

# HUMILITY

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- transcription from the original *PowerPoint* document-

## History of humility:

### Greek thought

- ✦ The concept of humility, as we understand it, did not exist in Greek thought. Humility does not appear any Greek list of the virtues.
- ✦ The emphasis is on greatness of character and honour:
- ✦ Humility is connected with lowly and servile manual labour and with social inferiority. The humble do not have freedom, learning, riches and influence.

### Humility in the Scriptures: Old Testament

- ✦ Theological humility in the Old Testament: dependence on and willingness to submit to God.
- ✦ Relationship between the experience of humiliation, poverty, oppression and the understanding of humility.

### Humility in the Scriptures: New Testament:

- ✦ The mystery of Jesus' self-emptying is the foundation of Christian humility (cf. Phil 2:5-11).
- ✦ Jesus gave up his divine status and prerogatives, renounces the display of his divine origins and also the imposition of his will.
- ✦ There is also an ethic of humility towards others (social humility):

'Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but **in humility regard others as better than yourselves**. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.' (Phil 2:3-4)

### Humility in the Christian Tradition:

Although the language of virtue (Latin *virtus*; Greek *aretē*) is almost completely absent from the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, in Christianity, from a moral defect in the Greco-Roman world humility has become a virtue.

#### Origen (186-255)

Origen identifies Christ as: exemplar and embodiment source and goal of the virtuous life.

Origen identifies the humility of Mary in the Magnificat as: the classical virtue of *metriotes* (measure), which in turn became the Latin *mediocritas* (moderation) taken up by Aquinas

#### Basil of Caesarea (330-379):

For Basil, humility is an all-encompassing virtue (*panaretos*).

#### John Chrysostom (345-407):

Humility is the 'mother, root, nurse, foundation and centre of all the other virtues.'

#### John Cassian (360-435):

Humility is 'the mother and mistress of all the virtues'.

### Augustine (354-430):

Augustine created the scheme of theological and cardinal virtues. Humility is the very quality that distinguishes Christianity from paganism.

Humility is the hallmark of Christian conversion. The reason that humility is so significant for those following Jesus is that it is the virtue that most directly combats pride (*superbia*).

Humility meant absolute dependence on God. The fundamental sin was thus pride, a rejection of humility.

### Dorotheus of Gaza (505-565):

'What is humility? ... Humility is a great and divine work and the road to humility is labour, bodily labour, while seeking to know oneself and to put oneself below everyone else and praying to God about everything: this is the road to humility, but **humility itself is something divine and incomprehensible.**'

### Aquinas (1225-1274):

Aquinas interprets humility as:

- a form of moderation (Latin *mediocritas*) from Origen's *metriotes* (measure).
- a limit on our ambitions.

### Summary:

Despite different emphasis, Christian humility consists of:

1. An opposition to pride or vanity.
2. A suitable response to creaturely limitations and flaws.
3. A willing submission of the self to God.

### Age of Enlightenment: Mid 17<sup>th</sup> century to mid 18<sup>th</sup> century:

Humility is characterised as harmful weak.

### David Hume (1711-1776)

dismissed humility along with 'the whole train of monkish virtues'.

### Post Enlightenment:

### Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900)

Humility is despised as a mark of the slave nature of Christian morality.

Humility is actually motivated by a desire to use weakness to gain power.

### Monastic tradition:

- Monastic tradition has continued to recognise humility, grounded in Christ's humility, as foundational to the Christian journey.
- André Louf has pointed out the problem in contemporary Christian spirituality in viewing humility as a virtue. As a virtue, humility is commonly named as an antidote to the vice of pride. Hence, from being foundational to the Christian life humility has become one virtue in a list of many.
- It is not so much humility as a virtue but a state or a way of being.

## Introduction to Bernard's thought on humility

*'Humility is the soul's loveliness.'* (SC 45.2)

- ✦ Occurrence of 'humility' and its forms in Bernard's writings – total of 545:

Humilitate: 114; humilitatem: 162; humilitati: 13; humilitatis: 186; humiliter 70.

- ✦ Bernard frequently uses pairs that are irreconcilable in his works. For instance, to study 'humility' he explores the antithesis 'pride' too.

Chronology of significant works on humility:

- 1125: The Steps of Humility and Pride;
- 1127: On the Conduct and Office of Bishops;
- Between 1138-1143: Sermons on the Song of Songs – Sermons 34 & 42

### Bernard's Humility:

#### *Steps of humility & pride*

humility because: 'All I can say is that I can teach only what I know myself. I could not very well describe the way up because I am more used to falling down than to climbing. St Benedict describes the steps of humility to you because he had them in his heart, I can only tell you what I know myself, the downward path. However, if you study this carefully you will find the way up.' (Hum 22.57)

#### *Vita prima*

- 'avoiding limelight' as a boy. (1.3)
- Bernard is 'a monk of such humility'. (1.31)
- 'in his own opinion he considers himself the lowest of all. Whatever he does he ascribes to God alone...' (2.25)
- No 'ambition for this world's doings' (2.26)
- Bernard was 'unbeaten in humility'. (3.1)
- 'The humility of his heart was greater than the renown of his name. When the whole world was keen to lift him up on high, **he alone preferred to be treated as nothing**. Reckoned as the greatest by everyone, **he thought of himself as the least**, and he who **put everyone before himself** thought himself to be less than anyone else.' (3.22)
- Bernard said, "**The truly humble man wishes to be thought of as little worth, not to be spoken of as humble.**" (4.7)

## The steps of humility & pride

*Liber de gradibus humilitatis et superbiae : (Hum)*

### Introduction:

- *Hum* was Bernard's first published work, probably written before 1125, for Godfrey of Langres who was then abbot of Clairvaux's second foundation, Fontenay.
- He had been a monk for at least 10 years (around 35 years old).
- The treatise is divided into 2 parts:
  - the goal of the steps of humility
  - steps of pride

The goal of the steps of humility

Jesus is the exemplar of humility:

- From "I am the way, the truth and the life" (Jn 14:6), Bernard intuitively: 'The way is humility; the goal is truth. The first is the labour; the second the reward.'

