
The Three Phases of Humility

Three "degrees" of humility once raised in people's minds the image of three dynamic ways of living under God. "Phases" raises in our minds the changes that a living being passes through, more or less permanent, epigenetic (they build on one another), and always moving toward some kind of fulfillment and completion.

Humility is not a quality or a status, like eye color or height. Rather, it is the ongoing, appropriate enacting of a relationship, first of all of a relationship with God. Humility is like health (a complex set of relationships); it goes up and down, is more or less intense, good or bad.

The humble person positively, gladly, and creatively accepts creaturehood. She affirms her limitedness in concrete particulars. She embraces having to depend entirely, in all, on God and actually delights in that. She does not demand to control everything in life, but deals with life as with a surprising series of gifts.

The humble person accepts creaturehood as she finds it. She includes in this humankind's sinful condition, and that sinfulness in herself. This acquiescence in the way things are—I do not mean connivance, and I do not mean passivity—flows from the decision to see things as they are and not to retreat into the subtle rejection of God's creating and governing by refusing to see things as they really are.

The first sign of the mere presence of humility comes when a person knows herself and her life world, with some clarity and objectivity. This is what the old dictum means: "Humility is truth."

But as Scripture says, we are to do the truth lovingly. This means that humility must be enacted. It is not merely an attitude, and it is much less merely a feeling.

THE FIRST PHASE

I see the world as it is. I see myself, first of all, desiring certain things. I might, for example, want a certain job or to live in a certain city. However, I understand that I do not determine which of my desires lead to my authentic life and to my deep happiness; I

depend on God for that. God the Creator and Lord has created certain values for and in me, so when I evaluate any thing or any action, I cannot make up the rules on my own. So, if I value very highly writing a certain letter in order to get the job I want, and then realize that writing this letter would violate my own conscience very gravely—then I do not write the letter. God sets my values. To use language we once all used: I want and value certain things very highly, but I would not under any circumstances choose to place a desire or a value that I have in front of the desires and values that God writes into my own conscience. I depend on God for my conscience. I am gifted by God with a conscience—this concrete conscience, with its own dictates. I acquiesce in having my own conscience and I acquiesce in the concrete dictates of that conscience. I am glad to depend on God and to acquiesce.

To put it succinctly: I live to obey God who speaks in my spirit. For I know this: God has placed deepest in me a desire for Himself and I have chosen to enact my desire to belong to God before I enact any other desire, and I will enact no desire that would separate me from God. This is the first phase of humility.

THE SECOND PHASE

I begin to find in myself the desire to find God and to grow to love God. I do not spend my time "avoiding sin"; rather, I spend my time finding God. In this mind-set, I would not go against my own conscience deliberately even in relatively unimportant things. It is not so much that I want to keep from offending God and violating my own honesty and integrity. I have changed in this, that I have chosen to love God, and not just to obey God. Of course, I still want career, and job, and very much else, and in the pursuit of these things I often discover that I can attain a very impor-

tant objective by just the mildest violation of my own conscience. I generally manage not to do that. I fear God, of course, and I dread acting unauthentically. One thing helps a good deal: I see how vain and empty much of the world is. I see how futilely I would live, for example, were I to give myself entirely to the job I love. I would be a fool to count on earthly things to give me lasting happiness—they don't last. So, I see and perceive from within my own creaturehood. I have happily accepted the wisdom of the prophets and the wise of old: The Lord's is the earth and all that is in it. But the fact is that I would find it impossible to follow my conscience so carefully except that a great love is growing in my life.

THE THIRD PHASE

In this phase, I come to see the earth and all that is in it through other eyes: the human eyes of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus came into a culture utterly unlike my own except in certain essentials: people then wanted wealth, power, fame, and pleasure just as people today want them. Jesus went against culture and human inclinations, by choosing to be born poor and to live poor, by electing to join the powerless and the outcast. I do not find it so easy to go against culture. I take my culture into myself and then contribute to it in my turn; and following that culture, I want to know a lot and to be known as wise, to have many skills and to be known as an accomplished person, to have wealth and to be known as a solid citizen. But along comes my Lord Jesus Christ. I am seized by His Spirit, and filled with His love. I come to love Him to this extent, that I really want to see as He saw, evaluate as He evaluated, appreciate as He appreciated, and simply to live the way He lived. He so humbled Himself that He poured Himself out, living like the lower classes, making the simplest and the most outcast welcome in His company, always serving. He kept on His course even when the choices He made under the Spirit led to great suffering and to a cruel death. I find to my astonishment that I want very much to follow along after Him in all that. I deliberately suppress any desire to

be famous, powerful, wealthy, and known to be wise. I want to live as He lived. However, I do not demand that specific kind of life from God my Creator. I accept with my whole heart that the choice does not finally rest with me; and humility means precisely that I acquiesce in what God our Lord creates in me.

