

# Catholic

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C2603A

MARCH 2026

**Catholicism in Context** WHAT WE BELIEVE AND WHY WE BELIEVE IT



# Humility

## IS STILL A VIRTUE

CHRISTOPHER M. BELLITTO

In our world of strutting, humility has gotten a bad rap—but it's still a virtue and one worth recovering. Dante called it the first virtue. Saint Augustine was asked to name the three most important virtues. His answer: humility, humility, and humility. Saint Isaac the Syrian, writing in the seventh century, taught that humility is to the virtues what salt is to food and that without humility, all our works are in vain.

### Why Humility Matters

In our own time, we witnessed a spectacular example of humility when Pope Benedict XVI announced his resignation from the papacy in February 2013. The ultimate company man with a tremendous sense of history and tradition, Benedict realized he simply was no longer up to the job. So, he stepped away from what is essentially the longest-running monarchy on the planet. With that simple yet powerful—even stunning—move, he proved that humility is worth recovering. This virtue can help us fight against narcissism among individuals, groups, and nations. It can replace “I” with “us” and selfishness with community.

Humility is the first step in self-reflection. It makes us have second thoughts. It opens us up to our blind spots and ignorance, our flaws and weaknesses. It tells us that it's fine to have doubt. In fact, humility is part of faith. Pope Francis put it this way in an interview with Fr. Antonio Spadaro, SJ, just a few months after his election:

*If a person says that he met God with total certainty and is not touched by a margin of uncertainty, then this is not good. For me, this is an important key. If one has the answers to all the questions—that is the proof that God is not with him. It means that he is a false prophet, using religion for himself. The great leaders of the people of God, like Moses, have always left room for doubt. You must leave room for the Lord, not for our certainties; we must be humble.*

### What Humility Is Not

Humility is not humiliation. It's a virtue, not a vice. A helpful way to look at humility is to use Aristotle's method from the fourth century BCE. He did not put a vice on one side of the equation and a virtue on the other, diametrically opposed. Instead, he placed virtue as a moderating balance between two vices. Aristotle placed humility (which he called pride, but in a good way) in between thinking too much of yourself (the Greek word *hubris*) and thinking too little of yourself (we'd call it low self-esteem or letting people dump on you).

While humility seems to be in short supply today, there's plenty of “me-ism.” Humility might serve as an alternative to the disease of narcissism that's infected us. We live in a world not of “I'm right and you're wrong,” but of “I'm right and you're bad.” At its worst, this attitude can

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deny another person's or group's right to an opinion or a place at the table. This is the self-absorbed and divisive product of reckless partisanship, not a well-informed sense of partnership. Humility can be our path back to courtesy, respect, and good manners in face-to-face exchanges and especially on social media (which is not always so social), with its protective yet poisonous mask of anonymity.

Me-ism is also a very bad management principle. If an organization, a school, or a local zoning board is dominated by someone at the top whose idea of leadership is shooting out commands like Zeus' thunderbolts, why would anyone creative or imaginative join? If the leader believes in a pure hierarchy in which information and policies

flow down entirely, then there is no chance for the leader to get valuable feedback for course corrections and improvements. The organization can never adapt and get better when top management is aloof and deliberately cuts itself off because it's sure the minions below have nothing helpful or substantial to contribute. The rigid dualism that me-ism creates is what makes arrogant management a barrier that shuts the door to potential.

On a broader scale of civil society and politics, rigid dualism does nothing to move us forward through dialogue, compromise, and consensus—which, admittedly, is not as enticing and exciting because that way of proceeding thrives in the gray middle ground. Yet, slogging through the gray has proven itself time and again to be far less divisive and far more successful than a cartoonish black-and-white opposition. Extremism may make us feel vindicated, but it doesn't move us forward together. Performative stunts and having a lot of followers on social media may fool us into thinking we're having an impact, but they don't solve problems. The frightening alternative to a life informed by humility has been the death of both civility and practical results. Some people prefer to be right and dead in the water than wrong and rowing together.

### How Jesus' Humility Upset the Ancient World

Where does the word “humility” come from? Its root is *humus*, meaning “of the earth”—a coarse, elemental start. Dictionary entries and thesaurus searches for “humble” and “humility” bring up mostly negative descriptions: submissiveness, timidity, self-abasement, a drooping sense of self-worth, putting oneself down, underestimating one's own abilities or value, and a lack of self-assurance that pushes against sticking up for oneself.

These words could describe not only people who happened to be born at the bottom of ancient society but also those from higher up who had a fall and were brought low. Their businesses may have failed, they could have gambled and lost politically or socially, or they might

have been taken in battle as prisoners of war, which crippled not only the male soldiers but also the women and children in their families back home. These concepts give us the negative idea of a humble person in downtrodden terms: defeated, crushed, beaten, thrown aside, pressed to nothingness. Some may have been born lowly, but other ancient people had lowliness thrust upon them.

In the Romans' Latin, someone described as *humiles* is "on the ground." This might be a free person of a low status or a slave or foreigner living outside the mighty protection of Roman citizenship. Even among the free, there were categories of essentially first- and second-class citizens: the *humiliores* are identified as distinct from the wealthy elites or "best people," called *optimates*. In practical status terms, the *humiliores* were demeaned, and were expected to interact with their betters accordingly: heads down and working the worst manual jobs. Even Romans with a skilled trade, say tailors or bakers, were considered ignoble because they worked with their hands, which was akin to the debased work of slaves, even if the artisans were free citizens.

