

This article explores an ancient Christian developmental path, commonly misunderstood and rarely heard of outside monastic circles. A version of this article was published in the Winter 2004 issue of "Nectar of NonDual Truth," an Advaitic-based publication interested in universal teachings from multiple traditions. It does not refer specifically to all aspects of an AQAL consideration, but does point to key elements in an effort to ground aspects of Christianity in Integral Theory, while honoring its roots and traditions.

## Humility: An ancient rhythm for the 21st century

by John Forman, OBISB

St Benedict of Nursia, the father of Christian monasticism and the patron saint of Europe, wrote a rule for monastic life in the 600s. It has evolved with the times while maintaining its essence as a set of precepts that continues to guide and nourish the Benedictine monks, nuns and oblates<sup>1</sup> who have adopted this rule up to today.

The largest, single chapter of the Rule, Chapter 7: "On Humility," is central to and leavens all Benedictine spirituality. It describes what is now most frequently a misunderstood concept, and one that doesn't get much press outside monastic circles. "Humility" is a withering notion if we use it to mean neurotically passive or self-effacing to the point of groveling. Benedict's Rule does not call for humiliation. If, on the other hand, we approach "humility" Christologically, that is, in the sense of Christ-centering and following the pattern of

Christ's emptying of himself called kenosis, "humility" becomes a gift of grace for our continued spiritual growth.

One key to differentiate life-giving humility from negating humility is the focus: Grace-given "humility" acknowledges both the individual self and the Self that transcends each of us, while hostile "humility" is entirely self-focused and, ultimately, consuming as it unevenly sees only the "created" and not the creator or that which sustains the created. Dietrich Bonhoeffer warned about this one aspect of difference in his book, *Ethics*: "The surrender of the ego in selfless service must never be confused with the destruction and annihilation of this ego; for then indeed this ego would no longer be capable of assuming responsibility."

Rather than destroying the self, the more Christ-centered path to seeking humility is stated clearly in Philippians 2: "Your attitude should be the same as Christ Jesus who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself

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<sup>1</sup> People who have connected spiritually to a specific Benedictine community, but who tend to live outside the monastery.

nothing, taking the very nature of a servant...he humbled himself and became obedient to death..." (Another translation says: "though Divine...he emptied himself.")

A fruitful way to think about it is that we work on our own deep interior for the purpose of getting through and entirely out of ourselves in love and service for God. It is vital that we get past ourselves yet without losing ourselves in this inner work, if we are to take on the nature of God's love and service described in Philippians. Mother Teresa's version of worrying about her self-image might be discerned from her daily prayer that God make her worthy to serve people that most of us would find exceptionally difficult even to be with.

### **A working definition of "humility"**

Jewish mystics say that we were created because God loves a story; in other words, we were created for God. With that background, we can begin to explore some of the deeper movement of humility – the created beloved in eternal dance with the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Humility (*humilitas*, meaning "on the ground") may or may not be passive; it may or may not be evangelical; it may or may not be temperamentally determined or come as the wisdom of age. Beyond these particulars, if we approach the gift of humility as praxis – the knowledge of truth applied – we discover the human dignity in understanding that we were called to live for God, and how to respond to that understanding so that we are a God-story worth telling.

### **The Original 12-Step Program**

Benedict considered humility to be the precondition for final exaltation...the intended destination for our spiritual development. He portrays the development of humility as a Jacob's ladder with both ascending and descending movements, which can also be understood as what Ken Wilber has termed the "involution/evolution" arch or the "in-volvement" of Spirit into the manifest realm as a movement of love called *agape* as matter (an aspect of Spirit) evolves ever more directly into Spirit in a movement of love called *eros*.

In his book *Reaching Out*, Henri Nouwen explores three related movements of spiritual ascent (with the essential guidance of "descending" *agapic* grace): from loneliness to solitude, from hostility to hospitality and from illusion to prayer. Benedict's ladder of humility can thus be realized as both prescriptive and developmental for the purpose of facilitating these very movements. We can also recognize foundational Christian dynamics of agency in communion – the interplay between the individual and the collective – on the road to

wisdom and self-transcendence, what St Benedict considered “exaltation.”

