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Turning life upside down

by Joan Chittister



Dreamstime

Women Today

In an essay titled "Pride and Humility: A New Self-acceptance," Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister takes a fresh look at the concept of humility in the Rule of Benedict. Benedict of Nursia, the founder of Western monasticism, Chittister writes, "made the keystone of his rule of life a chapter on humility that he wrote for Roman men in a patriarchal culture that valued machismo, power and independence at least as much as our age does. Pride, ancient spirituality says, is the corrosive of the human soul. Humility, the Rule of Benedict says, is an antidote to violence and a key to mental health."

She sets about examining what Benedict's teaching means for North Americans today -- both for men, from whom pride is expected and rewarded in a patriarchal culture, and women, from whom "false humility" is expected, "the counterfeit coin parlayed in place of the real thing."

The following is an excerpt from that essay, which originally appeared in Chittister's book Heart of Flesh: A Feminist Spirituality for Women and Men.

The Rule of Benedict, one of the oldest documents in the Western world to deal with humility, confronts a patriarchal society with humility as the major countercultural witness of the age. It endures in the history of spirituality to this day as an antidote to a disorder of the human heart. The context in which the rule was written may be its strongest lesson. Benedict was writing a rule of life for men, not for women, in a world given to male hierarchy and independence. By developing this new form of religious life around obedience, community and humility, Benedict called Roman men, who had been formed in a totally patriarchal society, a society that institutionalized power, hierarchy and dominance, to a clearly feminist spirituality. Humility, this ancient spirituality insisted, requires the ability to learn from others, to be part of the group, and to understand and accept personal limitations. ...

Humility, according to the Rules of Benedict, rests on 12 principles or degrees of development that cover the gamut of human existence and confront us relentlessly with the notion that human limitation is the gift that relates us to God, to the world, to the self and to others. Pride drives a wedge between us and reality; humility is its glue.

Humility, the principles imply, has something to do with our relationship to God, our openness to people, our expectations in life, and our attitudes toward others. The program is deceptively simple. In actuality, it would turn both spirituality and life upside down.

Humility, the Rule of Benedict teaches, requires first and foremost what the ancients called the *memoria dei*, the "awareness of God," at all times, in all places, at the center of all things. It is so easy in a patriarchal society to make ourselves gods of the tiny kingdoms we occupy. We climb very small ladders and then assume that we have risen to the heights of our humanity. The realization that God is God and that we are not requires serious reflection. Striving for all the tops of all the pyramids in the world will not change the fact that no person ever reaches the top of anything and that the real acme of creation lies deep within the soul and waits for us to bow before it in awareness and in praise. Those whose lives are lived without listening to their hearts, those who make themselves, their work, their status, their money their God, never find the God of the universe, who waits quietly within for us to exhaust our compulsive race to nowhere. Unlike everything else in a patriarchal world, God, according to the Rule of Benedict, is not a goal to be reached; God is a presence to be recognized. Men need the first degree of humility to curb the delusions of grandeur inherent for them in the system; women need it to realize that the presence of God is as strong in them as it is in any man. Real humility, based on the will of God for creation, leads women to reject oppression, not to accept it. The willingness to be defined by others for their own convenience, the indifference to the invisibility that comes from exclusion from the boardrooms, the synods, the decision-making centers, even from the pronouns of the language, and the lack of a sense of responsibility for women who are in the situations with no one to help them, no one to speak for them, no one to care become postures inconsistent with the first degree of humility.

Becoming aware of the presence of God within us, then, ranks clearly as the first characteristic of humility. The second degree of humility, that we "love not our own will," that we trust that God's will for me is what is best for me, is its corollary. These are impelling words. They raise the question of how it can be argued that the God who made women and men as two sexes of the same creature wills development for men and diminishment for women. Humility reads the will of God in creation and learns from it. God has a will for the welfare of all creation. We have no right to wrench it. When we can accept the obvious will of God for us, we learn to accept life and live it to the hilt. God's will for the universe, rather than my will for the universe, becomes a constructive way of thinking. The need for one group of people to subvert another group of people for its pleasure, its profit, its comfort, its convenience becomes clear for the obscenity it is. The need to consider myself the standard, the gauge of life, diminishes. The rationale for patriarchy disappears.

... In this degree of humility, men are called to recognize that they are not the norm of humanity. Women are called to live up to the potential that is in them. The second degree of humility teaches a patriarchal world that none of us, male or female, is either the last word or the only word. Each of us provides only one word of the human dialogue with life. For the rest of it, we must learn to listen -- men to women, women to men, and all of us to the word of God that's in us. There is so much glory to be missed in the world if we miss the will of God in it either for ourselves or for others.

