



THE ANSWER IN THE ASHES

February 2015

Dear Friend of Clear Creek Abbey,

“The sacred liturgy,” writes Dom Daniel Kirby of Silverstream Priory, “is the Church’s *theologia prima* . . . The Church’s doctrine emerges in all its shining purity . . . from the wellspring of her liturgy. . . .”

It is interesting in this sense to see how powerfully the liturgy of Ash Wednesday teaches us “what’s what” in the world and puts everything in its place, especially with regard to the human race and its history as seen by God. “Remember, man, that thou art dust, and unto dust thou shalt return.”

In a fundamental sense all things come from Heaven, since all creation comes from God. But the return trip to God, the great business in which we are all engaged, begins from the ground up. It starts in the *humus*, the dust. This seems quite negative, really, and not a little discouraging. Is this hard truth about man’s lowly state really the best idea to keep in mind as we go through life?

To be sure, man has tried other avenues. As is often the case, the English Bard expresses as well or better than any other the more positive outlook about human life that emerged during the Renaissance:

What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties,
in form and moving how express and admirable; in action how like an angel, in
apprehension how like a god: the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals. . .
(*Hamlet*, Act II, Scene 2)

But Prince Hamlet is soon brought to the realization that this rosy outlook must be tempered by the sad school of experience:

. . . and yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me; no, nor
women neither, though by your smiling you seem to say so.

We need to know the truth, the truth about God, the truth about the world around us, and the truth about ourselves. Without truth there can be no progress, no firm hope of reaching happiness. The Gospel, with its list of Beatitudes, is the great teacher of realism about human life: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.” (Mt. 5:3)

The truth about the world around us and, especially, about ourselves is expressed in the *Rule* of Our Blessed Father St. Benedict in terms of the virtue of humility. His chapter seven is often

considered to be the masterpiece of Benedictine spirituality. It is quite lengthy and contains an admirable synthesis of all monastic wisdom. All is based on the very words of Christ: “Everyone that exalteth himself shall be humbled, and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.” (Lk. 14:11) Referring to the episode recounted in the book of Genesis, St. Benedict uses the biblical metaphor of the ladder reaching from earth to Heaven, by means of which a monk will climb towards perfection and, in the end, eternal beatitude. This climb is one of humility, going from rung to rung of humility. It is all so perfect, so beautiful. Everyone who reads this passage of the *Rule* with faith admires the vision and the promise it contains.

The reality of the human struggle through life, however—the ashes and the *humus* encountered along the way, one might say—are a different matter. We admire the Saints of old: their writings and their deeds. But when we find ourselves in unpleasant conditions not mentioned in the books, our lower nature rebels and says, “No.” And yet the *Rule* teaches us (without doubt) that we must take it all in stride.

The sixth degree of humility is, for a monk to be contented with the meanest and worst of everything, and in all that is enjoined him to esteem himself a bad and worthless laborer, saying with the prophet: “I have been brought to nothing, and I knew it not: I am become as a beast before thee, yet I am always with thee.”

The hard facts here become more than just disconcerting. The sixth degree is only half way up the ladder, and already we are stopped! The beautiful ladder is forgotten; what was learned in our youth appears inapplicable. It seems as though we have to defend ourselves and fight for what is less demeaning and more honorable for our personal dignity. But we must either climb or descend the ladder of humility. We cannot suddenly change directions. And so the struggle goes on.

So, where does that leave us? When we find ourselves, not just in theory, but practically speaking, on the ground, on the *humus*, with a task to perform and someone or just the circumstances of life telling us to accomplish it in way we are not accustomed to and not at peace with, what do we do?

As is often the case in human affairs, we must not let “the tree hide the forest” from us. We must look at the bigger, broader picture and see what it is all about. For one thing, we have to remember what lies at the top of the ladder of humility.

Having, therefore, ascended all these degrees of humility, the monk will presently arrive at that love of God which, being perfect, casts out fear . . . (Rule, chap. 7, conclusion)

Is it all, therefore, just a trick of the mind, a matter of remembering certain more consoling perspectives? No, that would not do. There is nothing more realistic than the Gospel, more real than the Holy Rule. This realism is centered on the Cross. When humility leads us to a crossroads, where our life is seriously put to the test—where we hit the proverbial “brick wall”—we have to remember that to be a Christian is to convert. We live to imitate Christ, who was made obedient “unto death, even unto the death of the cross.” (Phil. 2:8) The way up the ladder of humility is also the rugged way of the Beatitudes, and, finally, the way of the Cross. There is a perfect consummation of things beyond the Cross, but Calvary cannot be avoided. This is what we meditate on during Lent. So, let us all, monks and laity, learn the lesson in the ashes, so that we may some fine day inherit the stars.

+ br. Philip Anderson, abbot

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