Humility
A Pilgrim’s Virtue

Lisa Fullam

The author discusses the virtue of humility and clarifies what it is and what it is not. She uses the pilgrim as the exemplar for seeker of virtue and offers several concrete suggestions for engaging in the practices necessary for formation of a character of virtue.

[A]ll I can say is that you already know that humility is the basis and foundation of all virtues, and that without it there’s no virtue worthy of the name. It smooths obstacles, overcomes difficulties, and is a means which always leads us to glorious ends. It makes enemies into friends, assuages the anger of the irate, and undermines the arrogance of the proud. It’s the mother of modesty, and the sister of moderation. In short, with humility vices can achieve no profitable triumph, because with its softness and meekness it blunts and dulls the arrows of sin. (De Cervantes Saavedra, 260)

Humility is a central virtue in the Christian tradition, praised by Jesus and by saints too numerous to count. To be humble is to imitate Christ, who “did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but . . . humbled himself” (Phil 2:6-8). Matthew’s Jesus describes himself as humble: “for I am gentle and humble in heart . . .” (Matt 11:29). And, Jesus tells us, “All who humble themselves will be exalted” (Matt 23:12).

But humility can be a difficult virtue to love. Humility is often seen as a stance of passivity or self-effacement. How can we reconcile the high status of humility in Christian tradition with a concept of the virtue that seems more about negation

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than about positive action? And even if humility is worth pursuing, what practices might help us become humble?

This essay is an exploration of an uncomfortable virtue in three parts. Part one looks at some ways humility has been misunderstood and proposes a different way of approaching the virtue. Part two breathes life into that description by looking at one Christian archetype of humility, the pilgrim. Part three offers a few suggestions for how we might acquire humility through practicing it.

**Missing the Mark**

Despite its good reputation, humility has been the subject of some pretty unsavory interpretations. I offer three standard—and, I think, fundamentally wrong—versions of humility.

Humility means **lying about ourselves**: “Well, it was no big deal. These days anyone can climb Mt. Everest with a little effort and the right Sherpas. So I’m not really that skilled.” Fundamental to virtue ethics is the notion that we acquire virtues (and vices) by practicing them. This view of humility leads to lying about ourselves. Unintentional, but still untruthful, is the understanding of humility as self-ignorance. Humility, in this view, is seen as a way to get others to love us, since no one will be jealous of a person who either has no skills or believes himself or herself to be nothing special.

Humility means **actively putting ourselves down**. “Oh, that country club record I set at Pebble Beach? Well, I guess that means I spend way too much time practicing my putting. Really, I was just lucky.” Humility in this version seems to require that we belittle or ignore exactly those things about ourselves for which we’ve worked hardest, or which reflect our most unique talents. But doesn’t that mean that we deny or ignore God’s gifts to us? In fact, as Aristotle observed, this kind of humility is really a worse vice than out-and-out grandiose pride, because it seems to inspire people to deny the good they really can accomplish and, therefore, make them less likely to do it. The overly grandiose might look like fools, but at least they are trying to do what they can.

Putting ourselves down has sometimes been carried to extremes in Christian tradition. For example, St Anselm listed several steps in acquiring humility: “to acknowledge oneself contemptible;” “to convince others of this, that is to wish them to believe it; . . . to bear patiently that this be said of us; . . . to suffer oneself to be treated with contempt;” and, finally, “to love being thus treated.” Anselm was both a saint and a scholar, but this seems like a formula for masochism, not virtue. And where this version of humility is not self-imposed but urged on others, it becomes a tool for perpetuating unjust situations in the world.

A third misunderstanding is that humility means **accepting humiliation or subjugation as good for us**. As feminists hold, too often women have been encour-
aged to accept second-class status on grounds of humility. St Paul admonished that women should be silent in churches (1 Cor 14:34). Poor people are told to accept their station in life humbly. African Americans have been told for centuries that they should “know their place.” Too often, humility has been used by the powerful to justify their oppression of others.

Thus, there is a reason to be a little leery of humility. And if these were true representations of what it means to be humble, then humility could rightly be expunged from any Christian account of the virtues. But these are misunderstandings of humility. There are two errors in these accounts.

