

Timeless Pride, Modern Humility
By Florence Forbush, 2018

St Bernard's first written work, *On Pride and Humility* details a list of twelve descending steps of pride and twelve ascending steps of humility. Each step of pride leads one deeper into sin and each step of humility draws one closer to God. As Bernard asserts and I find true in my own life, each step of pride is sequential, as is each step of humility. Each step of pride contains the former and likewise each step of humility, although in the moment one may dip into various steps of pride or humility, when we track the broad course of our life we find this sequence affirmed¹.

These steps were written hundreds of years ago by a white cis-gender man who held all position of power in the world he lived in. Consider also that this work was written not for the general populace, it was written for fellow monastics who we might conceive to have the discernment to understand the way in which he indicates each of these steps. For the rest of us, not white, trans, women, non-binary and otherwise the oppressed, these steps may feel confusing and indeed counter-intuitive. When we consider the long history of child sexual abuse by the Catholic Church as well as by many other Christian Churches and major world religious institutions, the call to submit to superiors seems nonsensical². Yet if we put aside the immediate desire to discard the entire work, we can find great wisdom in Bernard's words, wisdom which is applicable indeed in opposing the oppressor and standing on the side of love, with God alone.

I will proceed through the steps of pride and humility interpreting and explaining how they apply for a non-monastic yet devout modern application, making brief note of how I have myself fallen down or climbed up them in my spiritual life. As Bernard, I too know more of pride than of humility and although I have some minute measure of humility, I do not presume to be anything more than another of the faithful struggling towards God, yet far from perfection.

1 Clairvaux, Bernard. Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works. Translated by Gillian R Evans, Paulist Press, 1987. 99-143

2 https://www.democracynow.org/2018/8/16/this_church_is_a_criminal_enterprise ““This Church Is a Criminal Enterprise”: Former Priest & Survivor Speak Out on PA Catholic Sex Abuse” Democracy Now, 8/16/18

Then, we are at the first step of pride: “curiosity about what is not one’s proper concern”³. One’s proper concern can be understood here to mean that which moves one towards God, wholeness, The Good and away from sin, and evil. For myself this step began with curiosity around drugs, not for failing health or treating of others, yet for curiosity alone. At the second step we come to “Light-mindedness: chatter and exclamations about things which do not matter”⁴. Things which do not matter, like things which are not one’s proper concern, likewise perpetuate sin or at a minimum keep us away from God. If we assume that the entire point of living is some salvation, enlightenment, release, then we necessarily must view all that which does not draw us toward that as something which does not matter. Whether that is mindless consideration of what drug binge I could concoct, party I could plan or discussion of the latest TV drama. I do not think Bernard’s explanation needs much interpretation, even if some specific examples have changed over time.

Then the third and fourth step of pride, which we can put together as relating to actions of speech: “laughing about nothing; foolish merriment” and “boasting and talking too much”⁵. For my own part, as my relationship with drugs worsened and as intoxication grew a more daily experience, my life became literally laughing about nothing, my merriment was foolish for it brought me no closer to God than does any other’s drunken stupor. While boasting and speaking unnecessarily create a narrative in our minds, whether that is of the justification for our sinful action or trying to curry favor among drug-using peers, the fourth step leads us to perpetuate a mental and physical world away from God. There is no divinity in the literal haze of smoke and vapor.

As with many things, the spiritual life gets worse before it gets better. Here we arrive to the fifth and sixth steps, both relating to one’s perceived status: “trying to be different: claiming special rights”, “thinking oneself holier than others”⁶. In my life, this manifested as advocating for special academic privileges I did not deserve nor did I need. I was also deluded in believing I was allowed to engage in

3 Clairvaux, Bernard. *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works*. Translated by Gillian R Evans, Paulist Press, 1987. 100

4 Ibid, 100

5 Ibid, 100

6 Ibid, 100

sex work without social or legal reproach and without the real damage it caused me emotionally. While it can also be said that special rights are not accorded to anyone, what look like special rights in the form of reparations for blacks and other affirmative-action principles are in-fact the necessary penance for the harm carried out by our ancestors and the unequal benefits whites enjoy today. This applies in many areas where we may perceive special rights when in-fact there is necessary penance for past harm.

