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# The Doorway of Humility

God made Himself small, so that we might become great with the only true greatness: humility of heart. An article by Guillaume Derville on Christian life.

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The facade of the Basilica of the Nativity in Bethlehem still retains the mark of its ancient portal, which over time has become a tiny doorway barely a meter and a half high. Its lowness was meant to prevent

anyone from entering on horseback, to protect this holy site. The reduced dimensions of this doorway challenges visitors today with a message: "We must bend down; spiritually we must as it were go on foot, in order to pass through the portal of faith and encounter the God who is so different from our prejudices and opinions – the God who conceals himself in the humility of a newborn baby."[1]

## **We are children of God**

In his second encyclical, Pope Francis reminds us of why we so need humility, a simple and great truth that we easily run the risk of forgetting in the hustle and bustle of daily life: "We are not God."[2]

Indeed, the fact that we are creatures is the deepest truth about our being; we have received our existence from God. When we accept this fundamental truth, we allow

ourselves to be transformed by divine grace. We can then know reality as it is, perfect it, and offer it back to God, truly loving the world, as Saint Josemaria so often stressed. And at the center of this immense endeavor lies humility, "which helps us to recognize, at one and the same time, both our wretchedness and our greatness"[3]: our wretchedness, which we so frequently experience, and the greatness of our being, through baptism, daughters and sons of God in Christ.

Humility is "the virtue of the saints and those who let themselves be filled with God . . . the more important they become in the eyes of others, the more they come to realize that they are nothing, and can do nothing apart from God's grace (cf. *Jn* 15:8)."[4] This is how little children are, and this is how we are before God. Therefore we need to return to the essential point: God loves me.

When a person knows that he or she is loved by God – a Love that one discovers in the love received from others – that person can then love all men and women.

## **Humility with others**

Humility leads us to accept reality as it is, and specifically the people who are closer to us because of family ties, bonds of faith, or life itself. *So then, while we have the opportunity, let us do good to all, but especially to those who belong to the family of the faith (Gal 6:10).* The Apostle teaches us not to weary of living an ordered charity. How can we fail to see those who, like ourselves, have received the gift of baptism as brothers and sisters, children of the same Father of goodness and mercy? "Humility leads us as it were by the hand to treat our neighbor in the best way possible, that is, being understanding towards everyone, living at peace with

everyone, forgiving everyone; never creating divisions or barriers; and behaving—always!—as instruments that foster unity."[5]

Those who are humble have a special sensitivity for the gifts received from God, both in their own life and in the lives of others; they understand that each person is a gift from God, and thus they welcome everyone, without comparisons or rivalries. Each person is unique in God's eyes, and contributes something that the others cannot offer. Humility leads us to rejoice in the joys of others, simply because they exist and have inherent value. Someone who is humble learns to be just one more alongside the others.

Here the family has an essential role to play. A child grows accustomed to being with others, to talking and listening. With other brothers and sisters, a child is not always the

center of attention, and learns to give thanks. And when personal success comes, he or she realizes that so many things have been made possible thanks to the sacrifice of family members and friends.

Humility grows with gratitude, and also with forgiveness: forgiving, asking for forgiveness, being forgiven. Who am I that others should say to me, "I'm sorry"? The humility of a person who asks for forgiveness, being perhaps someone with authority, is attractive and contagious. It is especially so when it is lived among spouses, among parents and children, among superiors and co-workers.

Without being ingenuous, Christians should habitually be well disposed towards their neighbor, since each person really matters, and is truly of value. Being aware of the dignity of others helps us avoid falling into "humiliating indifference"[6]. The

Christian vocation requires being focused on others, being open to those around us without worrying too much about what they will say about us or whether we will look foolish. Some people can intimidate others because they are timid themselves, and fail to communicate light and warmth. They may be thinking too much about themselves, about what others will say, perhaps out of an excessive sense of honor and concern for their own image, behind which pride and a lack of simplicity may lurk.

