



Archbishop of Montreal

Homily
Sunday, July 5, 2020

Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A (Mt 11:25-30)

“I am gentle and humble in heart?”

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Do you often repeat in your prayers: “I am gentle and humble in heart?”

These beautiful words of Jesus are perhaps his most comforting ones: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens. I am gentle and humble in heart.”

This sentence reaches out to us, these words touch us, but at the same time, these words remain somewhat mysterious. After all, we could ask, what is humility? What does it really mean to be humble? What is gentleness? What does it really mean to be gentle?

Speaking about humility remains a mystery. Throughout human history, in different philosophies, in different religions, different authors have addressed humility in different ways!

In Christian faith, humility is a virtue at the heart of faith. It is faith’s foundation. The word’s origin is the word “humus,” which means ground or earth. It is the ground on which the virtues stand, the foundation on which the virtues are built.

What, then, is humility? We enter into the mystery where we will never cease to discover what humility is as we will never be sufficiently humble. Being humble is the only way to discover true humility.

In the Gospel, Jesus affirms that he is humble: “I am gentle and humble in heart.” We can contemplate Jesus in his humility and ask him to teach us to be humble.

We can speak of one aspect of humility with this sentence of Saint Paul: “What do you have that you did not receive?” (1Cor 4:7). To be humble is to be conscious that what I have, I have received. All of it.

When Jesus says: “No one knows the Father except the Son”, what is he saying? He continues: “I know the Father, I have received all things from the Father. I attribute nothing to myself.

Everything I have, everything I do, everything I say, I have received from the Father. The Father begets the Son eternally. I have received everything from the Father. I was begotten of the Father. Everything I do, I have seen the Father do. Everything I know, I learned from the Father. I have everything from the Father.”

Jesus sees by his humility, and he recognizes that he has everything he has, he has from the Father.

And he is happy to have nothing by himself, to have all by the Father. It gives him joy that all that he has comes from the Father. Hear his joy! "I receive all from the Father. I know that all comes from the Father. I know that the Father who gives himself totally. I receive all from the Father!"

Jesus' humility has repercussion in his life with us! Jesus is humble not only in relationship with the Father Eternal, but also towards each creature. The Eternal Son could say, on account of being God, that his is not humble, and it would have made sense! But being God himself, he is humble by nature, he is eternally humble! The humility of Jesus is not a humility in response to his incarnation, it is not a humility that only began when he became man! No, it is an eternal humility! Eternally, Jesus the Son, the Only Begotten Son, receives himself from the Eternal Father. Eternally, the Only Begotten Son receives everything from the Father. "What do you have that you did not receive?" "I received everything," says Jesus.

When he comes into the world, the Son of God made man, Jesus, expresses his humility towards the Father by living constantly in prayer, because he receives everything from the Father, and through prayer, he continues to receive everything from the Father.

He also expresses his humility towards humanity, towards his apostles, his disciples, towards all who come to meet him! For he came to serve. He himself says so: "I did not come to be served, but to serve. The Son of man came to serve and to give his life." To give his life. His humility gives life to his service. His humility gives life to the gift that he makes of his life. He is always serving. He is always giving his life.

At the last supper, according to the Gospel of John, he washes the feet of his apostles: "I have done this for you." Jesus put himself at his disciple's feet and washes their feet, performing the work of a slave.

In the tradition of the Middle East, washing the feet of guests who arrive at a house after a long walk, is a way to welcome them by removing the dust from their feet. It is a sign of welcome by the host, but given by a servant or a slave.

In the same way, Jesus has come to serve us. He came to wash us, to help us, to purify us, to save us. He has come to serve us. In this spirit, Jesus expresses his humility towards the Eternal Father: "I receive everything from the Father." But he is also humble towards us, towards all humanity, towards each and every one of us. To every one of us, he presents him-self as our servant. "I came to serve and to give my life for you." What sign of humility, what extraordinary humility!

This humility challenges us. He who calls us to himself, he who is gentle and humble in heart, he calls us to be likewise and be humility incarnate, just as he. To be a disciple of Jesus is to be humble. To believe in Christ is to learn to be humble. And this humility increases our humanity.

What does it mean for us to be humble like Jesus?

First of all, we need to return to the word from St. Paul: "What do you have that you did not receive?"

Do I see that in my life I have received everything? Do I know that I have received my existence from God by way of my parents? I received an education, thanks to my parents, my teachers, the people in whose midst I grew up, but also people I met somewhere and sometime in life, or those who by the Grace of God became his witnesses to me. I received it all!