Following, we hit the seventh step: “interfering presumptuously with the affairs of others”⁷. The important word for modern implementation here is presumptuously. If we define the affairs of others to be any activities which fall under their right to bodily autonomy and actions which do not cause immediate or long-term harm to others, then indeed it is presumptuous of any of us to interfere. What justification can someone provide for stopping someone who decides to paint a purple landscape over a green one? None I can conceive of. Yet it is in-fact not presumptuous for us to interfere directly with the affairs of others when those affairs directly harm others and infringe upon the right to bodily autonomy. As in a case where someone may attempt to mutilate the body of another, it is not presumptuous to physically stop them from doing so. Only when to interfere is to step out of the boundaries of what is required by ethics and Christ does it become presumptuous.

Further we go to the eighth step: “self-justification. Defending one’s sinful actions”⁸. As I myself did when I was a sex worker, when I was actively using drugs, when I was stealing or otherwise harming others, my immediate response was not to look deeply and seriously at my sin. My immediate response was to justify to myself why my action was permissible when it wasn’t. I do not believe we need much of any interpretation here, save for more specific disagreements of what constitutes sin. Likewise, the unwillingness to look at one’s own sin is seen further is attempting to conceal the most painful aspect of our sin the ninth step: “insincere confession”⁹. We falsely confess to conceal the

7 Ibid, 100

8 Ibid, 100

9 Ibid, 100

deeper sin, even if it is a true admission it is of a lesser nature. To assuage our concerned and angry critics, we give them a bite in an attempt to turn them away.

Further down into hell we go, at the tenth step, “rebellion against superiors”, where Bernard says that a monk will leave the monastery, I left university¹⁰. In my own life this can be understood to mean my parents and doctors, yet I think that is an inapt interpretation to be given to all. Better, if we understand superiors as the prophets and God, then rebellion is a turning away from and stymieing of the spiritual life. A rebellion against God through sin which in truth only deepens one’s suffering.

The eleventh and twelfth step come shortly together: “feeling free to sin” and “habitual sin”¹¹. The eleventh step understood to mean frequent sin with some hesitation for some actions, as in my initial hesitation and reluctance to steal, while the twelfth carries no such restriction, as when I was habituated to the point of finding no qualm in my thievery. Taken descriptively, I find little to interpret here. Thus at the end of the steps of pride, thoroughly entrenched in sin and perpetuating one’s own suffering we find that the only way out is the steps of humility leading up, starting at its most basic with “constant watchfulness against sin”¹². When sin has become so habitual as to be second nature, only constant vigilance does it, although I found in my own life that when the resolution to stop came, vigilance prompted itself in the great pain of early recovery.

Bernard then counsels us to the second step: “desiring no freedom to exercise one’s will”¹³. One’s will can be understood here to be the will of one’s ego towards sin and suffering, the natural tendency of desire and ignorance. Contrasted with God’s will, which drives us towards virtue and abiding joy. Thus we arrive at the third step: “submission to superiors”¹⁴. It is more fitting and more universal to consider our superiors as only the prophets and God. That no regular person can be our superior in truth, no one can engage in an unjustified hierarchy and demand deference when to give it is

10 Ibid, 100

11 Ibid, 100

12 Ibid, 100

13 Ibid, 100

14 Ibid, 100

to drive oneself away from God. Through the systematic sexual abuse conducted and concealed by the Catholic Church, thousands of people have been traumatized into finding every sight of a cross and every church to remind them of a deep harm perpetrated by supposed servants of God¹⁵. To rebel against these false superiors demands an adherence and love of Christ and God that pushes one to stand against abuse. The only thing that demands unwavering submission is God. On this point, even Pope Francis sees that unwavering submission to clergy leads us into sin¹⁶.

