

ST. JOSEMARIA INSTITUTE PODCAST

## HUMILITY AND THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. My Lord and my God, I firmly believe that you are here, that you see me, that you hear me. I adore you with profound reverence. I ask your pardon for my sins and the grace to make this time of prayer fruitful. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph, my father and Lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.

With your permission, Lord Jesus Christ, truly present with us in the Blessed Sacrament, we come before you, Lord and we come here to incarnate your teachings which are Spirit and Life into our daily practice by living some form of your total gift of self. We find you because the Holy Spirit in John's First Epistle says that God is *agape*. He's self-giving love. And to the degree that I give of myself, to that degree, in this life, I see God. I actually see God in an indirect way, in shadows, as I replicate - which we'll never do perfectly - his self-giving love.

And we make that act of faith that the Lord will arrange circumstances in our life so that we have opportunities to be purified so little by little, I am empowered to exercise that self-giving love to God directly in prayer and suffering, and to Jesus Christ through loving of those around us, first our immediate family, our extended family, our friends, our colleagues, including - that's one of the charms of the Gospel - people who have injured us and hurt us.

The topic of this conversation with Jesus is "humility as triumph." I'm plagiarizing St. Josemaria - he wrote a homily in *Christ is Passing By*, that "Christ Triumphs through Humility." And perhaps you've had that same experience reading through the Gospels, that our Lord's teaching and some of his actions seem contradictory - are certainly counterintuitive. And one of them is the way he deals with sinners, that he, in a sense, canonizes them. I don't mean he declares them saints. But he never says anything denigrating. He doesn't castigate them, number one.

And why I do say that? Because his entire Gospel raises a bar that is impossible to reach totally in this life. We have the saints who have come pretty close, but even in this life, they've never reached it totally. What do I mean by that? -That I need to mark my life by being a great foot-washer. That's a big deal in the eyes of Our Lord, of all the things he could have exhorted his Apostles, especially in his last evening - "I want you, twelve men" - or one left, eleven men - "who is going to revolutionize history, who's going to market God made man."

"Of all the things I want to tell you is: I want you to learn how to wash some feet here." It's not very practical, he didn't lose his mind. John keeps reminding, he knew who he was, he knew who he was. You know, he was Lord and Master, and he says, I know I'm Lord and Master. I know I'm God, that's the word for God in the Old Testament. They would be very reluctant to use the word *Yahweh*. He said, I want you do the same thing. This is a teaching device, so that's a very high bar.

Another high bar - we're not going to go through every high bar - but I can't be his disciple unless I deny myself and take up my cross daily. Another high bar. I've got to pray at all times. I have to renounce everything I have. Ouch. And the kind of no-nonsense in his teaching. And if you're not willing to renounce everything you have, you're not going to, you can't be my disciple. And then he gets even more radical in setting a high bar. He said if you're going to be on my team, you have to be like that grain of wheat and hate your life.

Now, this is Mideastern hyperbole - you don't take that literally because it's pretty sinful, but we get the message. And he continues with his high bar that even if you desire, look at a woman impurely, you have committed, according to the Sermon on the Mount, adultery in your heart. If you call your friend or your brother a fool, you're liable for hell. Jesus led up here, you're liable for damnation. So that's a high bar, but how do you make this compatible with this quotation:

"For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors," I guess that's the equivalent to organized crime, the tax collectors they extorted, they were violent, they didn't practice their Jewish religion. They were thieves. They were dishonest. Blasphemers. "You did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the harlots believed him. And even when you saw it, you did not afterward repent."

And then another Gospel, another verse of the Gospel, saying the tax collectors and the harlots will enter into the Kingdom before you. Counterintuitive! Sounds like a contradiction, and the biggest contradiction, at least in my estimation, and I am morally certain that his followers were quite confused. Now he becomes even more contradictory. There's a Pharisee - now the Pharisees are pretty good. I mean, let's not throw out the baby with the bathwater. I mean they lived a little bit more or less the Ten Commandments. They were truthful, they were honest, just, faithful to their wives. They prayed a lot, I mean in comparison to everybody else. They were generous with their almsgiving. So, I would say they were the upper echelon of the chosen people. And, our Lord says he can't cut it.