- “If I, your Lord and Master have washed your feet, *how much more* ought you also to wash another’s feet.” (Jn 13:14). Bernard, following Ambrose, adds ‘how much more’ (*quanto magis*). By word and example, Jesus taught us humility. (7.20)
- ‘Of all his virtues, and he possessed them all, Christ specially commends one to us, humility.’ (9.25)

#### Definition of humility

- ‘Humility is a virtue by which one has a low opinion (*vilitas*) of oneself because one knows oneself well.’ (1.2)
- Bernard quotes Augustine’s definition of pride: ‘The love of one’s own excellence’.
- So, Bernard writes that humility may be defined as the opposite: ‘Contempt of one’s own excellence’. (4.14)
- ‘Humility, therefore, demonstrates a disdain for self’. (Sent 3.127)

#### Critique:

Bernard’s definition of humility, borrowed from Augustine, arising from a different socio-cultural, anthropological and theological context, is largely rejected by contemporary theologians, spiritual writers and psychologists.

#### Schema of the three degrees in the perception of truth:

First degree of truth:

- Reason needs to be transformed by grace for us to attain humility. Christ is like a mirror, enabling us to see the truth about ourselves. In this sense, we learn humility by looking at Christ.
- Humility and humiliation: ‘First they are humiliated in truth and say: “In truth you have humbled me.”’ (8.23)

Humility is ultimately relational – with oneself, others and God.

- Bernard believes in experiential resonance: ‘You will never have real mercy for the failings of another until you know and realise that you have the same failings in your soul.’
- That is why Jesus ‘willed to suffer so that he might know compassion; **to learn mercy he shared our misery.**’ (3.6)
- ‘If you have eyes for the shortcomings of your neighbour and not for your own, no feeling of mercy will arise in you but rather indignation’. (4.13) ‘In other words, one cannot really be merciful if he is not humble.’ (4.14)
- ‘And **there is nothing more effective, more adapted to the acquiring of humility, than to find out the truth about oneself.** There must be **no dissimulation, no attempt at self-deception**, but a facing up to one’s real self without flinching and turning aside.’ (SC 36.5)

How can he escape being genuinely humbled on acquiring **this true self-knowledge,**

**on seeing:**

- **the burden of sin that he carries,**
- **the oppressive weight of his mortal body,**
- **the complexities of earthly cares,**
- **the corrupting influence of sensual desires;**
- **his blindness,**
- **his worldliness,**
- **his weakness,**
- **his embroilment in repeated errors;**

**on seeing himself:**

- **exposed to a thousand dangers,**
- **trembling amid a thousand fears,**
- **confused by a thousand difficulties,**
- **defenceless before a thousand suspicions,**
- **worried by a thousand needs;**
- **one to whom vice is welcome, virtue repugnant?**

#### Humility and humiliation:

Humiliation arises from one’s experience in these aspects:

- spiritual,
- moral,
- physical,
- intellectual.

Second degree of truth:

- When we look beyond our own needs to the needs of our neighbours and from the things we ourselves have suffered we learn compassion [*compassio*, literally, 'to suffer with'], then we have come to the second degree of truth. (5.18)
- For Bernard, the only way to know the other persons in their truths is through compassion for their sufferings and transgressions.
- The humble person also appreciates the gifts of others. The proud monk ignores or trivialises the gifts and talents of others.

Third degree of truth:

'If they persevere in these things:

sorrow of repentance,  
desire for justice and works of mercy,

they will cleanse their hearts from the three impediments of:

- ignorance,
- weakness and
- jealousy

and will come through contemplation to the third degree of truth. (6.19).

### The toil of Humility:

These are the three steps of truth. We climb

- to the first by the **toil** of humility,
- to the second by a deep feeling of compassion,
- to the third by the ecstasy of contemplation.
- On the first step we experience the severity of truth,
- on the second its tenderness,
- on the third its purity.' (6.19).

With the foot of grace firmly planted on the ladder of humility, **painfully dragging the foot of my own weakness behind me**, I should safely mount upwards, until, holding fast to the truth, I attained the broad plain of charity ... Thus I **warily enter on the narrow way**, step by step safely ascend the **steep ladder**, and **by a kind of miracle climb** to the truth, behind the time perhaps, and limping, but still with confidence.' (9.26)

For Bernard, humility is a way that is arduous and laborious.

### The steps of pride: gradual ascent and descent

'One does not plunge to the depths of evil in one sudden fall, no more than one springs to the heights of virtue at one bound, but has to climb step by step. So the descent too is spread out little by little...' (9.26)

The steps of pride are the reverse of the ladder of humility. They lead away from God.

### The phenomenology of pride

- First Step: Curiosity [*curiositas*]  
It is a failure or disorientation of attention.
- Second Step: Levity of mind [*levitas mentis*]  
It is an internal instability.
- Third Step: Giddiness [*inepta laetitia*]  
Giddiness or foolish merriment describes a false joyfulness.
- Fourth Step: Boasting [*iactantia*]  
It is self-promotion.
- Fifth Step: Singularity [*singularitas*]  
It is an exalted sense of being special and different from others.
- Sixth Step: Self-conceit [*arrogantia*]  
Praise from other monks confirms this self-assessment.
- Seventh Step: Presumption [*praesumptione*]  
It is placing oneself forward in situations, taking first place and putting oneself before others.
- Eighth Step: Self-justification [*defensione peccatorum*]  
Excusing one's own errors.
- Ninth Step: Hypocritical confession [*simulata confessione*]

Magnifying faults in a false pretence of humility.

