

# The Positivity of Humility.

**Brother Patrick Nora, M.Afr, from Ghana but based in Tanzania gave us a spiritual and illuminating retreat in Kasama from May 8 till 16, 2017.**

**On the third day, there was something that retouched me on the theme of the Mercy of God.**

Initially I wanted to have as title; 'forgiveness and humility'. I had the sense that you cannot forgive without humility because the two go together and especially when forgiving someone who is not contrite for what he or she did to you. Those who killed Jesus or St. Stephen were not remorseful as they thought that they were doing a just act. Even terrorists might think so. But Christians must make a difference by not retaliating. They should instead pray even for those who persecute them (Mt 5:44). Our Master Lord Jesus Christ said; *'if only you reserve your greeting to those you know what difference are you making, even pagans do the same, do they not (Mt 5: 47)?'*

On the theme of forgiveness, others think otherwise, namely, one can forgive even without humility because forgiveness is a human thing and especially when one sees the other suffering. The human conscious cannot allow one to see the other in a situation of suffering no matter how coarse his or her heart is. The case in point is that of the closure of the borders to immigrants due to terrorism. When a baby boy called [Alan Kurdi](#) slipped from its mother's hands in 2015 and was washed away by the current and landed on a Turkish beach, it sent shock waves and borders were opened for the immigrants. I agree to the fact that forgiveness is part of human nature. God has implanted it into every human heart. When we talk of sisterhood, brotherhood, freedom and indeed all the fruits of our nature and enterprise, they are all present to human nature in a mystery. For us, they are revealed in the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and will be brought into full flower when the Lord returns (class notes on Grace). But there is more to why forgiveness hinges on humility. For me it is not only biblical/spiritual but also productive and positive.



## The Christian aspect of forgiveness.

My spiritual director once asked me that when someone has insulted you or told you that you are a fool or stupid, who has to apologise? Off the cuff, my answer was: *"the one who had insulted me"*. To my surprise, he said no! You are the one who has to go and ask for forgiveness or reconciliation. You need to go in humility and ask him or her where you went wrong. This is being Christian. You need to go and ask to your brother or sister and say: *my brother/sister, forgive me, I saw you angry with me.* This will change your brother or sister's heart who wronged you or insulted you. This is biblical as scripture says;

*"Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift." (Mt 5:24).*

*"Do not repay anyone evil for evil (Rm 12:17). Carefully, consider what is right in the eyes of everybody."*

*"If it is possible on your part, live at peace with everyone." (Rm 12:18).*

This is the crux of the matter and why forgiveness calls for humility. It is Christian in the sense that it is not him who wronged you who should ask for forgiveness but it is you who was wronged, who needs reconciliation or to make peace. We instead wait for the other person who has wronged us to

come and apologise. If he or she does not come to me, I will never talk to that person. This can happen to priests, Church elders, leaders of lay groups such that they have never talked to each other for ages because something happened between them. Such kinds of hatred have even brought divisions in the Church but people pretend not to bother.

But by taking the first step in humility (and as a Christian) you emulate God who took the first initiative to come and save humanity at the time when we had sinned. St. Paul writes: *"You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. It is rare indeed for anyone to die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die"* (Rm 5: 7). We did not go to him but he came to us.

However there are stumbling blocks to this, taking into account our human insecurities, pride and fear. There are fears that others will manipulate me or think that I am too cheap. Additionally, fear in the sense that other people look for the mistakes or weaknesses in other people so as to blow them up. The attitude of blowing up mistakes of others is a sign of insecurity. Likewise the fear of revealing one's weaknesses is a sign of insecurity. There are insecurities on both sides. Insecurity also in the sense that others may take it as my weakness when I have already built up my self-esteem and I cannot bring myself so low. But I have also a sense that humility is a feeling of courage when others are pigeonholing you without shaking. Humility is daring to listen to feelings, comments, shameful and awful aspects of oneself which probably I have denied and repressed from my life. This attitude I believe can move me to the level of self-acceptance and wholeness. I would like now talk about the positivity or productivity of humility.

