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THE TABLET, SEPTEMBER 2, 2007–22<sup>ND</sup>  
SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

*Sirach* 3:17-18, 20, 28-29 (126C)  
*Hebrews* 12:18-19, 22-24a  
*Luke* 14:1, 7-14



Knowing one's place in life is perhaps the true definition of humility—to know who we are and who we are not. More especially humility means not just reflecting on who we have been or who we are as much as who we might become. More specifically, who we are before God and what is His will for us.

The wisdom of the Old Testament summarized so beautifully in the Book of Sirach in such succinct lines today speaks to us about 'conducting our affairs with humility'. For this we will be 'loved more than a giver of gifts'. Sometimes sadly enough we think that by impressing other people with titles or status or cleverness or wealth or fine appearance we will ingratiate ourselves to them and become more liked and accepted. How anxious we are, even if we do not admit it to ourselves, to be the front person, much like those invited to the wedding in today's Gospel who sought the best places first.

The beloved and Blessed Pope John XXIII, in his smiling and wise way, so often taught lessons of humility, having been himself many times humbled in his own lifetime. One perfect example comes to mind when he would hold large audiences in the Vatican. The more distinguished people would naturally be placed up front. The poor and the so-called commonplace people would be in the back. He would tell his aides upon entering the audience with him to go through the back door instead of coming through the customary front entrance. This would enable him to first meet the people in the back with whom he felt a real kinship, since he himself came from such a very simple, rustic background.

Pope John's humility was expressed so poignantly in his diary, *The Journal of a Soul*, in which he quotes from *The Imitation of Christ*: "If even the stars fall from heaven, what can I say for myself who am but dust and ashes?" The simple virtue of the man who rose from peasant stock to become the Vicar of Christ is recounted so humanly and humorously in the story of his previously being named Papal Nuncio to Paris. Many were disappointed in the choice, since the one supposedly in line for this prestigious post became ill. Apparently the French president himself was somewhat surprised as well, until the new Nuncio won him over by graciously saying to him: "Well, when they can't find the stallion, they bring in the donkey!"

We practice the virtue of humility so nobly when we treat others with great attention and respect, when we deal with people as unique and precious individuals, and not as functions or commodities. When we look deeply into others and treat them with genuine concern and compassion, it becomes a mirror for us to see who we really are. We discover something about ourselves and our own worth. How many times sadly am I told by others that when they are engaged in conversation at certain functions, a person who is speaking with them might look over their shoulder to see if someone perhaps more influential or attractive might be coming along for them to talk with. Moments like this can be quite hurtful.

To love each person as though you have love for that person alone is the test of who we really are. To look into another person's eyes with genuine attentiveness and

sincerity is really to penetrate into the depth of our own spirit. Perhaps in these moments we can discover the true meaning of humility, which comes from the Latin word *'humus'* meaning 'dust'. Like Pope John XXIII, we must never forget our origins. Someone who knew this saintly man well remarked that whenever the Pope spoke with a person, that individual walked away feeling as though they had been treated as the most important person who ever existed. When we gaze upon another may we never forget where we are coming from and how far we still have to go.

Honestly stated, the message of Jesus, as clearly proclaimed in today's Gospel, will have no meaning for anyone at all unless each of us lives out what Jesus teaches and what He asks of each of us, without exception. As one deeply spiritual person once said to me: 'the lesson is always humility'. It may be a very difficult and hard lesson, but it is at the core of what real spirituality is all about. We have to get beyond the realm of words and ideas to the heart of it all. Then people will truly believe in what we say we are about. We really should not wonder why we, an ecclesial community of faith, lose many of our members or not gain many more members. The fault is not in the world. It lies within ourselves.