- Tenth Step: Revolt [*rebellione*]

The monk is in open conflict with the abbot and the community. The monk in revolt will leave or be expelled from the monastery. (20.50)

- Eleventh Step: Freedom to sin [*libertate peccandi*]
- Twelfth Step: The habit of sinning [*consuetudine peccandi*]

The person sins effortlessly without fear.

**Ultimately, pride results in unfreedom.**

Steps	Contempt for	Locus
1 to 6	Community	Inside monastery
7 to 10	Superior	Inside monastery
11 to 12	God	Outside monastery

#### Summary:

1. Jesus is the exemplar of humility.  
Mt 11:29 – ‘Learn from me for I am meek and humble of heart.’
2. Humility is relational – oneself, others and God.
3. Humility begins with self-knowledge.  
It is an intellectual/rational perception.  
Humility is related to humiliation as a result of this self-knowledge.
4. Humility is toil.
5. Incentive towards humility.  
Humility towards God and others is ultimately beneficial to the practitioner: God ‘opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble’ (Prov 3:34) is explicitly cited in the New Testament (Jas 4:6; 1 Pet 5:5; cf. Lk 1:52).

### **On the Conduct and Office of Bishops** *De Moribus et Officio Episcoporum : (MOR)*

#### Introduction:

- *MOR* was addressed to Henry Sanglier, the archbishop of Sens, who was elected in 1122. Bernard probably wrote this letter in 1125.
- Nearly half of his composition (16 of 37 chapters) is on humility.

#### Humility:

Humility in relation to chastity and charity:

‘Humility is so essential to the two preceding virtues that without it they cease to count as virtues at all.

- Indeed, it is humility that merits the **giving of** chastity and charity, for God gives grace to the humble (Jas 4:6).
- And these gifts once received are **preserved** by humility, for the Spirit rests only on the tranquil and humble.
- It also **brings to perfection** the virtues it preserves, for virtue is made perfect in weakness, which is to say, in humility.’ (5.17)

Christ’s example of humility:

‘Did he himself not boast of humility as the very substance of his teaching and virtues?’

Learn of me, he says, not because I am sober or chaste or prudent or anything else like that, but because I am gentle and humble of heart (Mt 11:29) ...

It is myself I present to you as an example, myself as the model of humility.’ (5.18)

## Pride:

'Pride is a passionate desire for our own superiority.' (5.19)

Two types of pride:

Type of pride	Expressed as	Fault lies in
Blind ( <i>caeca superbia</i> )	Arrogance ( <i>contumacia</i> )	Reason/Understanding – rational perception
Vain ( <i>vana superbia</i> )	Vanity ( <i>vanitas</i> )	Will – misdirection of heart's desire

Elsewhere, Bernard seems to associate blind pride and vanity:

'To desire *vanity* is the same thing as to ignore the truth, and this ignoring of the truth is the cause of our *blindness*.' (J19/L18.1; dated 1126)

Blind pride:

- Blind pride is a defiant perseverance in one's own opinion. The Latin *contumacia* (instead of *arrogantia*) emphasises stubbornness or wilful defiance.
- It 'leads a person either to see in himself some imaginary good or to believe that he is the source of what he is, to glory in himself and not in God' (5.19).
- It is a form of self-sufficiency, which fails to recognise human dependence on God.

Vain pride:

- It is self-directed.
- Instead of giving thanks to God as the source of all goodness, all gifts, the person is intently listening for, and delighting in, the praise of others.
- This is an excessive need for human approval.

## Against Pride: Humility

- 'over against blind pride, a **modest opinion of what we know of ourselves** and
- to counter vanity, the **refusal to go along with the good opinion of others**'.

Two types of pride:

Type of fault	Blind pride – Arrogance	Vain pride – Vanity
Fault of	Reason	Will
Looks for	Glory in self (self-sufficiency)	Glory from others (vainglory)

Humility requires self-examination:

- To prevent him thinking more highly of himself and growing arrogant: 'Not having conceited thoughts, but being humble minded' (Rom 12:16) and 'If anyone thinks himself something when he is nothing, he deceives himself.' (Gal 6:3)
- To prevent him from believing that he is the source of whatever he fancies himself to be, he asks: 'What have you that you did not receive? If you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?' (1 Cor 4:7)
- Rejecting praise when he knows that it is undue.
- When praised for some good that he may be aware of possessing, he gives the glory to God instead.

Humility requires awareness of God's judgement:  
God knows our thoughts and feeling.

'A genuinely humble person does not argue with the judge or justify himself ... He declines judgement and asks for mercy, more confident of obtaining grace than of establishing his own righteousness.' (6.24)

#### How one should hold authority:

MOR is applicable to superiors and formators.

##### 1. Bringing benefit

**Power should be held with a level of trepidation, certainly not with enjoyment.** 'It is hard not to enjoy the elevation, and most unusual – but all the more admirable for being rare ... Do not think yourself fortunate in holding sway; **consider yourself unfortunate if you are not of service** [*sed si non prodestis*].' (8.30)

The emphasis here is on doing good or bringing benefit. The remedy for combating self-serving ambition is to focus on benefiting others.

##### 2. Acknowledgment of one's limits

'You admit you are weak, you confess to being dependent?' (8.32)

There is the need for a constant awareness of one's own limits before God.

