

22nd of Ordinary Time (August 28, 2016)

I would like to begin my reflections by giving thanks for being here. Yesterday, at about 2:00 PM I was backing up my car in a farmer's yard about an hour's drive from here. I backed into a ditch with one of my rear wheels hanging in mid-air.

It was about 3 hours before I was scheduled to give my reflections at the 5:00 Mass. I can tell you, I started doing some reflections of a very different kind.

Well, by the grace of God and the ingenuity of the farmer and his front-end loader, I managed to get my car back on the road. And today, I am still deeply thankful for the farmer's help and just a bit humbled by the experience.

And, as luck would have it, that's exactly what today's readings are about: charity and humility.

Humility and charity are generally regarded as virtues, and the readings certainly promote them as such. But the readings also call us to take a closer look at these virtues and they tell us some things about what they are.

Let's start with humility.

The first reading makes a connection between greatness and humility: "the greater you are, the more you must humble yourself".

As often happens with scriptural sayings, this seems like a contradiction. How do greatness and humility go together?

Humility comes from the word for the earth. It is about being at ground-level, being low. But why should this be a virtue? And how can it be reconciled with greatness?

Much depends on what we think greatness and humility are. And the first reading goes on to give us some insight into this.

Becoming greater can be thought of in terms of accomplishments and stature: if you do great things or are recognized to have remarkable talents, people will look up to you and expect more great things.

Becoming greater is often associated with leadership, and indeed in the Gospel reading Jesus is going to the house of a "leader" of the Pharisees. Leadership is generally recognized as a good thing. But leading is not something that is generally done from below. So how can a leader be humble?

Well, maybe humility is not just about being low, it's not self-abasement. Ground level often provides a good view of reality as opposed to lofty heights in clouds that obscure the view. Humility is about awareness and openness.

The Book of Sirach in the first reading says, "to the humble the Lord reveals his secrets" and "an attentive ear is the desire of the wise".

It goes on to talk about those who are proud: "when great calamity befalls someone proud, there is no healing, for an evil plant has taken root in them."

The Gospel reading presents the same counterpoint between humility and pride: "whoever exalts himself will be humbled and whoever humbles himself will be exalted."

But is pride always a bad thing?

This word has two different senses: one is positive, the other negative.

Pride in your country's performance at the Olympic Games is a good thing. Pride in the accomplishments of your children is a good thing. Pride in your sexual orientation is a good thing.

But pride is not always a good thing. Pride that makes you think you are better than everyone else is not. Pride that induces you to spend money you do not have to keep up appearances is not. Pride that prevents you from seeing your limitations and weaknesses is not. Failure to acknowledge them is the ultimate failing.

And as someone becomes "greater", particularly in the sense of having more power, the risk of catastrophic consequences from this failing becomes greater as well.

If there are two senses of pride, the single word for both also suggests they have something in common. It's like a lot of things that can be good to a point. But too much is not a good thing.

Pride is good when it makes us feel good about ourselves, when it gives us confidence, when it inspires us to do good things.

But pride-induced self-confidence can be a liability. Those whose pride makes them think they know everything are unlikely to learn much and often end up forcing the consequences of their ignorance on others.

The second main topic of the readings today is charity, and its conjunction with humility illustrates an important aspect that is sometimes overlooked.

In the Gospel Jesus tells us that charity is not simply giving things away.

It is not giving to make yourself look better in the eyes of others. It is not part of an exchange that gives you something in return.

It is giving things away to people who cannot possibly repay you. It is giving with no prospect of any reward. It complements humility.

So, to return to my story about how I got here, yesterday I had a very deep experience of both humility and charity.

I goofed backing up my car and I had to rely on someone else to help me get out of the mess I had made.

It would not have helped to get mad at the farmer for not marking the edge of the ditch on the side of his driveway. It would not have helped to start barking orders at him to do things. What helped was listening to what he had to say as he sized up the situation and figured out how to get my car out.

And when it was out, the farmer asked for nothing in return. He went back to his work stacking wood for the winter.

Humility and charity make a very good pair indeed.