

WHAT IS THE GREATEST CHRISTIAN VIRTUE? (HUMILITY)

THE GREATEST CHRISTIAN VIRTUE is a Christ-like humility, as depicted in the Scriptures and the Holy Tradition. It is a deep attitude of selflessness, service, and submission to God's will, modeled after the life and teachings of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

It's not about self-condemnation or false modesty but rather recognizing one's worth in relation to God and others, leading to voluntary lowering of oneself for the benefit of others, even in the most trying situation. Emphasizing that true greatness comes through serving, as Jesus taught: "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant" (read Matthew 20:26-28).

A Christian's call to Christ-like humility is explicitly configured in Philippians 2:5-11—often called the "*kenosis*" (Greek for "emptying") passage—where, Paul urges us to adopt the attitude of Christ: Jesus, though divine and equal with God, did not cling to his privileges. He "emptied himself" by taking on human form, becoming a servant, and humbling himself to the point of obedient death on the Cross. As a result, God the Father exalted him, showing that true humility precedes great honor. This also shows that humility is a conscious choice: surrendering power, status, or rights, out of love and obedience to God.

Obedience to God involves aligning one's will with God's, even in suffering. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed, "Not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42), submitting despite knowing the horrific agony that lay ahead.

Unlike worldly wisdom, Christ's humility avoids seeking personal glory. Like Jesus withdraws from crowds seeking to make him king (John 6:15) and attributed his works to the Father (John 5:19).

In secular terms, humility might mean downplaying achievements to avoid arrogance. But Christ-like humility is rooted in identity as a child of God—secure enough to serve without needing validation and recognition. It is transformative: it counters pride (the root of sin in Christian theology) and fosters unity, as Paul notes in Ephesians 4:2, urging believers to be "completely humble and gentle."

In practice, embodying this means prioritizing others' needs (Philippians 2:3-4), forgiving offenses, and pursuing reconciliation, all while relying on God's grace rather than self-effort. Like CS Lewis, describe humility as "not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less."

"...and learn from Me, for I am meek and humble of heart" (Matthew 11:29).

Coptic Pope Shenouda III commenting on this verse said, "He said this, in spite of the fact that we can learn every virtue from Him. It was possible that He would have said: learn from me wisdom, charity, compassion, quietness, service, instruction, strength of personality... why then has He concentrated upon meekness and humility? Is it not because of the extreme importance of these two virtues?"

Humility is indeed the foundation upon which all virtues are built up.

As St Augustine of Hippo (354–430) wrote, “Humility is the foundation of all the other virtues hence, in the soul in which this virtue does not exist there cannot be any other virtue except in mere appearance.”

In a similar way St. Thomas of Villanova (1488–1555) taught: “Humility is the mother of many virtues because, from it are born: obedience, fear, reverence, patience, modesty, meekness and peace. He who is humble easily obeys everyone, fears to offend anyone, is at peace with everyone, is kind to all!”

+

Conversely, humility is a powerful antidote to the seven deadly sins (in fact for all sins), though its role is most direct and essential in countering Pride, which is often described as the root sin that enables the others.

Pride is seen as the origin of the other sins because it places the self above God and others, blinding the individual of their shortcomings and interdependencies. As Proverbs 16:18 states, “Pride goes before destruction...” Thus, humility acts as a “spiritual vitamin” or foundational virtue that indirectly undermines the entire set of vices by promoting reliance on Divine Grace, gratitude, and service to others.

Tough, traditional teachings pair each deadly sin with a specific “heavenly virtue” as its primary countermeasure, with humility explicitly tied to pride while others have their own antidotes. However, humility’s emphasis on selflessness and truth can flow outward, supporting the growth of those other virtues and reducing susceptibility to the sins.

Let us examine the seven deadly sins, their standard virtuous antidotes, and how humility specifically contributes as a broader remedy.

Pride: Excessive self-importance or arrogance, viewing oneself as superior to others and in some cases even God.

