

The Twelve Steps during Covid-19 U-Tube version

Introduction

A Very Warm welcome to this Home Retreat, which will be slightly different. We are experimenting by putting a Powerpoint on You Tube, on the principle that a picture is worth a thousand words! During the Lockdown I have been reflecting on Humility and how the Covid 19 conditions have affected us and helped us to grow in this virtue. In the past I have used St Benedict's Twelve Steps of Humility, which we find in Chapter 7 of the Rule, and I am using Joan Chittester's sound-bite version, which is rather easier to remember and reflect upon. Rather than simply saying that Humility is the opposite of Pride, Benedict's 12 steps asks us to view twelve aspects of this virtue and to put each into practice. St Bernard always regarded Humility as living Truthfully, hence this is another way of seeing how each step is a way of living with integrity and truth.

1. Joan Chittester's first step or sound bite is **'Recognise that God is God.'** This summarises a quite complex first step in the Rule, which basically assumes we believe in God, but encourages us always to be mindful of God and of his presence. This is a primary step in curbing the ego, which so easily assumes THE position of importance in our consciousness and acts like a god in our life. Recognising that God is God, at least makes us pause, reconfigure, acknowledging God's presence and priority in all that we say and do. We have a better chance, then, of following his way and his will for us. We are on the ladder of humility, albeit going down, as far as our ego is concerned, but climbing by humility. Perhaps this pandemic has made us question our relationship with God and how God relates to such events in human history. Two pictures depict something of his majesty and his mercy.
2. The second step or aspect is: **'Know that God's Will is best for you.'** In the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Christ, we know that Jesus was completely obedient to his Father's Will, and that this is not only good for Jesus in that he was raised from Death, but is good for the whole human race, demonstrating to us that Death is not the end. Indeed, death and all agents of death are overcome in that moment of obedience and love expressed by the Son for the Father and by the outpouring in Jesus' last breath, of the Spirit upon our world. Whatever Covid 19 does to us and to the world, it cannot deny that truth – that what happens is best for us in the long term. God has entered our situation, suffered with us and been raised

from the dead to eternal life. Our slide depicts the yes to life, and the suffering of an AIDS' related death.

3. We have reached the 3rd Step of Humility which reads: **'Be willing to receive Direction.'** We have experienced 'receiving direction' in an unprecedented way in the last few months since the Coronavirus. It may have tested us quite critically – some of us being only too willing to receive direction from expert scientists and Government advice, some of us less willing. Much of this was motivated by fear of the virus itself and fear of the unknown. This is not what Benedict means, however. He is commending the person who is searching for God, for the will of God and the ways of God. Instead of knowing our own way, of considering ourselves an expert, we are willing, in humility, to submit to the wisdom of another, or others, whom we discern as pilgrims on the way. We recognize the Christ in them, and they recognize the Christ in us, and there is no hidden agenda in their gift of direction which we receive in faith. In all of this, we are seeking the Truth, the Way and the Life of the Spirit, in Christ Jesus.

4. Right through this period, our ego has been challenged. We are not in control and we have no real understanding of the outcome. The 4th Step is **Endure and don't grow weary!** which seems an appropriate step to consider at any time. Another way of putting it could be 'Persevere when trials come'. Why not avoid trials? Go round them, move on to the next dose of instant gratification? The humble way is to persevere, go through the trial, and know that God is putting us to the test. He desires our deeper faith, our tried and tested love, not superficial likes and dislikes. We are being tried as silver is tried, as gold in a furnace. He does not want us soft and yielding as lead. As the psalm puts it 'Be strong, let your heart take courage, all who hope in the Lord.' We see two responses – Perseverance and capitulation.

5. Let us consider St Benedict's 5th Step of Humility: **Acknowledge Faults.** What have we learned about ourselves during these weeks and months of lockdown? Whether we have been on our own, or in a household of family or community, there will have been frustrations or tensions and some manifestation of our Shadow side. This step of humility asks that we acknowledge that Shadow. And this is the first step in acknowledging ourselves more completely. Jung has suggested that we all have a Shadow side, often defined as those God-given attributes of ourselves which are unacceptable to society, and do not fit in our culture. Instead, they form a

‘deposit’ in our psyche, which we keep hidden. If we do not acknowledge that Shadow, it can erupt in anti-social behaviour. In general, this is what we mean by ‘our faults’. In order to maintain equilibrium, our Cultured attributes are normally expressed, but our Shadow attributes need to be acknowledged, at least by ourselves, and preferably by some other, whom we trust and who loves us. We can then live in Peace and in Balance. A rather large mistake and some shadow behaviour!

