



LIGHT & LIFE

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Fr. Dismas Sayre, O.P., *Director* Jan-Feb 2023, Vol 76, No 1 Western Dominican Province

A SAINT FOR SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE INTERNET AGE

Our little visionary of the wonderful miracles at Lourdes, St. Bernadette Soubirous, would seem to be an unlikely saint for our times. Humble, retiring, devout, never seeking attention for herself, she was the opposite of our contemporary social media influencers, who are always on the lookout for more “views” and “clicks.” Indeed, the very name often used for these internet personalities, “influencers,” would imply someone who is readily looking to influence others, to draw attention to themselves. These influencers always seem ready and able to sell themselves well. After all, if they were not good at it, then they would quickly fade away.

And yet, St. Bernadette, in her humility, lives on in the hearts and minds of generations, when many of the people we so celebrate today will be little remembered in the future by the fickle mass public, who will have moved on to other forms and personalities of entertainment. The Grotto of Massabielle where she saw Our Lady, at the time a city dump, became and continues to be a world famous shrine and place of pilgrimage for millions who seek graces and miracles – and receive them! St. Bernadette was poor, asthmatic, and essentially illiterate, unable to memorize her Catechism well. Even by regional stereotypes of the time, she would be considered a true “hick.” So she would be the worst possible candidate for a real “influencer.”

Nevertheless, on that fateful morning of February 11, 1858, sent on a simple task to gather firewood with a younger sister and a friend, Our Lady chose her as her favored instrument to influence countless souls. It was not mere material poverty that made her stand out to Our Lady, since her two young companions were not graced to see the Apparition. There was a singular quality about St. Bernadette.

As word got out of this apparition, St. Bernadette became the object of ridicule, gossip, and scorn. Her own mother, on hearing about St. Bernadette’s encounter with “the beautiful lady,” slapped her, and told her to stop looking for attention and speaking such nonsense. As she continued her mission and returned for a fortnight, the townsfolk called her crazy and neurotic. Her ecstatic



trances preceding the visions only led to curious people looking to prove her deluded or a charlatan, and many tried to “snap her out of it,” by pricking her or touching her with lit candles. Some folks told her that she was simply too useless for Heaven to make any good use of her.

Which is precisely why she was chosen by Our Lady!

With all the interest in this purported vision, the local priest told St. Bernadette to ask “the beautiful lady” for her name. Surely, she would come back with some common name or title, like Marie, the Blessed Virgin, Our Lady of some well-known apparition, or such. St. Bernadette dutifully reported back to the priest that Our Lady called herself:

“The Immaculate Conception.”

Her parents were dismayed by all the unwanted attention their daughter’s encounters were generating – friends and neighbors would talk! And then, the miracles began...

Now, she attracted *another* kind of unwanted attention, even if it was the “good” kind, coming with people trying to offer her money or asking for blessings, people seeing her as a kind of saint already in this life. She saw herself
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Novena of Masses in honor of

OUR LADY OF LOURDES

February 11th -19th

TO BE OFFERED FOR YOUR INTENTIONS

THEOLOGY FOR THE LAITY

Magnanimity and Humility

By Fr. Dismas Sayre, O.P.

To an unbeliever, magnanimity and humility might seem to be types of social grace, even if coming from entirely different kinds of people. A king might magnanimously forgive a lowly subject who committed a crime against him, regarding the poor man with pity and mercy, sparing him and even providing for the poor man's family. The guilty man, in humility, might see himself as unworthy of such an act of mercy, most of all coming from a mighty ruler towards a lowly commoner and criminal. The king is seemingly exalted by his beneficence, and the guilty man lowered by his humility.