##### 3. Submission to higher authority

The experience of under authority oneself helps to moderate one's own use of power. **Authority is associated with submission rather than elevation.**

#### Remarks for retired superiors and formators:

To Oger, a canon regular, who resigned after 14 years as superior of his community:

'Beware of thinking that because you were once in a place of honour, you should still be honoured above others, rather show yourself all the more humble, and more humble than any.' (J90/L87.8; dated 1140)

### Sermons on the Song of songs sermon 42

#### *Sermones super cantica canticorum (SC)*

##### Sermon 42:

Bernard comments on the verse:

'While the king was on his couch, my nard gave forth its fragrance.' (Sg 1:11)

##### The analogy of 'Nard':

Nard is fragrant, though 'an insignificant herb', and 'of a warm nature'. (SC 42.6)

Qualities	Analogy
Fragrant	Pleasing to God
Insignificant	Lowliness; humility
Warm	Holy love

In SC 45.2, Bernard uses the analogy of hyssop as humility when alluding to the verse: 'Sprinkle me with hyssop and I shall be cleansed' (Ps 519).

Hyssop, a 'lowly herb', symbolises 'the humility that purifies the heart'.

##### Types of humility:

There are 2 types of humility:



Type	Nature	Means	Effect
Cold	Rational	Truth leading to self knowledge	Humiliating
Warm	Affective	Love leading to affections	Liberating

The transition from cold to warm humility occurs through ‘the inpouring of love’ (*amoris infusion*):

‘But if you were so moved by **a love of that truth** which, like a radiant light, so wholesomely discovered to you the reality of your condition ...’ (SC 42.6).

Jesus ‘was humble in heart, humble with that humility that springs from the heart’s love, not that which is exacted by truthful reasoning.’ (SC 42.7)

Hence, Jesus humbled himself, **not because of the judgement of self-knowledge, but out of love for us.**

[There is no ‘judgement of self-knowledge’ in Jesus because he is holy and innocent.]

What Bernard is saying is that humility is therefore an attribute of love. Humility is a love that lowers itself. Bernard therefore exhorts us to love humility and a humble love.

Bernard understands ‘humble **in heart**’ to also signify the will. Jesus’ self-abasement is **freely** chosen out of love for us.

Therefore, ‘we attain to this **voluntary** humility not by truthful reasoning but by an inward infusion of love, since it springs from the heart, from the *affectus*, from the will.’ (SC 42.8)

Warm humility results when the humiliating encounter with our liabilities and unworthiness is freely received with love.

Elsewhere Bernard also speaks about the 2 facets of humility:

“Learn of me, for I am meek and humble of heart.” Consider well these words, for humility is twofold: one of thinking; the other of feeling – here called “the heart”.

By the former we realise that we are nothing, and this we learn from ourselves and from our weakness;

by the latter **we spurn worldly glory**, and this we learn from him who emptied himself, taking the form of a servant.’ (Adv 4.4)

Bernard exhorts a consonance between inner experience and exterior reality:

‘Try to use your will and make a virtue of necessity, because there is no virtue without the will’s cooperation. You will achieve this if you do not wish to appear externally in any way different from what you discover in your heart.’ (SC 42.8)

Elsewhere Bernard alludes to this consistency:

‘For this reason people should be in their hidden thoughts what they are in their ordinary life, lest they be humble in appearance but inwardly full of pride, presuming on their wisdom or virtue or holiness, which is no doubt imaginary, when they do not trust in the goodness of God alone, as the humility of their life would have they believe.’ (Abb 7)

This interior-exterior consistency is expressed through:

Submission to God

The height of humility seems to consist of our will being subject to the divine will.’ (Div 26.2)

This interior-exterior consistency is expressed through:

Submission to others

‘It counts for little, however, that you are submissive to God, unless you be submissive to every human creature for God’s sake, whether it be the abbot as first superior or to the other officers appointed by him. I go still further and say: be subject to your equals and inferiors.’ (SC 42.9)

“Blessed are the poor in spirit” who, because of their humility, do not desire to have power over others.’ (Sent 3.3)

Submission to others – Three degrees of humility (Sent 1.37):

Degree	Greater	Equal	Inferior
Sufficient	Subject	Not to dominate	
Abundant		Subject	Not to dominate
Superabundant			Subject

### Humility & obedience:

- We learn humility by obedience but humility is the prerequisite for obedience.
- Humility and obedience compenetrates.

The example of Jesus in his *via humilitatis* (Div 60.3):

Descending steps	Behaviour
First	Unwilling to dominate
Second	Willing to be made subject
Third	Suffer calmly any harsh abuse inflicted in his subjection

### Jesus' Humility & obedience:

- Because Jesus' obedience even until death is freely chosen, our submission is not merely legal obligation but acting in freedom.
- The fragrance of the bride's humility 'is destroyed neither by reprimand nor praise ... She does not boast of her merits nor forget her humility when she hears her praises multiplied.' (SC 42.9)

Bernard does not elaborate on what happens to the humble one when reprimanded. **Humility is not boastful in the portrayal of self to others.** It is clear that humility is also in the ability to receive praise and honours appropriately.

