

◇ Meditation 10 ◇

Lowly but Loved

Theme: Of ourselves we are nothing; all that we have and all that we are come from God (cf. *The Spirit of St. Francis de Sales*, p. 190).

Opening prayer: Dear God, may we have only the pure intention of seeking your honor and glory in all things. Help us to do what little we can toward this, and grant us the grace to leave to you the care of all the rest.

About Francis

Another of the little virtues practiced and commended by Francis, and perhaps the most important, is humility. According to Jane de Chantal, this classic Christian vision attenuated the opinions of Francis's many admirers.

He was not concerned just to appear humble but he wanted to be truly recognized as a lesser man than people imagined, for he was quite aware that others had a high opinion of him. In this connection he wrote to me one day that after reading a letter of mine, he had paced up and down in his room and tears had started to his eyes at the thought of what he was really like compared with people's imaginary ideas about him, and he used to say that

we ought not to think better of ourselves before men than we really were in the sight of God. (*Selected Letters*, p. 157)

Francis's humble vision also counteracted the seemingly natural human propensity to climb ever higher in one's career. Jane de Chantal continues:

It was unheard of for him to take steps to procure any sort of promotion, or important preaching assignments in large towns; on the contrary, he refused several. He had no ambition, as he said, except that he wanted to spend his life working usefully in God's service. . . . I have read a letter in his own hand where he says: "I hear from two quarters that there are plans for making me go up higher in the world; one letter is from Rome, the other from Paris. My answer is now in God's hands: no, you may rest quite assured that I wouldn't lift a little finger for all the world—I take too poor a view of it. If this is not for God's greater glory, the plan will leave me unmoved." (Stopp, ed., *A Testimony by St. Chantal*, p. 87)

This insistent concern for God's glory rather than human honor led Francis to single out humility as the virtue proper to the spiritual life. Jane recalls:

He used to advocate this virtue to everyone in his care, more especially to us of the Visitation. One day when he had entered our enclosure at Lyons to hear the confession of an invalid nun, the sisters put ready a pen, ink and paper on a table in front of him and asked him to write down what he most wanted of us; beginning at the top of the page and writing with great concentration he put down HUMILITY, and that was all. He wanted to show us what he thought of this virtue. (Stopp, ed., *A Testimony by St. Chantal*, p. 86)

Ironically, then, Francis's very determination to live a humble life contributed in no small part to his being honored as a saint!

Pause: Consider your own reputation; compare how you think others see you with how you think God sees you.

Francis's Words

For Francis, the virtue of humility combines recognition of the truth of who we are with the truth of God's love for us.

Humility is true knowledge and voluntary acknowledgment of our abjection. The chief point of such humility consists not only in willingly admitting our abject state but in loving it and delighting in it. (*Introduction to the Devout Life*, p. 139)

This humility helps us to combat the dangers we typically encounter along the journey toward our own spiritual perfection.

Why is it that when we happen to commit some imperfection or sin, we are so surprised, upset, and impatient? Without doubt, it is because we thought we were something special, resolute, and steady, and therefore, when we discover that in reality we are nothing of the kind and have fallen flat on our face, we are disappointed, and consequently we are vexed, offended, and upset. If we really knew ourselves well, instead of being astonished at finding ourselves on the ground, we would marvel that we ever manage to remain standing up. That's the other source of our disquiet: we want nothing but consolation and are taken aback when we see and experience our misery, our nothingness, and our weakness. (*Letters of Spiritual Direction*, p. 119)

At the same time, humility makes it possible for us to recognize and accept our companions on this journey.

Humility makes it possible for us to be untroubled about our own faults by reminding us of those of others; for why should we be more perfect than anyone else? In the same way, why should the shortcomings of others bother us when we recall our own? Why should we find it strange that others have faults when we ourselves have plenty? Humility makes our hearts gentle toward the perfect and the imperfect: toward the perfect, out of respect; toward the imperfect, out of compassion. Humility helps

us to receive afflictions serenely, knowing that we deserve them, and to receive blessings with reverence, knowing that they are undeserved. (*Letters of Spiritual Direction*, p. 121)

Thus, how we see ourselves in relation to how God sees us is for Francis the critical disposition that opens the door for God's entry into the human soul.