Benedict's stages of humility call us to live in accordance with what is God's will, not simply to submit passively to someone else's will for us. At the same time, in the third degree of humility, to "submit to authority," Benedict tells the seeker in the spiritual life that omnipotence is a quality that must be consciously forsworn. By recognizing that there are people in my life who have a claim on my behavior -- wives on husbands, authority figures on personnel, parents on children, officials on citizens -- we find a therapy for arrogance. There is no such thing as absolute authority, mine or anybody else's. There are only multiple authorities in different dimensions of life, to whom we owe a privileged hearing. To refuse to recognize someone else's right to help us construct our worlds is to live a very lonely life cut off from the wisdom and care that those around us are required to provide for us.

Beyond the insights of legitimate authority, however, there is a wisdom that comes from opening our minds and hearts to the world at large. Accepting the authority of those who have no official authority over us -- the middle-aged son who listens to his father, the professional expert who accepts the recommendations of the team, the experienced manager who accepts the expertise of the younger executive, the husband whose wife is his head as well as he is hers, the man who seeks direction and takes counsel and listens to advice and admits to error and weakness and uncertainty, the woman who learns to respect one man at a time rather than patriarchy for its own sake -- joins us to the human race. ... A man's sin against the third degree of humility is to assume that his independence gives him the right to be a woman's authority just because she is a woman. A woman's sin against the third degree of humility lies in accepting authority without seeking at the same time to shape it, to stretch its vision, to test its truth, and to hold it accountable for its consequences.

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The fourth degree of humility, to "endure direction and not grow weary" even when the situation is difficult, requires growth in internal discipline. Running away from the hard moments in life solves nothing, the Rule implies. We need guides. To be our own light is to have dim direction. Men in a patriarchal society find themselves required to prove their value by proving their independence. But arrogant autonomy makes for devastating effects -- on marriages, on businesses, on the society itself. Life is too important an enterprise to be in the hands of any single person. There is simply too much to know for any one person to know it all. We need help, and seeking it is not a sign of weakness.

Relationships crumble under the strain of power struggles. In order to merit the right to hold power, it is imperative to give up struggling to assert it before we have the kind of internal strength it takes to qualify to use it. Violence will stop only when we learn to learn from others and to control ourselves in difficulty. Men are called by the fourth degree of humility not to use force as a substitute for patience. Women, the missing members of every institution, are called to be patient in the struggle for personhood but to refuse to bear the unbearable, as well. Patience with an ongoing process is one thing. Acceptance of abuse is another. To bear abuse, injustice and invisibility is not a virtue; it is the sin of passive compliance with evil.

There is, at the same time, the need to develop the ability to work things through. Always to compete for immediate preeminence, never to accept guidance, constantly to demand instant results, instant gratification, is the mark of a spiritual adolescent. Real spirituality lays up strength for the long haul. Patience and perseverance hone us for those moments in life when there will be nothing we can do but wait, when there is nowhere to go but here, when there is no way to impose my will on the world. Laying down personal power enables me to benefit from the power of others, to accept direction so that I can learn to function without it, to gain self-confidence, self-control and insight.

Men who are denied the right to defer to others become social bullies. Women who are expected always to defer to others rather than to learn to exercise power themselves become trapped in small worlds, half developed, only partially alive. A world where men rule unilaterally and women bear the results is a world out of kilter. And we do. And it is.

The fifth degree of humility, Benedict says, is to let someone know us, to confide in someone ?any sinful thought entering our hearts or any wrongs committed in secret.? Striving always to appear to be something we are not leads the soul into a morass of emptiness and dissatisfaction. The masks weigh heavy on our hearts. What we seem to be we are not; what we are we do not want to be. We live our lives behind darkened windows. We pretend. We embellish circumstances and stretch details. We hide and parley and play with facts. We lose sight of ourselves. If there is no one with whom we are completely truthful in life, we are not truthful at all.

Self-revelation is the beginning of growth. Self-knowledge corrects. Once we open our hearts to another, the charade ends. We are saved from the burden of having to be perfect anymore. We get the opportunity to compassionate with others. ...

It is humility, not pride, that makes us fearless. Once we ourselves have admitted who we are in the secret places of our hearts, who is it that can diminish us? Self-righteousness dies, and simplicity and equality rise to take its place. For men, the call of the fifth degree of humility is to honesty with themselves and with others. Bragging can stop; self-sufficiency can stop; entitlement can stop. Men can learn to accept the human condition -- and admit it. They can simply put the universe down and relax. For women, the fifth degree of humility is also a call to honesty. They can admit their gifts and come to see them as a piece of God?s will for them; they can stop waiting to be called on and begin to volunteer the answers they feel inside of them. They can take responsibility for the resentment, the anger, the anger they feel at being overlooked, underrated and outtalked. They can turn the sin of false humility into honest participation.