In this phase of humility, some find themselves in this state of mind: I know that I am a sinful person, and I find it astonishing that I feel summoned to intimate friendship with Jesus Christ. I know that His way leads to dying to the self. I know His way leads to the cross. While I do not feel impelled to go looking for suffering or invited to inflict suffering on myself, I do feel perfectly ready to take whatever suffering comes along, and I will accept it as from the hand of God because then I will be following Jesus:

Some find themselves in the following state of mind: I have come to love Jesus Christ with my whole self, and even if I am a sinful person, I want to be really poor so I can be like Him. I want to be misunderstood and looked down on. I truly desire to experience these hard things with Jesus, as long as no one who inflicts them on me insults God or offends his or her own conscience. For Jesus chose to live this way. He lived a quiet and hidden life, for a long time. He was let down and disappointed. I truly want all that, because I will be following Him more closely.

These are three phases or degrees of humility. They are three ways of loving God. They are also three ways of acknowledging my own creaturehood, and three ways of entering into what it means to let God shape my values. The first is the way of the commandments. The second is the way of creative, active indifference. The third is the way of imitating Christ.

If I can let my own desires rise, I can take them first to the Lady Mary and ask that she ask Jesus to call me where He wants me. Then I ask Jesus to grant me to live authentically, and to give me the courage to live as His Spirit leads me. Finally, I turn full-hearted to the Father.❖

The Words of Life

Our purpose in contemplating Jesus' life is to come to know Him better—not the way a scholar knows Scripture or a historian someone's biography, but the way friends know one another. The more they know one another, the better they like one another. And usually, themselves as well.

We want to know and to like Jesus because we believe that He is the Way to life for us. He also is immensely lovable in Himself, and has drawn millions to love Him with all their hearts. Jesus chooses not to be Lord merely, but friend. In a wonderful miracle, He does become friend to those who accept Him.

We also want to know what Jesus said. Thomas Jefferson collected Jesus' sayings twice (someone stole the first list from his baggage, he thought). He rewrote Jesus'

words because he found them so profound and true. We can be sure, because of the teaching of the Church, that the words we read in the approved translations of the Gospels are faithful to what Jesus actually said in His own tongue.

As these days go by, you are very likely to find some of the things that Jesus did and some of the things that He said filled with meaning and significance for you. You would be foolish to let those words get away and slip into oblivion. They are words to live by. The weight they carry in your spirit measures the hope of the Holy Spirit in you. They are like atomic rods in your life that will radiate and generate energy in your spirit the rest of your life. ❖

A Readjustment of Life

We go through a spiritual experience when we approach the mid-life crisis. Here are some thoughts about it.

- Even had I not been growing and maturing, my interior life would have shifted significantly during the past thirty years because of huge shifts in the nation, church, and world.
- Some years ago, I felt convinced that all I had to do was use my spiritual muscles to escape sin and make myself holy. Now, because the Church has been teaching us from our family treasures, I know my own radical poverty before God. I am helpless to escape sin and death; God alone is my helper.
- Going through the Ignatian Exercises, I might have entered into a "spiritual childhood." I find it no easier than the brazen, muscular Israelite warriors who had to learn to be "brides of Yahweh." I find out in Ephesians that I am Christ's bride. My task is surrender. I find this astounding. I know that the only way I could catch on to this would be to pray for the rest of my life.
- My greatest problem: I find in myself—perhaps every person does—a blank place, a dark hole, a tough resistance that I do not want to be there. I hate it. Some habit, some sin, some personality trait. I reject it. I have in the past demanded that God remove it. I almost threatened not to love God unless I got rid of it.
- Romantics hope for a dramatic metanoia. They yearn to just walk away from their sinning into a wholehearted life in Christ. God does indeed give such a gift to some, and I am wise to beg for it myself, always mindful that it is a special gift.
- I learn that I am to be the same sinner when I am old as I was when I was young. I had taken comfort in what Paul said to the Philippians. "I am no longer trying for perfection by my own efforts." But now I understand that I face a very tough situation: I will die a sinner. Sinning.
- I find in my life things that I feel uneasy about. Life-style, motives at work, too little autonomy and too much attention to others' opinions, attachments, addictions, opinions, ignorances, relationships (friends, relatives, sexual), too much drudgery and too little creativity.
- They really boil down to this: I am saying no to God in many particulars in my life. I refuse to be a creature—not in general, but in this attitude, that relation; this habit, that attachment. I find that I have not been able to say the yes. I am helpless.
- My radical readjustment begins with this: I will so dispose myself, so live and think and desire, that God my Lord can say that yes in me, and say all those little yeses that I have wanted to say and have not been able to say. I will wait upon the Lord. If with humankind it is impossible—with God all things are possible. ❖

Power and Love

As we go through our middle age, we confirm a basic choice we have been making for a long time. Am I going to reach for power, or am I going to open myself to love? Will I fight for control over my life, or yield myself to the demands of love? I can take either way and still hope for God's mercy, but I cannot doubt which way the Spirit of God invites me to live.

We find ourselves surrounded by people who have made that fundamental choice. They are not divided between the bitter and disgruntled and the cheerful and creative. We find both kinds of people living out both of the choices. We also find people in every vocation living both choices. Each of us has to choose for himself.

