

# Humility

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Last year between Christmas and Epiphany we were performing Messenger of Peace in Assisi. In a break my friend Paolo and his wife, Monica, took me to the mountain town of Città di Castello for the annual celebration of La Befana. While there we visited a wonderful exhibition of crèches; there must have been at least 75 interpretations of the Incarnation event, most all of which were made in the Neapolitan style. You may have seen the extraordinary crèche in the Art Institute's collection – that's the style in which most of these were created and I include photos of a few here. You see how in these examples how everyday life was invaded by the birth of an unknown Child who changed the course of history.



Honorius III wrote *Quia populares tumultus* to the Franciscan Order on December 3, 1224; this document gave all friars permission to celebrate the Eucharist in their churches and chapels. In response to that letter during his final days on earth Francis wrote his *Letter to the Entire Order* [1225-1226]. I share with you my favorite passage of it that I frequently quote when speaking about the Eucharist.

*Let everyone be struck with awe, let the whole world tremble,  
and let the heavens exult when Christ, the Son of the living God,  
is present on the altar in the hands of a priest!  
O wonderful loftiness and stupendous dignity!  
O sublime humility! O humble sublimity!  
The Lord of the universe,  
God and the Son of God,  
so humbles himself that for our salvation  
he hides himself under an ordinary piece of bread!  
Brothers, look at the humility of God, and pour out your hearts before him.  
Humble yourselves so you may be exalted by him!  
Hold back nothing of yourselves for yourselves,  
So that he who gives himself totally to you may receive you totally.*

The last two lines are my favorite because they clearly define our response to all that Christ has done for the world ~ he sacrificed everything because of his commitment to God's will. That is our Christian vocation as we imitate the self-emptying of Christ. When baptized, we die to sin (our selfishness) and rise to live with Christ as the center of our lives. I've come to understand that the key that allows us to '*hold back nothing of yourselves*' is a spiritual virtue not cherished by the cultural standards that surround us now: **humility**. Francis synthesized the foundation of our discipleship: *Humble yourselves so that you may be exalted by him!* Humility brings life and peace.

I assist at a large suburban parish filled at times with lots of children. One person actually referred to the 10:30 Mass as “Uncle Bob’s Day Care”, which delighted me! The challenge at those Masses is to consciously be attentive to not just our rituals but what transpires and transforms us at Mass. Crying babies never bother me but people going to the restroom or reading or [my pet peeve] chewing gum – all these human behaviors demand a great deal of concentration and a focus on what



we’re truly about at the altar. Here you see another of the crèches. Can you find the Holy Family? Geese, a cow, people coming and going, sort of a shop and sort of a barn. With humility and simplicity the creator plunked Mary on the floor, holding her baby with Joseph over them at the far right. The Son of God on the floor. A cow mooing and geese honking make a royal fanfare unlike any other! This is where God chose to enter our world. Yes, our God came to t us in Bethlehem, as a human infant among the mayhem of life on earth.

St. Bonaventure, in his *The Tree of Life: throughout the whole world the heavens became honey sweet. Now then, my soul, embrace that divine manger; press your lips upon it and kiss the boy’s feet. Then in your mind keep the shepherds’ watch, marvel at the assembling host of angels, join in the heavenly melody, and sing with your voice and heart – Glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace to all people of good will.* How beautifully he expresses our love for the Lord.

We all know Francis was overwhelmed his entire life by the humility of God. Reread the story of him at Greccio in 1223. He wanted his friars to be called minor and leaders of the friars to be called servants. He said that friars “had come to the school of the humble Christ to learn humility.” Jesus, the paradigm of humility, told his followers: *whoever wishes to be first among you will be your servant.* And so it is in the Order. I’m guardian of our friar community here at St. Peter’s and our Rule states clearly that the guardian is to be “like a mother to the brothers.” When chosen as guardian a few years ago, I thought of my own Mom, Norma, and how she constantly sacrificed her life for her five children. Mom’s life was humble service to us, just as Jesus took our nature – both marvelous examples of humility. So how do WE imitate the poor, humble Christ?