The sixth degree of humility, the Rule of Benedict teaches, is ?to be content with the lowest and most menial of treatment.? Hoarding things in order to create a public image smothers life before it ever starts. When enough is never enough, happiness is always just out of reach, and unrest is pervasive. We set out to buy status by buying things. ?I have; therefore, I am? seeps into the psyche and shapes the soul into nothing but a plastic profile of myself. It is an empty existence. Humility, the grace not to put on airs, restrains us from substituting things for character.

The truth is that whatever the patriarchal delusion, there is no such thing as entitlement -- for anyone for any reason. We must learn to grasp life lightly, to look for its essentials rather than its baubles, to loose ourselves of things that clutter the soul and tie down the spirit. If we can possibly learn to be contented with less, we can never be frustrated again, never insulted again, never ashamed of our cars or furniture or clothing again. Freedom calls. Humility disentangles us from the burden of the unnecessary. Men are called to accept the mundane circumstances that make life go round -- the shopping, the washing, the care of small children -- and take personal responsibility for them. Women are called by this degree of

humility to insist on spending less time on the window-dressing of life and more time on becoming everything God calls them to be in a culture that calls them to less.

Humility frees us to make no exaggerated demands on the universe, to live with more soul and less greed. A patriarchal world touched by humility could learn to live with less oil, less money and fewer toys. Wars for gadgets could be over forever.

The seventh step of humility, according to the Rule of Benedict, tests Western patriarchy to the marrow. It is the step most often misread in the name of psychological theory, most totally rejected in the name of modern social science. It is the degree that cuts to the bone. The seventh degree of humility, the ancient text asserts, is that we not only say but really believe that "we are inferior to all and of less value." The patriarchal mindset rises in revolt. The woman's mind recoils from the message she has sought all her life to throw off. And rightly so. Yet, unless we face our basest selves, unless we see that we, too, are created from the same clay as the rest of the world, we run the risk of thinking just the opposite. "We, too, all of us, are human, fully human, not members of a one-person superrace, not immune to anything. No, the real truth is that we, too, are capable of the worst in the human condition. Self-acceptance is not the right to say to the world, "Too bad. That's the way I am." Self-acceptance is the obligation to say to the world, "Forgive me, friend. There is so much more than I can be." Both women and men are called by the seventh degree of humility to realize within themselves the grace of glory that comes with the grace of recognizing one's own need. Men need to recognize their needs. Women need to bring their needs for personhood, presence and power to light so that the world has access to all of its resources, unblocked by groundless invisibility and sinful deference.

The seventh degree of humility ties us to the human enterprise, links us to the rest of the human race, requires us to think in terms of circles rather than pyramids.

The eighth degree of humility is that we do only those things "endorsed by the community." We are invited, in other words, to learn from experience, to value wisdom figures, to follow in the wake of those who have tried life and found it navigable. We can stop reinventing the wheel. We can cease to act as if the world depends on us. We can stop calling attention to ourselves and simply join the stream of humanity at its best. We are immensely weak, the seventh degree of humility reminds us, none of us, male or female, beyond the pale of the human condition, and so, the eighth degree of humility instructs us, we need models; we need support; we need teachers. The patina of patriarchal independence disappears. We are called to see the glory of God in the other and to learn from it. Gone is the great-man theory of history. History is not one man anywhere. History is history. It is the story of all of us, none of us to be forgotten.

... People who use a group for their own purposes destroy it. People who forget the wisdom of the group in favor of their own whims sacrifice the group to a private god. Self-worship is the beginning of cruelty to others. If I am superior, I can do what I will to others. Women in a patriarchal society have known the truth of that for centuries. Only a consciousness of brokenness opens us to what is good in others. It is my unrehabilitated self that is tender, that is kind. When I see my own limitations, when I see the goodness in others, when humility comes, violence ends.

According to the time-tested wisdom of the spirituality of humility, consciousness of God, openness to direction, self-knowledge, and a sense of otherness shape the soul of a humble person. But attitudes are not enough to make for a world of equals. Behaviors matter. Behaviors signal what we think about ourselves -- and what we think about others. Benedict singles out four of them in particular.

The ninth degree of humility, this wise psychologist argued, is that we "control our tongues." The blustering has to stop. The commands have to stop. The criticizing has to stop.