The first error is that these versions of humility focus on the acts, not the virtue. The second error is that humility means evil behavior—telling lies, belittling our own work, or putting ourselves down. This opens up a key point about the relationship of virtues and actions: our virtues lead us to do good acts, and practicing good acts can build up our virtues. We recognize virtues in the acts of virtuous people, and we imitate the actions of the virtuous to become better people. Aristotle said we become builders by building, lyre-players by playing the lyre, and just by doing acts of justice—and likewise for the other virtues. But a virtue is not an act; a virtue is a state of character that may be cultivated by practicing acts typical of the virtues. Our practices of a virtue must make us people of better character, not worse.

Humility Reconceived

So how shall we understand humility? Richard M. Gula explains, “Humility is the virtue that expresses the realistic acceptance of our gifts and our commitment to do what we can” (125). This is a good description of what humility is once you’ve got it. What those of us who aren’t there yet are seeking is true self-knowledge and an accurate sense of what we can do. To practice humility, then, is to cultivate our capacity for true self-knowledge. Significantly, humility is the habitual practice of seeking self-knowledge, particularly about what we can do in the world.

Does saying that humility strives for a better self-understanding seem like it is an invitation to narcissistic self-absorption? Humility’s self-knowledge is not navel-gazing, and that is where the moral and spiritual power of this virtue lies. We must seek to know ourselves better in light of what a good person can be. Instead of Anselm’s narcissistic “Look at me, I’m contemptible,” we turn our attention outward: “Look at Jesus, Look at the saints, Look at that person of great courage or wisdom or prayer.” We then ask: “How can I, in my life, be more like Jesus, the saint, the great person?” In the language of Christian tradition, this is radical discipleship—to strive to become like Jesus so that we might incarnate Christ in the world. In Eastern Christianity, this dynamic is called theosis—becoming like
God in whose image we were created in the first place. This is the vision of humility that rightly claims first place among the virtues.

**Pilgrimage: Humility on the Road to Virtue**

Thus far my picture of humility is abstract. We need a better characterization of humility. To specify this a little, remember Aristotle: we become builders by building, and we become virtuous by doing virtuous acts. If I seek to be a builder, it isn’t enough for somebody to say, “Go build a house,” if I don’t know how to use a hammer. I must first cultivate the skills of building under the guidance of a master builder, a model or a teacher. Virtues are like this, too. To acquire virtues we first practice them by imitating those who are further along in virtue than we are. Our aim is to reach a point where our actions flow easily and naturally from the virtues we acquire. To act consistently from virtue will always be a challenge, but by practicing virtues in the everyday acts of our lives, they become more a matter of reflex and ease, just as a builder really doesn’t have to think much about driving a nail, but simply does so.

Likewise, if I want to know more about humility, I might look at the other traits that go along with being humble. As a model, I want to look to one Christian archetype of humility, the pilgrim. The theme of pilgrimage runs through centuries of Christian tradition: John Bunyan famously allegorized the Christian life as pilgrimage in *Pilgrim’s Progress*. C. S. Lewis took up the theme in his homage, *Pilgrim’s Regress*. Ignatius of Loyola speaks of himself in his *Autobiography* as “the pilgrim,” and signed much of his correspondence “the poor pilgrim.” Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* tell us stories, good and bad, of the lives of a group of people who find themselves together on pilgrimage. And while the word “pilgrim” doesn’t appear in the NRSV of the Bible, certainly the forty-year wandering of Israel toward the Promised Land and Jesus’ own ministry (“with no where to lay his head”) can be seen as a kind of pilgrimage. So let me offer a few words about pilgrimage and humility, in three steps.

**A Pilgrim Is Not a Tourist**

Most basically, a pilgrimage is a journey whose goal is less to reach a particular destination than to be transformed in the journey itself. Clearly, a pilgrim is distinct from a tourist: a tourist goes somewhere to see something new, while a pilgrim goes somewhere to become someone new. In fact, tourism protects tourists from becoming someone new by insulating them from the unfamiliar or the uncomfortable. “Yes, we were on photo-safari in the Serengeti, but I still had a nice
hot shower every day! And I got my oatmeal for breakfast.” Pilgrimage is an im-
manent, transformative journey, not mere travel. A pilgrim goes seeking Christ
in new places and circumstances. And like the disciples on the road to Emmaus,
pilgrims tend to find that Christ travels with them.

