

Integration of Humility and Holiness: A Saga of Real Sanctity

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The German verb saga means 'to say'. The Oxford Dictionary says that saga is "Old story of heroic deeds, especially of Icelandic or Norwegian heroes" and in the modern sense "number of connected books about a family". I am using the word saga to describe the old or modern stories of God's deeds in favour of the humble and the meek whom he has exalted, crowning them with true sanctity, a participation in his own holiness.

When I was a novice I was told that 'humility is truth.' The master meant that humility is not hiding reality nor boosting one's own greatness, but is simple transparency of what one is, humbly acknowledging whatever he/she has received from God. So also, whatever defect one has is to be accepted and the results of which should not be attributed to others. This self-acknowledgement of one's own reality, as it is, is truth and humility. Humility thus has a ring of subjectivity in the good sense that truth realized in you is the basis of true humility and acknowledgement. This would also basically agree with our ancient Indian dictum: "Knowing is becoming", an alteration of the Upanishadic text, "he who knows Brahman becomes Brahman" (Tait. Up. III.1).

When I was a young philosophy student I was told that truth is conformity between the mind and the thing, namely, what you think and what really is. This was a typical western definition of logical truth, with its emphasis on objectivity and clarity of the judgment we make. It brought to me a real point that truth is not what one may fancy in the mind, however

sublime it looks, but is an independent reality, existing outside of me, to which my mind has to conform. Then onwards I used to say, "Don't argue too much, but go and check up what really is". Our freedom of self-expression is so limited by the fact or reality that confronts us. This reality has a say in what we should say.

The Indian word for truth, *satya*, throws some more light on this point. The word *satya* is derived from the root *sat* which means being. *Satya*, truth, is that which emerges from the being which we encounter. Seen from this perspective the claim of being (*sat*) over us is truth (*satya*). We have to accept this claim of being with humility and acknowledge it as it is. Humility then is the basic acknowledgement of reality from all sides. As Jesus said: "What belongs to God give to God, what belongs to Ceacer give to Ceacer". In our everyday life the claims of other persons as well as beings are to be accepted and integrated. Humility is our readiness to accept this. What people call sanctity or saintliness is an unassumed existence of a human being, non-assertive, yet courageous and willingly offering one's self for the service of God and others. To combine courage, selflessness and service one needs a very great mind culturally and spiritually magnanimous. Saints are appreciated and the more humble they are the more exalted. Humility in saints becomes a shining beauty, which crowns all their works and above all their entire life-style. The saga of sanctity is this integration of humility and holiness in one single person. Here comes the question what is holiness.

Rudolf Otto in his book *The Holy (Das Heilige)* understands the word holy not as ethical purity, which however is not excluded. The holy is the feeling of an enrapturing experience of the majesty of God which is 'all transcendent' and yet enticingly 'all too near.' It is frightening and fascinating

(*tremendens et fascinans*) at the same time. God in his greatness and majesty stoops down upon my finite being, destructible and confronting its own nothingness, so much so that I get frightened as well as fascinated. Frightened, because I am nothing before this almighty God, fascinated because this God, the author of my life and also the judge of my deeds, condescends to me with love and affection, not to punish me but to save me. Therefore, here my experience is a combination of both, confronting God's greatness and dearness at the same time. I don't run away from this God but from the depth of my being I cry out: "Holy, Holy, Holy you are". This might be the origin of our famous *trisagion* formula: Holy God, Holy mighty one, Holy immortal one, have mercy on us. The *trisagion* is a spontaneous outward expression of a finite human being confronting the mighty power of God who can bring me down to nothingness or can raise me up to sublime divine existence. Hence, the soul says: "You are Holy", that is, you alone are Holy, adorable and I would worship you. "You are Almighty", that is, before your infinite and almighty power I am nothing, "you are Immortal", that is, you alone are immortal, I am finite and mortal. Out of this confrontation the sense of holiness arises. So the sense of holiness is emerging from the human confrontation of God who is all-powerful to save me or to condemn me, but is now coming down to me to embrace and take me to him. In this divine milieu I am taken into God's own being and I feel myself to be purified and also characterized by God's graceful touch and holiness.

