

How to Be Exalted

At the conclusion of the Prayers of the Faithful, I pray

*Loving God, you are like a Mother
who knows our needs before we even ask.*

Whenever we pray, we should acknowledge that God, as a Father or a Mother, knows all about us. So the Pharisee's self-endorsement in the Gospel is rather futile. God knows him very well. His self-righteous description is evidence of the shallowness of his prayer. The tax collector, on the other hand, begins and ends his prayer with the acknowledgement of his own unworthiness and places all in God's hands. This man understands that God knows him and he accepts himself as he is. That's why Jesus testifies that he went home justified. His prayer was heard. The obstacle in the Pharisee's prayer is his self-righteousness. The key to the tax collector's prayer is his humility.

The dictionary defines *self-righteousness* as being confident of one's own righteousness, especially when smugly moralistic and intolerant of the opinions and behavior of others. One might see this as an epidemic in our day, and we all are susceptible to falling into that

trap. If it didn't work with the Pharisee, what makes us think it will work for us?

What is needed is the spirit of the tax collector. We may not see this as a particularly pleasant alternative; after all, he acknowledged that he was not a very nice guy. He earned his living from the foreign oppression of his own people. He accepted that he was flawed. He had a modest estimate of his own worth; a sense of his own unworthiness, his imperfection. He was humble. This is a foundational virtue, even more than faith, hope or charity. Think about it. Can one be a person of faith without humility? A person of hope without humility? A person of charity without humility?

To insure that faith, hope and charity can flourish in our lives, we need humility. It is the virtue that Mary asserts is the reason God so favored her. It is the virtue that more than any other sets Mother Teresa of Calcutta as a model of contemporary Christianity. It is the virtue that is drawing the admiration of the world to Pope Francis! It is the very virtue that led Jesus of Nazareth to offer himself freely for the salvation of the world. It is the only virtue that will be the antidote to the self-

righteousness that fuels all the antagonism and vitriol we find in our world today.

Each one of us, as we gather around this altar, is called to humbly acknowledge who we are. We first recall the times we have failed to respond to God's love and we ask forgiveness. So we begin our celebration with the disposition of the tax collector, not the Pharisee. It is especially significant today that we celebrate the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick at this Eucharist since it is a witness of our human frailty, a profound act of humility in our prayer of healing.

It is the beauty of this Eucharistic celebration that everything that follows these two acts of humility is thanksgiving -- the thanks that cannot repay, cannot atone. The recognition of this fact is in itself an exercise in humility, something we often find so difficult to accept in relation to Christ's death. It was a gift given not because we earned it, but simply because we are loved just as we are, warts and all. No need to put on airs like a Pharisee, but like the tax collector, humbly accepting the fact that we are so loved will assure our being exalted!