This is why pilgrims serve as a model for what it looks like to be humble: humil-
ity as the virtue for acquiring virtue leads us to be seekers of God at play in the
world. As pilgrims seek God, so the humble ask God to open their eyes to how
God is already and always with them and ahead of them as they go.

A Pilgrim Risks and Trusts

Traditionally, pilgrimage involves risk, and the virtue of the risk-taker is trust.
Pilgrims set out from familiar ground toward whatever destination they have
in mind. Setting out on the road makes us strangers and vulnerable, easy prey to
hucksters and pickpockets. The good news is that the world is full of kind people
who will come to our aid. The mark of a pilgrim, then, is vulnerability but also
receptivity, openness to the gifts offered along the way. A pilgrim’s journey is a
vote of confidence that God will look out for the wandering stranger as God cared
for Israel in the desert. It also expresses confidence in our fellow human beings
that someone will help us with a meal or a room for a night. Humility begins with
the acknowledgment that we are vulnerable. It calls us to grateful receptivity of
the gifts given us by the people we encounter and to trust in the providence of
God who is the source of all good gifts.

But there’s another kind of risk and trust involved in pilgrimage. By leaving
home and traveling to places where they are strangers, pilgrims leave behind the
usual social supports and contexts that define us in our communities. Pilgrims
come to know themselves in light of the trials of the journey. We see something
similar when young people go off to college, where they have a chance to redeter-
mine what kind of person they’ll be. As adults, we encounter fewer of these
chances to meet ourselves, to find out how unfamiliar circumstances will challenge
us, and to learn how we’ll respond. Humility cultivates a sense of who we are by
setting us loose from our usual surroundings.

Being away from the usual structures of our lives also sets us outside the usual
sources of our social status. The pilgrim is no longer a teacher or a carpenter, but
just a pilgrim. The group in Canterbury Tales was a mixed bunch of people who
held in common only their state as pilgrims. In pilgrimage, identity is blurred,
boundaries are blurred, and we meet people with a freedom that our usual social
location might prevent. Imagine fishermen, rich folks, Pharisees, tax collectors,
and prostitutes all together on pilgrimage with some carpenter from a backwater
town called Nazareth. Only in the context of such an erasing of status could this
group begin to see what the reign of God might look like.
A third layer of risk and trust in pilgrimage lies in the most radical vulnerability of the pilgrim to risk being remade in the journey. To be open to God is to obey Jesus’ words to those who would follow him: “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 18:2). Humility means that we risk radical vulnerability and trust God to remake us in Jesus’ image.

**A Pilgrim Is a Witness**

A final trait of pilgrims important for understanding humility is that a pilgrim is a witness. Certainly the pilgrim’s stance of openness to the new, the willingness to risk and trust, is a form of witness to confidence in the providential grace of God. The transformation of the pilgrim by God is witness to how God acts in us and for us, when we seek with “a sincere heart.” This aspect of pilgrimage as witness is clearest when the pilgrim comes home. One of the most striking contemporary accounts of pilgrimage can be found in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Among the fruits of his pilgrimage to Mecca was Malcolm’s shattering sense of the common dignity of all human beings seeking to serve Allah.

The humble person is witness to the work of God in himself or herself and in others. Sometimes the truly humble person can even sound proud: she might say, for example, that God “has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant,” and because of this, “from now on all generations will call me blessed” (Luke 1:48). She might go on to tell how this is typical of God who has “scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly” (Luke 1:51). That’s what humility sounds like—not self-abnegation, but celebration of the solidarity of God with all humanity, and most especially the insignificant, the powerless, the ignored. The role of the humble pilgrim is to witness to the love of God for all humanity. Real humility calls us to align ourselves preferentially with the powerless, so that the structures that divide the human community into strata based on race, sex, wealth, education, or whatever demarcation are destroyed. Humility doesn’t lower us; it raises us all up together as children of one God.