Antidote—*Humility*

Humility directly opposes pride by encouraging a realistic self-view, acknowledgment of flaws, and dependence on God rather than self-elevation. Practices like prayer or reflecting on one’s limitations foster this grounding.

Greed: Insatiable desire for material wealth or gain, often at others’ expense.

Antidote—*Charity*

Humility reminds us that possessions and status are temporary and not measures of worth, reducing the urge to hoard by shifting focus to gratitude and sharing with those in need.

Lust: Uncontrolled sexual desire or objectification of others.

Antidote—*Chastity*

Humility curbs lust by promoting respect for others as equals created by God, rather than objects for personal gratification, and encourages self-discipline over permissiveness.

Envy: Resentment toward others' success, traits, or possessions, wishing harm upon them.

Antidote—*Kindness*

Humility counters envy by fostering contentment with one's own gifts and celebrating others' achievements, recognizing that all blessings come from a common source rather than competing for them.

Gluttony: Overindulgence in food, drink, or comforts beyond necessity.

Antidote—*Temperance*

Humility encourages moderation by acknowledging human frailty and the value of self-denial, viewing excess as a distraction from spiritual growth and service.

Anger: Uncontrolled rage, hatred, or desire for vengeance.

Antidote—*Patience*

Humility diffuses anger/wrath by promoting empathy and forgiveness, understanding that holding grudges stems from an inflated sense of personal justice, and instead seeking peace through meekness.

Sloth: Laziness or neglect of responsibilities, especially spiritual ones.

Antidote—*Zeal*

Humility combats sloth by instilling a sense of purpose and accountability to God and community, motivating action through recognition that one's talents are meant for use, not waste.

In essence, while humility is not a direct cure for every sin, its practice—through actions like prayer, self-reflection, and service—creates fertile ground for all virtues to flourish, effectively weakening all sins at their core.

+

Early Christian Saints built on New Testament foundations, viewing Christ-like humility as the root of all virtues and a defense against sin. They drew from Scripture to emphasize self-knowledge, submission to God, and service to others.

St. Clement I (1st–2nd century) said: “We should let God be the One to praise us and not praise ourselves. For God detests those who commend themselves. Let others applaud our good deeds.”

St. Jerome (c. 343–420) taught: “Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven. Just as this child, whose example I show you, does not persist in anger, does not long remember injury suffered, is not enamoured inordinately by the sight of a beautiful woman, does not think one thing and say another, so you too, unless you have similar innocence and purity of mind, will not be able to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.”

St. Basil the Great (329–379) stated: “Humility is not just about self-mistrust but about the entrusting of ourselves to God. Distrusting ourselves and our own strength, produces trust in God and, from that trust, generosity of soul is born.”

St. Ambrose (340–397) encouraged: “Let your door stand open to receive Him, unlock your soul to Him, offer Him a welcome in your mind and then you will see the riches of simplicity, the treasures of peace, the joy of grace. Throw wide the gate of your heart, stand before the Sun of the Everlasting Light!”

St. Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335–395) reflected: “What could be more wretched for God, than to take the form of a slave? What lowlier for the King of the Universe, than to share our human nature?... Consider the excessiveness of His voluntary poverty!”

These Early Church Fathers saw humility as the greatest Christian virtue for spiritual growth, often linking it to Christ’s incarnation and the battle against pride.

—END OF THE MAIN ARTICLE—

FURTHER COMMENTS ON "GREATEST CHRISTIAN VIRTUE"

The prayer—quoted in the image at the top of this page—”Jesus, meek and humble of heart, make my heart like unto Thine“, draws directly from the Bible, specifically Matthew 11:29, where Jesus describes himself as “*meek and humble of heart*“.

As a standalone prayer or aspiration, it gained prominence in Catholic devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, which originated in the 17th century through the visions of St Margaret Mary Alacoque.

