



Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time October 23, 2016 C

Are you 'humbitious'? Are you able to combine ambition with humility?

In his book of homilies for Cycle C, William Byron, S.J., past President of the Catholic University of America, Washington, DC, and Professor of Business and Society at St. Joseph's University, Philadelphia, writes about 'humbition' in his homily reflection for this Sunday.

I recommend "humbition" to Christian men and women in the world of business who want to maintain a proper balance between their commitment to follow a leader who described himself as "meek and humble of heart," and their effort to succeed in business. In other words, I recommend this term, humbition, to those who want to balance their religious faith and their effort to imitate Christ with their professional, daily, secular pursuits and Monday-through-Friday responsibilities.

*An amalgam of the words humility and ambition, **humbition** means Spirit-driven, purposeful, forward motion that is founded in humility, linked to service, and propelled by a desire to devote one's workplace efforts to the greater glory of God.*

*Let me begin my explanation of humbition with reference to a secular setting completely unrelated to the context of faith or spirituality, namely, a back-office service company, SEI Investments, in Oak, Pennsylvania, where the work "humbition" is held up for praise and imitation. "At SEI, the most effective leaders exude a blend of humility and ambition—humbition—that relies on the power of persuasion rather than formal authority" [See William C. Taylor and Polly LaBarre, *Mavericks at Work: Why the Most Original Minds in Business Win* (New York: Harper Paperback, 2008, p. 240)]. This book, *Mavericks at Work*, is where I first encountered the word humbition.*

*Later, William Taylor, one of the co-authors of *Mavericks at Work*, authored a book titled *Practically Radical: Not-So-Crazy Ways to Transform Your Company, Shake Up Your Industry, and Challenge Yourself* (William Morrow, 2011). In it he mentioned the notion of humbition again. He credits Jane Harper, a thirty-year veteran of IBM, "who devoted her career to*

*transforming how the once-famously top-down organization, founded by the larger-than-life Thomas Watson, approaches innovation, collaboration, and leadership...." Humbition, Jane Harper explains, is the blend of humility and ambition that drives the most successful businesspeople—an antidote to the hubris that infects (and undoes) so many executives and entrepreneurs (*Practically Radical*, p. 197).*

Jane Harper, according to Taylor, says the term "humbition" was coined by researchers at Bell Labs in an effort to describe the personal attributes of the most effective scientists and engineers.

The Christian seeks to combine humility with achievement in the marketplace

Where it originated is not all that important for our present purposes. I simply want to make the point that the Christian in business has to be grounded in humility and determined to achieve (but not at any price). The Christian sees humility as a way to imitate Christ, and achievement in secular pursuits as a way to give glory to God. Both—the imitation of Christ and giving glory to God—are within reach of all Christians in business. This is not doormat spirituality; this is practical business advice!

Just to provide a bit more background, here is an excerpt from the text of a "manifesto" written in 2002 for young IBMers by John Wolpert and a few other IBM managers, including Jane Harper. They wanted to encourage emerging leaders within IBM. It is titled "Staying Extreme: How to Make a Difference in Any IBM Environment."

*Humbition is one part humility and one part ambition. We notice that by far the lion's share of world-changing luminaries are humble people. They focus on the work, not themselves. They seek success—they are ambitious—but they are humbled when it arrives. They know that much of that success was luck, timing, and a thousand factors out of their personal control. They feel lucky, not all-powerful are the ones who have yet to reach their potential... So be ambitious. Be a leader. But do not belittle others in your pursuit of your ambition. Raise them up instead. The biggest leader is the one washing the feet of the others. (*Practically Radical*, pp. 197-198.)*

The point I want to emphasize here is simply that humility, as demonstrated in the life of Christ, is a highly desirable leadership characteristic. This is not unrelated to what Jim Collins has called “fierce resolve” - see “Level 5 Leadership: The Triumph of Humility and Fierce Resolve,” Harvard Business review, July-August 2005, 136-146. Collins says, “The most powerfully transformative executives possess a paradoxical mixture of personal humility and professional will.” “Our discovery,” says Collins, speaking of a five-year research project on the nature of effective leadership, “is counterintuitive. Indeed, it is countercultural.”

The dominant values of the world v. the dominant values of the Gospel

Cultures are defined by dominant values. The dominant values in contemporary business culture are competition, individualism, greed, power, and accumulation of wealth. The dominant values in Catholic Christianity are love, humility, collaboration, sacrifice, service, and care for the poor. How do we bridge the two worlds? How do we remain authentic Christians while succeeding in the world of business?

Or, ask yourself, how would you describe the dominant culture within which the Pharisee of our Gospel story today lived and worked? And how would you describe the culture within which the tax collector lived and worked? Apparently, they were influenced by different dominant values and that was evident in their demeanor and attitudes there in the temple.

