

- I The last line of today's Gospel from Matthew states, "Whoever exalts himself will be humbled; but whoever humbles himself will be exalted." Jesus is addressing "the crowds" and his disciples but he is talking about the scribes and Pharisees and how many of them have fallen into the trap of prideful behavior. Jesus says "All their works are performed to be seen." Even if they are doing good works they are doing them for the wrong reason. It reminds us of T.S. Eliot's line, "The last temptation is the greatest treason: to do the right deed for the wrong reason." For Jewish leadership, of whom Jesus is speaking, and for all of us the temptation is pride. What is our motive when we do some good deed? Is it to draw attention to ourselves or is for love of God and neighbor?
- A. One example Jesus gives of the scribes and Pharisees doing things to be seen is he says "they widen their phylacteries." As a reminder phylacteries were small leather containers or boxes containing a scripture quote worn on the forehead and arm. Their true purpose was to keep the faithful Jew mindful of the law of God and to assist the worshipper in prayer. Jesus is saying they distorted that motive and had turned them into a fashion statement to show how holy they were. It would be like a contemporary Christian wearing an overly large cross or crucifix

around his neck to broadcast his believe in Jesus. Is this faith or flash, praise or pomp?

- B. Humility is an important word in Scripture. It is praised 25 times. The humble are praised about 48 times. Pride is held in contempt 103 times. The proud are disdained 68 times. Humility, it seems, is a foundational virtue.
- C. The word humility derives from the word humus, meaning earth or ground. We capture the idea when we use the phrase “down to earth.” Abraham Lincoln was right on target about this idea of humility when he humorously said, “A man’s legs ought to be long enough to reach the ground.” Another way to define humility is knowing who one is and where one fits into the cosmic scheme of things. St. Francis de Sales said it this way, “True humility is to see yourself as you are seen by God, not more than you are and not less than you are.” Yes, we are made in the image of God and yes we are sinners. We can see the balance there and like most of life, balance is needed.
- D. We know pride is dangerous for us besides being unattractive and obnoxious to those around us. Here is a warning from Fr. Benedict Groschel, may he rest in peace. “Pride sneaks down into the bottom of our soul. It makes believe that we are something more than a creature. Pride makes us demand the things that are God’s. It says ‘I will not serve,’ or ‘I will

serve, but only under these circumstances,’ or ‘I am willing to do everything you want, God, but could I make a suggestion? I’ll carry the cross, but preferably something with wheels on one end, and a nice little shoulder pad.’ All these things are pride. While they may not be mortal sins of pride, they could grow into them. Life is a constant struggle against pride. The old Irish proverb that the higher we climb, the higher the devil climbs, is true with regard to pride. Until the day we die it can trip us up.”

- E. “The higher we climb, the higher the devil climbs.” Jesus is well aware that when anyone assumes a title of honor it is not long before that person begins to believe that he is deserving of such acclaim. That is where pride enters. The acclaim does not go to us. The acclaim goes to God, for it was God who gave us life, God who gave us particular gifts and God who gave us the grace to use them.
- F. One priest who had much acclaim in his life was St. John Vianney, popularly known as the Cure of Ars. He was so well known as a confessor and holy priest that thousands of people flocked to his church in this small French town. This made other priests jealous. A petition was circulated by these priests accusing him of “sensationalism, ignorance, and showy poverty.” By accident he received it. He signed it and sent it on to the diocese.

- G. St. Augustine wrote, “If you ask me what is the most essential element in the teaching and morality of Jesus Christ, I would answer you: the first is humility, the second is humility, and the third is humility.” St. Vincent de Paul wrote, “You must ask God to give you power to fight against the sin of pride, which is your greatest enemy-the root of all that is evil, and the failure of all that is good. For God resists the proud.” Pope Benedict XVI wrote in his book The Spirit of the Liturgy about a desert monk who had a vision of the devil. The devil was ferociously ugly, just as expected, but there was one strange thing about him that the monk reflected on afterward: Satan had no knees. The essence of Satan, therefore, is that he will not bow before God. He denies God’s providence, and he wants us to do the same. He does not want us to kneel before the Lord, the Giver of all life. He wants us to disdain the seven sacraments. He want to pretend that the Eucharist is less than the presence of Christ Himself.
- H. I close with a quote from one of my favorite Catholics from the 20th century, Dorothy Day, who was recently named a Servant of God by the Vatican. She said with honest humility “I feel that I have done nothing well. But I have done what I could.” Her simple prayer was “Help me, dear Lord, to do my little daily tasks with ease and discretion, with love and delight.”