This alignment of loyalty to God alone can naturally lead us to the fourth step of humility: “patience in the face of accusation”¹⁷. As is frequently the case when a sexual abuse survivor comes forward, standing with God against the abuser prompts accusations of lying and other harsh assaults. We can only grow closer to God when we tolerate this false accusation, however painful it may be. In other cases, as in my own life, tolerating the real and legitimate accusations of harm we did cause and resolving to listen and change our behavior, not justify sin, likewise brings one closer to God. In my own case this leads naturally to the fifth step of humility: “confessing one’s sins”¹⁸. Wherein the genuine accusation is heard, the sin is acknowledged and a move to correct and over-correct for the harm is taken.

If steps three, four and five are how we engage with others, then steps six, seven and eight all relate to how we view ourselves in relation to others, following sequentially: “thinking oneself unworthy to take initiative”, “thinking oneself less holy than others” and “regarding oneself as having no special rights in the community”¹⁹. The call to restraint from initiative may seem counter-intuitive, what about initiative to renounce? To do good? Yet I believe this counsel is wise when held in the light that God will push us and lead us when necessary. Guilt, shame and sorrow arise in the absence of

15 https://www.democracynow.org/2018/9/13/headlines/report_over_3_600_children_in_germany_were_sexually_abused_by_clergy “Report: Over 3,600 Children in Germany Were Sexually Abused by Clergy” Democracy Now, 9/13/18

16 https://www.democracynow.org/2018/10/4/headlines/pope_condemns_clericalism_as_root_of_church_sexual_abuse_scandal “Pope Condemns “Clericalism” as Root of Church Sexual Abuse Scandal” Democracy Now, 10/4/18

17 Clairvaux, Bernard. *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works*. Translated by Gillian R Evans, Paulist Press, 1987. 100

18 Ibid, 100

19 Ibid, 100

virtue and motivate reform. In my own life, when counseled by a dear friend to take a back seat to leadership I grew in humility. The seventh step arising when I put myself before monks and nuns with no assumptions of my own holiness, only the desire for discipleship arose. Then in the removal of all hierarchy through consensus based community organizing, I could find no more right to power in myself or anyone else. I found no special privilege justifiable for myself or anyone else. The seventh and eighth step are not an assuming of the negative of yourself, only an assuming of the positive in all others.

The ninth, tenth and eleventh steps concern particulars of communication, starting with “keeping silent unless asked to speak”, followed by “reluctance to laugh” and finished with “quiet and restrained speech”²⁰. On first pass these can seem restrictive, especially for those of us raised in a culture of speaking often and much. Yet their wisdom has not aged since Bernard’s writing nor has it aged since the Buddha taught a similar truth. In keeping silent, we speak only when another will listen. In restraint to laugh we attend to the true tone of the moment. In quiet and restrained speech we speak ever more true and ever more gentle. Restrained speech does not mean a silencing of the good or a refusal to speak against evil, yet it is a refusal to speak out of immediate impulse, it is the careful consideration of the truth and effectiveness of words. Dr Christine Ford’s 2018 testimony of sexual assault was an example of speech which first was held back by restraint and only articulated after due consideration²¹. The truth of her words resonated naturally and were heard clearly by all willing to listen.

We arrive finally at the last step of humility, “containment of interests; showing itself in a humble bearing and lowered eyes”²². Containment of interests can be understood as directing all efforts towards God, the behavioral appearance of a bearing naturally arising when the primary goal and

20 Ibid, 100

21 https://www.democracynow.org/2018/9/28/dr_christine_blasey_ford_i_am “Dr. Christine Blasey Ford: I Am 100% Certain Brett Kavanaugh Attempted to Rape Me in 1982” Democracy Now, 9/28/18

22 Clairvaux, Bernard. Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works. Translated by Gillian R Evans, Paulist Press, 1987. 100

direction of one's life is the divine. The lowering of eyes happening when we are not altogether concerned or attached to the world around us, our eyes and mind directed only towards God.

Much of these values of humility are counter-culture and many of the values of pride are extolled. American culture broadly praises out-spoken personalities willing to seize what they desire, if Trump's current presidency is any indication this seems hard to deny. To take counsel with Christ, to speak only truth with due consideration, to direct all time and thought towards God is rarely praised outside the most devout circles. Yet I think Bernard's teaching holds true that without doing such, we can never run headlong into the Holy Spirit.

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