



Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

May/June 1997

HUMILIATION

The world rewards pride and self-assertion. To get a job we are to "sell ourselves." To get ahead, we promote our abilities and accomplishments. To be successful, we need recognition. And to get recognition, we have to be sure that what we do is noticed. We have to be careful, of course, lest we over-reach -- as in Jesus' parable of the guests at the feast (St Luke 14:9). One may aim a little too high and be sent down in disgrace. We want to avoid that. But we also fear that if we take a lower seat, no one will come along to tell us to come up higher. We take Jesus' parable seriously -- but it does not lead us to humility so much as to the calculations that will seat us as high as possible without being sent down.

The world's affirmation of pride and self-assertion is a problem for us as Christians. We live in the world and are inevitably affected by what goes on there. Yet as Christians, we purport to value humility. We honor the humility of Christ as He is born of Mary in the humble surroundings of the stable. We admire His humility and reserve in accepting John's baptism for sin when He actually had no sin. We are astounded at His humility on the Cross, when He is taunted, "If thou be the King of Israel, come down from the cross and we will believe him." (St Matthew 27:42) There is in His humility a power which we can admire, and even desire for ourselves. Yet this desire conflicts with our worldly expectations.

The problem with pride (as we learn in our efforts at Christian life) is that it is an obstacle between us and God. Self is in competition with God. There is an element of truth in Satan's tempting promise to Eve, "Ye shall be as gods." (Genesis 3:5) The true God cannot abide rivals because in truth there are none, and He is committed to the truth. If we treat Him as one god among many (or even among two) we do not treat Him as truly God. In His love for us, He will give us the opportunities to be purged of our pride, and so have no obstacle between us and Him. He will allow us the chance to be humiliated.

We must admit at the outset that humiliation is not a pleasant business. The root of our pride goes deep within us, so our aversion to humiliation is deep as well. Since humility is a hard lesson, God gives us that many more opportunities to learn it. In a sense, humility is the key to the other virtues, as pride is behind other sins. Only with humility are we willing to let God run our lives. Only with humility are we willing to let Him be God, and to enjoy our place as His creatures and children. Only with humility can we abide in His presence, and thus take our place in heaven. Pride will keep us out.

So it is worth looking at some of the opportunities He gives us to be humiliated, and by recognizing them, perceive them to be the touch of His loving hand. When our pride takes offense at humiliations, we forfeit the benefits God would give us. We need to learn that they represent God's love, so that we can benefit, and learn to be thankful for them.

Think of some of the ways we are humiliated. We find that the world does not cooperate with us the way we expect. When we try to get things done, it often seems to resist us. When we are in a hurry to get breakfast and out the door, we drop the jelly jar and it breaks. We take this as a personal offense. It doesn't seem fair. We were doing nothing wrong. The world just doesn't cooperate.

It is humiliating when things don't go right, especially when we do our part. After conscientiously keeping track of the bills (and the checking account balance!), we find the post office didn't deliver the check (or else it wasn't properly credited when it did get there), and we feel betrayed. We did all we could, and it wasn't enough. We look like a deadbeat, and we resent it.

Yet, why do we expect the world to support our efforts? The expectation suggests that we regard ourselves as the center of the world: in short, as gods. That the world does not support the expectation brings us face to face with reality. God alone is God, not us. A humiliating lesson, but an essential one.

Likewise when God expelled Adam from Eden, He told him that no longer would his care for the earth be a comfortable thing as in the Garden. After the fall, the earth brings forth thorns and thistles more easily than fruitful crops. There is an element of adversity built into the fallen world. Traffic jams get in our way (especially when we are running a little late). Or the road signs are missing or misleading when we try to find our way around a strange area. Or the traffic lights all seem to be red. The thorns and thistles remind us (as sons of Adam) that things are not as they are supposed to be. This shows that the illusory divinity we acquired in the fall ("ye shall be as gods") is illusory, a pretense. Humiliation knocks out the illusion that the world revolves around us, or ought to.

Then there are the humiliations of failure. Sometimes we fail because we didn't put the effort into the task. Sometimes we just don't have the ability. Sometimes failure come for reasons beyond our control. Whatever the cause, fail-

ure is humiliating. Think of how you feel when you have to tell someone you didn't get done what you had promised. Or how you feel when you see things piling up, and you just can't get everything done: it is humiliating. It offends the way we think of ourselves -- no one likes to think of himself as a failure. It tempts us to anger and thus to dejection, whether or not it is really our fault. That is the response of our pride.