The seeming paradox Benedict proposes in this chapter is that by descending in humility, we ascend. It is the work of a lifetime and is essentially given as a gift of grace, rather than something that is mastered or achieved. While not a lock-step sequential process, it is a progression that involves the integration of body, mind and soul. To seek God, as St. Augustine advised: “Seek within yourself and ascend through yourself.” We seek the realization of that which grace (involution) is extending to us as we climb (evolution), and these gifts of grace offered as we move along the steps of Benedict’s ladder of humility involve increasing psychospiritual realization.

**The first step** of the ladder is to “always keep the fear of God before [one’s] eyes.” Spiritual development is, in part, a process that can begin with a sound understanding of one’s place in the universe, which is the appropriate basis for live-giving humility. Benedict’s first degree of humility can be thought of as simply a restatement of the first great commandment, which is to put God first. The self-restraint and mindfulness created by a growing awareness of the presence of the Almighty forms the foundation of a Christ-centered relationship with God and from that, all relationships, from friendship to family to community.



One radical lesson here is that, although humility is a gift from God, still our own efforts and thoughts matter, and progress (if that word can be used) begins within the core of our own hearts, motives and expectations. Benedict’s admonitions to avoid self-will and to “not pursue your lusts,” while stated in the negative are actually positive moves, providing an action for the soul about to encounter the Divine that is not unlike a wine-taster cleansing her palette in preparation for a fine Chateaufeuf du Pape.

Notice that we begin with our own inner dimensions rather than the exterior manifestations<sup>2</sup>. People stepping onto this rung may be

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<sup>2</sup> James Fowler has researched faith development and created a stage model that is particularly helpful for understanding Christian spiritual growth. This particular step of humility correlates at least loosely with Fowler’s Stage II, the Mythic-Literal, where the individual is just beginning to take on a personal explication of a spiritual knowledge and growth. From this point, the steps that Benedict outlines may serve

noticing the voice of their conscience for the first time and perhaps have some early sense of calling or vocation. The fear that we experience here can frequently be a useful motivator and may be caused by any number of interpretations, but might involve some combination of the fear of losing of this budding awareness of grace, of our moral fragility or of our comparative lack of power, even of the vast, oceanic sensations of spiritual awakening themselves.

**The second step** is “the renunciation of self-will and desire,” which can be appropriately considered a Christian harmonic of Buddhist non-attachment. At this stage, we’re preparing for self-transcendence, whether we can articulate it or not. If we stop here, we will be stuck with our own recently discovered limitedness. There are additional steps to take or we wind up as Abbot Michael Casey, OSB, says: “...striving for abstract perfection” which he calls “a boring and narcissistic way of spending one’s time on this earth.” What matters is following Christ into that movement of transcendence, which Christians acknowledge and can experience in the Eucharist.

At this point, we are weakening the nexus between one’s previous motivations and behaviors so that we can open to the next. We now extend the awareness begun on the ladder’s first rung into a movement toward surrender to God<sup>3</sup>. The second and third degrees both extend this awareness into surrender to God, and a recognition of authority outside ourselves. This obedience is not blind or unquestioning, but is more akin to listening for the voice of God through other people: one’s spouse, friends, priests; perhaps doctors or other caregivers.

**The third**, briefly, is “submission to one’s superior in all obedience.” Easily misunderstood, this is not military obedience or slavish compliance. Reconsider the notion from the framework of formation and the obedience (meaning “to hear”) becomes more accurate. It becomes formative listening undertaken by choice in the compassionate light of an Abbot or Abbess who bears the yoke of shepherd’s responsibilities on the other end. This relationship can be seen as Ramakrishna’s “fence around a sapling” providing protection and guidance until we are able to grow past its boundaries.

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either to widen one’s experience from within a stage or to nudge a person toward opportunities for higher stage development.

<sup>3</sup> If a person is developing in spiritual depth rather than breadth, it may be that the person is now prepared for Fowler’s third stage (Synthetic-Conventional) somewhere near this stage.

While this is not surrendering one's liberty and dignity, it is substantially more than simply getting good advice. This step is intended to be submission to wise and experienced counsel for the purpose of self-emptying. As in the Zen story of the master filling the inquirer's teacup to overflowing, we can take in nothing new if we are already full. This obedience is also not for the purpose of social harmony, though that may occur, but to bring the individual soul into harmony with the Divine in preparation for true contemplation. For some, this is the first blush of recognition of any authority outside themselves. This obedience is not blind or unquestioning, but is more akin to listening for the voice of God through other people: one's spouse, friends, priests; perhaps doctors or other caregivers



**Fourth** is essentially "patience in enduring hardship with equanimity." In short, we are learning to accept difficulties of life with patience and to approach suffering with maturity. Life and love are hard. Suffering and pain are already part of the package and are frequently unjust and cruel, which means that we can't afford to be distracted by the merely irritating.