Trying to keep attention focused on oneself, repeatedly making known one's own wants and desires, emphasizing health problems that are more or less common; or on the contrary, hiding a sickness that others should know about, in order to help us better with their prayer and support: all these attitudes are probably a sign that we need

purification. "You are not mortified, if you are touchy; if your every thought is for yourself; if you humiliate others; if you don't know how to give up what is unnecessary and, at times, what is necessary; if you become gloomy because things don't turn out the way you had hoped. On the other hand, you can be sure you are mortified, if you know how to make yourself 'all things to all men, in order to save all'(1 Cor 9:22)."

[7]

## **Focus on the good, and live in harmony**

*We played the flute for you, but you did not dance, we sang a dirge but you did not mourn (Mt 11:17):* Our Lord makes use here of a song or possibly a popular game to show how some of his contemporaries failed to recognize Him. We are called to discover Christ in all events and in each person, and to respect the



divine ways of acting. God is the one who creates, liberates, saves, forgives, and calls.... "We cannot risk opposing the full freedom of the love with which God enters into the life of every person."[8]

Opening ourselves to others implies in some way adapting ourselves to them; for example, playing a team sport with others who are less skilled; or forgetting personal preferences for the sake of doing something another person likes to do in order to rest. In relationships with others, a humble person loves to be positive. While a proud person tends to overly stress the negative. In the family, at work, in society at large, humility allows us to see the others in the light of their virtues. In contrast, those who tend to speak frequently about the things that "make them nervous" or that bother them about others, usually do so because they lack openness of mind

and heart. Perhaps they need to learn to love others with their defects. Then we can put into action a "pedagogy of love" that, little by little, creates an irresistible force: becoming smaller so that others can grow. As Christ's herald, John the Baptist, said: *He must increase; I must decrease (Jn 3:30)*.

The Eternal Word made Himself small. "The Fathers of the Church found in their Greek translation of the Old Testament a passage from the prophet Isaiah that Saint Paul also quotes in order to show how God's new ways had already been foretold in the Old Testament. There we read: 'The Lord made his word short, he abbreviated it' (*Is 10:23; Rom 9:28*). The Son himself is the Word, the *Logos*: the eternal word became small – small enough to fit into a manger. He became a child, so that the Word could be grasped by us."<sup>[9]</sup> —

Jesus puts Himself within everyone's reach. He carries out a dialogue with his disciples, having recourse to parables and putting Himself at their level. In resolving the need to pay a tax to Caesar, Christ treats Peter as an equal (cf. *Mt 17:27*).<sup>[10]</sup> He also does so with the holy women and with other women more distant from God, with the Pharisees, with Pilate. We need to be "detached" from our own way of being, in order to go out towards others. Thus we develop a certain capacity to adapt ourselves to others, avoiding getting carried away by obsessions or manias; discovering in each person what is lovable, the spark of divine love; being content to be just one more among many, in family celebrations and in following the liturgical calendar, which marks the rhythm of our life as sons and daughters of God. The humble person lives attentive to the needs of others. This attitude is at the core of good manners, shown in many

details such as not interrupting a conversation, a meal, and even less someone's mental prayer in order to answer the telephone, except in the case of a true emergency. Charity ultimately arises in the *humus*, the fertile ground, of humility: *Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful* (1 Cor 13:4).

## **Humility in work**

In the encyclical *Laudato si'*, the Pope points out that underlying all work is "a concept of the relationship which we can and must have with what is other than ourselves," [11] with the things and people around us. Thus work offers many opportunities to grow in humility.

For example, if our boss is a bit overbearing, we can try to find an excuse, the burden of a heavy responsibility, or simply having slept badly the previous night. When a co-worker makes a mistake, we try to

correct the error without wounding the person. Feeling sad on seeing the success of others is a clear sign of a lack of humility, and also of faith: *all are yours; and you are Christ's; and Christ is God's* (1 Cor 3:22-23). Those who are humble, when striving to improve their professional formation, also do so in order to better serve others. This means rectifying one's intention, recovering supernatural outlook, not being dragged down by a superficial or even corrupt environment, although not for this reason looking down on others either. Those who are humble flee from perfectionism, recognizing their own limits and relying on others to improve what they have done. The humble person is able to rectify and ask for pardon.

