Opinion
Spirituality



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"*The twelfth step of humility is that we always manifest humility in our bearing no less than in our hearts, so that it is evident ... whether sitting walking or standing.*"

The 12th degree of humility goes directly to the core of the matter. It reads straight and clear, without equivocation, with certainty: "We always manifest humility in our bearing no less than in our hearts so that it is evident ..."

The operational word here is "evident." Evident.

At this point, comes the test. At this point all theorizing ends. It's not a matter anymore of talking about humility. Now is the moment of fulfillment.

This time, we're not just considering the almighty presence of God in our lives, or even our degree of spiritual consciousness. Now, it's no longer about simply accepting the vagaries of life without moaning or demanding more. It's even beyond the ideas of learning to listen and honoring the insights of others.

No, here at the top of the ladder of the steps to humility is the challenge to be humble, to become humility itself. No words, no prayers, no public penitential disciplines required. Just the power of humble presence itself.

Now, having accepted all the other degrees of humility, we're expected to become what we've been talking about: humble. Humble even in bearing. Humble even in the way we present ourselves to the world physically, as well as in our intention to climb down off our personal thrones and so quietly rejoin the human race.

It's hard not to smile when you read the 12th degree of humility. A modern translation of the idea might just make the issue clearer than does the elegant language of the past. In more modern parlance, we might be closer to the original idea if we said, "All right, enough already. No more posturing. No more 'dressing for success.' No more grand entrances at the meeting, or loud jokes to get the attention of the crowd. No more need for special places at the table. No more expectation of my right to control any other human being. No more rolling my eyes rather than

listening when someone else is talking."

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No, by this time, we are meant to be able to blend into the world around us — serene, contented, open — too grounded interiorly to crave public approval, to assume the right to lord it over other people in a nation that calls itself democratic.

This is the moment we have been waiting for. This is the moment of integrity, of community, of wholeness.

There is a saying: "Happiness is when what you think, what you say, what you do are in harmony." The 12th step of humility is about living an integrated life, a happy life in which each part of it is in harmony with its every other dimension.

The truth is that we are meant to be transparent. People, hearing what we say, should know what we think. Seeing what we do with our lives, people can infer what we care about and how we think about things.

If we say one thing but think another, somewhere, somehow, it all begins to seep out. Worst of all, the burden of hiding exhausts a person in every way, in every dimension, from the soul on out.

Benedict, in his chapter on "Humility," is quite direct about the intertwined life of soul, body and emotions as the life of integrity, strength, serenity and freedom. In the twelfth step of humility, his clarity is so simple it is stunning. He writes: Our humility "must be evident at the Opus Dei [at prayer], in the oratory, the monastery, or the garden, on a journey or in the field, or anywhere else."

The directions are achingly pure: Be what you say you are. Do not lie, even to yourself. Don't live two lives — loving parent/missing parent, honest employee/cheating employee, devoted public servant/self-absorbed public celebrity.

The truth is that egotism is the bane of community-building. It presents itself as what it is not, lives only for itself, and presumes it is heir to its universe. It is a false and baseless claim to superiority. No one can build anything that lasts when the materials are bogus.

Benedict brings the steps of humility to an acme in the 12th of them. Physical appearance, he warns us, betrays the quality of our souls. People know by looking into our eyes whether we are really intent on being with them or not. They can tell if we are interiorly what we purport to be exteriorly. Even in a culture whose penchant for casual long ago broke the boundaries of propriety, excess in any direction says more than we want to admit about our respect for others.

Most of all, what we wear and how we carry ourselves defines us. Our clothes, our gait, our accessories — the big signs of religion or the heavy makeup, the overdressing or underdressing, the self-serving boasting or the simple truth-telling — all expose us. They add up to what's most on our mind, how honest is our speech, how caring is our presence.

Certainly, another word for humility is authenticity, the grace of being who we say we are.

From where I stand, the way we carry ourselves and talk and look and speak and walk with those around us is the only real proof of our humility. Where insult and expectation, disdain and dismissal of others, arrogance and authoritarianism are evident, they exude indifference to the needs and values, intelligence and insight of others. Then the size of our own soul shrinks under the light of day.

We have never needed more the humility that brings the world together as pride threatens to wrench us apart. In the end, Benedict is right: Stifling arrogance, embarrassing self-aggrandizement, and the insufferable pomposity that pathological pride spawns expose all the empty spots in the soul. And they are gaping. Or as St. Vincent de Paul put it centuries ago, "Humility is nothing but truth, and pride is nothing but lying."

And, remember, evident.

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Editor's note: *We can send you an email alert every time Joan Chittister's column, From Where I Stand, is posted to NCRonline.org. Go to this page and follow directions: Email alert sign-up.*

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