**HUMILITY AND THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY**

Humility is a virtue difficult to translate for people in today’s world. However, we do recognise its absence. In an article written in 2007, Tom Frame, Australian Anglican Bishop, reflected on humility in a helpful way.

The humble have an ability to recognise and to celebrate greatness for its own sake and do not feel personally diminished in complementing others. Disinterestedness and self- forgetfulness mark the attitude of the humble[[1]](#footnote-1)

This reminds us that being humble is not about putting ourselves above or below others: we acknowledge our own achievements but equally those of others. Bishop Frame goes on to explore the virtue, “true humility is to see others in the same way that we see ourselves.”[[2]](#footnote-2) This is the essence of humility and a great way to understand it. He finishes his discussion by saying:

A person who becomes the servant of all cannot be the slave of anyone. They are freed from self-centredness and find liberty to live virtuously.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Vincent and Louise had a similar understanding of humility, one centred on Christ, the model of self-sacrifice and the attitude of service. Both have much to teach us about the virtue and how to make it a more active part of our lives.

**Vincent and Humility**

Vincent’s understanding of humility changed over his life’s journey. An ambitious young man, he wanted to succeed in the world and make a good life for himself and his family. Fr Luigi Mezzadri tells us that humility did not come naturally to Vincent.[[4]](#footnote-4) However, his arrival in Paris marked a change in him. He met and was influenced by de Berulle and Duval. He was also influenced by the experience of being accused of theft of which he did not defend himself.

This episode reveals in Vincent less concern with self-advancement and public image and an emerging resemblance to his silent Master. [[5]](#footnote-5)

This change was gradual and although he was ambitious, he had within him the desire to follow God and serve him. Another important event in his life was the experience of doubt. During three or four years he suffered crippling doubts about his faith. This experience taught Vincent about suffering and poverty. As Fr Hugh O’Donnell says:

This prolonged experience of anguish, desperation, and suffering raises the question: Who was the poorest person Vincent ever met? The answer that suggests itself is that he himself was.[[6]](#footnote-6)

It is in Vincent’s writings that we find the greatest evidence of how important humility was to him and how his understanding of it developed. Since we have few early letters of Vincent, ten of which were written before 1625, we, therefore, do not see the real Vincent until he was well into his ministry and his virtue was developing. In 1628 Vincent described himself and the role of humility in the Company:

Since I left, God has been pleased to make use of this wretch to convert three people; but I must admit that meekness, humility, and patience in dealing with these poor misguided people was the essence of this good work... I wished to tell you this to my confusion, so that the Company might see that, if God has been pleased to make use of its most ignorant and wretched member, He will make much more effective use of each one in the Company.[[7]](#footnote-7)

To our ears today Vincent’s talk of himself as a wretch is jarring. Our understanding of humility does not involve putting ourselves down; we understand that we can be detached from pride without seeing ourselves completely abhorrent. What we can learn from Vincent is that he saw himself as the instrument of God on whom he depended for guidance in life and ministry.

In a letter in 1640 to Jacques Tholard, Vincent gives him advice about how to cultivate humility:

Be very cheerful and humble yourself as much as you can. Ordinarily, God allows these things to happen to free us from some hidden pride and to engender in us holy humility. They will diminish in the measure that you humble your understanding, and will disappear when you have made noticeable progress in that virtue. Strive therefore to acquire it.[[8]](#footnote-8)

These words of wisdom were given to his confrere as he was experiencing difficulty with being obedient to his superiors and with other temptations. Vincent’s wisdom and experience allow him to encourage Jacques to learn from his struggles and to use them to help him understand other people’s struggles. In another letter to a priest being sent to Madagascar his advice is tender as he instructs him to place his trust in God:

Humility alone, Monsieur, is capable of bearing this grace, and perfect abandonment of all that you are and can be, in exuberant trust in your Sovereign Creator, must follow.[[9]](#footnote-9)

If we abandon ourselves to God with anything like the “exuberant trust” of Vincent then God can work through us.

