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From the Selected Works of Reverend Lawrence E. Frizzell, S.T.L., S.S.L., D.Phil.

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Humility and Hospitality

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Humility and Hospitality

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Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Sunday Readings for September 1, 2013 for Cycle C:

Sir 3:17-29; Ps 68; Heb 12:18-24; Lk 14:1, 7-14

HUMILITY AND HOSPITALITY

Lawrence E. Frizzell

The Jewish and Christian teaching about human nature is often at odds with the popular culture in challenging people to grasp principles of the moral order. For example, many psychologists stress the necessity of building self-esteem in their clients, showing the benefits of a good self-image and an assertive attitude in the competitive context of their daily life. Yet the biblical message points to the folly of pride and extols humility as the virtue to cultivate so that arrogance and vanity will not usurp control of our lives. St. Thomas Aquinas summarized the tradition about pride as the first in the list of the seven capital vices by noting: "Human nature naturally is inclined to appreciate its own excellence and fears to see it diminish. This leads to the vice of envy and resentment" (*Summa Theologiae* II-II q. 162). St. Jean Marie Vianney (1786-1859) drew upon his pastoral experience regarding human failings to note: "Pride makes us hate our equals because they are our equals; our subordinates from the fear that they may equal us; our superiors because they are above us. Envy, my children, follows pride; whoever is envious is proud." This certainly leads to an isolated existence!

The sin of Satan was well depicted by John Milton with the phrase: "Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven!" (*Paradise Lost*, Book I line 263). The weaknesses of human nature are varied and temptations come from many sources, but Lucifer may have greatest success in enticing people to pride. "Men can heal the lustful; angels can heal the malicious, but only God can heal the proud" (St. John Climacus, 570-649).

How can we develop a healthy self-esteem, a sense of our personal dignity without falling into pride and envy? The secret is to acknowledge that our inner worth is derived from God's decision to create us in the divine image and likeness, a fundamental quality that is shared with all human beings. The uniqueness of each individual allows each to respond to this gift in a personal way; our use of the time and talents bestowed on us must benefit others as well as ourselves, ultimately redounding to God's glory. Then we will find our recompense. "The reward of humility and fear (awe or reverence) of the Lord is riches, honor and life" (Prv 22:4).

The sage Jesus ben Sira lived in Jerusalem two hundred years before the time of Jesus. Drawing upon the insights of Moses, "the meekest man on the face of the earth" (Nm 12:3), other prophets and psalmists, he taught that humility leads one to be favored by God and neighbor (3:18-19). The dangers of intellectual pursuits fostered by the Greeks may intrude into the life of Jews and lead to pride and arrogance. Sira feared that such people would forsake the wisdom bestowed upon Israel by God. The Church would have us rejoice in exploring truth in its myriad forms but concurs with Sira that dangers abound. Do we cultivate a time for prayer in the context of our search for knowledge? Do we read about the Church's teaching and consult others regarding the moral

implications of the research that may draw us into uncharted waters? When Jesus was invited to a sabbath meal, he was bemused to see other guests jostle for the favored places at table. True honor comes when the host invites a person to take a special place. The teaching of Jesus is close to that of other teachers: "The one who exalts himself, the Holy One, blessed be he, will lower" (Babylonian Talmud Erubhin 13b).

In the context of daily life, people naturally foster relationships with relatives, friends and neighbors on the same social level. But if hospitality is to be a virtue, then we should reach out as well to those whose status or personal afflictions deprive them of potential for returning the favor in kind. Then the reward will be given by God. Who knows? We may also learn important lessons about life from those who have endured the crucible of suffering.