However, the exact wording referenced is most famously used as the refrain in the Litany of Humility, a prayer that emerged in the 19th century. The litany focuses on seeking deliverance from pride and embracing humility, aligning with the Sacred Heart devotion’s emphasis on imitating Christ’s gentle heart.

ST AUGUSTINE’S VIEW ON HUMILITY

St Augustine of Hippo (354–430 AD), one of the most influential Church Fathers, was a philosopher, theologian, and bishop whose works like “Confessions” and “City of God” shaped Western

Christianity. His teachings on humility stem from his dramatic conversion from a life of intellectual pride and moral struggle to one of deep faith.

For Augustine, humility was not mere self-deprecation but the essential virtue that counters pride—the root of sin—and opens the path to God. He viewed it as the foundation for all spiritual growth, drawing from Scripture, his personal experiences, and Christ’s example. In his letter to Dioscorus, he famously emphasized: *“This way is first humility, second humility, third humility and no matter how often you keep asking me I will say the same over and over again.”*

This underscores how humility permeated his theology.

Humility as the Foundation of All Virtues

Augustine taught that humility is the bedrock upon which other virtues stand. Without it, even apparent good deeds are tainted by pride. He wrote: *“Humility is the foundation of all the other virtues hence, in the soul in which this virtue does not exist there cannot be any other virtue except in mere appearance.”*

This idea reflects his belief that pride bloats the self, leading to spiritual downfall, while humility keeps us grounded in reality before God. In “Confessions”, he contrasts his pre-conversion pride—such as dismissing Scripture due to its *“unpolished”* style—with the humility that allowed him to ultimately embrace truth.

He saw humility as the *“first rung on the Christian ladder,”* enabling acceptance of God’s grace amid human weakness.

The Contrast Between Pride and Humility

Pride, for Augustine, was the original sin that *“changed angels into devils,”* while humility *“makes men as angels.”* He described pride as a “swelling” or infirmity that distorts self-perception, leading to harm.

In his sermons and writings, he warned that pride must be feared even in virtuous acts: *“It is true that other defects have to be feared in our sins, but pride is to be feared in our very acts of virtue.”*

Humility, conversely, exalts the heart: *“There is something in humility which, strangely enough, exalts the heart, and something in pride which debases it.”*

This transformation occurred in his own life; during his conversion, his *“heart went into labor and gave birth to humility.”*

Christ’s Humility as the Ultimate Example and Remedy

Augustine often portrayed Christ as the “*physician*” who heals the sickness of pride through His own humility. Exhibited in the Incarnation and Crucifixion, Christ’s descent from Divine Glory to human suffering provides the model: “*Christ humbled himself in crucifixion,*” inviting followers to learn from His meekness (Matthew 11:28-29).

This humility remedies sin by deflating human arrogance, as Augustine noted: “*The humble Christ emptied Himself on Calvary to atone for Adam’s sin of pride.*”

Salvation comes not through self-ascent but by “*falling before Christ,*” leading to exaltation and the “*happy life.*”

Humility in Daily Life and Spiritual Practice

Augustine emphasized humility’s practical application: it must “*accompany all our actions*” and be present “*everywhere,*” lest pride nullify good works.

He advised building spiritual “*towers*” on humility’s deep foundation: “*Do you wish to rise? Begin by descending. You plan a tower that will pierce the clouds? Lay first the foundation of humility.*”

In relations with others and God, it involves submission, gratitude, and contrition—willingness to let God be God and acknowledge dependence.

He contrasted biblical humility (rejoicing in God’s goodness) with pagan versions (devaluing life arrogantly).

Humility also enables charity: “*You cannot attain to charity except through humility.*”

Influence and Legacy

Augustine’s teachings influenced later saints like St Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) and St Teresa of Ávila (1515-1582), who echoed his view of humility as essential for virtue. In modern Christianity, his ideas remind believers that true greatness comes through service and dependence on God, not self-elevation. His personal humility—evident in the honest self-examination in “*Confessions*” —continues to inspire, showing how embracing weakness leads to divine strength.