in 1652 Vincent writes to a Brother:

Practice humility and patience; you need these two virtues to attain true charity, and they are also necessary for all who wish to serve Jesus Christ.[[10]](#footnote-10)

By this time he is well advanced on the spiritual journey and has a great understanding of the requirements for the service of people living in poverty. He realises that in order to serve people we need to allow them to set the agenda rather than try to make them fit ours. We need to put the needs of the other first and ourselves second. In a letter to one of the sisters, Vincent writes on a similar theme:

You will attain this happiness if you practice faithfully humility, gentleness, and charity toward the poor and toward your Sisters.[[11]](#footnote-11)

He was teaching her that the road to true happiness lies in placing herself in the position of servant, not only of the poor, but of her peers. In another place, he reminds the sisters to model themselves on Christ who was gentle and humble of heart:

That is, dear Sisters, learn from me that I am respectful and gentle because by humility He means respect, for respect proceeds from humility.[[12]](#footnote-12)

In so doing he reminds us that respect for others, in particular people living in poverty, stems from an attitude of humility, considering them worthy of our respect.

For Vincent, humility is a virtue which is itself a gift from God.

…as soon as a heart is empty of self, God fills it. God remains and acts in it; and it's the desire for shame that empties us of ourselves; that’s humility, holy humility.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The idea of emptying our heart in order to allow God to fill it is a very beautiful way to acquire the virtue of humility. We would not use the word “shame” but rather “self-forgetfulness” as being the way to open our hearts to God. In a conference to his confreres Vincent examines humility, sharing quite openly about his own struggle and the ways in which he fails. In a few lines, he sums up why we need to open ourselves to God to acquire this virtue.

Nothing is more touching than God’s interest, nor more tender than the thought of His goodness and good pleasure, and nothing stronger than to say, ‘It’s for a God who loves me that I want to humble myself; it’s for Him that I want to love my abjection.[[14]](#footnote-14)

The invitation is to place all our trust in God and to give way to what God desires for us, in order to live the life to which we are called and to be a true servant.

**Louise and Humility**

Louise suffered much in her early life because of her illegitimacy, the absence of her mother and her Father’s remarriage. At the time of her marriage, her father being dead by this time, the Marillacs did not even acknowledge that she was family. Having experienced a difficult beginning, Louise was sensitive to others and humble with regard to herself. In fact it gave her a unique insight into both sides of life; on the one hand privilege and advantage, and on the other suffering and disadvantage. Most of what we know of Louise comes from the time of her active ministry. Initially Vincent mentored her and drew her into the mission, which helped her overcome her grief and depression. In these early days of their relationship, Vincent counselled her:

Be then His dear daughter – quite humble and submissive, full of confidence – and always wait patiently for the manifestation of His holy and adorable will.[[15]](#footnote-15).

He was encouraging her gently and showing her that she could let go of her anxiety and allow herself to be drawn into the mission of God. To do this she needed humility as she waited for God’s plan to be revealed and for her path to become clear.

Louise became an organiser and formator for the Confraternities of Charities and then for the Daughters of Charity. We learn about Louise’s understanding of humility from the way she dealt with these two groups. The sisters needed to be “aware of the degree of humility” necessary for an attitude of servant and to learn what was required of them.[[16]](#footnote-16) And she went on to assure them that “True humility will regulate everything.”[[17]](#footnote-17) At another time she tells one of the sisters:

All must be done with gentleness of heart and humility, as we consider the interests of those with whom we are working rather than our own or even those of the Company.[[18]](#footnote-18)

So we have a picture of the example Louise gave of service which places the needs of the other and the mission before the needs of the servant.

