

22<sup>nd</sup> Ordinary Time Year C  
August 27-28, 2016  
Readings: Sir. 3:17-29; Heb. 12:18-24; Luke 14: 7-14

We have all had our moments of inspiration, when a thought came to us that turned out to be spot on and enlightening. However, if we are honest, more often than we wish to admit, the first thoughts that came to our minds were ones of a critical spirit towards others.

More than thirty-five years ago, I vividly recall sitting in high school Church History class thinking to myself- “I could teach this class better than the teacher.” That was hubris, and years later I would have my chance, and could only surmise how many students of mine were muttering something similar under their breath.

The Scriptures often speak about the virtue of humility, with respect to its attributes, its necessity or even the pitfalls that flow from the lack of this virtue. While we need to remain humble about our accomplishments, we experience a continual struggle to refrain from telling everyone else what they should do in any given situation.

Certainly, we have a duty to holdfast to our convictions, to proclaim them with clarity in a spirit of love and compassion. But we must consider our tendency to think that we have all the answers about how to handle a particular situation. This is revealed in our propensity to articulate, often in the form of gossip, what those in positions of authority ought to be doing, when we conclude they are not. This can happen equally amongst family members as it can happen in the Church. Parents stand in judgment of other parents.

Priests, who have never had to raise children, too quickly presume that if only their advice were heeded, there would never be such family turmoil. “My children would never do that!”

Many priests would love to be the diocesan bishop- but only for one day, no more! While we think we could fix everything, we really should know better. It would hardly be enough time to feel the incredible burden that such leaders must feel in their hearts.

St. Thomas Aquinas wrote: “The virtue of humility consists in keeping oneself within one's own bounds, not reaching out to things above one, but submitting to one's superior.”<sup>1</sup> These are wise words for each of us.

Sirach could say in our first reading: “Humble yourself the more, the greater you are, and you will find favor with God.” Some intellectuals have even questioned the value of the virtue of humility. They see it as amazingly unattractive, as little more than self-debasement. There is a kernel of truth to this. But is that all there is?

In his Rule, St. Benedict outlines twelve degrees of humility for the monks. While most of the degrees pertain specifically to monastic life, others are more general. The first exhorted each monk to “keep the fear of God before his eyes and beware of ever forgetting it.”<sup>2</sup> The second degree of humility is that a person love not his own will nor take pleasure in satisfying his desires, but model his actions on the saying of the Lord, *I have come not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me.*

Humility falls under the cardinal virtue of temperance because it restrains and moderates the “impetuosity of the emotions.”

Humility includes an essential component of self-knowledge: part of being humble is “knowledge of one’s own deficiency.”<sup>3</sup> Or again as Sirach noted, “into things beyond your strength search not.”

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Bk. IV, Ch. lv

<sup>2</sup> Rule of Benedict, chapter VII

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 161 a. 4, art.2.

If we put ourselves in a low place, it is so that God can occupy the highest place. This does not preclude aiming for high things, setting high goals, seeking perfection. But in truth, the root of the word humility comes from *humus*, the earth that is beneath us. It does include seeing ourselves as lowly. Being in a lower place is actually quite good for our spiritual lives, provided we do not carry it too far.

Nor can we avoid criticism in life, unless we refuse to take a stand on anything. Any priest who serves as a pastor knows this, having received letters, e-mails or verbal criticisms. Speak with any parent of teenagers, any business leader or one in a position of responsibility. It goes with the territory.

It is easy to criticize; it is much more difficult to listen to criticism patiently, not defensively but in humility. We all need to be able to hear criticism, hopefully given in a constructive manner. If we choose to give criticism, we must also be willing to receive it ourselves.

If we do receive it, we must do so humbly, not preparing our response even while the criticism is being delivered. Bite your tongue; there will be time for a proper answer later. Sometimes our best response is one of silence, not opining about everything.

I close with these words of St. Augustine, whose feast is observed today, August 28: “If you should ask me what are the ways of God, I would tell you that the first is humility, the second is humility, and the third is humility. Not that there are no other precepts to give, but if humility does not precede all that we do, our efforts our meaningless.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Saint Augustine, Epistle 118, 3, 22