God has called us into being, with a love that is free; sometimes, however, it seems that we have to justify our own existence. The

eagerness to stand out, to do things in a different way, to call attention to oneself, an excessive preoccupation for feeling useful and to seek to "shine" even in serving, might be symptoms of a sickness in the soul that requires asking for others' help and being docile to grace. "With a sight indifferent to the good and much more concerned about what highlights our own ego, the lukewarm will accumulate in the soul sediments of selfishness and pride . . . empty conversations centered on oneself . . . that *non cogitare nisi de se* shown in *non loqui nisi de se*. One's charity cools off, and apostolic zeal slackens." [12] In contrast, a humble person avoids steering the conversation towards his own life, his experiences, what he has accomplished; he avoids seeking out in an exaggerated way that others recognize his merits. Very different is the attitude of a person who constantly remembers God's

mercies and sees life in light of the designs of Providence. If one speaks about what one has done, it is so that the others can benefit. Thus the testimony of a personal encounter with Christ, within the due limits modesty requires, can help the other person to discover that Jesus also loves him, forgives him, and divinizes him. What joy is the result! "I am loved, therefore I exist"[13].

Some moments are especially propitious for renewing our desires for humility. For example, when receiving a promotion or starting a job with a certain amount of public visibility. It's the moment to make decisions that reflect a Christian way of working: seeing this position as an opportunity that God gives us to serve even more; not using it for our personal advantage; increasing our concern for the weakest, without giving in to the temptation to forget them, now that one is dealing with

people one did not have access to before. It is also a moment to give an example of detachment from personal gains and honors inherent to this position or work, to give little importance to the applause that is typically given to the person in charge, and instead to be open to criticism, which often contains a kernel of truth. There are many ways to strive for simplicity in our work: laughing at ourselves when, for example, we find ourselves searching to see how we have come out in a photograph or if we are cited in a text; not trying to leave our personal mark on everything or becoming upset when our advice is not asked for to solve some problem...

## **Learning to yield our own judgment**

In professional and family reunions, points of view are often exchanged



that perhaps are conflicting. Are we someone who always wants the others to yield to our own way of thinking? The way things should be, what needs to be done... The excessive tendency to insist on one's own point of view might indicate a rigid mind. Certainly, yielding to others is not something automatic that is always prudent to do. But often it shows that we can rise above our own point of view. Taking advantage of the opportunity to surrender our own judgment is something very pleasing in God's eyes.[14] With incisive words, Benedict XVI once remarked on Tertullian unfortunate rigidity of thought during the last years of his life, when he isolated himself in his own point of view: "When one only sees his thought in all its greatness, in the end, it is precisely this greatness that is lost." [15]

Sometimes we need to listen to younger people who have less experience but perhaps possess greater gifts of intellect or heart, or hold a position in which God's grace gives them special help. If we are overly concerned about what others think of us, we lack humility. The life of Jesus, the Son of God, is an inexhaustible lesson for any Christian possessing a responsibility that the world considers important. The acclamations on entering Jerusalem did not lead the King of Kings to forget that others were going to crucify Him and that He would also be the Suffering Servant (cf. *Jn* 12:12-19).

Saint Louis, the King of France, once advised his son that, if one day he became king, during meetings with his council he should not defend his own opinion too avidly, without first listening to the others: "The members of your council might be afraid to

contradict you, something which is not to be desired." [16] It's very healthy to learn not to offer one's own opinion too quickly, above all when one does not have ultimate responsibility and lacks background information on the subject, not to mention lacking the grace of state as well as knowledge of the facts that perhaps the person in authority does possess. One needs to practice the prudence of listening to advisors and changing one's own opinion.

Prudence in judgment is furthered by teamwork. Working as a team, uniting efforts, reflecting carefully and arriving at a decision with the help of others: all of this is also an exercise in humility and intelligence.

## **Humility of the unprofitable servant**

In pastoral initiatives, in parishes, in charitable associations, in projects to help immigrants, often the solutions

to problems are not self-evident, and there are many possible ways to approach them. A humble person will make known one's own opinion, while asking that specific points be clarified if needed, and even accepting guidelines different from one's own insights. Thus one shows trust in God's grace, which assists those who carry out their responsibilities with a right intention and rely on the advice of experts in the area.

