

HUMILITY

The importance of humility

Fr. Nicolas Barre made clear his stand on the importance of humility when he said: "Whoever is not prepared to accept being humble can never enter the state of contemplative prayer nor advance in the way of perfection." (MAP 43). This statement seems almost harsh, but in one of his letters he explained the pivotal place of humility in our lives: "The adoration of God's majesty reigning universally over us all and casting light into the depths of our hearts, reveals two abysses: our own nothingness and God's greatness. It will plunge us deeper and deeper in humility, that sea abounding in all virtues and the inexhaustible source of God's graces and most intimate communications." (L 27)

Two abysses: God's greatness and our own nothingness

In the radiant and inaccessible light of God's majesty and divine transcendence, we become aware of our own nothingness. According to Fr. Barre, what we can and ought to do is to adore humbly in recognition of the Divine Transcendence: "Enter into your own nothingness before the immense greatness of God. Recognise your total dependence on God and be ready to let go to God's desires" (L36). By worshipping God we show respect "for the Sovereign Majesty before whom we remain in a continual spirit of humility" (MAP 234).

In his letters, Fr. Barre reminds us of our nothingness: "You know that of yourself you are nothing. Therefore give **all** to God and be happy with your nothingness. Ask for nothing more and desire nothing more" (L 36). There is a need, therefore, to grow in humility: "We are really wasting our time **and our** very life, if we are not making progress in humility and reaching down to its admirable depths fully aware of our own nothingness before God, at all times and in all places" (L 32).

For Fr. Barre, the experience of "the deep abyss of one's sins, one's poverty, one's infidelities" is the first step towards God, and the foundation of all others. Those who accept it and cry out to God from the midst of their distress are the true children of God: "Grace it was that made you cry loud and long from these depths —'Out of the depths I have cried to you, O Lord, Lord hear my voice.'" (L14; psalm 130)

Jesus, the bridge between the two abysses

"God lives in light inaccessible" (1Tim.6:16) says St. Paul, and Nicolas Barre echoes his sentiments. God is inaccessible, unapproachable, or rather, He is only accessible in Jesus. As Jesus Himself said: "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life; no one can come to the Father except through Me" (Jn.14:6). St. Paul highlights the humility of Jesus: "In your minds you must be the same as Christ Jesus. His state was divine, yet He did not cling to His equality with God but emptied Himself" (Phil.2:5-7). In his Maxims, Fr. Barre encourages his followers to walk in the ways of Jesus: "Charitable Sisters, listen to what Jesus Christ said about Himself. He is your model. Weigh all His words and act accordingly." (PM 8)

"We must therefore walk in the ways of Jesus, suffer and die like Him and for Him." (MAP 162). If one is aware of having received more graces than others, "one should feel encouraged to follow Jesus Christ more closely and to humble oneself all the more since a great deal still remains to be done." (MAP 65)

Humility vis-à-vis God's excessive love

Ever mindful of the fact that God so loved the world that He sent His only Son to redeem us, Fr. Barre sees humility as a response to that unconditional love. In the Old Testament, "God is revealed as mighty, terrible, sovereign, thunderous." In the New Testament, "He is little, gentle, humbled, hidden, annihilated — Jesus, God-man, man of sorrows, is put to death by humanity, dies on a cross for all, is buried and descends into hell." (MAP 163)

Convinced that it is only to the humble that God gives His greatest and truest gifts and there is no humility without obedience, Fr. Barre counsels his followers: "Value suffering, humiliation, scorn and contradiction as the most glorious things in life; as much a gift from God as a means of growing in divine love and plunging into God's depths of humility and obedience." (L 37)

Humility Patterned on Jesus

Jest's has come to show us the way to the Father, and He tells us in no uncertain terms that humility is a prerequisite for this way: "I tell you solemnly, unless you change and become like little children you will never enter the kingdom of Heaven. And so, the one who makes himself as little as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven." (Mt. 18:1-6)

Mindful of that, Fr. Barre tells his Sisters: "We must follow Jesus Christ in order to be saved. How can this be done? — through humility, annihilation and dying to self. God must 'become' in us; Jesus must become incarnate in us, in our lowly state, so that we may lead the life He led, suffer, die..." (RR 1).

When Fr. Barre recommends gentleness in his Maxims: "You must reach out to souls with gentleness in order to win them; never behave in an overbearing manner but always with great humility and modesty" (PM 19), we are reminded of the words of Jesus (Mt. 11:29): 'Shoulder my yoke and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart...' Fr. Barre asks the Sisters to imitate the gentleness and humility of Jesus. Furthermore, he reminds the Sisters in their apostolic service to be "... particularly careful to curb and stamp out from their hearts the satisfaction of self-love amidst the successes of their charitable mission... And so, placing themselves with humility at the feet of God's love, they must work harder at the transformation of their own hearts so that Jesus may find happiness everywhere." (PM 23)

Since the charitable schools have been established entirely for Jesus and for the purpose for which He came into the world, we must follow Him in all His ways and do everything in the same manner, in poverty, lowliness, and humility. (FM 10)

Like Jesus, a humble person remains peaceful and serene in the face of either adulation or condemnation. Fr. Barre reminds his Sisters of this fact when he says: "A true spirit of humility will enable us to shun all desire for praise and flattery. It will strengthen us in times of humiliation or contradiction which God could allow or which could arise through our own fault." (I, 22)

The relevance of Fr. Barre's teaching today

Fr. Barre's texts, which were profoundly inspired by the Scriptures, still maintain today their vitality and strength, since the Scriptures do not become outdated. The Word of God is not used on the surface of Fr. Barre's texts as a coat of varnish; its use could be compared to the pith that nourished his thoughts and inspirations

In our Book of the Institute we have captured the essence of Fr. Barre's spirit of humility: "Relying on the power of the Holy Spirit, our whole life is animated by love which is for us the source of disinterestedness, humility and availability, freedom and daring." (BI 1)

With regard to our mission: "In our apostolic service we will be humble and unassuming. This calls for a letting go of the spirit of the world. We will not seek privileges or honours for ourselves and will be on our guard, so that the attraction of prestige, power or will never divert us from the work of God. Out of love for Christ, we will also accept in faith and with patience the deprivations which life brings such as failure, old age and illness." (BI 30)

References:

The texts of Fr. Nicolas Barre

Infant Jesus Sisters' Book of the Institute

Director in the Darkness by Dr. William Makin

'Biblical Texts which inspired Fr. Barre' by Fr. Gerard Chantereau

'Themes from the writings of Nicolas Barre'.