There was plenty of humiliation outside the Romans' social system. An example of how Romans proclaimed an enemy's defeat and resulting deprived status was to make those they'd conquered pass under a yoke, which was typically constructed by stabbing two spears into the ground and then

balancing another spear across the top. This ancient limbo ritual forced each enemy—from a leading general down to a foot soldier—to bend over in a symbolic demonstration that they were now under Roman power. The very phrase "under the yoke" in Latin is *sub iugum*, which gives us the brutal verb *subjugate*.

### But, Then Came the Incarnation

God becoming human upended ancient conversations about humility in a very dramatic and influential way. This divine action in turn ennobled all human beings, even if they were on the ground floor of Roman-occupied Jerusalem. The fact that Christians believed that God became an actual human baby boy befuddled the Greco-Roman mind. Yes, Greeks and Romans knew that Yahweh had been the object of reverential fear and obedience for Jews for centuries. Yahweh was the source of understanding and wisdom for the humble with ears to hear, not the high-born who didn't want to listen. But this human-God Jesus was quite a next step to grasp.

A centerpiece of Jesus' ministry that he repeated often is that the humble should rejoice, which was, of course, countercultural to the Roman occupiers but familiar to Jews. Not only that, but those who sought to be the greatest must take the last spot in line. Jesus said this to both big crowds and his bickering disciples, who were

jostling to be next in prestige after him. The most striking litany of this theme is the Sermon on the Mount. The gospel writer Matthew sets the scene: Jesus' reputation for healing and wisdom is spreading fast. The crowds grow. In some other gospel scenes, he has to stand in a boat pulled back from the shore to keep from being crushed. In this episode, Jesus stands atop a mountain so more people can see and hear his lyrical message:

*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*Blessed are they who mourn, for they will be comforted.*

*Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the land.*

*Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied.*

*Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.*

*Blessed are the clean of heart, for they will see God.*

*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*

*Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you [falsely] because of me.*

*Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven. Thus they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

MATTHEW 5:3–12

This list, known as the Beatitudes, is startlingly out of touch with the Greco-Roman social and value system in which Jesus and his Jewish followers lived. Yet, for anyone who may have been subjugated by the dominant political system of raw power and oppression, Jesus' idea that the meek and the poor in spirit—the humble—are blessed and not worthless must have been hopeful



and attractive, indeed. By contrast, nowhere does Jesus say, “Blessed are the smug,” but that’s a real temptation when you think you know it all—that is, when you’re without doubt or humility. Consider a 1956 letter in which the Southern Gothic author Flannery O’Connor identified the great Catholic sin as smugness, adding, “I find it in myself and don’t dislike it any less.” It’s hard to be stubborn when you’re humble.

### Moving Forward

Pope Francis, perhaps inspired by the humility of his predecessor, embraced certain symbols of humility: he didn’t wear red slippers, for instance, and he preferred toned-down vestments and thrones. After his election, he called to cancel his Buenos Aires newspaper delivery and went back to his hotel to pay the bill. True, but there’s more at work here, and we should say again that Francis became pope because of the startling example of Benedict XVI’s humility in resigning the papacy. Francis honored that example at a Mass commemorating Benedict XVI’s death about a year afterward, putting humility front and center in his homily:

*God seeks the humble, those who hope in him and not in themselves and their own plans. Dear brothers and sisters, this is Christian humility, which is not simply one virtue among others, but the basic disposition of life: believing ourselves to be in need of God, making room for him, and putting all our trust in him. This is Christian humility. God loves humility because it permits him to interact with us. Even more, God loves humility because he himself is humble. He comes down to us; he lowers himself; he does not impose himself; he makes room for us. God is not only humble; he is humility itself.*

All throughout the process leading up to the Synod on Synods in 2023 and 2024, Francis repeatedly stressed the need for humble listening: to be open to other people’s ideas; to listen not to counter, but



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*“God seeks the humble, those who hope in him and not in themselves and their own plans.”*

to learn; to have a civil ear and a gentle tongue in understanding that your own word is not the final one on any topic.

Pope Leo XIV continues in this vein, encouraging a Church that “builds bridges, not walls,” and that inspires a “culture of encounter.” Preaching on the Gospel of Luke, chapter 14, he said,

*In the gospel, Jesus speaks of “humility” in describing perfect freedom. (See Luke 14:11.) Humility is really freedom from ourselves. It is born when the kingdom of God and its righteousness become our real concern and we allow ourselves to lift up our eyes and look ahead: not down at our feet, but at what lies ahead! Those who exalt themselves generally think that nothing is more interesting than themselves; yet, deep down, they are quite insecure.*

*Whereas those who know they are precious in God’s eyes, who know they are God’s children, have greater things to be worried about; they possess a sublime dignity all their own. Once we learn to take the last places, rather than striving for the first, that dignity will appear, and we will come to the fore simply and effortlessly. (Angelus, August 31, 2025)*

We might join Pope Leo in his prayer that the Church (and perhaps our homes, schools, and work places) “will always be a school of humility for everyone, a home where all are welcome, a place where rivalries are set aside and where Jesus still speaks to us and teaches us to imitate his own humility and freedom.”

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