For Thomas Merton, a humble person is one who has ceased paying attention to self. Humility detaches them from 'the absorption in [themselves] which makes [them] forget the reality of God'. (*Silent Life*, 4)

They are no longer self-conscious: their thoughts and concern are not about themselves. They can, therefore, accept their incompleteness with joy, knowing that such completeness comes from God. A humble person can also do what a prideful person cannot: accept praise graciously and without fuss, knowing that it belongs to God. 'The humble person receives praise the way a clean window takes the light of the sun. The truer and more intense the light is, the less you see of the glass.' (*New Seeds of Contemplation*, 189)

## Sermons on the Song of songs sermon 34

*Sermones super cantica canticorum (SC)*

### Humility and humiliation: "It was good for me that you humiliated me." (Ps 119:71)

1. Being humiliated, for example, 'humbled by correction', is a sure sign of impending grace: 'Just as the heart is puffed up with pride before its destruction, so it is humiliated before being honoured.' (SC 34.2) 'It is a mark of your innate humility not to mind correction, if sometimes you are in error.' (J36/L35, dated Sep/Oct 1124)
2. The source of humiliation may be from God or others:

'But it matters little if we willingly accept the humiliation which comes from God himself, if we do not maintain a similar attitude when he humiliates us by means of another.' (SC 34.2)

### 3. Different responses to humility:

For Bernard, God gives grace to the humble, not the humiliated. The humble person is one who turns humiliation into humility.

'How many are humiliated who are not humble? There are some who meet humiliation

- with rancour,
- some with patience,
- some again with cheerfulness.

The first kind are culpable,  
the second are innocent,  
the last just.' (SC 34.3)

Three kinds of responses to humiliation:

Response:	Judgement:	Characteristic:	Merits:
Rancour	Culpable	Murmuring	God's anger
Patience	Innocence	Patient; sadness	
Cheerfulness	Just; righteous	Joyful	God's grace & glory

### 4. In responding with patience, the person's humility is out of necessity or constraint.

On the other hand, in responding with cheerfulness, the person's humility is willing and spontaneous (cf. cold and warm humility):

'It is significant that not every kind of humility is to be exalted, but that which the will embraces; it must be free of compulsion or sadness ...Therefore it is not the one who is humiliated who will be exalted, but he who voluntarily humiliates himself; it is merited by this attitude of will.' (SC 34.4)

### 5. Elsewhere, Bernard writes:

'Humiliations lead to humility and humility is the foundation of the spiritual life. Humiliation is the only way to humility ... If you want the virtue of humility, you must not shun humiliations. If you will not suffer yourself to be humbled, you can never achieve humility.' (J90/L87.11; dated 1140)

#### Caution:

- Bernard is not advocating humility for its own sake.
- The experience of humiliation has the potential to seriously injure one's self-identity and relationships with others.
- It is certainly not anyone's right to humiliate another.

## Bernard's other teachings on humility

### I. Humility as the foundation of virtues

From the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Lk 18:9-14), Bernard adduced:

'**Without the virtue of humility, the other virtues cannot advance.** This is why blessed Gregory wrote: "The person who brings together virtues without humility is like a person who carries dust into the wind." Just as dust is dispersed by the force of a strong wind, so every good which lacks humility will be torn away by the blast of vainglory. **It is far better to be a humble sinner than to be just but arrogant.**' (Sent 3.126)

Bernard exhorts his audience to learn from Jesus' self-emptying and self-humbling in his incarnation:

**'Be zealous for humility, which is the foundation and guardian of the virtues. Pursue it, for it alone can save your souls.'** (Nat 1.1)

- 'Indeed, **humility is the true and firm foundation of the virtues.** For, if humility should waver, the system of virtues is ruined.' (Csi 5.32)
- '**The structure of virtue rises by humility,** it is erected on its own foundation...' (Div 91.3)
- 'This virtue is a tower of strength in the face of the enemy.' (Csi 2.13) Cf. '[The enemy] cannot bear our humility...' (Ded 3.2)

## II Humility and grace:

- 'What is richer, what is more precious, than the humility with which we purchase the kingdom of heaven and acquire divine grace?' (NatV 4.6)
- 'Into what vessel can grace most effectively be poured? ... What can we present as the vessel most fit for grace? **Balm is very pure and needs a strong vessel – and what is as pure, or as strong, as lowliness of heart?** Rightly is grace given to the lowly [cf. Jas 4:6], rightly has God looked upon the lowliness of his handmaiden. By what right, you ask? Certainly **because a humble soul lacks all human merit; therefore the fullness of divine grace can freely flow in.**' (Ann 3.9; dated 1150)

## III Humble confession of faults:

- 'From humility ... arises confession, in which there is a cleansing from all vice.' (Sent 1.34)
- 'For when did the Master of humility, who by his very nature is inclined to give grace to the humble [cf. Jas 4:6], ever scorn a humble confession? It is impossible for him not to be appeased **if the humility professed in words finds its source in the heart.** For these reasons I have said confession should be humble.' (SC 16.10)

## IV Humility and salvation:

Desert mother Theodora: 'It is neither asceticism nor vigils nor any other work which save us, only sincere humility.' (Apothegmata, Theodora 6)

- 'Only one thing can be known for certain: **if we are not humbled, we cannot be saved.**' (Sent 3.127)
- 'For in this humble way of life I seem to observe some signs of your calling and justification.' (Asc 2.5)

For Bernard, humility and sublimity are the two poles corresponding to earth and heaven, human and divine. The human journey to sublimity mirrors the prior divine journey to humility:

'On that account, dearly beloved, **persevere in the observance you have undertaken, that through humility you may ascend to sublimity.** This [is] the **way**, and apart from it there is no other. One who goes another way falls instead of ascending, because humility alone exalts and alone leads to life.

Christ, in his divine nature, had no way to grow or ascend, because there is nothing beyond God. Yet he found a way to grow by descending, coming to be incarnated, to suffer and to die, lest we should die forever. Because of this God exalted him; for he rose, ascended, and took his seat at the right hand of God. "Go and do the same". You cannot ascend unless you descend, because it is fixed as by an everlasting law, that "everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, and one who humbles himself shall be exalted.'" (Asc 2.6)

## V Humility as desert:

'John cried out in the desert of humblest simplicity or simple humility ...

