

If you haven't read or heard today's Mass readings for this **26th Sunday of the Year** please read them first, particularly the second reading from St. Paul's Letter to the **Philippians**, and then return here for my thoughts.

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We have an incredibly beautiful second reading today - from St. Paul's Letter to the Philippians - written about twenty years after Jesus.

Philippi is the first church Saint Paul founded in Europe. He spent his early years of preaching in countries we now call Lebanon, Syria and Turkey - and the islands of Cyprus and Crete. Well, later he sailed over to Greece, which is Europe. And Philippi is an important city in the north, named after Philip of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great, about 350 years before Christ.

Paul establishes a church there and he really comes to love these people. And, later, having moved on, he writes to them in the hope that they remain united - united in Christ - united in faith. For Christians...there's no place for division.

"Complete my joy by being of the same mind, with the same love, united in heart, thinking one thing."

Sustaining unity is the whole purpose of this letter. And the reason we hear a reading like this, down through the ages, is that we Christians, twenty centuries later, are called to be united as well. We're to put division behind us.

That doesn't mean we won't have our own individual personalities or opinions. It doesn't mean we can't dialogue. But the essential thing is to maintain our unity in Christ.

Over time, we all know, there's been division in the life of the Church. A thousand years ago the Church of the West broke with the Church of the East. We're still divided in some ways though things have improved. Five hundred years ago came the Protestant Reformation. And the splintering continues. But we're called to be one.

So, Paul tells the Philippians how to maintain unity. Through humility. It comes in the second part of the reading, in what is known as "the Philippians hymn." This was a real hymn.

Lots of us have our favorite hymn. For some it's "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee" - or "Holy God, We Praise Thy Name" - or "Amazing Grace" - or "On Eagle's Wings." All fairly modern.

But today we hear the oldest Christian hymn known to us. It may have been sung as early as a few years after Christ's death, in the 30s of the first century. It speaks of Christ's humility and asks that we live the same way.

The hymn sings that Jesus "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave. He became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" - all the time depending on God.

When we're humble - pouring out our lives in service to one another - we build unity in the Church.

All the saints understood that humility means depending on God rather than oneself. Everything comes from God. And God is everything.

St. Teresa of Calcutta, remembered vividly by so many of us, called humility the mother of all virtues. She said: "If you're humble nothing will touch you, neither praise nor disgrace, because you know what you are. If you're blamed for something you won't be discouraged. And if they call you a saint you won't put yourself on a pedestal."

Some think humility is putting ourselves down. It isn't.

The most humble people out there are often the most confident. And some of the most prideful people are the most insecure. Humble people know their life is dependent on God and know what to value - things that last, eternal things, not passing things. They value a relationship with God over anything else.

The humble person is the one who listens and cares about others as opposed to being focused on their own self or trying to look good.

And humble people don't look for praise. They want to do something simply because it's right.

The greatest obstacle to growing closer to God is when we rely more on ourselves than on Him. When we look at the crucifix, we see a man who's humble and not living for himself. There's *the man for others!*

So, how do I cultivate humility within myself?

Speak about yourself as little as possible. Praise others.

Don't seek to be admired or loved. Admiration comes naturally to the humble person.

Don't dwell on the faults of others. Again, praise them when they've done something well.

Accept criticisms in good humor, even if those criticisms are not merited.

Be courteous even when provoked by someone.

You know, in the Bible there are just two people mentioned that came "in the form of God." Christ was one of them. We just heard that in the Philippians hymn.

Adam was the other. He was formed in the image of God. But Adam wanted to be God. He grasped at being God. This was the sin of pride, the first sin, original sin. Humility would have protected Adam from thinking he could disobey God and become like him.

Our hymn says that Christ, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, “he emptied himself...accepting even death on a cross.”

Saint Augustine once wrote that, “It was pride that changed angels into devils. It’s humility that makes men as angels.”

Jesus was humble. And we Christians are called to the same. It was the greatest act of humility - up there - through which we are saved.