Few people realize that the Catholic Church, with a marvelous collective humility, inspires throughout the world such a great number of initiatives to assist the sick and the poor. Humility is especially needed in the people of God, where the human and divine intermingle so closely. How beautiful it is to be the envelope that is discarded when the letter is received! *We are unprofitable*

*servants; we have done what we were obliged to do (Lk 17:10).*

Similarly, a priest will have the "humility of learning not to be fashionable,"[17] and not seek to always be at the center of everything; he will reject almost instinctively the desire to stand out, to always be in the limelight, which can so easily be a sign of someone who sees himself as the "owner" of souls. On their part, lay people, if they are humble, will respect sacred ministers for what they represent; they won't criticize their parish priest, or priests in general, but rather try to help them and pray for them. The sons of Noah covered over the nakedness of their drunken father (cf. *Gen 9:23*). "Like the good sons of Noah, throw the mantle of charity over the defects you see in your father, the Priest."[18] Saint Thomas More even applied this story to the Roman Pontiff, for whom the Christian

people should pray....and not persecute![19]

## **Time belongs to God: faith and humility**

"The witness of Scripture is unanimous that the solicitude of divine providence is concrete and immediate; God cares for all, from the least things to the great events of the world and its history. The sacred books powerfully affirm God's absolute sovereignty over the course of events: 'Our God is in the heavens; he does whatever he pleases' (*Psalms* 115:3); and so it is with Christ, 'who opens and no one shall shut, who shuts and no one opens' (*Revelation* 3:7). As the book of Proverbs states: 'Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will be established' (*Proverbs* 19:21)"[20].

Faith and humility go hand in hand. In our journey towards our celestial home, we need to let ourselves by

guided by God, having recourse to Him and listening to his Word.[21] A calm reading of the Old and New Testaments, with the aid of theological and spiritual commentaries, helps us to understand what God says to us in each moment, inviting us to conversion. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD" (*Is* 55:8; cf. *Rom* 11:33). The humility of faith kneels down before Jesus present in the Holy Eucharist, adoring the Incarnate Word like the shepherds in Bethlehem. Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, Edith Stein, said she never forgot the time she saw a woman enter a church with her shopping bag and kneel down to pray.[22]

Humility leads us to live in the present detached from what the future might bring, finding there God's will. For we Christians are a people "who have longed for his

appearance" (2 *Tm* 4:8). If we find ourselves getting upset at adverse circumstances, we need to grow in faith and humility. "As soon as you truly abandon yourself in God, you will know how to be content with whatever happens. You will not lose your peace if your undertakings do not turn out the way you hoped, even if you have put everything into them, and used all the means necessary. For they will have 'turned out' the way God wants them to."[23]

Thus we can avoid getting excessively upset, or the tendency to hold on to humiliating memories. A child of God forgives offenses and moves on without holding grudges. [24] And if someone thinks they have been offended by someone else, they try not to dwell on these offenses, and not to hold a grudge. We need to look at Jesus, realizing that "much more has been forgiven me. What a great debt of love still remains for



me to pay!"[25] The humble person takes to heart Saint Paul's example: *forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus (Phil 3:13-14)*

Even illness can be accepted as a mission that God gives us. And part of this mission involves learning how to let ourselves be helped and accompanied, a sign of abandonment in Jesus' hands, who makes Himself present in our brothers and sisters. For we have to complete *what is lacking in Christ's affliction for the sake of his body, that is, the church*" (Col 1:24)

The realization of our own weakness leads us to let ourselves be helped, to be indulgent towards others, to understand the human condition, and to avoid Pharisaical surprises. Our weakness opens our intellect

and heart to understand the weakness of others: always assuming a good intention, for example, or mitigating circumstances that made it hard for someone to act otherwise, although this doesn't mean ignoring the truth, calling *evil good*, and *good evil*, or changing *bitter into sweet*, and *sweet into bitter* (Is 5:20).

