

SPIRITUALITY

- Topic: The Virtue of Humility and the Spirituality of the Theologian
Convener: Diana L. Villegas, Acton, Massachusetts
Presenter: Lisa Fullam, Quincy University
Respondent: Angela Senander, Boston College

In her presentation entitled, *The Humble Theologian: Retrieving Aquinas' View of Humility for Contemporary Theologians*, Lisa Fullam brings out the meaning of humility in the context of Aquinas' work, and then shows us ways in which this meaning can be fruitful for the spiritual practice of contemporary theologians. After situating Aquinas' thought relative to that of his sources, Augustine and Aristotle, Fullam guides us through the interplay of distinctions that forms Aquinas' view of humility. Humility's function is to moderate hope. Hope is understood in Aristotelian terms as the drive or passion to achieve the difficult, possible future good. Given Aquinas' Christian framework, the virtue of humility is that virtue which moderates the human drive towards the good by recognition of human limitation before God. Humility is motivated by reverence of God, which is the acknowledgement that only God is the source of all good. Practice of reverence for God involves recognition of the good in others. This recognition of the good in others tempers the drive in any of us to overvalue our own capacity for what is good and great, and further leads us to recognize God as source of gift. Indeed, Aquinas urges recognition of our own defects and limitations in comparison to the good in others. Fullam shows how practice of this apparently unfair comparison further fosters recognition of God as source of good, a key element of humility.

In Aquinas' schema the act that characterizes the virtue of humility is translated as self-abasement, but can be understood as the recognition of our limitations. Since all Aquinas' teaching assumes truth and the use of human reason, a key gift of God, then the act of recognition of our limitations must be exercised in truth and with due reason. In other words, it includes a truthful view of self, which implies balanced self-regard. Thus, while humility calls for the exercise of recognition of our defects and limitations and recognition of the gifts of others in comparison with our own limits, such an exercise must be based on truth and reason.

Aquinas' teaching on humility must also be seen in the light of his strong emphasis on the virtue of magnanimity, which at first glance appears as the opposite of humility. Magnanimity is the virtue that makes possible achievement of great potential. That Aquinas teaches about a virtue the goal of which appears to be the opposite of humility, shows that the virtue of humility is not intended as a denial of the importance of striving toward the good of which we are capable, but rather that humility is a virtue which calls our moral attention beyond ourselves to the other, while magnanimity's focus is on diligence in

recognizing, cultivating and using the gifts God has given us. The key for Aquinas is recognition of who we are relative to God, namely that we need God and God is source of all good. Thus, magnanimity is the virtue that counters despair, for despair fails to recognize the good God has created and the grace God offers to move towards that good.

How does Aquinas' teaching on humility challenge contemporary theologians? Fullam suggests several areas. For Christians, the practice of virtues involves both God's gift of grace and intentional human effort, in other words ascetical practice based on relationship with God. Fullam challenges theologians to intentional ascetical practices that would foster the virtue of humility. Humility, which recognizes the gift of the other, and God at work in this gift would challenge theologians in a number of ways that involves truly listening to *the other*. Such *others* include those not traditionally heard, such as minorities or the oppressed, as well as those of other faiths. Recognizing the voice of Black theologians, as Jon Nilson challenged us to do in his Presidential Address, offers an example of the practice of humility. Practice of humility would suggest recognizing how God is at work in other faiths when engaged in interreligious dialogue. Recognizing God at work in the gifts of others would foster less polarization in discussions regarding the current crisis in the Church.

In her response, Angela Senander described Catherine of Siena's understanding of humility. While influenced by Aquinas, Catherine's teaching suggests other connotations to humility, as well other challenges to the theologian. For Catherine, humility involves knowledge of self, both one's greatness as created in the image of God, and one's limitations in the tendency to self-centeredness (for Catherine, the root of sin). Such self-knowledge acquired through relational knowledge of God results in humility, and humility nurtures charity. It is charity that moves persons to serve others. Catherine lived humility and charity in her passionate engagement to foster reform in the Church of her day. Catherine's example challenges today's theologians to engage in fostering reform from a stance of humility, that is, engagement moderated by a knowledge of self, which is nurtured in relational knowledge of God. Relational knowledge of God requires a commitment to prayer, a dimension of the ascetical practices to which Fullam referred.

The presentation was followed by a lively discussion challenging and expanding on both Aquinas' and Catherine's approaches to humility.

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