Our Lord Jesus Christ taught this humility in words and sanctified it by his example. He taught it verbally when he said: "Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart." He sanctified it by his own example, since he showed himself humble in everything he did.

**This humility is referred to as a desert because few seek it out, and it is shunned by many.**' (Sent 3.115)

'There is another desert – **the humility of Christian simplicity,** which is called a desert because **almost no one is an imitator of Christ,** someone zealous in devoting himself to this good. It is necessary for us to go up through this desert.' (Sent 2.11)

## VI Humility and the cloister

But here and there I see – and it gives me greater sorrow – people who, having scorned the pomp of this world, learn greater pride in the **school of humility** (*schola humilitatis*), and under the wings of their meek and humble Master give themselves **grander airs** and become far **more impatient** in the cloister than they ever were in the world.

And what is even worse, there are many in the house of God who **cannot endure being slighted** whereas, had they remained at home, they would have had to be slighted. Many who would have merited no honours in the world, where they might aspire to them, **now hanker to be honoured** here where honours are by one and all despised.

I see still others – which ought to be the most painful sight – who having enlisted in Christ's army involve themselves again in civilian affairs and swamp themselves in greed for earthly goods ...

All these evils only happen because, having **renounced the humility which made us leave the world**, we chase after the silly preoccupations of the world again, no better than dogs who return to their vomit [Prov 26:11].’ (Miss 4.10; dated 1118-1123)

For Bernard, the monastery is the *schola humilitatis*. What is the school of humility?

‘Our place is the bottom [*abiectio*], is humility, is voluntary poverty, obedience and joy in the Holy Spirit.

Our place is under a master, under an Abbot, under a rule, under discipline

Our place is to cultivate silence, to exert ourselves in fasts, vigils, prayers, manual work and, above all, to keep that “more excellent way” which is the way of charity; and furthermore to advance day by day in these things, and to persevere in them until the last day.’ (J151/L142.1, dated 1138)

## VII Humility the greatest monastic virtue:

In addition to what has been mentioned with regard to the common life and brotherly love, to good works and holy fervour, **we have the greatest need of the greatest virtue, humility**. This is so that we may outdo one another in showing honour, putting before ourselves not only our seniors but even our juniors, for that is the perfection of humility and the fullness of righteousness.’ (Pur 2.3)

‘Humility, my brothers, is a great virtue, great and sublime. **It can attain to what it cannot learn; it is counted worthy to possess what it has not the power to possess; it is worthy to conceive by the Word and from the Word what it cannot itself explain in words**. Why is this? Not because it deserves to do so, but because it pleases the Father of the Word ...’ (SC 85.14)

## VIII developing humility

Four things teach and strengthen humility: the exercise of humility through the poorness of one's clothing, food and similar things; consideration of oneself; consideration of those better than oneself; and consideration of the judgements of God.’ (Sent 3.37)

There are four things which bring us true humility: the meanness of our work; the constancy of our subjection to others; the comparison between us and those who are better; and the judgement of our Creator.’ (Sent 2.88)

‘On the exercise of humility. Five things can assist us to exercise humility.

The first is love of lowliness, so that one seeks out those circumstances in which a position of humiliation seems to exist for him.

The second is a continuous practice of subjection, so that one always wants to be with someone whom he rejects and fears, in order that he may learn to break his own will ...

The third aid in the exercise of humility is a comparison with a better person, so that an individual should always be a companion to one in whom he finds the grace which is lacking in himself ...

The fourth is continuous meditation on one's condition, so that this verse will at once occur to you whenever you feel exalted: "What reason do dust and ashes have to be proud?"

The fifth aid is to remember the one who watches you secretly ... always to realise that God is watching him, to give heed to his gaze in one's heart, and to consider what he should do and what he should decide and what he should think as if it were of concern only to God.' (Sent 3.16)

Sent 3.37	Sent 2.88	Sent 3.16
1. Material poverty	1. Meanness of work	1. Love of lowliness
2. Consideration of self		4. Consideration of self
3. Consideration of betters	3. Comparison with betters	3. Comparison with betters
4. God's judgement	4. God's judgement	5. God's judgement
	2. Constant subjection to others	2. Subjection to one whom he rejects and fears

3 elements of humility:

Comparison with	Recognise
Those who are better	What one lacks
Those who are worse	What is not one's own
Those who have suffered loss eg Adam & Eve, Solomon, demons	What one can lose

### Christ's humility:

#### Extreme Humility

#### I Bernard's use of Ephesians 4:10

'He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.'

Against the predominant patristic interpretation, Bernard understands Eph 4:10 as descent to the world instead of descent into the underworld. What emerges is that the trajectory of Christ's entire life is understood as a deliberate paradox of ascending by descending:

'Christ, in his divine nature, had no way to grow or ascend, because there is nothing beyond God. Yet he found a way to grow by descending, coming to be incarnated, to suffer and to die, lest we should die forever. Because of this God exalted him; for he rose, ascended, and took his seat at the right hand of God.' (Asc 2:6)

Christ 'descended and ascended in his human nature, and he showed to us the way by which we would ascend ... And in descending, the first step indeed is from highest heaven to the flesh, the second step to the cross, the third step to death ...