The Advent/Christmas/Epiphany season is a rather easy time for us to see humility in Jesus. But what is our own pursuit of humility the rest of the year? We contend with superegos fueled by pure selfishness. Some examples I hear: ‘those people don’t matter as long as I make money.’ ‘He’s just a beginner; what could he possibly know about banking?’ ‘She doesn’t have a college degree; what could she have to say about raising three kids?’ ‘I’ve been in religious life five years and know everything.’ It takes courage and pure guts to let those kind of attitudes not get under our skin, right? But what about how I give myself permission to not strike back or show off my years of experience without a verbal conk on the head? How can I emulate the poverty of Bethlehem?

Honestly, I find it’s much, much easier and far less anxiety producing to simply let God take care of other people. Let God save the world because God is extraordinarily good at what God does. That means I sometimes must eat crow or stand back with my mouth shut or withhold caustic remarks. Being humble is, as I said above, not a virtue highly prized in our world. It takes energy to realize and admit that I don’t have all the answers. I am not the best in everything, I can’t come up with solutions to all the world’s problems. My classic line to keep in mind: only God is perfect.

I’ve been working here at St. Peter’s in various capacities over 32 years now. I cannot begin to tell you how often people were afraid we would close the doors (the Covid days were an exception) because of financial or staff problems. It’s important to realize and constantly call to mind that St. Peter’s is not a business. Yes, we have an operations director and through our new provincial structure a plethora of financial directors. More often than not, though, God and loving, believing people have brought us from darkness to days of light and hope. We friars hold Christ as

the center of our lives and our service to God's People. One of my least favorite things in life is to allow myself to worry about money; it sometimes wakes me at 4 a.m. and the next morning I always have to remind myself that God runs this world. I make myself remember all the times in 32 years that God has pulled us through and kept the doors open and the lights on here and it's always a combination of humility and trust that I know God loves us all and wants us friars to be here!

It's one thing to be fiscally responsible with the gifts and grants that are given us. It's another to let money distract me/us from the sole purpose of giving witness to the joy of Franciscan life in service to God and God's People. It demands we humbly let God take charge, make sure we have a competent staff of friars and lay employees and then, watch what happens when we walk humbly with God. And I (usually secretly) take great delight in those moments when God, so often through others, brings new life to our community and our Franciscan presence in the Loop. Here are a few examples going on right now.

It has taken five years to crawl out of the destruction of Covid, both in business and in the Church. But you need to know that NEW LIFE is abundant here at St. Peter's. Our beautiful baptismal font is presently being refurbished so we'll again have the flowing waters of salvation ever-present to greet people. After 18 long years of dreaming, two new confessionals in church are under construction and will be ready for use by Easter. These will complement the font so people who enter this holy place will know us as a baptizing and reconciling community where every person is welcome. We have an international friar community so we visibly witness that Christianity and our Franciscan way are inclusive; we friars learn from each others' cultures and show that boundaries can be dropped. Our liturgical life is being rebuilt (along with an ailing organ), concerts bring beauty to people and God continues to work among us in the Sacraments, spiritual direction and simple, humble Franciscan friars who believe we must remain here at St. Peter's for another 150 years! We stay. You walk with us. And together we build the future of Catholic life in the spirit of Francis and Clare of Assisi.

Franciscan scholar Ilia Delio, O.S.F. wrote that "the Incarnation is God bending low to embrace the world in love." If God embraces all of creation then it follows that all of creation is holy, a concept echoed in our Eucharistic Prayer III: *You are indeed Holy, O Lord, and all you have created rightly gives you praise, for through your Son our Lord Jesus Christ, by the power and working of the Holy Spirit, you give life to all things and make them holy....* or as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, S.J. wrote: "the entire creation, including every person, is a sacrament of God because within each and every thing, in some way, God is hidden."

**Humility.** This virtue is a source of life, even when it's difficult to attain and live daily. But Jesus didn't say: "get a Serta Perfect Sleeper and think about me sometimes." Nope – he said pick up your CROSS and humbly let me lead you through the journey of life. On this page you see a crèche where Mary and Joseph love their baby in the middle of a real mess – just like our lives! God led them through pain and suffering. When we humbly allow God to lead and guide us, we find a cross can be bearable and this cherished virtue brings us closer to being a lovely image of Christ. And people see that image in us. Humility brings us life, happiness and peace. It's definitely worth the effort to treasure and live it. On behalf of all the friars here, thank you for the incredible support with which you gift us all year long. You help us know God is within all of us. May Christmas be a joyful feast this year. May you know that the Child of Humility fills your heart and your life with gentle peace. We are gifts to each other this Christmas and every day of every year.

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