

2nd August 2015
TENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

“O God, be merciful to me, a sinner.”

– Saint Luke 18:13.



In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

If the Pharisee from today’s Gospel had come today to church instead of going to the Temple, he might stand up just before receiving holy communion and cry out, “Lord, I *am* worthy to receive you!” Put bluntly like that, the Pharisee’s religious position seems so very obviously foolish. And yet, the contrast between the prayer of the Pharisee and the prayer of Publican gives each of us the opportunity today to examine the nature of our own spiritual life. In a word, Our Lord wishes to teach us today that the only authentic basis of our spiritual life is a profound *humility*.

Now, I want to erase from your minds a false notion of humility, which is a parody of true Christian humility. True humility is simply the acknowledgment of our real status before God. In fact, created in the image and likeness of God, we do have a lot of which to be proud – proud in the best sense of that word. In the immortal words of Saint Leo the Great: “O Christian, acknowledge your dignity, and becoming a partner in the divine nature, refuse to return to the old baseness by degenerate conduct. Remember the Head and the Body of which you are a member” (Sermon 1 on the Nativity of Our Lord).

Here, however, we almost have the impression that the Pharisee is asking God to thank *him*, as if he – the Pharisee – is doing God a favor by being so wonderful. His great folly is to think that he himself is the source of the graces he has received. It is true that he is not a thief or an adulterer. But is this due to his own efforts or motivated by love of God?

In everything we do – indeed, in our very being itself – there are two principles at work: God, who created us, and the nothingness from which we were made. And so, whatever good we may possess or perform really comes from God, and not from us. Of course, we have to cooperate with God’s grace – but grace itself is exactly that: grace, something that is freely given. Whatever in us is not good – whether it be a grave sin or a slight imperfection – *that* is what really comes from us. “What hast thou that thou hast not received? And if thou hast received, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it?” (I Cor 4:7).

The proud man does not thank God, since he attributes all his religious observance to his own merits; he does not think to ask God for any favours – not even for the gift of final perseverance – because that would require him to acknowledge his own needfulness. That is why the Publican went down justified and the Pharisee did not. Often a person who commits a grave sin, unless his conscience has been falsified, makes such a fervent act of contrition at seeing his weakness that he ends up *advancing* in holiness; whereas the lukewarm, overconfident in their own merits, slip slowly into the abyss without even realizing it. Please God, let us see ourselves the way we really are!

According to the Psalms, God “hath had regard to the prayer of the humble: and he hath not despised their petition” (Ps 101:18); on the other hand, Saint James tells us, “God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble” (Jas 4:6). In other words, the principal disposition we should bring to prayer is humility. Saint Paul warns us, “he that thinketh himself to stand, let him take heed lest he fall” (I Cor 10:12). God withdraws his actual graces from the proud: if he allows them to fall into sin as a result of their pride it is in fact for their own good. By allowing the prideful to see that “without me you can do nothing” (St. John 15:5), God endeavours to bring them back to the right path. That is why our sins should actually *help* us in our spiritual life: we should, like the Publican, learn from our sins and use them to cultivate a greater humility.

The religion of the Pharisee, according to Cardinal Newman, “is the religion of the natural man in every age and place: often very beautiful on the surface, but worthless in God’s sight; good, as far as it goes, but worthless and hopeless, because it does not go further, because it is based on self-sufficiency, and results in self-satisfaction.”

This parable also shows us that appearances can be deceiving. To the eyes of his contemporaries the Pharisee is a model of piety; the Publican seems to be an outcast who ought not really dare come into the Temple. Are we also guilty of making rash judgments like this? Do we fall into self-complacency and routine in our religious practices or do we animate them with a real sense of contrition and gratitude? Do we pray for the conversion of sinners and non-believers or are we content to sneer?

The lesson we should take away from all this is what Our Lord tells us at the end of today’s Gospel: “everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, and he who humbles himself shall be exalted.” In saying this, Our Lord shows himself truly to be his Mother’s Son. Remember what Our Lady said in her canticle of thanksgiving: “He hath put down the mighty from their seat, and hath exalted the humble” (Lk 1:51). But there is no slavish false humility in the Magnificat. “He that is mighty, hath done great things to me.” But why? “Because he hath regarded the humility of his handmaid.” Let us therefore ask Mary to obtain for us the blessing of true humility, combined with gratitude for God’s grace and a fruitful sorrow for our sins.