But the ascent is also triple: its first step is glory of resurrection, the second power of judgement, the third sitting at the Father's right hand.' (Div 60.1-2)

## II Exhortation to imitate Christ's humility: Jesus is the *forma humilitatis* (model or pattern of humility).

Bernard particularly proposes to us the abasement of Jesus in his nativity and passion for imitation:

### The incarnation

'Unless you turn and become like a little child you will not enter the kingdom of heaven ... let us look upon **this little child, the master of gentleness and humility**, by which means we must be turned.' (Quad 2.1-2)

'Look, a little child is put in our midst. O little child so desired by your children! You are indeed a little child, but a child in evil-doing, not a child in wisdom. Let us make every effort to become like this little child. Because he is meek and humble in heart ...' (Miss 3.14)

### 'For some Christ has not yet been born ...

How is his humility active in us, he who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant? How, I ask, is God's humility present in those who are still dazzled by the desire for earthly riches and honours?' (Pasc 4.1)

### Jesus' passion

“I will show myself to humanity as a human being, **the most despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrow and familiar with suffering. As a result humanity can be zealous in imitating my humility.** Through humility they may come to that glory after which they raced too hastily before. And so let them hear my words: 'Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls'". (Sent 3.70)

### Jesus' passion

'Do you see him **emptied out? Let it not be indifferent vision**, because you will not be able indifferently to see him lifted up. You will be like him when you see him as he is; be like him now, seeing him for what he became for your sake. For if you do not refuse a likeness in his humility, you will certainly be granted a likeness in his splendour.' (1 Nov 1.2)

## III Christ as mirror

### “The name of Christ means humility.

**He makes himself the teacher of this subject** when he says: I do not summon you to the prophecies of the patriarchs; “Learn from me myself, because I am gentle and humble of heart”. **I place myself before you as a mirror. Outer humility is of little help, unless internal humility is present.**' (Sent 3.88)

'O humility, moral excellence of Christ, how you confound our pride and vanity!' (Epi 1.7)

## Mary's humility

### I. Pre-eminence of humility

At the Annunciation:

'**Humility is the only good which Mary, full of all the virtues, thought to glory in.** When she heard the angel's greeting: “Hail full of grace”, it seemed that of all the fullness she recognised only humility in herself, mentioning that alone when she returned her grace-filled thanks in the well-known words: God has looked on the humility of his handmaid.' (Mor 5.17)

'... because [Mary] **boast of humility in a singular way.** The Lord has regarded, it says, the lowliness of his handmaid. It might be true that virginity without humility has glory, but not with God.' (Asspt 6.1)

### II Necessity of humility

'Virginity is a praiseworthy virtue, but humility is by far the more necessary. The one is only counselled; the other is demanded. To the first you have been invited; to the second you are obliged. Concerning the first he said, “he who is able to receive this, let him receive it”; of the second is said, “Truly I said to you, unless you become like this little child, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven”. The first is rewarded; the second is required. You can



be saved without virginity; without humility you cannot be. Humility which deplores the loss of virginity can still find favour. Yet **I dare say that without humility not even Mary's virginity would have been acceptable.** The Lord says, "Upon whom shall my Spirit rest, if not upon him that is humble and contrite in spirit?" On the humble, he says, not on the virgin. Had Mary not been humble, then, the Holy Spirit would not have rested upon her.' (Miss 1.5)

### III High humility

'If her charity burned in asking for grace, her virginity shone forth in her flesh, and her humility stood out in her obedience. **For if everyone who humbles oneself is exalted, what is higher than this humility?** It is said that Elizabeth marvelled that she had come and said, whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? But it is more to be wondered at that, **like her son, she came not to be ministered unto but to minister.**' (NBVM 9)

'What is this humility so sublime that it resists honour and refuses to vaunt itself in glory? She is chosen to be the mother of God, and calls herself a handmaid. Surely this is a not insignificant sign of humility, when glory is proposed not to forget humility. It is no great thing to be humble when we are cast down, but **honoured humility is great and rare virtue.**' (Miss 4:9)

### IV Humility and gentleness

'It is obvious enough in the Virgin's case that the virtue of humility shines forth from her very gentleness. Doubtless humility and gentleness are, so to speak, sisters sucking at the same breast, completely at one with him who said: Learn of me, for I am meek and lowly of heart. For as self-exaltation is the mother of presumption, so **true gentleness is only born of true humility.**' (OAsspt 12)

### V Imitate Mary

'Let all strive to imitate the humility of the Mother of God.' (Miss 1.9)

## Contemporary understanding of humility

### I Context for humility

- Despite contemporary emphasis on individualism, psychological science has seen a recent surge in research on the virtue of humility since 2000.
- People who are more committed to their faith are more humble. There is positive correlation between religion/spirituality and humility.
- Contrary to expectations, individuals did not become more humble as they age, previously considered part of a normal developmental process.

### II What is humility?

Humility has 3 core aspects:

1. Accurate self-perception or self-assessment.

One irony about humility is that people may not be the best judges of their own humility. People can easily overestimate their own humility. Arrogant individuals especially may think they are more humble than average.

Humility has 3 core aspects:

1. Accurate self-perception or self-assessment.

Accurate assessment of both weaknesses and strengths.

Freedom from distortion about strengths and weaknesses.

Secure and accepting self-identity.

To Abbot Baldwin (Monastery of Rieti): 'Do not make futile excuses about your being new to the office and inexperienced, which might be sincere or might not. **Barren modesty is not acceptable nor is humility**



**praiseworthy when it is not in accordance with the facts.** Attend to your duty. Put aside all false modesty by considering your position.’ (J259/L201.2; dated 1137)

2. Modest self-portrayal or self-presentation:

One does not boast about one’s strengths and achievements or act with a sense of superiority. The humble person is able to share credit without seeking attention.