6. We had reached the sixth of twelve: **Be content with less and less.** This is indeed a challenge to us in the West, where we have been encouraged to accumulate more and more. Perhaps since our lockdown, we have begun to question that suggestion on several levels. Firstly, on a personal level, do we need more and more? We may have found that we have managed perfectly well with less. Like many people, you may have spent some of the time at home sorting out your possessions and clearing out unwanted stuff. Has this provoked a deeper question – what am I doing with all of this, what is it for? Have these questions arisen on a household level, even a national level? At least some of our accumulation on every level, is to enhance our self-importance, or our security, even our power. This step in humility may be asking us to prioritise on what is really needed, and what is important in both material and in spiritual terms. We see shortages on the one hand and our propensity to waste on the other.
7. The seventh step or aspect of Humility in St Benedict’s Rule is **Let go of the false sense of self.** St Bernard of Clairvaux believed that Humility was all about Truth, so letting go of any false sense of anything was recommended and to be encouraged. But what is a false sense of self? In the Covid 19 context, I am sure there are many of us who imagine that we will not pick up the virus, simply because we are who we are. We may never have really been ill in our lives, we are reasonably careful with our health, we are young and vigorous, we seem to be immune to diseases, or we are too important, our work is too important to be checked by a mere virus. These are all false senses of self. We are human and humans are prone to viruses, especially those previously unknown. To act on the basis of our false sense of self, and to take unnecessary risks, is sheer folly. My great-great-grandfather, starting as an humble carpenter, rose to being an overseer of ships, until the company collapsed and he died in a mental institution.
8. We move on to the 8th step **‘Learn from the Community’.** In Benedict’s scheme, this would encourage a novice to see himself as capable of learning from the Community and its wisdom, and not feel he knew all the answers,

or indeed was the answer to the Community's problems. In our condition of lockdown and in our experience of this pandemic, we can expand that step to listen to Communities of the past, and the experience of other cultures and nations in the present, who may have different perspectives to ours. None of us have all the answers as to how we are to live in post-pandemic conditions, or how to make use of the insights we have had during lockdown. We can listen and learn from the world community and work together, instead of remaining in isolation and arrogance. Our world-wide web is indeed just that and can enable us to communicate with others and listen to their views. But a word of warning. We need to develop discernment of spirits also. Not every voice needs to be listened to. Not every influence is for the common good. Use the Spirit within you to listen to those who are also in tune with the Spirit.

9. The 9th step of Humility, is indeed '**Listen**'. For St Benedict this is a highly significant word. It is the first word of the Prologue of the Rule, and it encapsulates a characteristic attitude and action of the monk, or of anyone who truly seeks God. The classic Mandarin Chinese word for Listen is Ting – and consists of six Chinese Characters which also form the basis for the word 'Obey'. The characters refer to the Ear, the Eye, the Heart, the Number One, meaning Concentrate, the number Ten, meaning whole or fully, and the King. This complex of characters tells us a lot about the attitude and action of listening. We listen with our Ear, we watch with our Eyes, picking up gestures and hidden messages. We listen with our heart open, and lovingly, we concentrate on the whole message, and we listen with wisdom like the King or as the prime listener in the Kingdom. We can also apply this process to our listening to God and to his Word in the scriptures. I include two images of listening.

10. This tenth step is **Never Ridicule**. At a superficial reading, Benedict might be thought to be rather humourless, since he discourages laughter. However, a sense of humour is a crucial element in being a monk or anyone else! Benedict discouraged coarse laughter, and in particular the use of ridicule, which is always at another's expense. It is a classic way of putting another person down and thereby boosting our own ego and self-importance. Nothing could be further from Humility. It used to be common to indulge in racial jokes, or ones which targeted certain professions, and ridicule them, but they are rightly less common. To be able to laugh at ourselves and not to take things too seriously links the notions of humility and humour. How much ridicule might this little one experience at school? And even a swan should not be ridiculed like this!

11. The Penultimate step in Humility in St Benedict's Rule, is **Speak Kindly**, according to Joan Chittester's sound-bite version. We often assume that monks and nuns live a life of silence, and indeed we are encouraged to practice Restraint of Speech. This is for two main reasons: in order to Listen, and in order to use words sparingly and positively to build community, rather than to destroy it. We are all familiar with the use of the tongue to destroy reputations, to lash out at people, to ridicule, as we reflected in the previous step. So often we use speech in reaction to another's words or behavior. Rather than reacting, if we responded with thought and reflection, we might be more inclined to be positive and uplifting, even when we disagree or need to point out the truth. Correction does not exclude kindness, and a 'kind word is better than the best gift', as it says in the Book of Ecclesiasticus. Our pictures speak for themselves.
12. Today we are going to reflect on the final step of Humility, which in Joan Chittester's scheme is: **Be serene – Stay Calm**. In the Rule, Benedict appears to emphasise a person's bodily aspect, but in reality he says that the body follows the disposition of the heart, so that humility in the heart is manifest in a person's body, wherever and whenever and however that person is at the time. Think of the character and disposition of St Theresa of Calcutta, whose humility crafted her appearance and whole physique over the years of helping the poorest of the poor. If our heart is truly humble, our body will communicate that humility wherever we are. And yes, we will be **serene and stay calm**, because of our utter trust in God and knowledge that he will provide his help and protection in every situation. I hope these two images convey something of Humility.
13. Thank you all for watching and for Listening. I will include the Words in the Video among the resources for the retreat and also my 'Lectio' notes on St Benedict's 7th Chapter of the Rule. I also include a suggested timetable if you want to make it a longer day of retreat for yourselves. Again, Thank you!