Those who reach for power want, more than anything else, control over their lives. They may want to choose what kind of work they do and refuse to let others' needs influence their decision. They might drag their families all around the country for the sake of job promotions, for example, or simply refuse to spend enough time to rear their children because they work twelve- or fourteen-hour days. They want complete control over their own time. If every other kind of control fails them, they will keep tight control over their attitudes and opinions, refusing to let friends' convictions really influence them, or staying far away from the Church's teaching.

The interior consequences of this option for power emerge constantly. Those who go for control tend to tell very little about themselves. They keep their own counsel and are rarely open and frank with others, even with their own spouses. Self-revelation, after all, threatens our control over ourselves and over others. They will hold on to their own opinions and tend not to really listen to others' opinions. They ordinarily have a difficult time with authority, perhaps criticizing and ignoring their superiors or being subservient and manipulating them. Even those who do not want to hold authority tend to think that they could do a better job of running things than those who are in authority. Above all, they show their choice of power in the way they live friendships. They do not allow them-

selves to be vulnerable to others. They may be very happy to help others when others are in need, but they want to choose what help they will give and when they will give it. They are rarely lonesome (the hard feeling of actually missing a concrete person); their usual pain is loneliness (the harsh feeling of insulation, alienation, of there not being anyone there for me). Yet, those who opt for power do not really confront their own inner brokenness; that they are both sinful and called by Christ is a theological truth they consent to, not a religious truth that they live in and out of.

Those who choose the way of love, on the contrary, know their own brokenness and out of that humbling knowledge, let the Spirit of Life lead them on to growth. The immediate reality in this way is openness to friendship and perhaps also to intimacy (even very reserved people know intimacy). Those who choose the way of love are very active in forming and enjoying friendships. They come to know at a deep level that they need to die to selfish ways that mar friendship. They risk being vulnerable, having to grow and change under the influence of their friends and colleagues. At some point, even if they are married, they recognize that they have to give up possessing the other, and let him be himself. As they grow in love of God, they see that some friendships focus on doing and making, but others relate almost exclusively to our humanness. Those on this way continually deepen in compassion. They experience powerlessness again and again, always finding it difficult, and always finding truth in the experience. They are glad just to live and work with those God puts into their lives. When they are asked to take on some authority, they take it in the general conviction that they can help people, more concerned to serve and help than to get some job done—even if they are astoundingly efficient.

Does this go some distance toward distinguishing two ways of life? It is important to distinguish them in yourself, as you make the many choices that lead down these two different roads. Only one of them is truly Christ's way. ❖

Three Times When We Come to Decisions and Choices

When you are seriously trying to serve God and grow in love of Jesus Christ, you will face many decisions and choices. Notice how differently you might make them.

Sometimes, as you realize that you face a choice, you come to know at the same time what you are to do—easily, and without any doubt. You might choose to marry, to move to another place, to let go of some habit, as though the choice just grew from within your life and your self. You know that you have decided or chosen, and cannot doubt that you have done it well.

Other times when you face a choice, you find yourself acting differently. You work to a decision or a choice only with a lot of emotional ruction. You experience desire and fear and hope and confusion and clarity, all mixed together, and you swing back and forth to one option and then another. Finally, though, you have a pretty sound grasp of what you want to do.

At still other times, you come to realize quietly and calmly that you face a decision or a choice. You remain tranquil as you think through exactly what the decision or choice entails, what it will result in, and its importance. You place it under the light of faith and hope, and choose for the love of God.

Now, about the first time, when you make a decision or a choice easily and without being able to doubt whether you have done it well: Consider that decision or choice a gift of the Holy Spirit.

About the second time, when you are pulled and pushed around by emotions and desires and affects: You will need to pray more. You will need to keep mindful of what you know about yourself. And you will be very smart to have someone to talk with about the decision or choice. Once you have decided or chosen, you can expect either of two kinds

of eventual result: If you have chosen authentically and according to the hopes of God, you will find yourself at deeper peace than before. You will be clearer and more hopeful. If, on the other hand, you have followed fad or fashion or some ambition that unbalances you, then, after you have decided, you will find yourself less at peace than before. You are likely to feel confusion in your spirit and wonder whether you can ever figure out what to do. The eventual result, obviously, will tell you a good deal about whether you decided and chose for the love of God, or for self-love.

Finally, about the third time, when you are tranquil: First, you need to be very clear what the choice is (sometimes we make a choice hidden under another choice). Second, keep in your mind that God the Lord continually creates you, shapes you, and makes your deepest desire to love God. Third, continually beg God the Lord to help you choose well and decide properly. Fourth, without fear, look at the pros and cons on both sides. Thus, if you face a decision to marry or not to marry—you know reasons for marrying and reasons against marrying; you know reasons for not marrying and reasons against not marrying. Or if you face a choice between teaching and writing—you know reasons for teaching and reasons against teaching; you know reasons for writing and reasons against writing. Those who serve God eagerly want to be thorough, and know themselves completely! Fifth: Among all the reasons, choose to follow the more serious ones, the more spiritual ones; refuse to follow trivial likes and dislikes. Sixth, offer whatever decision or choice you make to God the Lord, begging that it be according to His hopes for you. Then watch to see whether peace and joy follow on your choice, even if you chose something very difficult. You will find that they always do when you have chosen according to God's hopes. ♦