And then we have this guy who is probably everything the Pharisees accused him of. I just read it: "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus within himself, 'God, I thank you that I'm not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week. I give tithes of all that I get.' But the tax collector standing far off would not even lift up his eyes to heaven but beat his breast saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!' I tell you this, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other, for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Lord, help us unpack this. Let's see what we read from *The Way* to get a little bit more enlightened: "Don't feel hurt when others see your faults. What should really distress you is the offense against God and the scandal you may give. Apart from that, may you be known for what you are and be despised," don't take it literally, "don't be sorry if you are nothing, because then Jesus will have to put everything into you."

I think that's the linchpin that resolves the contradiction because faith and reason have to mesh. So far, things seem pretty unreasonable. Let me just read this again: "Don't be sorry if you are nothing because then Jesus will have to put everything into you." I recall... I was a, a number of years ago, layman, young priest, I was younger but not that young, and obviously, we all want to be idealistic and holy and all that,

and this person still had his ordination oils still fresh on the palms of his hands. And he was an enthusiastic whippersnapper, and he was doing some exhorting.

The gentleman, if I recall correctly, was hinting that he was going through a few difficult spells. And the priest said, "Well, you want to offer that up!" Now one thing is when you've been through the mill and you say, "Well, offer that up," that's okay. But when you can be the guy's son and you haven't really experienced much of life, well yeah, of course, you offer it up, that's, you can't dispute that kind of advice. But make sure it's not condescending, and make sure it's, you can identify with that person. Don't make it so simplistic.

And this generic person, because these things happen, wanted to speak with an older priest. And I would ask, "Well, what's wrong with the younger guy? He's got his act together." Said, "Well, that's probably- that's the- he's- you- I don't think he's really seen enough to understand me. I don't want to scandalize the younger person." Says, "I need someone who knows a little bit more about human weakness because of his pastoral ministry." And so, it's, it's counterintuitive but it's clarified. Our Lord never endorses sinful behavior, but he does go "gaga" over sinners who recognize their sin and repent. Why this heavy emphasis on humility?

I would say two reasons. If without humility, the biggest obstacle to following Christ is our sense of self-excellence. Now, I mean hey, I know I have excellent people here, talented men here, good professionals. I don't mean, "Hey, I'm just going to be, I'm going to lie to myself and just deny that I have gifts." No, you do have gifts! But you're not the genesis of these gifts.

As this, now he's retired, I knew this professional football player, and he said "Well, you know, I hang out my friends and play every sport possible and when I was about sixth grade, I threw the ball three times further than anybody else. And any time I touched a ball or a bat, we'd win." I said, "Okay, so what are you trying to tell me?" He said, "I didn't know I had this! I thought everybody was like me until I got a little older and then I was leaving everybody in the dust. He became a professional athlete."

Now I'd say the same thing with our gifts, they come from, we're not the origin of those gifts. And this especially applies to my life of love, of self-giving love. The more self-centered I am, the more smug I am, the more debilitated I am on the order of discipleship. Just to do some saintly name-dropping. You know, it's not easy to know blessed and saints, you know, but the one I know the best is a blessed. I didn't know he was going to be a blessed.

And I would see him a lot. He was my prelate, and he was the first successor of Saint Josemaria, Blessed Alvaro del Portillo. And it was always about the needs of others. I noticed that even before really knowing him, it was very easy to open up and tell him everything because there is nothing - you tell him anything! - and you would not be afraid to tell them anything. And it wasn't just me, okay? He would be at every Synod of Bishops in Rome, and during the recess and the intermission - trust me, this is huge - people going to the bathroom and getting a cup of coffee and whatever, they would pull him aside and ask him for Confession.