**Practice for Growth in Humility**

Because virtues are states of character, no list of actions can be complete. Virtues in this sense are inherently creative: the virtuous person manifests virtue in new ways in each new situation. It is also true that no particular act can guarantee that we will acquire virtue—we must act with attentiveness and with
the intention of internalizing the disposition of character that the act signifies. But there are acts that can help create the possibility for growth in virtue, just as a piano student practices scales in order to become a piano player. Hopefully, practicing scales leads to making music, an art that transcends and includes facility at playing scales. So here are a few ideas, offered not to exhaust the practices of humility, but to suggest some ways in which humility might be fostered in us as we continue our pilgrimage back to God.

First, consider making a pilgrimage. Whether you travel to Jerusalem or to a local shrine, what matters is the journey. For example, pilgrims go to the corner in Louisville where Thomas Merton realized that he loved all the people he saw there on the street and so experienced a manifestation of God’s love for humankind. It’s just a street corner, but it’s a street corner where Merton met God and became more like him. Since the goal of the pilgrim is not merely to see but to become, the actual destination is less important than the pilgrim’s willingness to be a pilgrim. Your pilgrimage might even be walking the Stations of the Cross or a labyrinth. When we walk slowly and attentively with Jesus, we are pilgrims.

For those who are able, though, you might leave familiar surroundings and go where you may be uncomfortable or where you are a stranger. The point is not just to be uncomfortable, but to seek the face of God, to ask God to help us understand ourselves and to show us who we are and what we can do. So volunteering in an unfamiliar place like a nursing home or a prison or a soup kitchen can be a practice of humility. Have the attitude of a pilgrim, an attentive seeker, and you will be graced.

A third way to grow in humility is to learn something new. Early in his travels the pilgrim Ignatius discovered that his education was inadequate for his mission, and he found himself sitting as an adult surrounded by schoolchildren learning Latin. He set aside the usual status of an adult. He “became like a child” in fidelity to his vocation. We might seek God in exploring another religion or the teaching of another Christian denomination or learning about another culture. Study puts us in new territory. Looking for God brings us new challenges, shows us our gifts and limitations, and reveals the wonder of the gifts and generosity of others in sharing them. These fruits of the journey will take us closer to humility’s goal.

Fourth, the Ignatian examen prayer is a valuable practice in cultivating humility, a imaginative walk through the day with Jesus. In an examen, sometimes called an examination of conscience, we begin by reminding ourselves that we are in the presence of God who is love. Then we move slowly through the events of the past

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day, asking how God was present and where God was painfully absent. Next we offer to God the insights and pains of the day. Then we ask God to continue to guide us along the way and to trust God to remake us in the likeness of Christ.

Finally, the sacrament of reconciliation can be an avenue of self-knowledge by self-assessment. I think this is especially true if our preparation for the sacrament is cast as a serious assessment of our character in light of the witness of Jesus. A warning here: since virtues cannot be summed up in acts, we cannot be responsible for everything. Preparing for confession by looking at my successes and failures in justice, for example, means that I need to look at the ways in which I, in the circumstances in which I find myself, have or have not responded to injustice and sought to establish a more just world. Too often the sacrament of reconciliation has been seen as the occasion for acknowledging ourselves as contemptible. Instead, we might acknowledge ourselves imperfect, but capable of greater perfection, greater virtue, greater holiness.

For Christians, the life of virtue is a life of discipleship. The humility that we’re called to in imitating Christ is far from the common caricature of narcissistic self-abasement or untruthfulness. Christian humility is more the characteristic of the adventurous pilgrim who sets out in risk and trust to become someone new. Humility turns our attention outside ourselves to a vision of human life exemplified in Jesus and refracted in the faces of the countless saints who are our fellow pilgrims on the road. On this road we will set our sights toward the goal of all Christian striving—the reign of God. That reign is not a place; it is a people transformed into the likeness of Christ who is our guide, our model, and our companion on the road.

References

Anselm. Liber de Similitudinibus, 101ff. Cited by Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, 2a2a, q. 161, art. 6, obj. 3.
