Humility

By Susan Colón

The Bible teaches that God gives grace to the humble (Prov. 3:34, 1 Pet. 5:5). But I think it would be a mistake to imagine that God has a humility meter he uses on us, doling out grace to those who deserve it by their superior humility (if there is such a thing). Rather, we should understand that there’s a natural and direct connection between humility and the capacity to receive the gifts of God and of other people: humility enables us to receive from others, whereas pride blocks us from doing so. The Christian gospel is saturated with humility.

Humility entails the recognition that we’re not perfect, and never will be in this life. It’s a necessary disposition for approaching God and for having healthy relationships with others. That’s why Proverbs teaches, “Do you see a man who is wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him” (Prov. 26:12). A fool, who is at least open to realizing he may be a fool, can be taught; but someone who is wise in his own eyes cannot.

We’re all aware of some of our imperfections, but what we sometimes forget is that we also all have blind spots: imperfections that we are too immature to see as imperfections. Once my five-year-old daughter argued with me vehemently about how to spell a word. What showed her immaturity the most was not that she misspelled the word, but that she was unable to realize that my knowledge on the subject was more reliable than hers.

This sort of thing can happen at the university level too. When students object to curricular requirements, for example, they are essentially saying that they know better than the professoriate what they need to learn. Someone may ask, why do I have to learn a foreign language, I’ll probably never need to speak? Why do I have to take Great Texts for my engineering degree? Why do I have to take a lab science if I’m going to be a history teacher? They’re like the character in The Karate Kid who was furious at his teacher after three days of being made to paint the fence, wax cars, and sand the floor, not knowing that his teacher was using those chores to train his muscles and reflexes in ways necessary for vital karate moves. Fortunately, the kid had enough humility to follow directions he didn’t understand. Do you?

Pride lurks in unexpected places. You probably have no trouble acknowledging that you don’t know everything; that you have much to learn. But chances are there are certain things you think you do know—a sort of common sense you’ve learned to take for granted about the way things are, and what life is about, and what you’re doing here in college. To give a personal example, as a college student, I was sure that Baptists had the right ideas about all things religious, and that other faith traditions were in error wherever they differed from mine. I remember visiting a Methodist church once and sitting in the pew thinking I had to be on guard against whatever heresies might be taught! I was wise in my own eyes about my denomination, and I couldn’t even see it.

There are other examples of unquestioned assumptions. I regularly meet students who take it for granted that the purpose of their life is to be successful according to the
American dream: to enjoy a high standard of living and a set of pleasant relationships. Or that books older than their grandparents don’t have anything to say to people today. Or that poetry, or philosophy, is useless. Or, that the most efficient way of doing something is always the best way.

Whether we like it or not, our culture infuses us with assumptions we’re hardly aware of. Today’s culture makes humility easy in some ways and difficult in others. Since bigotry and chauvinism are “out,” and tolerance and diversity are “in,” you probably find it natural to learn from people different from yourself. It’s probably easy for you to acknowledge that your point of view is limited and particular, and that people from different backgrounds will think differently about things, and that they are not necessarily wrong.

But in another way humility may well be difficult to practice. Along with the toleration of diverse points of view you may have imbibed some skepticism of any claims to authority. Our culture seems to have decided that authoritative truth claims are bigoted or arrogant: how can someone say what is true or good for someone else, since everyone has a different point of view? The result is that people are left with little else than their own powers of reason for finding truth. At first blush this seems humble: I wouldn’t dream of dictating what is true for anyone else. But it masks a dangerous hidden pride: The ego—my ego—is made supreme over matters of truth for me. This leads to taking your own reason or common sense or conscience as the highest guide to truth, while distrusting authorities outside yourself.