### **Positivity of humility.**

In communities, we live with people whom we do not like and those who do not like us. But how do you feel especially when you are not talking to each other and you have to face each other every so often? The world becomes small having to avoid them all the time. But when you forgive and reconcile you feel free and healed. Someone told me that forgiveness is like swallowing a bitter pill but it heals you. A grudge, on the other hand, sickens and kills you psychologically in the sense that you need a lot of negative energy or emotions to keep it going. You cannot go for a long time before it suffocates you. But if you let go with a lot of pain- if you go to that pain of letting go rather than avoid it, the Kingdom of God comes.

Humility helps to reach out to others strongly. The letter to the Philippians is a prime example of the positivity and productivity of humility of our Lord Jesus Christ (Phil 2:5-11). It says; *"though he was God he did not cling to his divine nature but assumed the nature of a slave and through that he reached out to many people."* You know your rights and your importance but as a Christian, you forgive because you want reconciliation and reach out to other(s). It is much easier to talk and write about humility but quite hard to practise it in one's life. Other people have responded to me by asking and challenging me saying; "what about the humility and forgiveness of you, Patrick"? In other words, I should not only write or talk about humility and forgiveness but I should put it into my life. Let me also talk about what humility is not.

### **Humility as different from low self-concept.**

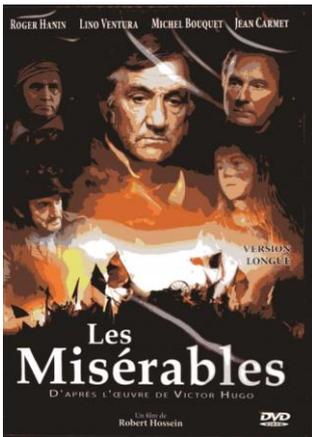
Humility actually builds up and elevates the self-image. Spiritual masters always tell us that the one who says I am sorry for my wrong doing, builds up self-esteem instead of being proud or putting up a wrong/false façade. Humility does not involve thinking less about yourself or having a negative view of yourself. When you forgive, it does not mean that others are much better than you. When you forgive you also respect the person you have forgiven. Humility involves letting go wholeheartedly and that is freeing. It is also composed of sacrifice, self-denial, fasting and going an extra mile or giving more than what was asked of.

Let me also quote another Bemba proverb about humility. It says that; *“tobela tobela akafye inganda.”* The literal translation is that; *“endless arguments leave people nowhere.”* There needs to be at least one who gives up his or her position or each one of you moves half way so as to bring up peace. Sticking to one's position without any movement will not solve any problem. It requires one to relinquish his or her position. For example, one can say; *“I am the president”* and another says, *“I do not recognise your presidency”*. If the two sides perpetually stick to their positions, nothing will materialise in terms of peace or reconciliation. Whereas humility is attractive, arrogance is repulsive. You cannot feign humility just as a drunkard cannot feign sobriety.

Therefore, humility does not mean that you look down on yourself. But humility is different from low self-concept, esteem or low locus of evaluation. Forgiveness is not completely due to the realisation of human contingencies or that I am a sinner therefore I need to forgive; this is self-pity. Realisation of one's contingency or sinfulness could be a step towards forgiveness. Jesus was not a sinner but he forgave those who killed him.

### **Do not intimidate the offender.**

Is it not right to say that preventing humiliating the offender breaks the circle of violence? In being offended we carry with us a lot of anger in our chest believing that the offender must be punished, crushed and feel the pinch of his or her offence. But what actually are we doing to them? Haven't we created a psychological warfare or created a spirit of vindictiveness in them which will never end? It is part of human nature that even if people have sinned or offended they should not be intimidated but need respect and experience softness in order to foster the attitude of change. Besides there are



some people who may not be ready even to relinquish their pride. They would prefer to die with their pride other than swallowing it while others may be shy or find it humiliating by being forgiven.