We are also learning to let go of former ways of engaging the world. Walking away from one's coping systems, even intentionally, is difficult, but now Benedict is adding a trust relationship that extends far beyond most of our limits. Life lived to another's will is certain

to be difficult and Benedict expects us to learn to approach all our suffering with mature patience. This patience is intended not to be mindless endurance, but rather as an intentional joining with Christ's suffering in life and on the cross for the purpose of transcendence. One illustrative example is at the 8th station of the Cross<sup>4</sup> At this point in his ordeal, he has already been beaten, tortured and humiliated. He has fallen twice. He has seen his mother for the last time. And yet as he continues to carry his cross toward what he knows will be a prolonged and extremely painful death, at this 8th station, he stops to "comfort the women of Jerusalem." At a point when any of us would

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<sup>4</sup> These are a set of icons or imagery designed to be a guide for prayer or meditation that depict key moments in the story of Jesus' crucifixion.

forgive a certain self-absorbance, he responds outwardly to those who need him once more.

Most of us have a bit less hardship than this to transcend, but fidelity in hard times is proving and the movement within this degree is exercise intended to result in deep, reliable interior quietude. We begin by learning to be present with what actually is, to gain experience coming to know and interact one's situation without fear (though maybe anxiously!) in anticipation of what Michael Casey calls "the joy that comes when everything is lost but love perdures."

The soul, it is said, grows by subtraction: through suffering and through giving. Life and love are hard. Suffering and pain are already part of the package and are frequently unjust and cruel, which means that we can't afford to be distracted by the merely irritating while we are getting stripped to the core, which is the love of God.

**The fifth step** is concerned with "self-revelation and the acknowledgement of sinfulness." If we take "sinfulness" to mean our own movements away from grace, we can follow Bernard Lonergan's advice to understand this first blush of recognition as a gift: When we encounter a situation where we can see the right thing to do and can't bring ourselves to do it, we tend to either rationalize our behavior away or lapse into some version of self-recrimination. Lonergan points to a third alternative that is also one of the most useful ways to consider this stage. Before we do anything else, we can notice this gap as our growth edge. Recognizing our shortfalls as signifiers of our growing edge puts us in a more actionable context as the created reaching toward our Creator.

Standing in the wash of the movement of Spirit, we learn at this stage the difficult art of ruthless and radical self-honesty. Benedict's desire was that we would have a community first of support (step 3) but also of challenge (step 4) within which to practice this. And now we are beginning to take on more responsibility for our actions or inactions<sup>5</sup>. This is an opportunity to seek a "confessor," a counselor able to skillfully fill in our blind spots, thus fulfilling the trusting relationship begun in the previous steps.

**The fifth degree** involves self-motivated openness and trust, specifically in relation to one's Abbot. While most of us don't have an

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<sup>5</sup> This is likely to relate to Fowler's Stage Four (Individuative-Reflective) of faith development.

abbot or abbess to confess our “evil thoughts” to, we do have people all around us who care about our growth. Self-disclosure and trusted spiritual guidance from loving, listening guides is essential to our development. A skilled spiritual director or similar guide can provide both the acceptance to hear and the challenge to explore how our missing the mark is manifesting in the lives of those around us. These guides can help us with the simple awareness of certain gaps between our espoused philosophy and our philosophy in action. The abbot or abbess’s role as Christ in the community provides the model for our guides as they take the other role in the relationship, remembering that compassionate “acceptance” can range from righteous, compassionate anger to the sharing of honest if uncomfortable truth, but it is never just simple-minded absorbance.

**The sixth step** is focused on “contentment with the least,” to which might be added: “for the purpose of yielding to others.” This is, in fact, the intentional lowering of one’s self-esteem, which is can be quite difficult to grasp given pop psychology’s emphasis on low self-esteem as a cause of contraction and misery (though there are studies showing that many criminals actually have extremely high levels of self-esteem, which is precisely how they justify placing themselves above the law).