Even if I had the possibility to develop my talents, skills, and habits in the workplace, I must acknowledge that even there, I received it all! I received these talents, these beautiful skills, these gifts that I am trying to increase by my efforts. I have really received it all.

But I might have the temptation to say that because I succeeded in increasing my talents or professional strength, it is on account of my merits, because of my efforts.

What presumption! If I had not had people who love me, if I had not had people who took care of me, if I had not had people who prepared the food on my table, I would never have had the strength to work, I would never have had the strength to develop. Definitely, I received it all. Even my strength to work. I received it all. "What do you have that you did not receive?"

The more we develop within ourselves the sense that we have received everything, the more we walk the path of humility. It is like a call, the call to follow Jesus, to be his disciple, to follow the one who is meek and humble of heart, profoundly humble.

Before expressing humility in words and actions, his humility is expressed in his innermost being. He is humble. In the same way, we are called to be Jesus' disciples, to become humble ourselves, to be humble.

We can find the way through prayer: "Lord, teach me! Teach me to recognize that I received everything! Teach me never to forget that I received everything." And even when success should happen, I should pray: "Lord, I thank you because I received everything! I received my gifts, I received the strength to work, I received success. I received it all."

The more we develop our sense to have received everything, the more we walk on the path to humility. Being able to recognize that I have all received lets me recognize how lucky I am to be God's creature. Having all received and aware of being a creature of God makes me happy, it really makes me happy. As God's creature, I have received all. Without God, I had nothing. Without God, I were nothing. But with God, I am a human being called to be a child of God.

Humility is a fundamental quality in being human. It is truly a quality of the heart, a quality of the soul, a quality of the spirit, a quality that we are called to develop, with the challenge to make it grow in us.

This challenge is paradoxical. Humility is not acquired by practices that I might find in books that tell me what to do for 10 minutes a day, or maybe another exercise that tells me what to do for 20 minutes each day. There is no book that tells me what exercise to do in order to become humble. There are no exercises that let me acquire humility because humility is a gift.

If humility were the fruit of our efforts, then we could be proud of being humble. This would certainly not be humility! Humility is a gift, a pure gift. If we receive it, we must have an attitude of availability and total openness.

Where might we be able to learn what humility is about?

Look at the little ones, new-born babies, in their mothers' arms, in their fathers' arms. A new-born knows that he has received everything. He knows that when he cries and no one answers, there is a problem.

If he knows that there will always be someone who tends to him, he does not find his joy in saying "I have relied on myself." His joy is to know that he has received everything. He knows that his parents will take care of him. He remains continuously joyful in having received everything.

We are invited to imitate the little ones to experience the joy of having received everything. The joy of having received all from God, our parents, from other, people we met at some point in our life. Perhaps a professor enriched our life with a word he said in a moment when we were searching or suffering. This, too, we have all received.

Growing in the understanding that we have all received is not something that makes us sad or depresses us, thinking that because we have received everything, we are unable to do anything by ourselves. In the contrary, we rejoice because we have all received!

Having all received, what does this mean? It means that I received life from another. It means that someone loves me. Furthermore, if I have all received, it means that someone thinks that I exist. The one who gives everything, the one who gives us the gifts that we need, he who gives himself, what does he want to say? He says to us again: "It is good that you exist."

Exploring the depth of humility, we discover not only that we have received all, but we discover the goodness of our existence. We discover that it is good that we exist because we exist created by God, seen by God, loved by God. We exist and are made to exist under the protection and love of our parents, under their loving glances,

Yes, we can say it again, we have received everything.

In receiving these gifts, in receiving life, in receiving our talents, we also receive the strength to live. In receiving love, we received the strength to love. In the end, we are all called to love, but we cannot love if we have not been loved. We cannot love if we have not personally made the experience of being loved. When we have not made the experience of being loved, we are not capable of loving. Even if we desire to love, we cannot get there.

But when we have made the experience of being loved, we also made the experience that we cannot love by counting on our own strength alone. Once again, we can turn to Jesus and say again: "Lord, I received all, Lord give me the strength to live, give me the strength to love." Let our love become what we have received! In receiving existence, we also received love. We received love. We received love and feel loved, we receive love to love.

Humility is a fundamental quality of existence, both in our relationship God and in our relationships with each other. With an attitude of having received everything, we learn to be humble and appreciate the gift of others. We can learn to see their capacity for truth, beauty and goodness that is present in their soul, in their heart, and in their flesh.