Reflection

Religious humility is often misunderstood. But in the Salesian tradition, humility is highly prized as

the recognition of the reality of human dependence upon God, the truth of the profound limitations of the individual person and communities of persons, and the acknowledgment of illusory human pride that strives to be like God and so conspires in its own destruction. . . . Humility is thus not "humiliation" in the negative sense that might be perceived as psychologically unhealthy today. It is rather a recognition of one's own littleness and need in relation to the Creator's immense and lavish abundance. (*Letters of Spiritual Direction*, p. 65)

Humility is also a somewhat paradoxical virtue. The recognition of our lowliness is the admission of the inherent incapability of rising above our mortal limitations on our own. While this admission should rid us of self-destructive pride, it should also fill us with joy in the knowledge that God loves us precisely for who we are and that in the divine goodness we are recipients of God's grace in our journey toward becoming who God wants us to be.

◇ Prayerfully read the account of Jesus' washing the feet of his disciples at the Last Supper (John 13:1-20). Imagine yourself being in the room with the others.

◆ What would your reaction be when Jesus comes to wash your feet? Open your heart and soul to be cleansed by him as well.

- ◆ What do you think of the Jesus who performs this service? Give thanks to him for making you his beneficiary.
- ◆ How might you “wash one another’s feet”? Resolve to treat others as more important to you than you are to yourself.

◇ Create a diagram that charts the progress you have made in your chosen career.

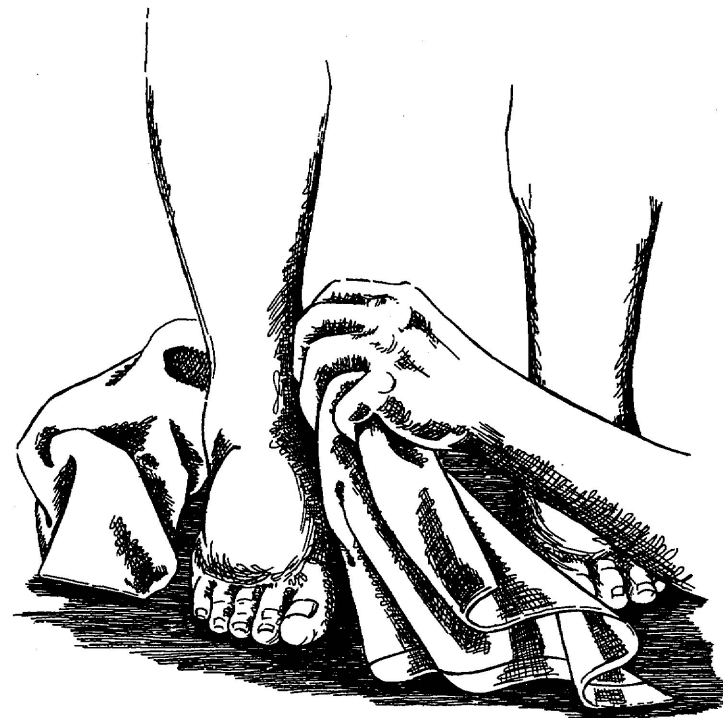
- ◆ Where does the chart lead? Where will you be on this “ladder” in five or ten years?
- ◆ What aspirations do you have in your career? Are these plans “for the glory of God”?
- ◆ What aspirations do you have in your spiritual life? How do your designs compare with what God wants of you?

◇ Make a list in two columns: on one side, list all those things you consider “afflictions” that you have received; on the other, list those you consider “blessings.”

- ◆ Have you received the afflictions “serenely, knowing that [you] deserve them”?
- ◆ Have you received the blessings “with reverence, knowing that they are undeserved”?
- ◆ How might the afflictions be turned into blessings?
- ◆ Give thanks to God for both lists!

◇ Humility means recognizing the truth about oneself, and yet, we are usually very hard on ourselves. When you receive compliments from friends, do you believe them? Do you appreciate the skills and talents that God has given you? Take some time to write down the things that you like about yourself. Look at what you do for others that makes them happy, even if those things are not glamorous or noteworthy. Before God, give thanks for all that is good about you.

◇ After these examinations, try this exercise. Write two recommendations for the “job” that you are seeking: that of being a devout soul. In the first letter, make yourself the author and give an honest evaluation. In the second letter, make God the author. How do the two letters compare? What can you do to bring the two letters into closer correspondence? Bring your final reflections before a God in whose presence you are both lowly and loved.



God’s Word

Jesus, knowing that [God] had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. . . .

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. (John 13:3–5,12–15)