

## **A Triduum of Humility**

### *Reflecting on a Pivotal Time*

#### *The Rule of Saint Benedict: Chapter 7. Humility*

The seventh degree of humility is, when, not only with his tongue he declareth, but also in his inmost soul believeth, that he is the lowest and vilest of men, humbling himself and saying with the Prophet: “But I am a worm and no man, the reproach of men and the outcast of the people” (Ps 21[22]:7). “I have been exalted and humbled and confounded” (Ps 87[88]:16). And also: “It is good for me that Thou hast humbled me, that I may learn Thy commandments” (Ps 118[119]:71,73).<sup>1</sup>



During the Easter season of 2011 when I was still a Trappist monk, I found myself reflecting back on the Triduum and how personally formative it has been in my life. This was particularly the case since, at the tail end of winter heading into spring that year, apparently in preparation for Lent, God provided me with an unanticipated Triduum, or “three days” as well.

Shortly after entering the monastery, I was shocked to discover that I had been chosen to be in charge of trash and recycling. I was the monastery garbage man, and at that time it was my most significant non-liturgical responsibility. In retrospect I probably should have felt less indignant about the assignment and simply accepted it, but that was where I was, and I absolutely detested having to do it.

## **Holy Thursday**

But one Thursday it was different. I was driving a truck we used for hard work and doing the rounds, and suddenly had an inexplicable sensation of being filled with light. It occurred to me that if I was to become the type of priest I felt called to be, that I

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<sup>1</sup> Christian Classics Ethereal Library. “The Holy Rule of St. Benedict.” Accessed April 17, 2025. <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/benedict/rule.html>.

would have to get extremely comfortable with humility as freedom, and that there was an interior link between taking my *inner* garbage, and integrating that into a greater understanding and appreciation for taking out the monastery refuse. Theoretically I understood this from the beginning, but a practical experience of God began to dominate, and I knew that it was right for me to continue doing this for awhile.

I thought of myself as a total nobody, an insignificant speck of flotsam, and the light seemed to approve. Humility had freed me, God was present in the moment, and I felt exalted. It was a real gift of grace, and I was free to be myself. This was later affirmed when the monastery business office asked me to write an article for the abbey newsletter – a modest beginning but a start nonetheless, and they would never have known that I wanted to write if we had not gotten to know one another when I came to take out their trash. Humility revealed itself in that moment as *purification*, and not humiliation.

### **Good Friday**

That night, technically early Friday morning came, and God appeared to me in a dream. If someone else told me that I would probably be deeply sceptical, at least at first, and most of the time a dream is little or nothing more than that, but I am trusting you to give me the benefit of the doubt. I am not prone to making these types of claims, and sometimes exceptions can prove the rule.

I was in a dark labyrinth of a city, alternately walking, crawling up extremely steep inclines, running at great speeds and sometimes against resistance as if walking out into the ocean, and occasionally leaping great distances and flying. In retrospect the dreamscape was probably God working through a projection of my own mind as a

cityscape, which in this case resembled a Manhattan-esque metropolis of San Franciscan Lombard Streets as drawn by a triumvirate of Matisse, Picasso, and M.C. Escher.

During a crawling interval, I saw my hand reach up and grab hold of a fire escape, pulling me upright onto a level sidewalk. I faced a temple portico, or in this case, a porch in front what looked like a liquor store or a brewery,<sup>2</sup> with large, well-lit windows facing the street. In the middle of them and in the form of a Black man nearing the other side of middle age, God was enthroned in a rocking chair. He held an acoustic guitar on which he'd been playing the blues. "Watch out now, that's my Son you're touching," he said. I looked up and noticed that my hand was still grasping the fire escape. Lying on its back and facing upward was the African wooden crucifix from the monastery church, the crux of which rested on the backs of my knuckles. I let go and faced God directly. He was accompanied by Saints Mary and Therese.

Both appearing at his side as Black women, Mary bore resemblance to the Salve in front of the church, and Therese was a younger teenager. Bottomless love poured from them all, and I didn't know what to do except bask in their glory in spite of my total unworthiness. God broke the silence: "Don't worry – I see that big, brilliant thing in you. It's gonna be alright. Do you want to hear a song?"

Mary and Therese suggested "Walking Blues," which has the same triplet theme as the Angelus bell. They looked at him and hummed the tune, and God began to play. Then I woke up. I didn't get back to sleep that night, but was in a state of total invigoration, which carried me through the following day.

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<sup>2</sup> Imagine my surprise after applying to the Salvatorians and moving into our new formation house in Milwaukee the following year, which has the Miller Brewery immediately behind it. Whenever I see it from the parking lot, I am struck by a sense of signal grace and God being in charge. As to God, Mary, and Therese appearing as Black, they can manifest however they please. If there are any meaningful connections to be made regarding how they appeared, I will trust God to clarify things as he sees fit.

## Easter Vigil

Friday came and went, and that night or early Saturday morning, I dreamt again; this time about peacocks. At a certain point some monk had gotten the bright idea to introduce them into the local ecosystem, and though the abbot had decided to have the local fish and game department remove them in light of the real problems they caused, a year had passed and the peacocks were still there. It is difficult to describe how much I despised those beasts. People talk about how *beautiful* they are, but what remains unrealized is how thoroughly a lousy personality can shred and incinerate the wrapping off of any pretty package. All they did was scream, defecate, make impossibly annoying honking sounds, run around pointlessly, and wreck rooftops. And in their quarter-year long mating season the screaming never stopped – I am not violent, but really did feel like killing those spray-painted turkeys.

In my dream I meant to do just that. I was driving the truck again, and next to me on the passenger seat was the alpha peacock. It was tied up inside a burlap sack, and was somehow speechlessly communicating with me, pleading for its life. I told it, “No, I’m going to murder you.” Yet it was so terrified and impassioned, that I was moved in spite of myself. I stopped the truck in the midst of a forest clearing and got out of the truck, pondering my next move.

While I was looking the other way the peacock rolled out of the passenger door, still enclosed in its shroud. Then it crawled out of the sack and dug down into the ground, only to re-emerge a short distance later. We looked at one other, and I understood that there was peace between us. We would go our separate ways, and trouble each another no more. The next morning I got up and looked around, and

realized the peacocks were gone. The fish and game department had removed them from the cloister while I slept. It was a matter of first letting go of my intense hatred – God then dissolved the problem.

I was later assigned to clear some weeds from in front of the old abbey ranch house, and while digging down beneath the dirt to pull up some particularly stubborn roots, my fingers encountered something hard. I felt around the edges, brushed the dirt off the emerging object, and pulled it free. It was a concrete slab, covered with pieces of colored glass. At some point another monk stood it on its flattened base, and it can be said to resemble the fan of a peacock. As far as I know, it remains propped up in the cloister to this day.

My experience of the seventh indication of humility freed me to be assured by God that my vocation would work out the way it was most meant to, and that the will of God would prevail. Then the letting go of all that blocks it, symbolized by the facing of literal life and death, made possible the re-emergence of the peacock from the ground, as representative of my own pre-and-post monastic death and resurrection. A peacock is a firebird, a phoenix come up from the ashes; these archetypes have always deeply resonated with me. Echoing outward from the original Easter phenomenon, even while rippling out toward the end times, this was my personal Triduum.