Learn to see the goodness in the other! It is very easy to see problems in others, but it is more challenging to see the problems they see in us. Often, when someone asks us what we can do better in our life, we find it hard to respond. Perhaps we need to take the time for a week-long retreat to discover what we need to improve in ourselves, because we are not able to respond right away!

But when it is the opposite, when it is about saying what others need to do to improve themselves, we will not hesitate to let them know. In life, we seem to know quickly what others need to do to improve themselves, but we do not know what we ourselves need to do.

Thus, growing in humility is really a long process. At the same time, it can be the fastest work to make us humble before others, because humility lets us see others as a gift from God. It lets us see the other as a human nature created in the image of God. Humility lets us see the other person as called to become a child of God. Humility makes us capable of seeing others with all their natural capacities, beyond their limits, beyond their fragilities, their sins, their difficulties, beyond the misunderstandings and disagreements. Finally, humility gives us a new way of seeing that safeguards our capacity to see the true, the beautiful, and the good in the heart of the other.

Having proper self-understanding permits us to recognize that we have received all. It permits us to truly see the other, and this way of seeing gives us the ability to learn how to appreciate the good that is in the other.

Understanding that we have received everything, keeping this attitude towards the other, being capable to see the good and the capacity for the good that is the other, lets us experience the fruits of gentleness.

Fruits of gentleness let us confront the difficulties in life, the difficulties and hardships in life whose existence we cannot deny. For this reason, we are more than ever in need of gentleness in our life so that we can face life's hardships.

This hardness of life, we are very close to it and very aware of it in this pandemic. At the same time, we can recognize in gentleness what we receive, we can easily see the gentleness of God who strengthens us against the hardships of life. But, with his grace, we are capable to give what we received, to be gentle and patient with one another.

The confinement period completely changed our habits. We used to be with many people, at work or even in our extended family. Due to physical distancing, we see each other much less frequently.

On the other hand, in our immediate family, we are spending more time together. When we are forced to spend more time together, we are also more confronted with each other's presence, which includes our impatience and fragility.

In this particular context, gentleness is especially important, as it is so easy to say a hurtful word! It is much too easy! We see it every day, as the media are full of it. The world of communications is full of harsh words.

Let us remember that we can stand against hurtful words, that we can speak words of gentleness to those around us, to communicate gentleness. Let us open our hearts to the gentleness of God so that we, too, can show gentleness in response to the hardness of life.

Let us remember that we can stand against this, that we can speak words of gentleness to those around us, to communicate gentleness. But how can we communicate gentleness if we don't experience the gentleness of God in our life? Let us open our hearts to the humility of God, to the gentleness of God's so that we, too, can be humble with others, being of service to others, and showing gentleness in response to the hardness of life.

The family is the environment that can become a microcosmos of gentleness. In the family, are we able to be patient with each other? Are we able to wait for one another? Are we able to be gentle with each other?

If ever there are moments of impatience, think of God who is patient with us! If ever there are moments of humiliation, ask for the grace to not humiliate another in return. Sometimes, we make the experience of being humiliated, maybe because of some failure that we experienced in the workplace, or even right within our immediate family, without having wanted any of it, even if our own actions might have had a lot to do with it.

When we make this experience of being humiliated, one way to respond to the humiliation that we resent so very much is to become aware of it and to ask God for the grace not to humiliate another in return: "Lord, help me, I am humiliated. Give me the grace not to humiliate another person."

In this way, the fact of having been humiliated make us more humble and gentle towards others. Today, on this feast day of St. Peter, he invites us to believe in the victory of gentleness.

In the book of prophet Zechariah from which we read today, Jesus is anticipated as the Christ, the King of the Universe. The passage from the Gospel today makes other references to the prophet Isaiah and other prophetic writings where the Messiah is announced as a King-Saviour.

How does the King-Saviour present himself? He does not arrive on a great battle horse, he arrives on a small donkey. Jesus, the King and Saviour, arrives humbly, a humble king.

Does this humility mean that he will be a defeated king? No. Because he is a humble king, he will be a victorious king.

In humility is gentleness. And in gentleness is strength.

The real strength is gentleness. Gentleness is a force. The real force is in stability of gentle-ness. The real force is in perseverance of gentleness. Strength is stability and perseverance in service. This is gentleness, the service by love.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Christian Lépine". The signature is written in a cursive style with a cross symbol at the beginning.

† Christian Lépine
Archbishop of Montreal