

St Thérèse and Humility

What is humility?

Humility is a way of being and it is shown through a person's words and actions. A person who shows great humility is said to be 'humble'. A humble person doesn't seek to make themselves look better than anyone else even if they have achieved really great things. Instead they recognise that they, like everyone else, have strengths and weaknesses. They try to use their gifts to help others and to overcome their weaknesses. As Christians, we believe that our strengths are gifts from God, to be used wisely to bring God's love to others and to bring glory to God. We also believe that God helps us to overcome our weaknesses, if we remember to call on His help. A person who shows humility, uses their gifts to serve God and to help others but not to bring glory to themselves.



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What did Jesus teach about humility?

Jesus' whole life was an example of humility. When some of his disciples were arguing about which of them was the greatest he said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must make himself last of all and servant of all." (Mark 9:35) Jesus was the Son of God and he could have used this to gain himself power and fame. Instead he served others, helped the sick and downtrodden, forgave sinners and brought new hope to the poor. In humility he was crucified with two thieves. He showed us that in order to follow him, we too must put others' needs before our own, recognising that our gifts and successes are given to us by God and are to be used to bring God's love to others. We must therefore show humility in our words and actions.

St Thérèse and humility

At first it would seem that St Thérèse didn't do anything outstanding and yet Pope St Pius X stated that she is "the greatest saint of modern times" and her life is known all over the world. We know about Thérèse's life because of her writings, particularly her autobiography, 'The Story of a Soul'. This reveals an ordinary life that reflects Jesus' example and teachings on humility. She trusted in Jesus completely and she understood the meaning of Jesus' words, "Unless you become like little children you will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven" (Mark 10:15). Therese was aware of her strengths and her weaknesses. She believed that every good thing she did was done with God's help and she asked God to help her overcome her weaknesses. Therese acknowledged that she was not perfect and sometimes she found it difficult to get on with others in her community. One day she wrote:

"For a long time I had to kneel during meditation near a Sister who could not stop fidgeting; if it was not with her Rosary, it was with goodness knows what else. Maybe no one else noticed it; I have a very sensitive ear. But you have no idea how much it annoyed me. I wanted to turn around and glare at the culprit to make her be quiet, but deep in my heart I felt that the best thing to do was to put up with it patiently, for the love of God first of all, and also not to hurt her feelings." Therese's 'little way' of living was to carry out ordinary everyday tasks with extraordinary love. She didn't seek praise or fame but instead tried to do God's will in every part of her life. She wrote:

"We must never search for what seems big in human eyes."

And

"What matters in life is not great deeds, but great love."

and by following this, Thérèse made her life holy. She believed that God chooses people to bring His love to others and to build His Kingdom so the glory belongs to God and not to us. She wrote:

"As a small flame, weak and shaky, can spark a large fire, God uses who he wants to extend his kingdom ... So, there's nothing to boast about when we're used as his instruments."

Thérèse became known as the 'little flower' because she saw herself as the 'little flower of Jesus', giving glory to God simply by being herself. She recognised that she didn't have to do anything amazing to be a good friend of Jesus. She just had to trust in his help and act in love at all times.

What can we learn from St Thérèse?

As Christians, we are not called to seek praise and fame. We are called to use our strengths to give praise to God and to carry out even the smallest tasks with great love. Jesus is there to help us to overcome our weaknesses so that we can bring love to situations and people we find difficult. In this way, by putting God and others before ourselves, we can follow the example of St Thérèse and live lives that show humility.