

*Humility*

The theme of Ash Wednesday is humility, holy humility. The words humus, human being, humble, humility, and humiliation all come from the same Latin root word meaning “of the earth.” Humus is the decaying animal and vegetable matter in soil that gives it its dark, rich brownish-black color. Humus is what we might call “earth” or simply “dirt.”

Human beings, of course, are the two-legged creatures that inhabit the earth. Genesis 2:7 tells us that “the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground.” There is a pun there in the original Hebrew that sometimes gets lost in the English translations. Better translations of Genesis 2:7 might be “the Lord God formed earthlings out of earth” or “the Lord God formed humans out of humus.”

The word “humble” also refers to something of the earth, especially something down-to-earth, not lofty or pretentious. Often today “humble” is used in a pejorative way to denote something low or inferior. A person who grew up poor is said to have had a “humble beginning.” Unskilled labor is sometimes called a “humble” occupation. Such negative uses of the word “humble” have almost overshadowed its true positive meaning.

To be humble is to be modest, not arrogant or conceited. A humble person doesn’t feel the need to attract attention to his self or what he does. To be humble is to be meek in the best sense of the word; and it is not to have pride, in the worst sense of that word. Sadly today, many people think being prideful is a good thing and that meekness is a bad thing, but that’s because we don’t really know what it means to be humble.

There is a similar misunderstanding about being “humbled” and being “humiliated.” No one wants to be humiliated. When a person is humiliated they are made to feel shame, and that’s something all of us would rather avoid. To be “humbled” is different. Being

humbled reminds us who we really are. When we get to full of ourselves, when our opinion of ourselves becomes too high, we need to be humbled. Sometimes being humbled can feel like being humiliated, but ultimately being humbled is for our own good. It sets our relationships and our priorities straight.

In our relationship with God, our proper response to Him is a humble response. As we said earlier, in Genesis we are reminded that God is the Creator and we human beings are creatures. As we say on this Ash Wednesday, we are creatures made of dust, and to dust we shall return. The dust that we are is absolutely worthless compared to the glory and greatness of God.

In the Old Testament, our Almighty God commands us to walk humbly with him. He tells us that our good works, even our best deeds, are like filthy rags in His sight. We are not able to comprehend his ways. On our own we can do nothing to please Him or earn any favor from Him. No matter how famous, financially successful, or even faithful we are, we are beyond insignificant in the order of the universe. God could wipe us out at any time and start over again like he did with Great Flood in Noah's time. A truly humble person knows that everything, including his very existence, depends on God.

Jesus exhibited that kind of humility and dependence on God the Father. In St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians we read how Jesus Christ did not consider his eternal equality with the Father and the Holy Spirit as something to be clung to, but for our sake and for our salvation took on human flesh. Christ humbled himself and became one of us. And not only that, but as Paul also in tonight's reading from 2 Corinthians, Christ who was himself sinless, took on all our sin -- he became sin itself -- so that our sin might be crucified with him. Jesus suffered that ultimate humiliation so we wouldn't have to.

In light of Jesus' sacrifice on our behalf, how are we to live then? We are to live humbly, with genuine humility before God and our fellow man. Infecting the world today are many kinds of false humility. That is what Jesus was exposing in the gospel reading today. Still in this age, just as in Jesus' day, there are hypocrites who love to make a show of their piety. They love to demonstrate how faithful and wise they are. They love to draw attention to their prayers and alms and whatever else churchy they do, although they feign being self-effacing. Jesus says they have already received their reward. That is to say, the 15 seconds of fame they get for their performance is all they are going to get; God is not impressed.

True humility means coming to God in faith. When we recognize that before God we are nothing, only then can we be truly receptive to His word. As long as we are prideful and arrogant, as long as we think we know something, our corrupted human nature rejects God word. The gift of faith enables us to receive God's word humbly and to our spiritual edification.

When we do receive God's word in humility and faith, it will always lead to the crucifying of one's self. I'm not talking here about self-mutilation or self-flagellation or anything like that. What I am talking about is putting the needs of others above our own, and about putting the will of God above our own will. We can do that by denying ourselves our wants and desires, and putting those energies and resources into providing for the good of others. We can do that by denying ourselves some of our pleasures, and putting our time and effort into prayer and Bible study.

Lent is a very good time for us to begin or renew such spiritual disciplines. There is nothing wrong with prayer or fasting or almsgiving. There is nothing wrong with having a sacred assembly to weep and mourn for our sins. Jesus only says those things are wrong when we do them for attention, when we do them for show and without sincerity.

We can't earn our way into Heaven by any action on our part. Our salvation is all wrapped up in what Jesus has done for us. But through prayer and study and service we can deepen our knowledge and love of the Lord. Salvation is a gift, not a reward, but God does reward our humble efforts to turn from our sin and draw closer to Him in other ways. One thing He does is rewards us by giving us even greater humility. That's where this Lenten journey is taking us: from the humiliation of ashes and sackcloth today to humble obedience and love for the crucified and risen Christ.

May God bless us in this Lenten season with a true sense of humility before him and toward each other. Amen.