Another significant aspect of Louise’s vision of humility is her understanding of leadership. Giving instruction to a Sister Servant of a local community she reminds her of Jesus’ instruction to be gentle and humble of heart and not to look for any kind of acclaim or applause. She also tells her that she should look on herself as “the beast of burden of the house, the one who must carry the entire load”.[[19]](#footnote-19) The Sister Servant or the leader, must be considerate or charitable to those being led and place their needs above of her own. She should treat each of those she is serving equally respecting their diversity. In her description for her own role as Superioress she wrote something similar:

She shall consider herself the beast of burden of the Company, loaded with a precious treasure of which she must give an exact account. [[20]](#footnote-20)

Louise’s own attitude towards leadership is imbued with the virtue of humility, based on the belief that it is a service to be given to the ones being led. This same attitude is required of the one being led:

It is necessary for the Sister Servant to make this act of submission with cordiality, gentleness and true humility, occasionally foregoing her personal judgment, except in matters of importance. Likewise, it is necessary that the sister do the same, always acquiescing to the opinions of the Sister Servant when she sees no notable interest in her opinions either for the glory of God or for the service of her neighbor.[[21]](#footnote-21)

So we see that Louise’s view of humility is one in which we listen to each other and try to work together, yielding to each other when required and not being too attached to our own way of doing things.

**Humility for Us**

“Truth and humility go well together.” stated St Vincent. [[22]](#footnote-22) This, I think, is the essence of the virtue of humility. It is not about saying how terrible we are and how much better others are. It is rather about acknowledging that we are all gifted in different ways. All that we have are gifts from God. Vincent and Louise teach us to place all at the service of others. Charity, obedience, and so many other virtues are based on this attitude of humility. The essence of humility is self-forgetfulness in which we allow God to work through us, and we focus on the needs of those being served.

Louise and Vincent also teach us about the need for humility in the way we lead. They embodied servant leadership long before it was a principle in management circles. For both of them, humility was the virtue which enabled them to put the needs of others first and to go to whatever lengths necessary to serve another. We see in their example a model of how to place ourselves at the service of others, especially when in a leadership role. Leadership for them has appropriate use of power but no sense of using power over another in a dominant way. Humility calls us to have a collaborative style of leadership that enables us to listen to all the voices that need to be heard, especially those we find difficult or challenging.

Louise, in her retreat reflections, reminds us of the basic attitude of humility:

The humility of God who calls us to be perfect as He is perfect should give me great courage and lead me to great purity of intention. It should also make me confident that He will never fail to assist me when He asks something of me which is beyond my capabilities. I must have great trust in God and believe that His grace will be sufficient to enable me to fulfill His holy will, however difficult it may appear to be, provided the Holy Spirit is truly calling me. I shall know this by listening to the advice which He will permit me to receive.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Humility enables us to recognise that we are created in God’s image and held in his embrace. Once we realise this, we can love others as we recognise that they are also made in the image of God.

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1. Tom Frame, “Humility the Despised Virtue’, *Quadrant.* April 2007, 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid, 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid, 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Luigi Mezzadri, “Humility in Saint Vincent’s Apostolic Dynamism”, *Vincentian Heritage* Vol. 1(1) 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Hugh O’Donnell, “Vincent de Paul: His Life and Way”, in Frances Ryan and John Rybolt (Eds) *Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac, Rules, Conferences, and Writings* (Paulist Press: New York,1995) 16 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. O’Donnell, *op. cit.,* 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Jacqueline Kilar, D.C., Marie Poole, D.C. et al (eds), *Vincent de Paul Correspondence, Conferences, Documents* Vol.1, 57-58. Hereafter CCD [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. CCD Vol. 2, 153. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. CCD Vol. 3, 279. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. CCD Vol. 4, 442-443. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. CCD Vol. 7 , 471. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. CCD Vol. 9, 211. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. CCD Vol. 11, p281. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. CCD Vol. 12, 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. CCD Vol. 1, 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Louise Sullivan, *Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac*, (Brooklyn, New York: New City Press, 1991), 19. Hereafter SW [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. SW, 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. SW, 208. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. SW, 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. SW, 754. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. SW, 752. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. CCD Vol. 1, 140. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. SW, 716. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)