This attitude is far removed from the low self-esteem that is quite common today, and that is unhealthy since it fails to correspond to the truth and prevents one from setting daring goals. There is no reason for discouragement. Humility leads us to accept what we cannot change, with the deep conviction that our Lord wants to lead us along paths of mercy (cf. *Heb* 3:10; *Ps* 95[94]:10). "To know we are made of clay, riveted together again, is a continual source of joy. It means acknowledging our littleness in the eyes of God: a little child, a son. Can there be any joy to

compare with that of the person who, knowing himself to be poor and weak, knows also that he is a son of God?"[26]

## **Open to Providence**

Those who are humble are open to the action of divine Providence. They don't seek to control everything in their life or have explanations for everything. They respect the mystery of the human person and trust in God, although the future seems uncertain. They make no effort to uncover God's secret intentions, or what exceeds their own strength (cf. *Sir* 3:21). God's grace is sufficient for them, because *power is made perfect in weakness* (2 *Cor* 12:9). We find this grace in our relationship with Christ, sharing in his life.

After a moving act of thanksgiving to God the Father, Jesus invites his disciples of all times to draw close to Him, *quia mitis sum et humilis corde*

(Mt 11:29). Our Lord is meek and humble of heart, and in Him we will find understanding and peace. We approach Christ in the Eucharist, his Body wounded and resurrected: *in humilitate carnis assumptae*, we pray in Preface I of Advent. He comes to us in the humility of our flesh. We touch the ineffable humility of God. "The humility of Jesus: in Bethlehem, in Nazareth, on Calvary. But more humiliation and more self-abasement still in the Sacred Host: more than in the stable, more than in Nazareth, more than on the Cross."[27]

The Virgin Mary accompanies us so that we might receive Him with the humility with which she received her Son Jesus. *Salve radix, salve porta, ex qua mundo lux est orta.*[28] Hail the root, hail the gate giving birth to the Light that illumines a world submerged in the darkness of pride. Christ Jesus, Light from Light,[29]

reveals to us the mercy of God the Father.

*Guillaume Derville*

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[1] Benedict XVI, Homily, December 24, 2011.

[2] Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'* (May 24, 2015), 67.

[3] Saint Josemaría, *Friends of God*, 94.

[4] Pope Francis, Address to the Roman Curia, December 21, 2015.

[5] Saint Josemaría, *Friends of God*, 233.

[6] Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus* (April 11, 2015), 15.

[7] Saint Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, 9.

[8] Pope Francis, Apostolic Letter *Misericordia et misera* (November, 30, 2016), 2.

[9] Benedict XVI, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*, 12.

[10] Cf. Guillaume de Saint-Thierry, *Exposé sur le Cantique des Cantiques*, 109, in *Sources Chrétiennes* 82, 243.

[11] Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, 125.

[12] Blessed Alvaro del Portillo, Pastoral letter, January 9, 1980, 31 (cited in Álvaro del Portillo, *Orar. Como sal y como luz*, Barcelona: Planeta, 2013, 207).

[13] Pope Francis, *Misericordia et misera*, 16.

[14] Cf. Saint Josemaría, *The Way*, 177.

[15] Benedict XVI, Audience, May 30, 2007.

[16] Saint Louis of France, *Spiritual Testament* written to his son, the future Phillip III, in *Acta Sanctorum Augustii* 5 (1868), 546.

[17] Saint Josemaría, *Conversations*, 59.

[18] *The Way*, 75.

[19] Cf. Saint Thomas Moore, *Responsio ad Lutherum*, in *The Yale Edition of The Complete Works of Saint Thomas More*, vol. 5, p. 142 (CW5, 142/1-4).

[20] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 303.

[21] Cf. *Sagrada Biblia*, Translation and notes from the Faculty of Theology at the University of Navarre, commentary on Psalm 95 (94).

[22] Cf. Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein), *Aus dem Leben*

*einer jüdischen Familie. Das Leben Edith Steins: Kindheit und Jugend*, 1965 (Complete edition, 1985), p. 362.

[23] Saint Josemaría, *Furrow*, 860.

[24] Cf. Javier Echevarría, Pastoral letter, November 4, 2015, n. 21.

[25] Saint Josemaría, *The Forge*, 210.

[26] *Friends of God*, 108.

[27] *The Way*, 533.

[28] Hymn, *Ave Regina Cælorum*.

[29] Cf. *Roman Missal*, The Creed.