So, he'd be busy hearing his brother bishops' Confessions. And I would say, I know from personal experience, that he was all for you and all sorts of things you don't know about him, what he did was never brought up. And people said, you know, people said, "What are you praying for?" "I never pray for myself," he said. He said, "I pray for others. I pray for those I, the faithful of the, of Opus Dei, and those in touch with Opus Dei, and my friends. I pray for others. I'm for others, and I figure if I think about others the Lord will take

care of me. But I can't really love others if there's too much of 'me' in me. If there's a lot of love for myself, inordinate love. I need to be literally filled with the heart of Christ."

Two. Without a sense of my sinfulness and weakness, I'll never have a real spiritual life. Why? "I don't need God!" Isn't that the characteristic of when things are going well on a material level, on an emotional level, on a health level? "Things are going well. I don't need God." But when I'm more cognizant that we're all sinners, then I really grow. See, we Americans - if I were with Frenchman, I'd say, we French, but I'm not a Frenchman - but we Americans, and there's a good part to that, we're into performance, but we can't be into performance when it comes to humility and charity.

Love may overlap with performance, but it's not performance. It's not, "Finally I've made it as a humble man. I'm going to give this meditation on humility because I'm good at it!" You'd say, "Get somebody else." All right? I'm not supposed to say that, let alone believe it. Now, Paul was a great saint and attracted many people to the Lord: St. Peter, St. Augustine, all the Apostles. What happened here? Let me just give you a snippet.

All right, Paul is a mystic, brilliant theologian. But him and Peter share one thing in common - they're disciples of Our Lord, obviously, but one thing in common: they both had big falls. One got off to the wrong foot when the pope denies the other knows Christ. So, you know, there's hope for all of us. Peter denies Christ and Peter can never forget. And tradition, and it's veritable tradition, St. Peter's Church, on the top mosaic of Peter's crucifixion where he's crucified up, upside down because he doesn't have the dignity, he said to the executioner, to die like the master. So, we see that this weakness of his has dogged him for his entire life, even to his own execution.

And Paul's virulent destruction of the Church in those early years would never let him go. Virtually in every epistle, it's there, that destruction of Christianity, that he led, and now he's going to make reparation. And so, we have that perspective. Saint Augustine, another experienced sinner, says that God, in his love and mercy - and I would say in Augustine's theology, there's three elements there. One is conversion. Conversion's always there, the need to rely on our Lord. The other one is the Gospels, and especially the Epistles of Saint Paul. And thirdly, don't worry about that one, Neoplatonism.

And because that, he, because someone who knows he's sinful, relies on our Lord, needs our Lord. I mean his act of contrition comes from the gut, "Have mercy on me Lord." And here's Paul, the celebrated self-revelation, he's, I don't know what kind of temptation he had, but he was tempted in the flesh, so, could have been, who knows, could've been temptations against purity, or could've been a temptation of pride, I don't know. He doesn't specify. But let's read this:

"And to keep me from being too elated by the abundance of revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'"

Because I complain, very good people complain, "Why doesn't our Lord remove this? This weakness, this temptation, these little, these falls?" "My grace is sufficient for you; my power is made perfect in weakness" if we're contrite. Let's continue: "I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of

Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities, for when I am weak, then I am strong.” That’s why our Lord will invite us. We’re free not to be humiliating, be humbled, but I don’t- that’s not the good use of freedom. I want to say no to self, Lord, so I can be filled with you. “I can do great things in him who strengthens me,” that’s St. Paul.

Let’s close our prayer going to the Blessed Mother who also talks about, “He has looked upon my humility and done great things through me.” Our Lord triumphs through my humility. I become a light through the self-knowledge and repentance, little things, bigger things, my lukewarmness, and then I acquire that compassion of Christ, that joy of Christ, that affection of Christ, that understanding of Christ, that interior life that relies on our Lord. Mary, pray for us so that we see that humility is your Son’s triumph through me.

I thank you my God for the good resolutions, affections, and inspirations you have communicated to me in this meditation. I ask your help in putting them into effect. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph, my father and Lord, my guardian angel intercede for me.



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