Yet, these two beautiful virtues are, and should be, connected. Our Lord Himself, in warning His disciples not to seek honors, as well as in the Parable of the Guests, where a person tried to seat himself higher, warns us that those who seek to be exalted shall be humbled, and those who humble themselves shall be exalted (cf Luke 14:8-11 and Matthew 23:12). This was not a new teaching by Our Lord – the exaltation of the humble and the casting down of the proud is asserted in the Book of Proverbs (cf Proverbs 11:2, 15:33, 29:23), and repeated throughout the history of Israel, especially in the lives of the prophets that God lifted up from among His people to call Israel to humility and conversion before her Lord and God (e.g., Isaiah 6:5-7). But Our Lord wanted to instill this mindset even more deeply into those whom He called first to serve, not to be served. And it worked – one need only compare St. Peter before the Resurrection with the St. Peter in the Scriptures after Pentecost, or Saul of Tarsus with St. Paul after his encounter with the Lord on the road to Damascus.

One of the problems is that we will often see false humility or undue humility. Golda Meir, a former Prime Minister of Israel, loved to tweak the falsely humble, saying, “Don’t be so humble – you’re not that great.” On the other hand, there is also a story about her going to Rome and being the first Prime Minister of Israel to visit the Vatican and the then-Holy Father, Pope St. Paul VI. Before entering the papal library, she remarked, “Imagine me, the daughter of Moshe Mabovitz, the carpenter, going to meet the Pope of the Catholics.” One of her aides replied, “Wait a minute, Golda, carpentry is a very respectable profession around here.”

Magnanimity and humility both work to correct us, then, from a wrongful estimation of ourselves to a rightful estimation of ourselves. God made you in His own image and likeness, so you are not “garbage,” by any means, I don’t care what your status is in this life. At the same time, we are infinitely more distant from the glory and majesty of God than we are in proximity to the lowliness of the humble earthworm, and after death we are often no more than mere food for those same earthworms, so don’t get too ahead of yourself.

The old Baltimore Catechism summed this up beautifully in the very first questions:

Who made us? *God made us...* Why did God make us? *God made us to show forth His goodness and to share with us His everlasting happiness in heaven.* What must we do to gain the happiness of Heaven? *To gain the happiness of heaven we must know, love, and **serve** God in this world.*

So we are oh, so very far below God, but God made us so that He could exalt us to the glory and joys of Heaven. He, who by nature made us lower than the angels, seeks and desires to have us reigning over the same angels in Heaven! Those particular angels that sought to exalt themselves over God, well, we know that they were lowered – very much lowered and cast down from Heaven.

As I wrote in the last issue of *Light and Life*, there can be two things in seeming paradox, not as contrary things, but as two things in tension, but we need that tension to work well and to do the good: magnanimity to pull us higher toward things of Heaven, and humility to pull us lower and ground us in reality.

This kind of tension is, by nature, not paralyzing, but creative. A fellow (and smarter) Dominican friar writes about the magnanimous man:

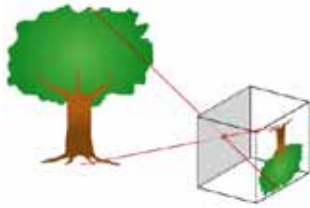
As St. Thomas notes, he is so named (magnanimus) because he possesses a great spirit or drive; the magnanimous man is a veritable dynamo of virtuous action—a fact of which he is well aware. To think less of himself would be unduly humble, what St. Thomas terms pusillanimous [lacking courage; overly timid]; to think more of himself would be presumptuous.

[Magnanimity and Humility according to St. Thomas Aquinas, *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review*, Volume 82, Number 2, April 2018, pp. 265-266, Gregory Pine, O.P.]

This creative tension, this dynamo, this engine of virtue is shown in the life of the Blessed Virgin Mary. In her humility, she is the Handmaid of the Lord, bending her will perfectly to His. And then, in haste, she makes her way to her cousin St. Elizabeth, to announce the Good News, and to care for her in her advanced age and pregnancy. At the Wedding at Cana she is moved to action to ask her Son and Lord for His mercy upon the wedded couple, and then pulls back, not assuming anything, only instructing the servers to “Do whatever He tells you.” St. Bernadette, as we saw in the previous article, was likewise humble, but also likewise moved to action. She truly was a dynamo in making the message of Our Lady known. Once her initial mission was complete, she retired from the public eye into religious life, praying for the salvation of the world and doing penance for sinners, among whom she counted herself.