Instead, I invite you to assume the posture of a learner. This might seem obvious, or even redundant: students are learners by definition, right? Not necessarily. Our culture tends to define as “real” what is understood economically, and in that light university students are apt to be seen, and to see themselves, as consumers of a product and as future employees. These roles carry certain expectations. For example, in the role of employee-in-training, you might assume that you only need to learn things that are directly applicable to your expected future job. If you see yourself as a consumer, you might feel it’s your prerogative to pick and choose which classes to attend, which professors to listen to, and which assignments to do your best on.

If you are a learner, however, you will abandon the mentality that you are your own highest authority, and intentionally humble yourself under the teaching of others. You will accept that teachers have authority to teach you, and will consider yourself obliged to take seriously what they say, even if it challenges your assumptions. You will be open to thinking of education not just in terms of career preparation, but also in terms of disciplined formation of the soul.

How can you practice the humility of a learner? Like all the habits we’re considering in University 1000, humility is formed by practice, which means by deliberate, repeated acts of body and mind.

Humility requires that you learn to recognize the mental impulse to reject an idea as wrong. When you catch yourself in that impulse, make a point to listen first and listen longer. Ask questions to fully understand the idea being presented. Challenge the idea by all means, but give respectful consideration to the arguments raised in response to your challenges.
At some points in this essay I may sound like an unreformed hippie, urging you to question everything you believe and consider nothing sacred. At other times I may sound like an unreformed totalitarian, requiring conformity with a given program. This tension arises because humility is about being suspicious of the wrong authorities and deferential toward the right ones. Who are the wrong ones? Yourself, for starters, and those (like advertisers) who want something from you, and will tell you what you want to hear in order to get it. To take yourself and these appeals to your ego as authorities is the opposite of humility.

The right authorities, to whom you should humbly yield, are those whose moral character, Christian journey, and intellectual preparation has equipped them to speak with authority about things that matter. And not only individuals with these qualities, but also institutions with these qualities, should be regarded as authoritative. Be discerning about whom you trust. Look at the character as well as the competence of potential mentors. When you find someone you can trust, be willing to be vulnerable to him or her, to be challenged, and to be guided.

Humility makes it possible to seek truth above all, because only for the humble does finding truth become more important than being right. In seeking truth, be suspicious of messages that gratify your ego, because you are more likely to be misled by those than the messages that demand self-denial. Even more important, demand truth from yourself. Peeling back layers of self-deception is one of the most humbling things you can do.

I offer in conclusion two concrete starting points for cultivating humility.

- Read the book of Proverbs. Read one chapter a day and you’ll finish it in a month. It’s not a bad idea to repeat that reading every few months. Proverbs has a lot to say about the disposition of a good learner: one of the most salient characteristics of a wise person in Proverbs is that he or she is open to instruction. I’m sure you’ll find plenty in Proverbs that relates to the other practices discussed in this course as well.

- Get to know at least one of your professors this week. Make an appointment to visit with him or her during office hours. You can chat about what you’re learning in class and about what you hope to get out of the class. You could ask the professor’s advice about how to be successful in college. Have a question or two in mind as well, like, “What would you do differently about your own college education if you could do it over again?” You’ll not only be getting to know the professor and letting him or her get to know you, but you’ll also be learning how to be a learner.
Questions for Reflection and Discussion about Humility

1. Dr. Colón writes “The Christian gospel is saturated with humility”? What do you think she means by that?

2. Can you think of someone you know who is “wise in his/her own eyes”? How is that attitude manifest? How do you experience that person?

3. Give an example of either 1) a “blind spot” you used to have—that is, an idea you used to hold firmly that you now see as immature; or 2) a teacher or mentor who changed what you think about something. In either case, how did the change come about?

4. What aspects of our culture make authority difficult to swallow? What might be some of the costs of this impoverished view of authority?

5. How can you learn to discern what persons and what institutions to regard as authorities?

6. What’s the difference between being a humble learner and a blind follower?

7. How might you be humble with your fellow students”

Dr. Colón, an associate professor in the Honors Program and associate dean in the Honors College, was a devoted daughter, wife, mother, and teacher. In health and sickness, she exemplified for her family, colleagues, and students, the virtue of humility.