Yet the anger which arises from pride is not the only possible way of dealing with failure. An alternative is to accept the humiliation, repent (if we are responsible for the failure), and accept God's providence with joy. He is still in charge, even if I have failed and failed spectacularly. My failing does not undermine the providence of God. I can no longer approach Him with the sense of my own worth and pride of my accomplishments -- but that sense wasn't accurate anyway. I cannot offer Him the merit of my success -- but His is the only real merit anyway. So my failure can bring me closer to the truth of where I stand with Him.

We also experience humiliation from our inability to control things. For this reason, illness is humiliating. When a migraine keeps us from work or a social obligation, we are apt to become defensive. We ought to be strong, and yet we are shown by the migraine to be weak. We fear that others who do not so suffer will gain some advantage over us. We feel this to be unjust -- we should not have to suffer with such weakness.

Or it may seem that we need more sleep than others, and that this weakness prevents us from functioning as we would like. We tend to be frustrated by it, rather than accepting it as our limitation, and being humbled by it.

It is also humiliating to be unable to control our feelings. It may be a desire to possess something we cannot afford or obtain. Or it may be a desire for companionship or family. We may see that the satisfaction of the desire is impossible, and tell ourselves that we should just stop wanting it. But it doesn't work. Even our best efforts to alter our desires fall short. We find ourselves impotent to alter the way we feel. This can be even more trying than the original desire, for it tells us that we are not in control of our lives.

This internal lack of control is even more humiliating than the lack of control we have in the world. No one else can be responsible for what is inside of me, and so I ought to be able to manage it. Yet I cannot. I am not as good and powerful as I expect to be.

Finally, there is the humiliation of sin. This is perhaps the worst of all. We assume that if we just pay attention, put in enough effort, and accept the grace God gives us, then we will be able to live without sin, doing everything right. But it doesn't happen. When we first begin to live an intentional Christian life, we expect a few sins now and then -- we're new to the life, and it will take some practice. But when we have been at it for a number of years, and still keep sinning in

all (or most) of the old ways -- this is much harder to take. Just as we are more forgiving with the rookie ball player than we are with the veteran, so we treat ourselves. For the veteran Christian, sin is the more humiliating.

No doubt, this is the use God makes of it: to teach us that we need a Saviour even more than we thought we did. There are times when it is more important for us to learn humility (by way of sin) than for us to get it all "right." Otherwise our pride gets the better of us, and we begin to think that we are Christians (and more or less good ones) because of all we have done in the Christian life. Our good deeds end up driving us away from God. So He allows us some(!) sins to show us our weakness and need, and thus to push us into His arms.

Generally, we deal with humiliations by trying to take control to overcome the challenge. This only makes things worse (at least, insofar as we are trying to be Christians). Since the circumstances are in some way beyond our control (the need for sleep or the traffic lights turning red), such an approach is doomed to increase our frustration and anger. It is self-assertion, which gives full rein to our pride -- which leads us to resent the humiliation all the more. This response to humiliation is deeply rooted, and developing a Christian alternative (which means taking advantage of the opportunity as an opportunity of grace) will not be easy.

The first step is to learn to recognize humiliations when they come along. Too often we see them as injustices, or impositions, or offenses against us. Seeing them as external to us leaves us unable to take advantage of them spiritually: since they are outside forces, what can I do? If instead, we see that God's hand is present to form us into His likeness, then we can also see that there might be some alternative ways of dealing with the situation, other than the resentment. When we take stock at the end of the day in the brief daily self-examination, we might ask God to point out to us those humiliations which we failed to see and accept.

Once we have recognized the humiliation, we will need a hefty dose of grace to respond to it with humility. Only by grace is this possible: any attempt to do this ourselves (including the expectation that we ought to be able to handle it) will only increase pride. Opening ourselves to this grace requires all the things usually needed to receive grace: the willingness to put ourselves in His hands and let Him run our life, the willingness to sacrifice anything that gets in the way of Him, and the willingness to be thankful for whatever comes our way, even humiliations.

Thankfulness is a good focal point. If we can focus on being thankful even for the humiliation, then the hold resentment has on us will be weakened. Being thankful to God means that we shift our attention from the offending humiliation to Him, and thus open ourselves that much more to the Lord. That is the use God makes of humiliations: to purge out the self so that we may be able to receive that much more of Him.