The very word we use for Mary’s song of praise at the Annunciation, the *Magnificat*, comes from the Latin “magnificat anima mea Dominum”, literally, “my soul magnifies [makes great] the Lord.” “Magnanimous” is a

combination of “magna” and “anima,” literally “great-soul.” It would seem to be anything but humble for the Blessed Virgin Mary to claim that she is somehow making the Lord “bigger” or “magnifying” Him somehow. The only way she does this is through her smallness. In the same way that an old pinhole camera works better the smaller the aperture or hole is in order to display the image, but not so small that it is closed off, the better then that God’s wonders through Mary are made manifest for mankind.



Pinhole Camera: from Wikipedia

St. Bernard of Clairvaux, speaking of the Annunciation event, notes that heavy tension at this scene, which countless artists have tried to capture:

Why do you delay, why are you afraid? Believe, give praise, and receive. Let humility be bold, let modesty be confident. This is no time for virginal simplicity to forget prudence. In this matter alone, O prudent Virgin, do not fear to be presumptuous. Though modest silence is pleasing, dutiful speech is now more necessary. Open your heart to faith, O blessed Virgin, your lips to praise, your womb to the Creator. See, the desired of all nations is at your door, knocking to enter. If He should pass by because of your delay, in sorrow you would begin to seek Him afresh, the One whom your soul loves. Arise, hasten, open. Arise in faith, hasten in devotion, open in praise and thanksgiving. Behold the handmaid of the Lord, she says, be it done to me according to your word.

Yet the doubt might still linger that somehow, in magnanimity, aren’t we just seeking great honors and praise? Even if just a teensy-weensy bit? The Blessed Virgin Mary, in her Magnificat, herself states that, “from this day all generations will call me blessed.” That is some high praise indeed!

Our brother Gregory Pine, OP, cites another Dominican in highlighting for us that:

The magnanimous man is not one who seeks out great honors, but one who seeks out the great goods of the soul, great virtues, or, even better, one who accomplishes great virtuous acts. He tends to the great in every category of virtue. And thus, he must be rectified vis-à-vis great honors, because honor attends virtue, and great honors attend great virtuous acts.

[Henri-Dominique Noble, O.P. in *Saint Thomas d’Aquin, Somme théologique: La force* 2a-2ae, Questions 123-140, Éditions de la Revue des Jeunes, French trans. J.-D. Folghera, O.P., notes by Henri-Dominique Noble, O.P. (Paris: Desclée & Cie, 1926), 293]

In other words, one receives great reward and honor by those great acts, and should seek those acts for themselves, virtue being really its own best reward. A true war hero does not seek medals – the medals are the result of his heroic deeds. A *false* war hero that sought medals *first* would almost certainly get himself, if not his entire unit, killed in battle.

We can see the opposites of our virtues working in that story we always hear for the Annunciation and that we recently heard for the Fourth Sunday of Advent for Year A in the lectionary cycle:

The LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying: Ask for a sign from the LORD, your God; let it be deep as the netherworld, or high as the sky! But Ahaz answered, "I will not ask! I will not tempt the LORD!" Then Isaiah said: Listen, O house of David! Is it not enough for you to weary people, must you also weary my God? Therefore the Lord himself will give you this sign: the virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel. (Is 7:10-14)

A perfectly valid question from our point of view might be, “Isn’t Isaiah being just a *tad* harsh with King Ahaz? Isn’t King Ahaz simply being humble before the Lord, not daring to ask for help?” The simple answer is: not at all. He is the opposite of the Blessed Virgin Mary in this case.