Jesus invites us all to be countercultural, against the values that dominate in our secular culture. If we are going to follow him, we have to be different. Even the folks at IBM noticed that back in 2002 and caught the idea in that memorandum I quoted earlier: “Be a leader. But do not belittle others in your pursuit of your ambition, raise them up instead. The biggest leader is the one washing the feet of the others.” That notion of washing the feet of others comes, quite obviously right out of the Gospel that Jesus gave us to shape our outlook, form our values, and lead us to eternal life.

Here again today, we have a lesson from that Gospel that each of us would do well to heed: “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted.” Adopt the notion of humbition; it will help keep you on track. It is working now for others in the real world of business; no reason why it cannot work for you.

Reflection questions

- **What speaks to you most in the above article? Why?**
- **Do you know of any leader who practices “humbition”?**
- **What do you need to do to be more ‘humbitious’ in your daily life?**

Authentic prayer changes us

Reflecting on today’s reading, Patricia Sanchez writes:

Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), the Danish philosopher and author who described faith as a “leap” whereby the believer goes beyond reason to embrace the paradox of God, also wrote, “Prayer does not change God, but it changes him who prays.” In a similar vein of thought, the eminent biblical scholar, Raymond E. Brown, once said in a homily that if no change occurs as a result of prayer, then one has not really prayed. Today’s scripture readings, with their shared focus on authentic and genuine prayer invite the gathered assembly to consider the insights of Kierkegaard and Brown inasmuch as these may challenge and change their own personal experiences as praying believers.

The Lucan parable which comprises today’s gospel features two men at prayer in the temple. After they had prayed, both departed the temple and ostensibly both probably looked the same to passersby. However, as Jesus observed, one man left his prayer a changed person; he was justified, i.e., set in right relationship with God. The other was not. What accounted for the difference? The Pharisee, it would appear, aimed his “prayer” in the wrong direction. Rather than leap forth in faith from the security of his own self-righteousness, he remained anchored within himself. Rather than gaze in awe and gratitude upon God, he looked at himself, basked in the glory of his accomplishments and liked what he saw.

Then he looked around and was pleased that he found no one of comparable stature. He had not changed; he had made no leap of faith; he had not truly prayed. By contrast, the tax collector looked, not at himself or others, but at God and flung himself upon God’s tender mercies which transformed him with forgiveness. His prayer was authentic because, through it, he allowed God to change him.

Prayer had effected a similar transformation in Paul (second reading); suffering, imprisoned, facing a trial that could have resulted in his death, he did not look at himself as a victim. In prayer, he looked only at Christ, felt his strength at his side and knew himself to be a

partner in the suffering that brings salvation. He could have looked at the community of believers and faulted them; they had abandoned him, leaving no one to take his part. Instead, and through prayer, he looked only at Christ and asked that it not be held against them. Through prayer, Paul had changed; he had learned to look at others with the eyes of God and to serve others with the loving, forgiving, selfless compassion of Christ.

In today's first reading, Jesus ben Sira reminds his readers that those who allow God to change their hearts in prayer will also be pleased to discover that God, who hears all prayers, also has the power to change wailing into laughter, weakness into strength, oppression into freedom and complaint into contentment. All that is needed is a faith that is willing to leap toward God and surrender to the power that saves.

Today, as the members of the congregation depart from their time of prayer together, each of us will look ostensibly the same. The change in us that is effected by authentic, faith-driven prayer will become obvious as the coming week with all of its joys and sorrows, smiles and suffering, loving and living, serving and giving unfolds. Whether or not that change can be sustained will depend upon the renewing power of daily prayer. Until we meet again next week for our communal celebration, each of us can lend to one another the support of mutual prayer, so that the change that occurs in each of us might become contagious. Learning a lesson from the Pharisee and the tax collector, each of us might also offer to one another the freedom to change. By withholding criticism, by giving one another the benefit of the doubt, by relegating the prerogative of judgment to God alone, by forgetting past mistakes and by being willing to be surprised by another's growth in goodness... we become enablers of change. Changed by God in prayer, each of us becomes a catalyst for changing and transforming the world.

The above are surely great sentiments to reflect on during this very contentious election season.

Reflection questions

- Are there individuals or groups that you tend to despise?
- If so, what do you need to do to transform this attitude into a more Christ like one?

Christian Pumpkins

A lady recently being baptized was asked by a co-worker what it was like to be a Christian. She replied, "It's like being a pumpkin."

God picks you from the patch, brings you in, and washes all the dirt off you that you may have gotten from the other pumpkins. Then he cuts the top off and scoops out all the yucky stuff. He removes the seeds of doubt, hate, greed, etc, then he carves you a new smiling face and puts his light inside of you to shine for all the world to see.

Have a blessed week,