With the arrival of Jesus, the great, stupendous Majesty of God, was communicated to us as a loving Father, who sent his son into the world, in our own likeness and form that we eventually become God-like. He also breathed his Spirit into us that this Spirit proceeding from the Father and the Son, prepares, transforms and divinizes us. Call to holiness now become not just a call to

adore the most holy transcendent God from afar, but to participate in the very being and nature of God and become an exact image of his son Jesus Christ. Thus seen, holiness is a radical transformation of the very consciousness of the human being, who is now characterized by the very vision of God enlightened by the Holy Spirit through what we call faith. Faith as the opening of the third eye, gives this holy person a vision, that is, totally God-centered, God-seeking and God-saturating. He/she sees God everywhere just like Jesus saw his Father everywhere. Since God, the Father, is communicated to this soul through the Son, the soul, perusing the path of holiness, may find it easy to see her Lord Jesus every where and his very Spirit guiding her life. Any way a profound change takes place in the soul; her life is totally de-centered from her own individual self, is totally and uncompromisingly focused on the Lord; everything else, including her own self, is surrendered to him. "For, to me to live is Christ" (Phil.1: 21), she says with great joy in her heart. No sacrifice is counted, no reward is requested, and no agony is refused. She has only one desire: to be with my Lord, to be like my Lord. This sublime joy at the depth of her heart, even in the moments of agony and aridity, overflows in and through all her actions: the Lord's hand is seen every where, he is recognized and acknowledged always, first in the depth of her own heart and then by outward expressions as well. This inseparable company with Jesus and the inner contentment it gives is the fountainhead of her sublime simplicity and unassuming humility in all her words and deeds. There is nothing artificial in this; no simulation at all. Everything is one natural flow of life, which is totally guided by the Spirit of the Lord. She is holy and humble; daring and surrendering at the same time. She sings the song of mercies she has received from her beloved Lord.

Models of Integration of Humility and Holiness

Preamble: The preamble and the foundation principle of this wonderful combination of humility and holiness are the very clear words of Jesus who said: "Father, Lord of all heaven and earth! I thank you because you have shown to the unlearned what you have hidden from the wise and learned. Yes, Father, this was how you wanted it to happen (Mt. 11:25-26)."

The unlearned are the little ones to whom the mysteries of holiness are revealed. The learned, the academically qualified, the university degree holders are not necessarily excluded; but they should be like little ones, unassumingly humble, not self-centered based on the qualifications of human education they have accumulated. If too much importance is given to secular knowledge and values, these can work as hindrance for receiving the secrets of divine wisdom of holiness, which is taught by the Lord, by his abiding Spirit very personally to the little ones. I am presenting here three models of the integration of humility and holiness, carefully drawn from the beginning, middle and modern periods of the history of our Church.

1. Mary our Mother

Mary's song of *magnificent* is a great *saga* of real simplicity and victory in God. She spontaneously says as she meets her cousin Elizabeth who lived in the "hill countries" (Lk.1: 39). Probably Mary lived in the plane and had to make this journey "in haste" (*Ibid.*) to serve her cousin, just after listening to the world's greatest tiding which it ever received, the annunciation: The angel of the Lord came to her and said, "Peace be with you! The Lord is with you and has greatly blessed you... You will become pregnant and give birth to a son and you will name him Jesus. He

will be great and will be called the son of the most high God" (Lk.1: 28, 30-32). But the greatest of all women never thinks that she is the greatest one, but humbly calls her "the handmaid of the Lord" (Lk.1: 38, 48) and her humility is bottom-deep. But now, after the event of annunciation, which is a free gift confirmed upon her, she is aware of this elevation God in his loving providence has granted to her for the sake of all humanity. Out of this awareness of her own littleness and God's mercies showered upon her, bursts out Mary's *magnificent*, a *saga* of real sanctity, combining humility and holiness. She sings: "My soul magnifies the Lord; my heart is glad because of God my Saviour, for he has remembered me, his lowly servant" (Lk.1: 46-48a). Greatness and littleness, power of the heavenly graces and simplicity of a lowly self, both are beautifully integrated in Mary's song.

