



Three Kinds of Humility

St. Ignatius, like many spiritual masters over the centuries, suggested that humility was a prerequisite for the successful living of one's spiritual life. In his *Spiritual Exercises*, he described three kinds of humility:

- To humble myself to *total obedience to God*.
- To be ready to receive *honor or dishonor, poverty or wealth, or anything else for God*.
- To desire *poverty, dishonor, and even be a fool for God since Christ was*.

The last of these three, he said, was the most perfect, because it expressed a desire to be like Christ in the living of one's life.

For many, this exhortation to truly humble humility can be both confusing and even dangerous, particularly since it can be misunderstood to mean that those who live in situations of suffering injustice in one's life ought to be content with accepting injustice in the name of humility. Both ancient and modern thinkers have suggested the exact opposite: that the good life is characterized by rejecting humility and embracing virtues with many different names: Aristotle's "great-souled-ness" or the modern term "living large." So why humility?

In 1640, Flemish Jesuits produced a volume commemorating the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Jesuits. An anonymous inscription in that volume offers us a tantalizing hint of what Ignatius sought to convey in exhorting his followers to humility: *Not to be constrained by the greatest thing, but to be contained in the smallest thing, is divine*.

The Jesuit theologian Brian Daley suggests that this inscription is a clue to Ignatian humility. The faithful follower of Christ lives in a kind of "tensed state" between *magnanimity* (the Aristotelian virtue of having a great soul) and *humble submission* to the word of God through imitation of Christ. The Christian seeks great things for God's greater glory—a phrase Ignatius used frequently—measured not by the usual metrics of popularity and prestige in the world, but rather by the love of the one who is "meek, and humble of heart." The third degree of humility is the degree to which one is willing to live in the ugliest, most marginalized parts of our world in order to discover the great beauty there, and be positioned and prepared to rejoice there and, so, to love with abandon.

Those who are poor in spirit, Jesus tells us in the *Beatitudes*, may already be a step ahead of those who live in comfort, since they do not need to let go of false desires. They need only to express love in who they are and where they live.