**Chapter 7: Humility**

January 25, May 26, September 25

*Brothers [and sisters], divine Scripture calls to us saying: “Whoever exalt himself shall be humbled, and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted” (Luke 14:11, 18:14). In saying this therefore, it shows us that every exaltation is a kind of pride, which the Prophet indicates he has shunned, saying: “Lord, my heart is not exalted; my eyes are not lifted up and I have not walked in the ways of the great nor gone after marvels beyond me” (Ps. 130[131]:1). And why? “If I had not a humble spirit, but were exalted instead, then you would treat me like a weaned child on its mother’s lap” (Ps. 130[131]:2).*

*Accordingly, brothers [and sisters], if we want to reach the highest summit of humility, if we desire to attain speedily that exaltation in heaven to which we climb by the humility of this present life, then by our ascending actions we must set up that ladder on which Jacob in a dream saw “angels descending and ascending” (Gen. 28:12). Without doubt, this descent and ascent can signify only that we descend by exaltation and ascend by humility. Now the ladder erected is our life on earth, and if we humble our hearts the Lord will raise it to heaven. We may call our body and soul the sides of this ladder, into which our divine vocation has fitted the various steps of humility and discipline as we ascend.*

Here Benedict speaks of exaltation as self-promotion. This kind of self-promotion has pride at its root. Pride is the reaction that springs from the ego’s sense of identity and entitlement. Perhaps that promotion at work should have been yours and not your colleagues; perhaps that car space is yours, even if someone got it first; perhaps the attention given to someone else should be mine instead. Pride reflexively ‘amp up’, ready to defend, protect, and promote the self that somehow needs that promotion, that car space, the attention. Pride is the ego alternate to humility.

Is there a difference between self-promotion and self-expression? One seeks attention, the other does not. In Luke’s Gospel (14:7-11) Jesus tells a parable about choosing places at a wedding table. The self-promotor takes a place of honour. The one who is simply themselves is free within themselves to take the lowest place. There is a difference between exaltation as self-promotion and exaltation as gift. The gift is for the humble.

Sometimes, in community, how we see ourselves needs to change – regardless of what seat we have chosen, what role we think we should have. Someone who is living with others in a haughty way may find themselves lovingly overlooked. Another may be encouraged to live more confidently. It may be necessary, in love, to wean some of attention while giving attention to others.

Self-expression is about being in humble and confident touch with who we are and our vocational, or heart, direction. Self-promotion can be attention-seeking to ease insecurity, anger, inner pain, loneliness, injustice, driven ambition. With healing comes humility.

A humble person has no need to self-promote. The humble are their deeper, true selves and this is enough. Living as this self is living with the idea of self-promotion forgotten. As we grow in humility pride loses its sting because egocentricity is being lost. This is ascending the ladder.

Yet contemporary culture sees self-promotion as normal. This is how we ‘get-ahead’; it is how we get noticed. In a competitive and individualised environment, self-promotion is seen as necessary.

The spirit of the rule would have us noticed as self-expression interacts with the needs at hand. This kind of noticing requires discernment: seeing what needs to be done and who has the gifts to help meet the need. And so, trust is an important part of communal life. As we grow in humility we grow in trusting others to see who we are. If we are locked in pride trusting others is very hard.

So growing in humility requires courage. It is a courageous act, often in the face of pride, to shift attention from our unmet needs to the needs of community. And yet, paradoxically, this act can also be an act of self-love. Ordinary, everyday acts of gentle kindness are the best ways of beginning, and of continuing. Then, in time, with growing openness to the healing love within and around us, these acts of kindness become the ways we love ourselves as much as we love others. Saying good morning and saying the mantra become the same thing: humble, attentive acts of kindness that have us caring less about ourselves while, at the same time, growing in the divine love-life of God. Humble self-expression is loving forgotten.

Wear constantly the garment of humility to one another, for God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves, then, before the power of God now, so that he may raise you up in due time; casting all your worry on him, since he is concerned about you. (1 Peter 5: 5b-7, RNJB)