However, the intentional movement is more life-affirming if it is approached as a concrete and immediate means of expressing love and respect for the other, rather than as abject submission. The most fruitful interpretation is probably to emphasize the role of “contentment” rather than to fixate on “the least.” Where does your worth originate? If not from this plane, but primarily from grace, then why be distracted by the trappings of this plane? The sixth degree is contentment in the form of gratitude for and acceptance of what one has in the spirit of Mary’s acknowledgment in the *Magnificat*: “The Lord has done great things for me...” If you can be grateful for the least of things, how much more appreciative will you be for anything beyond that?



For Benedictines, what is truly needed is not of this world anyway; we were put here to serve God and, to do that, we need to appreciate what is. Here, there is a delicate balance. Benedictines are not asked to live in abject poverty, but more along the lines of the Buddhist

notion of right use and generosity, and always in gratitude. We are to treat everything from our bodies to our garden tools as respectfully as the “vessels of the altar” because these all are on loan from God: held only to give and gathered only to share. Here, then, is a restatement of Nouwen’s movement from hostility to full hospitality. At this half-way point on Benedict’s ladder, we make an important turn. Just as Augustine advised, we are now beginning to ascend through ourselves to turn our attention externally – still Christ-centered, but now seeking the Christ in others.

**The seventh degree** has to do with “the awareness of one’s own liabilities.” This degree follows closely on the heels of the sixth and is also quite a slippery slope. It is often interpreted incompletely as a statement of human equality. It incorporates the stance that we all have intrinsic value, but also that each of us always has room to grow. There is still greater opportunity for spiritual growth if we also see this awareness as the embracing of one’s shadow toward the integration of our authentic selves, beginning with a clear-eyed assessment of ourselves as instruments. And that includes those areas where we are not strong. We have learned that abasing ourselves is a thinly veiled form of egoism, a truth that must be realized before coming to this stage, and we have more recently just passed through a stage where we are learning to consider ourselves in our entirety as the tools of God’s work, which means that we do well not to try to hammer with a saw.

There is a strong role and need for discernment here because some people, many of whom are called to monastic life, are predisposed to self-denial in ways that are not life-affirming. Again, a certain non-attachment in this examination allows the Spirit to shine more freely through us for others. (Not thinking less of one’s self, but thinking of one’s self less.) Each of us is here with gifts to give, and it not only has only a little to do with us and may not even be what we think we want to give. The role of discernment, again, is essential.

**The eighth degree** of humility is basically “the avoidance of attention-seeking behavior.” This aspect of humility can be disarming in its simplicity, especially for those who don’t understand why this is being stressed. There are several ways to explain the purpose of this practice, but perhaps the best umbrella statement is that we are learning to extend our ego to include others. What, in other words, will drawing attention to myself do to further the realization of Christ in those around me? Sometimes there are positive answers to this question. But there are also times and places to defer the attention

elsewhere. Those who never learn the difference are left with fewer resources to be of service, but this is a difficult lesson and is intended for those with the prior seven stages well understood.

A slight variation on that theme is illustrated by a story about Herbert von Karajan, conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic, who worked with varying degrees of skill in music and who understood the degree of maturity required to know both when to show up as an adept, but also when to get one's self and abilities out of the way. When asked if he were an elitist, von Karajan said: "No, I'm a super-elitist." He explained that he would not admit into his orchestra anyone who did not fulfill two essential conditions: "They must have the music within them, and they must play in time with others."

In the same way, we must be aware of the unique gifts each of us have been granted – being who and what we truly are – but must also learn to be mindful of the expression of them for the purposes of harmony, because our gifts are given in service always of something greater than the individual and frequently even the community. The emphasis here is not on simple conformity (a stage we have already grown beyond and included in our being) nor is it on uniformity. The proper emphasis is on harmony in concordance with God's will. In other words, not only must we learn from those who have gone before us, but all of our relationships have been connected in the service of a higher purpose that may or may not be fully disclosed to us<sup>6</sup>.



**The ninth degree** is "the radical restraint of speech." This is another action frequently misunderstood as a loss. Again, once a person has lived through the other eight stages, they come to a very different realization: the gift of silence. Silence of mind...silence of body...silence of spirit. This profound quiet leads to clarity, concentration, stability and simplicity in body, mind and spirit. It is not a lack of sound, movement or imagery at this point so much as it is the fullness of contemplation. The sitting of *zazen* from a Christian perspective. Not

"dusting the mirror of the mind" but resting in the realization that there is no place for the dust to alight.

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<sup>6</sup> A speculative point of the emergence of Fowler's Stage 5 Conjunctive faith.