You remember in that film [“Les misérables”](#) how the pursuant asked his enemy why he did not kill him but forgave him. In other words, he was telling him: *“who told you to forgive me”*. Sometimes, I am led to think that it is the poor and the humble who appreciate forgiveness. In this world where people have acquired a variety of statuses in forms of richness, education, political mileage, etc. humility to accept forgiveness will be hard to come by. It is up to the victim or the offended to be humble to forgive.

### **Humility in valuing others or seeing goodness in others.**

There was a woman who came to me and said she lent a lot of money to her friend and for many years she asked for that money but to no avail. Her friend always told her that she would give it back to her but she did not. In the end, she just gave up her pursuit of that money for the sake of friendship. There are similar examples of that nature such as giving up the debts, the land, and property helplessly. But is this forgiveness? Wouldn't it be much better to tell the other one that I have forgiven you, so that the other does not look down when you meet face to face?

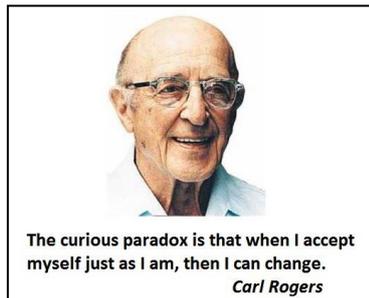
Scripture says that humility consists in valuing others above yourself. I quote: *“Do nothing out of selfish ambition, or vain conceit but rather think of others as better than you.”* (Phil 2:3). St. John of the Cross said that rejoice in the goodness of others as if it were your own, desiring that they be given precedence over you in all things. In other words, try to see goodness in other people. This is very difficult especially when you are at loggerheads with them. It is even harder to see goodness in people who pride themselves.

I would like to quote a Bemba proverb or a tale which says something about humility. It says that friendship started by 'help me look for my arrow' = *Icibusa catampile muli mfwailako umufwi*. In the process of helping the other to look for his arrow, the two boys became friends. If it was not for loving humility, the other boy would have gone home and not have spent hours looking for the lost arrow.

Let me also talk about another side of humility. Probably other people may find some truth or meaning in it. There is one thing I liked about **Obama's** character. When people talked ill about him such as calling him a nigger and what, he just smiled and laughed. I found that healing instead of having to defend oneself and arguing. If you know who you are, why should you worry about negative remarks people make about you? (*ukukuntikilwa = to worry about negative remarks.*) We are very quick at defending ourselves whenever people say something negative about us. When I was doing the course of psychotherapy there was a day in a week which was strictly dedicated to each person. Fellow students would point at each and every defect they have known about the person and the person is supposed to keep quiet. Knowing one's weakness in humility is also empowering. But some students would end up crying all day thinking that others do not like them.



There are some people in this world, when you meet them, you feel like a human being, empowered and magnanimous. This is not pretence or that they are putting up a façade but it is just the way they are. I also believe that we can heal people simply by the way we are. It is the phenomenon which the psychologists call '*participation mystique*' = *when what we are experiencing from inside is in resonance with what is happening from outside*. You are truthful to other people in your relationship and forgiveness.



I like what [Carl Rogers](#) said which I think is related to healing and it comes from conscious forgiveness. Rogers said: "*If only I can be real, if only I can be transparent, if only I can get in touch with my inner self so that the other can see through me that I am not holding anything back, then process of therapy can begin to take place*" (Rogers, 1959). In this case forgiveness is coupled with honest and respect of someone, and honouring of that person (*hyperecho* to elevate/hold above in Greek). It is not pretence or demeaning of someone like; "I have forgiven you, little mosquito". People are not fools, they can see through whether you have forgiven them or not. If you haven't, they will always walk with a guilty conscious and will never look into your eyes.

### **In conclusion.**

We are born in different settings with different upbringing and humility may not be part of our life. Some people are lucky by being born with humility. But if we can train for transformation we can as well train or learn to be humble. We can start by appreciating others; delight in the success of others. All in all, in my view, forgiveness is positive and hinges on true humility.