None of us is anybody's god. None of us is anybody's patriarch. Other do not exist at our fiat, and we cannot extinguish them, verbally or otherwise. What we need is reflection. Talk without thought is useless. What we may need most is interior quiet in a culture of boom boxes, agitation and perpetual motion. We need space to think in a culture bombarded by sound, most of it vacuous, much of it extraneous, a great deal of it self-centered. We have a culture forever geared to mending the way we talk when it may be silence that is lacking.

Silence is not an empty thing. Silence is full of what we need to learn about ourselves. The angels with which we each must wrestle reside in the silence within. ... The adversaries within us with whom we have yet to contend, the strengths within us which we have yet to release are all exposed by silence. Without silence, we risk the possibility that everything else we do will be nothing but sound and fury. Humility lies in discovering what we really think, what we really fear, what we're really worried about, what we really want to do in life. The questions are within us; so are the answers.

Silence also makes us accessible to others. When I am able to resist announcing myself, I can listen to others. I can hear what they're trying to say to me. I can listen to them for their own sakes. ... The relationship of silence to humility and of humility to equality is plain for all to see: The first step in becoming a humble member of the human race, in tempering the arrogance that patriarchy breeds, lies in silence. To be true to the ninth degree of humility in a patriarchal world, men must learn to listen; women must learn to speak the silence that has been imposed on them for centuries, without apologies, without timidity, without fail.

The 10th and 11th steps of humility, then, follow naturally. The 10th step of humility is that we "are not given to ready laughter," the 11th, that we "speak gently and without laughter, seriously and with becoming modesty." When we know ourselves, cruel laughter aimed at others ends. The quality of our laughter is a measure of our sanctity. It tells us how we feel about others. It tells them, too. More than that, laughter tells us what we think about ourselves, whom we think we're free to judge, who we think we are. Why we laugh, the way we laugh, and the things at which we laugh say more about ourselves than they do about whatever it may be that provokes it. A sneer and a smile are not the same thing. A document that was clearly written for men in a barbarian age rises above the cultural level of that age and brooks no misunderstanding of the relationship of laughter to humility. The bawdry and the brutal are not humor. There is no boys-will-be-boys philosophy here, no tolerance of locker-room language, no assumption that girlie jokes are innocent humor, are acceptable commentary. The 10th and 11th degrees of humility order us to take life, all its facets, all its peoples, seriously. The 10th and 11th degrees of humility bring patriarchy with all its derisiveness, all its ridicule, to its knees.

Humor and laughter are not necessarily the same thing. Humor enables us to see life from a fresh perspective. It gives strength, insight and sight. Benedict does not forbid humor. Benedict forbids the garrulous, the thoughtless. Benedict insists that we take our humor as thoughtfully as we take our life so that the lives of others are not impeached by it.

Finally, the 12th degree of humility describes the human being with the humble heart. The 12th degree of humility, the Rule says, is that we "manifest humility in our bearing no less than in our hearts." Bearing comes from the soul. Presence itself is a message. Communication theorists tell us, in fact, that over 80 percent of every message is communicated nonverbally. What I believe in my heart will show in my body. It's in the strutting, the agitation, the seething, the disdain that corrupting, damaging, demoralizing pride shows. It's the "Daddy says" look on a husband's face; it's "the Terminator wants" look on the bully's face; it's the "because I said so" look on the face of the boss who intends to intimidate, who expects to be obeyed, who humiliates and depreciates and exploits the other that signal pride where

humility should be. It's also the wilting, the withdrawal, the agitated hovering in a woman that belie a false, a damaged and deficient sense of humility.

Pride is patriarchy played out in a democratic world to remind its underlings who's really in charge. Humility brings us, instead, to the presence of God, the wisdom of others, the authenticity of the self, and the esteem of the other that make life, the world, a good and gracious space. It is the preventative of bitter divorces, abuse in the home, disparagement in the workplace, ethnic wars, domineering relationships, social derision, classism, sexism, and global exploitation.

Benedict of Nursia was a man with a feminist soul in the midst of the most macho of cultures. He brings us all, women and men alike, to realize that in the softer side of human nature, in the cultivation of the mystical, nurturing and poetic side of life, lies the key to equality, to respect, to spiritual maturity, and, perhaps, even to the preservation of the planet.

Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister is a frequent NCR contributor, author, international lecturer and the executive director of Benetvision. Excerpt from Heart of Flesh: A Feminist Spirituality for Women and Men (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998). Reprinted by permission of the publisher; all rights reserved.

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