3. Other-centred relational stance:

They prioritise other’s well-being, needs and relationships over their own desires.

It is an attitude oriented towards benefitting others, building others up and not squashing them down.

Warm humility is not self-interested: ‘Take an interest in the man of little account, defer to those of lesser rank, be of service to the young.’ (SC 42.9)

### III Different types of humility

**General humility** is a trait describes the person as meeting the definition of humility in virtually all situations and relationships.

**Relational humility** is humility within a particular relationship.

**Intellectual humility** involves an accurate awareness that one’s knowledge is limited and a way of sharing ideas that values the person with whom one is sharing and takes his or her ideas seriously.

**Political humility** is concerned with negotiating and respecting others’ political, philosophical and pragmatic ideas.

**Cultural humility** involves both intrapersonal and interpersonal components:

Intrapersonally, cultural humility involves an awareness of

(a) limitations of one’s own cultural worldview and

(b) limitations in one’s ability to understand the cultural background and experiences of others.

Interpersonally, cultural humility involves a stance that is other-oriented towards (or open to) another individual’s or group’s cultural background and worldview.

**Spiritual humility** is humility before what one considers sacred. For many, this is God. For some, it is nature or environment; for others, humanity; for still others, it is what seems transcendent or beyond the mundane.

**Religious humility** involves people’s commitment to the sacred (eg. monastic humility).

**Leader humility** consists of three core behavioural facets: self-awareness, appreciation of others’ strength and contributions and modelling teachability – as perceived by followers.

### IV Developing Humility

‘If anyone would like to acquire humility, I can, I think, tell him the first step. The first step is to realise that one is proud. And a biggish step, too.’ (C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*)

Dorotheos of Gaza:

‘Nobody learns about [humility] from words nor is it an inborn quality if it is not learned from experience.

Nobody learns humility from sermons.’

**Christian approaches:** Emphasises disciplines like prayer, submission to legitimate authorities, self-sacrificial acts and service.

**Secular approaches:** Inspiring stories of heroic humility; examples of persistent humility and service to others.

**Miscellaneous methods:** Habituation: acting regularly so the value become internalised and a part of one’s own character.

Other virtues: humility might be developed by cultivating other pro-social virtues such as forgiveness and gratitude. Humility in apologising and gratitude (‘sorry’ and ‘thank you’).

### Hillary Clinton

Hillary Clinton revealed that one of the influential books of the past for her was Henri Nouwen's, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*: ‘I read that parable and there was a line in it that became just a lifeline for me. And it basically is ‘practice the discipline of gratitude’. So regardless of how hard the days are, how difficult the decisions are, be grateful. Be grateful for being a human being, being part of the universe. Be grateful for your limitations. Know that you have to reach out to have more people be with you, to support you, to advise you, listen to your critics,

answer the questions. But at the end, be grateful. Practice the discipline of gratitude. And that has helped me enormously.”

#### **Practical steps:**

1. Get feedback from trusted sources.
2. Know your tendencies.
3. Identify challenging situations.
4. Practice developing that muscle.
5. Shift the reward intrinsically.
6. Compare upward.

#### **V Features of humility**

Humility has a special feature – it is self-invalidating. Generally speaking, when you are conscious that you are humble, then most likely you are not. The truly humble would be surprised if someone would remark that they are humble.

#### **Self-invalidating feature of humility**

Bernard said, “The truly humble man wishes to be thought of as little worth, not to be spoken of as humble.” (Vita 4.7)

#### **Self-forgetfulness**

C. S. Lewis says that the humble person ‘will not be thinking about humility: he or she will not be thinking about himself or herself at all.’ He also says: “Humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less.”

In this sense, humility is associated with self-forgetfulness.

“Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it is thinking of yourself less” (C. S. LEWIS)

#### **Receptivity**

One approach understands humility as receptivity. A lake receives water from a river, but if the lake, because it wants to be autonomous, says to the river, ‘You need not flow into me anymore’, even though the lake will be alright for a while, over time with evaporation and drainage, the lake will dry up and end up being a huge hole in the ground. All life in the lake will perish. In the same way, the earth or ground, *humus*, from which the word humility is derived, therefore suggesting humility as being grounded, is also an image for receptivity. The earth receives seed, water, nutrients for it to bear fruit.

Humility is receptivity because of our inner poverty. Being receptive therefore recognises that we are not self-sufficient, that all we have and possess, even our excellent attributes, do not come from us. St Paul reminds us: “What do you have that you have not received?” (1 Cor 4:7)

For Thomas Merton, in perfect humility selfishness disappears and we are transformed into God in a pure and selfless love that ‘empties the soul of all pride and annihilates it in the sight of God, so that **nothing may be left of it but the pure capacity for God**’. (*New Seeds of Contemplation*, 182)

#### **Letting go**

Like Jesus, humbling ourselves begin by not grasping at our privileges and prerogatives, not asserting our lineage, brilliance, distinction or superiority, not giving undue weight to our importance, even if all these are the truths of our being. After all, what do you have that you have not received?

#### **Eschatology**

Honour and glory, not only in this life but the next, are not for us to grasp. When James and John (or their mother, depending on the gospel) made the request to Jesus to sit at his right and left in his kingdom, Jesus’ reply was that ‘This is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father (Mt 20:21-23).’

It is God who honours the humble, who has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servants. In the great Reversal in heaven, the truly humble will be completely surprised when they are exalted by God.

### Questions for reflection

1. How much importance does your community give to the monastic value of humility?
  2. Are there models and exemplar of humility in your community?
  3. What are your thoughts on the relationship between humility and humiliation?
  4. How do we help those in formation grow in the monastic value of humility?
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