

We are on the threshold of the month of September, which has three major Marian feasts, and so is really a sort of “month of Mary”. On the 8th we will celebrate her birthday; on the 12th, her holy name; and on the 15th, we will honor her as Our Lady of Sorrows. And I think today’s Gospel is an appropriate introduction to the month that begins this coming Thursday. Jesus said, “Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.” Certainly, Mary greatly humbled herself, and we know that she was greatly exalted; indeed, she is now the greatest of all the saints.

But in the gospel we also hear about the Pharisees. We can compare them to Our Lady and see that they are really the exact opposite. At this dinner party that they were having, they were busy taking the seats of honor for themselves. It was a sort of competition: who could appear to be the most important. Perhaps some of them were even deserving of such honor; but honor is always better when we received from others, rather than taken for oneself. And that is the point that Jesus was trying to make to them. That is why he told them that they should always take the lowest seat, the least important seat, and then the host will move them to a better one.

We could say that the Pharisees were not being true to themselves. But humility is being true to oneself, being true to reality. Humility is recognizing things as they really are, not as we want or hope them to be. I can look at myself and soberly recognize all of my strengths and weaknesses, all my successes and failures. Or, I could deceive myself into thinking that my weaknesses and failures don’t really exist, or aren’t that bad. That’s not being humble. It’s like when we commit a sin; of course it makes us feel bad – it’s a sin. But what do we do with it? Do we humbly recognize it’s a sin and seek God’s forgiveness? Or do we just convince ourselves that it wasn’t really a sin? The Lord wants us to be humble. He wants us to recognize reality as it is, and when we do that, then he is able to lift us up, to exalt us.

But when we deceive ourselves, or try to be something that we are not – how can the Lord help us then? Jesus came to save “me”; he didn’t come to save the person that I have deceived myself into thinking that I am. He didn’t come to save the person that I am trying to be. Neither one of those persons exists yet, and may never exist. No, he came to save me, as I am right now, with all my weaknesses, all my failures – and also with my strengths. If I am going to be saved, I need to recognize all these things as they really are. I need to be humble.

So humility helps us to have a right relationship with the Lord. Because when we reflect on our lives, we realize that we need his help. Mary knew this. She was born without Original Sin and never once sinned even in the slightest way throughout her life. But do you think she thought for a second about bragging about this? Of course not! She knew that if it wasn’t for God’s help – his special gifts – she could have been a horrible sinner. When the angel came to Mary, to invite her to become the Mother of God, what did she say? “I am the lowly handmaid of the Lord. Let it be done unto me according to your word.” She humbly depended on God. She knew that God was the one who had given her all the good things that she had. She knew that her salvation depended upon him and not on her own achievements.

Again: being humble involves recognizing reality and seeing our lives in relation to the Lord – being transparent before him. It is looking at our lives honestly and not seeking to be something that we are not. In our quiet times of prayer this week, let us take inventory and renew our resolve to seek and live out true humility on a daily basis. He came to save “the real me”, “the real you” – not some distortion or delusion of our imaginations; when we come before him in that way, then he can work with us and transform us into something much greater. Our salvation is God’s work, and Mary shows us the way. What a joy to celebrate so many of her feast days at this of the year! May her words be ours each day: “I am the lowly servant of the Lord; be it done unto me according to your word.” Amen.