Mary even dares to say, "From now on all people will call me happy, because of the great things the Mighty God has done for me. His name is holy; from one generation to another he shows mercy to those who honour him" (Lk.1: 48b-49). This reminds me what was said in the beginning, "humility is truth". Mary is just proclaiming the truth, what God has done in her. But such a proclamation can be also done by projecting one's own self or professing her gratefulness to and trust in the Lord whose great deeds she is proclaiming. The beauty of Mary's proclamation is that she is humble and meek, just like her son invited us to learn from him: "I am meek and humble of heart" (Mt.11: 29). Mary participates in the same mentality and becomes the beacon light of humility as she humbly sings her simple song. As Scripture says "humility goes before honour" (Prov. 15:33) and it is literally realized in Mary.

Mary then takes us to the past and the future of history and shows how God is always kind and gracious to the humble and turns upside down the world of the proud and the mighty.

His name is holy; from one generation to another he shows mercy to those who honour him. He has stretched out his mighty arm and scattered the proud with all their plans. He has brought down mighty kings from their thrones, and lifted up lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away with empty hands. He has kept the promise he made to our ancestors, and has come to the help of his servant Israel (Lk.1: 49b-54).

The really humble and lowly person will gladly sing what God has done in herself and in others. But praise is to Him alone, "For all things were created by Him, and all things exist through Him and for Him. To God be the glory forever! Amen" (Rom. 11:36).

"His name is Holy" Mary says. Mary thus gives us a clue to real holiness. Whose name is Holy? One who exalts the humble, crowns humility with his mighty power: yes, his name is Holy. This agrees with the primal experience of holiness as described above, frightening and fascinating. The almighty power of God has a frightening factor, because he can judge me, punish me and even annihilate me; but the reality is not that. Instead, he loves me, condones me and condescends to me and dies for me. It is so fascinating that I do not leave this all pervading power of God, instead feel forced to cling to him and the tremors of my fears vanish and tears of joy well up in my eyes. It is like a glittering star in the sky, which falls in love with a tiny blade of grass on earth wavering in the wind. The weak and wavering herbal blade is overwhelmed with joy, because something that transcends all frontiers of loveliest imagination is

just happening in its life. Mary remained transfixed in the ecstasy of this heavenly embrace and said: "His name is Holy". The really holy is like this blade of grass, the more elevated, the more humble she becomes. She is gracious, forgiving and self-giving in all her dealings with others and gently participates in the holiness of God. No one is greater than Mary in this regard.

What the humble here on earth reflects is the true nature of God and can be traced back through the pages of human history. God has always exalted the lowly and knocked down the proud and the haughty powers of the world and he will do the same in the future. Because the humans do not have anything which is not received, the real human greatness is to acknowledge the giver of gifts, who alone is Holy, Mighty and Immortal in the real sense of the world.

Thus Mary sang her song of humility which was a *saga* of the stories of God's victories in favour of the humble ones.

2. St. Francis of Assisi

Born and brought up in a business family, with good educational background and gentlemanly behaviour, Francis was an icon of the youth of his time. Francis also successfully led the war in Perugia and thus became a hero of his native town. His father had high expectations in him and was proud of his growing fame among the people of Assisi. But all these human ambitions and calculations did not work. Francis was a totally different person, once he was awakened. His own father could not understand or contain him. During the trial against Francis, to the question by the Bishop: "what is the matter between you and your father?", Francis said: "I was in darkness, but I am now in light. I see things differently." Saying this parting words and giving back