Remaining in contemplative space is the highest benefit we can be given as it brings us to the Word beyond words. Sr Donald Corcoran, OSB, prioress of Transfiguration Monastery, says: "Silence is oxygen for the soul." Silence is the language that God speaks. Silence is related to solitariness, not loneliness, which is why it is difficult to treasure from outside the cloister or from earlier stages on Benedict's ladder of humility. The intent here resonates beautifully with Nouwen's movement from illusion to prayer as the voice of God (speaking silence) is becoming more regularly present for the oblate, monk or nun, and through their very being for others to hear.

**The tenth step** on the ladder finds the nun or monk "not ready and prompt to laugh." This is the second of the steps referring specifically to speech, and in a surface sense, Benedictines are primarily concerned here about mockery, cynicism, gossip and the indulgence in vacuous talk, but more deeply the effect these have: unchecked, they all destroy community and distract from the pursuit of learning one's discipline.

Deeper additional meaning is available when we look at this stage in its original context; it was written at a time when people considered a spiritual life to be marked by seriousness...and the more spiritually developed one was, it followed, well then all the more serious she must be. The appearance of God's presence for the benefit of others is becoming more important than the monk's personality. Just as they learned to see themselves as God's vessels and, as such, to treat all God's tools with reverence, they are now learning to treat each other with reverence first.

The laughter treated at this stage can be overstressed to the point of humorlessness, but this is a misapplication. Surely, the Creator delights in Creation! Rather than condoning a joyless life, this stage becomes far more life-affirming as a stance of mindful preparation to receive the other with gravity and reverence before anything else. It is seeing the beauty and love of Christ manifested uniquely in all the people we encounter – including those who are behaving in frivolous, wasteful or silly (even hateful) ways – with the same clear-eyed and ruthless, but loving eye that we learned to turn on ourselves in earlier phases.

**The eleventh step** is "being mild and speaking in a few reasonable words." This manner of "elegant gravity" means weighing one's words and avoiding that which lacks substance. Notice how late this appears in one's progress up the ladder. It is not for everyone, especially for

the newcomer. It is written for wise men and women on the cusp of learning to allow truth to serve as the principle upon which they base all their interactions.

Notice how in these last three moves that all focused on humility in manner and speech, we approach the emergence of the external manifestations of a lifetime of wisdom-seeking and contemplation. We are becoming vessels of God's love for others and, consequently, carry ourselves in a fitting manner not because to do so provides us any further benefit, but because it may be necessary for those we interact with. Internally, these eleven degrees have prepared us to take on the mind of Christ in his humility.



**The twelfth and final degree** is “embodiment.” Humility now manifests more fully to others in ones body, heart and mind. Fr Casey calls this step “integration and transformation<sup>7</sup>.” Finally, we reach the state of the “perfect love of God which casts out fear”—a full movement motivated by *eros* from the fear and interiority of step one to the integration of interior love and wisdom exemplified by manners and speech that are consistent with all the work we have begun and that is being completed upon us. We are acting no longer out of fear of hell but, as Benedict

writes, out of “love for Christ, from good habit itself (or the praxis of humility) and delight in virtue. All this the Lord will, by the Holy Spirit, graciously manifest in his workman (or woman) now cleansed of vices and sins.”

The giving of one's deepest gift...that for which each of us was put on this planet to do at this time with all the relationships, skills, knowledge and motivations that each individual has been entrusted with; that which is to be given because the Spirit of God is calling it forth and we have come to desire it...all this is now possible. Casey says that we are now “so liberated from narcissism that any thought of self could be entertained only in function of remembrance of God.” The summit of the ladder is the perfect love of God, agape, from where all our actions can now be chosen. We have been granted this gift freely through the involution of grace – the exhalation of Spirit which has been fully present all along if not yet fully manifested; our only

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<sup>7</sup> It's likely that the widest and deepest forms of Fowler's Stage 6 Radical Actualization may first be available here.

“achievement” has been to say “yes” and take the first steps into this for which there is no striving – and, yet also, from the first step there’s nothing to do but strive. We work over the course of a lifetime to realize a summit that is always right beneath our feet.

**Complete humility**, then, is aware assimilation into the Paschal mystery of Christ. Passing from fear to love; from one’s identity as self to one’s authentic identity in God. To become transformed in this way is to open and refine the vessel of the mind, heart, body and soul to fill to overflowing with the Spirit and pour it forth like a fountain for others to come and drink from as they choose and need to commune with the Divine.