Through the voice of the prophet Isaiah, the Lord sounds almost beside Himself. He is begging King Ahaz to ask for His help. His kingdom of Judah is under the mortal threat of the mighty Assyrian Empire. The northern kingdoms of Israel and Aram want to ally themselves together with Judah to fight off the Assyrians, depending on their armies and not the Lord for their survival, although King Ahaz knows that this is likely a losing cause, and so refuses to join them. In retaliation, and in order to replace King Ahaz with a ruler more in line with their wish for a military alliance, Israel and Aram invade Judah, in order to supplant him. What was King Ahaz supposed to do? He was supposed to do exactly as Isaiah had asked, and let the Lord work through him and defend Judah. In refusing the sign from God, in turning away His help and His might, King Ahaz would depend on his own strength and political cunning to try to save his own skin. In 2nd Kings we read that:

Meanwhile, Ahaz sent messengers to Tiglath-pileser, king of Assyria, with the plea: “I am your servant and your son. Come up and rescue me from the power of the king of Aram and the king of Israel, who are attacking me.” Ahaz took the silver and gold that were in the house of the LORD and in the treasuries of the king’s house and sent them as a present to the king of Assyria. (2 Ki 16:7-8)

This came at a great cost for Judah, making Judah a vassal state of Assyria. Notice how the wicked King Ahaz refuses to humble himself before the Lord, selling out the very treasure of the Lord, yet he tells the pagan king, “I am *your* servant and *your* son.” If he had humbled himself before the Lord, instead of in front of a mortal man and king like himself, if in magnanimity he would then have carried out the Lord’s orders on behalf

of his people, how much less would his own nation have suffered for his cowardice and pride!

Now, it would seem that Our Lord, then had no need of either virtue, being the source of every virtue and perfection. And that much is true. However, St. Thomas Aquinas reminds us that “Everything that the Lord did or suffered in the flesh is an instruction and an example for our salvation, and so we find in John: *I have given you an example that as I have done, so you should do also.*”

St. Paul, perhaps encountering too many haughty Philippians, teaches them to follow Jesus in this:

Do nothing out of selfishness or out of vainglory; rather, humbly regard others as more important than yourselves, each looking out not for his own interests, but [also] everyone for those of others. Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus, Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.

Because of this, God greatly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil 2:3-11)

We see, then, how God, in order to exalt us from our humility, to raise us up from our lowliness, first lowered *Himself* from His exalted majesty to our lowly human condition in everything but sin, and through Himself, lifts us up, and not even for His own sake, but for the glory of God the Father! He did not seek His own glory, rather it was given Him by the Father, precisely because He did not seek His own glory first in His earthly mission, but our salvation. And in His magnanimity, sought first and above all to put the will of the Father in action, preaching the Good News to the poor, announcing salvation, healing the sick, the blind, and the lame, raising the dead, and forgiving sins.

This we see in the very physical language that we use to describe the life of Jesus: that He came down from Heaven, lived and worked among us as man, then ascended back into Heaven. He did not descend in order that He might ascend – that would not make sense, for why descend in the first place? He descended in order that we might be raised up with Him, the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary being the first fruits of the fullness of the promise that not only will we ascend in soul, but also be reunited fully in body, even our very matter that He created participating in our sanctification that He worked in His earthly life.

If then you were raised with Christ, seek what is above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Think of what is above, not of what is on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ your life appears, then you too will appear with him in glory. (Col 3:1-4) ■

A Saint for Social Media... (Continued from page 1)

merely as an instrument, a “most ignorant” instrument, who was chosen so that Our Lady’s message could never be attributed to her own intellect or talents. She knew she could never persuade anyone into believing. When pressed for proofs, she would say, “My job is to inform, not to convince.”

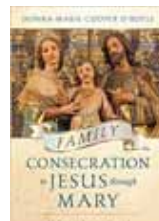
These last words, especially, should give us pause. On social media, we so often want to receive those “likes,” those “karma points,” those clicks. But what are those, really? Icons of passing human opinions?

As another great French saint, St. Jean-Marie Vianney, would tell us, “Do not try to please everybody. Try to please God, the angels, and the saints—they are your public.” And don’t forget – *they* are also *far* more forgiving than the court of public opinion.

St. Bernadette is frequently listed as a patron saint for “those ridiculed for their piety.” So, if you are tempted to be an influencer online, or even in person, remember our saint, explain what you believe as best you can, and leave the rest to God, asking for the grace to be like St. Bernadette.

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