the expensive dress his father had purchased for him, Francis left his house empty handed, to an unknown future of total void, nothingness and darkness. However, on the other end of this road he could see in a flash of light, as the moon was just struggling to move away from a towering dark cloud, a beautiful young lady, bereft of all worldly décor and ornaments, but bedecked with the beauty of unpolluted innocence, simplicity and transparency. She was the 'Lady Poverty' whom Francis was contemplating since the day of his awakening. With wedding wreath in her hands, she gently and silently approached and garlanded him. Francis thought that the long cherished wish for his heart is now fulfilled. But the Lady Poverty was only a symbol, a preamble, of his fundamental option of the crucified Lord. The medieval church was celebrating the glory of Jesus the triumphant. Jesus, the poor, the stripped and stoned was not the centre of the thinking of the day. As saints, down through the history of the church said in their hearts, Francis said: "I will become that Christ, the poor of the Lord". A great movement had its beginning in the church, a movement which trusted in utter simplicity, nothingness and total reliance on the providence of God. "My God and my all", the saint said. Thus St Francis gave an expression of humility and holiness abandoning everything, transcending everything and controlling everything from within.

The hymn of Francis, 'the canticle of the sun' is another brilliant example to show how Francis was at home with everything here below and how he rose with nature to the highest heaven of the Lord. A proud and powerful person may look at human beings as things, namely, labour-force or service-power at his disposal. But a humble person does exactly the opposite. This one gently raises even the infrahuman beings to the level of personhood. Thus Francis says, brother sun and sister moon. The song gently invokes all cosmic elements, invites them to

human companionship and raises them to God in praise, whose mighty symbols they are. The respect and regard accorded to them flows from a humble heart, whereas the arrogant and avarices use these very divine symbols for the extension of their power and destruction of nature. It is the humble and holy who keeps the world in rhythm and harmony.

I am now reminded of a text from the *Gita* which speaks about a devotee (*bhakta*) of the Lord. Francis was a devotee of the Lord and the text quoted would very well agree with his mind.

He who hates not creature, and is friendly and compassionate towards all, who is free from the feelings of 'I and mine', even-minded in pain and pleasure, forbearing, ever content, steady in meditation, self-control, and possessed of firm conviction, with mind and intellect fixed on Me – he who is thus devoted to me – is dear to Me (*Gita* 11:13-14).

This is a clue to us, if God really touches a soul, in spite of the difference of the religions, that soul will participate in the real nature of God. It is the Spirit who forms and transforms the soul. For Francis this Lord to whom he was devoted, was undoubtedly Jesus Christ, crucified and resurrected. For Francis humility and poverty go hand in hand. Poverty is freedom from attachments not only from wealth and power but also from the tendency to be aggressive to others and the universe. The respect to sacredness of nature is only natural to such highly cultured humble minds.

The lady poverty he envisaged is humble in heart, meek and gentle in behaviour and was adorned with all the characteristics of the Spirit which Paul enumerates in his letter to the Galatians:

But the Spirit produces love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility, and self-control. There is no law against such things as these. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have put to death their human nature with all its passions and desires. The Spirit has given us light; he must also control our lives. We must not be proud or irritate one another or be jealous of one another (Ga. 5:22-26).

3. St. Therese of Lisieux

Sanctity is real life. So, in order to see real sanctity of a soul, we have to go through the real life of that person. Our third model of the integration of holiness and humility is St. Therese of Lisieux. Her autobiography is known as 'The Story of a Soul'. It is authentic and transparent from the very beginning till the end. The beauty of its authenticity is its utter simplicity and complete absence of arbitrariness. Everything about her life is little in the sense that they are really small, unassuming, not so important, and in a sense insignificant, very ordinary events of her life which happens in any family with few children. But through these simple incidents, a careful reader could see, how Jesus was operating through and through this holy soul, how he was guiding and transforming her and how deeply she was attached and surrendered to this divine lover and master. Her little way is a royal path of humility and unconditional trust in the Lord. The secret of the little way is just what the Gospel says: "Be like little children, then you will enter the kingdom of God". Hence, Therese considered herself always little, unworthy of any claim of greatness, but ever singing the glories of His greatness who had been gracious to her and was readily showering his graces upon her. What is extra ordinary in her life, compared to our ordinary life, is that she is never tired of saying to us what the Lord is doing in her. How he teaches her secret wisdom of holiness, guides her faltering steps, lifts her up to heaven with the

help of a heavenly 'life' which is his own holy hands. I think this is true humility, acceptance and acknowledgement of holiness, which is a gift of God. She writes:

When a Gardner carefully tends a fruit he wants to ripen before its time, it's not to leave it hanging on a tree but to set it on his table. It was with such an intention that Jesus showered his graces so lavishly upon his little flower, He, who cried out in his mortal life: "I thank the, father, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and the prudent and reveal them to babes, " willed to have his mercy shine out in me. Because I was little and weak, he lowered himself to me, and he instructed me secretly in the things of his love (St. Therese of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, Philippines, 1996, p. 105).

The theology we study in our seminaries and this secret wisdom of love look very different, though they are not certainly unrelated. Therese never hesitated to acknowledge what the Lord has done to her. Her life history is the stories of graces the Lord has showered upon her. Little or great things which happened in her life she could always see as Jesus specially doing them for her. So near and dear was Jesus to her always.

I was at the most dangerous age for young girls, but God did for me what Ezekiel reports in his prophecies: "Passing by me, Jesus saw that the time had come for me to be *loved*, he entered into a covenant with me and I became *His own*. He spread his mantle over me, he washed me with precious perfumes, he re-clothed me in embroidered robes, he gave me priceless necklaces and ornaments. He nourished me with purest flower, with honey and oil in abundance. Then I became beautiful in his eyes and he made me a mighty queen (*Ibid.*, p.101-102).

Thus she appropriates the words of Ezechiel to herself. She also daringly writes this sentence with all her simplicity and true humility.

Ah! Had the learned who spend their life in study come to me, undoubtedly they would have been astonished to see a child of fourteen understand perfection's secrets, secrets all their knowledge cannot reveal because to possess them one has to be poor in Spirit. (*Ibid.*, (p.105).

To be really poor in spirit is not just a matter of poverty, but also a matter of humility. In this sense humility is really truth, just to acknowledge what God has done in the soul. Astonishingly saints' autobiography is the story of the soul's life, rather than that of achievements in the world and contributions to the rebuilding of the same. Saints do this in a different and very much hidden way. This will be acknowledged by the world only much later. The immediate recognition and praise are not at all their vision, much less their demand.

A Concluding Word on the *Saptati* and Golden Jubilee Memorial

I am very happy to contribute this article to this volume planned in memory of the Golden Jubilee of the First Religious Profession and the 70th birthday (*saptati*) of Rev. Fr. Thomas Aykara CMI. Dear Fr. Thomas, I consider this as a favourite occasion for me to remember you, our longstanding friendship, and our lovely days in Oxford, collaboration at DVK and above all your concern and support for me and for the ashram project. I very well remember some of our evening walks on Oxford streets sharing our views, discussing different matters on Dharmaram, planning the *Journal of Dharma* which was originally designed in Oxford. I was deeply moved by your comment when I spoke to you about the

ashram: "I do not think that I have a vocation for ashram life. But it is certainly a need for our church in India and if you really come forward for that I will certainly support you with all my ability". You have kept your promise, when years later, ashram began to take its shape. I am happy to say that this article is being written in this ashram (Vidyavanam Ashram). A special thing about this article is that this is written lying in bed in the sense that I have scribbled them in pieces of paper in the bed and later dictated them from the bed. Not very seriously sick, but yet bed ridden, I had enough time to reflect and give shape to some of the good thoughts that was passing through my mind during these days. This you could see from the theme chosen which is not so much philosophical or theological but a journey right into the core of spirituality. Humility and holiness were themes that came to my mind as I went through the biography of Little Flower. Since the general theme of the birthday memorial volume is 'integration', I thought of developing this article under the title *Integration of Humility and Holiness, a Saga of Real Sanctity*. I wish you all the best and *MULTOS ANNOS*.