knowing many things. They want to be praised by learned men. When confronted by educated men, they are obliged to admit that they are not very learned. In the presence of idiots, they behave as masters. This happens often, even with you! We find ourselves stating as true something we are ignorant of, because we know just a little about it. What is worse is to see people crowning themselves with a virtue they don’t have. They are full of self-love, yet pretend to be humble. Exposed pride is very ugly. In the world, no one wants to deal with proud persons; nor with those who crown themselves with purity and modesty, but who are less than nothing, mere dung. Others take pride in their penance: you find people who fast out of vanity. Certain religious, men and women in communities near the city were found to order food in secret from the city but acted as if they were always fasting. These were not very humble.

To want to be known externally as important, when internally we know that we are so poor presupposes great pride. It’s so hard to be nothing, and to be treated as such! You blush when you are told: You did this; you made this mistake in your work. Wouldn’t it be better to tell the truth, rather than justify yourself? The person who is doing the admonition knows that you are wrong, and says: I thought I

would find in you the humility [of admitting] a mistake; but there is pride. Such a person moves away very quickly – nothing can be done: the fire has been set at the four corners – what an unfortunate situation!

Seeing prisoners acting as kings, we would say: They're fools. But, are we less foolish when we do likewise? What must we do? Pray to the Good Lord to give us the grace to be humble; if we don't pray, we will not become humble. If you say: I am nothing, I am bad – the devil says the same – you don't deserve honor or glory; but if you add to this: I am a sinner – it is only just. But we don't want this. The glory of humility is only for heaven; if you want it in this world, all is lost.

Besides, my poor Daughters, Christianity has still another kind of humility: **the humility of love**. You are here to serve God: you have left your relatives, you have found a family, you are not starving to death – things couldn't be better. Each of you is free – the more detached a religious is from the world, the more she is free. What are you doing? Everything is for the Good Lord: you adore, you pray, and externally your life seems bearable – many communities do more penance than you. What you need is humility.

What is spiritual humility? Without it, the rest is worth nothing [...].

Humility consists in being always contented with the Good Lord, with what he gives us. As soon as we are dissatisfied, it seems we believe the Good Lord is always afflicting us, and that we are no longer holy. That is the limit! Spiritual humility consists in being content in any life situation. In a state of dryness, I am not happy about this state of things, but I know I don't deserve anything else. I am happy that the Good Lord allows me to lament at his feet – everyone is not called by the emperor to present him a request. I have terrible temptations; I don't want them: this is very humiliating, but the spiritually humble person says: My God, how good you are to show me what I am capable of doing, how good you are to give me a sense of my weakness! That's how we move on to make a wonderful act of humility. Someone else, on the contrary, will despair and say: I am condemned. – So then : to put out a fire will you add fuel? The Good Lord is silent. – Isn't it enough that he listens to you! But we are still not content: I used to be happier. – What payment are you looking for? Why not wait a while. If you are paid in advance, you are poorly paid – something is always withheld. Those who are paid in advance will have nothing in the end.

That is what I wish for you: spiritual humility in the service of God. The pride of the world is hideous, but spiritual pride is the sin that reaches into heaven. The Good Lord will not tolerate it. Always be satisfied: a good beggar is grateful if we give him a little. If you receive only a small portion, the Good Lord will give you a proof of his love along with it. If you understood that the less the Good Lord gives, the more he gives, then you would be delighted. He does not give the small rewards of your virtues from the temporal point of view – he is reserving all your merits. There is more love in little things than in big ones. The best gift that a famous person can give – even the Pope does this – is to give his pen: he touched it, and wrote with it. The Good Lord does the same thing: there is a deeper value that you don't understand.

Therefore, be humble, my poor Daughters. If we cannot do great acts of penance, have great devotion, do apostolic works, then humility is your natural right. Merely look at the Blessed Sacrament; you have your mission there. My poor Daughters, let us put to death this villainous self-love that dishonors the Good Lord so much. You run after your little faults, but let the big ones to stay – everything comes from pride in our spiritual sins: our failures in punctuality and in external charity are nothing – but the real evil is the self-love they contain. How good it would be if we could say: I am humble; we would not dare say it, but I can say that I appreciate humility – that will bring about the end of all my faults. Then all will go well.

Points for reflection:

This instruction and the preceding one were given on the same day of the monthly retreat. Focusing on humility, the Founder gives us a glimpse of how a deep humility can liberate and transform our entire person. Take note of the Scripture texts that he quotes. In your own words, describe what is the humility of love. Find some corresponding texts in the Rule of Life, the Imitation of Christ, and the lives of the Saints.