

Marian Studies

Volume 3

Article 13

2-13-1952

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Edward A. Ryan

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Recommended Citation

Ryan, Edward A. (1952) "Historical Notes on Luke I. 48," *Marian Studies*: Vol. 3, Article 13.
Available at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian_studies/vol3/iss1/13

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HISTORICAL NOTES ON LUKE i. 48

"My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour" are the first words of Our Lady's Magnificat. She immediately gives the reason for her joyous praise of God in words which the Rheims Version translates: "Because He hath regarded the *humility* of His handmaid." The Confraternity Edition has: "Because He has regarded the *lowliness* of His handmaid." Msgr. Knox writes: "Because He has looked graciously upon the *lowliness* of His handmaid." Father Hugh Pope's edition of the Rheims-Challoner Version retains *humility* but *lowliness* is introduced in a marginal note. The Revised Version has: "For He hath looked upon the *low estate* of His bondmaiden," while Goodspeed's American version reads: "For He has noticed His slave in her *humble station*." In this paper we shall study briefly a forgotten controversy about our Lady's word and its meaning.

Just as lowliness and humility are interchangeable in English, the Greek word *tapeinosis* can mean either. Following Erasmus, many exegetes limit the meaning to "*lowliness*," at least as far as the Scriptures are concerned. In the Epistle of James (1:10), however, the word is used in the sense of humility and a cognate form appears in the texts: "Learn of Me, for I am meek and humble of heart" (*Matthew* 11:29) and "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (*I Peter* 5:5 and *James* 4:6). In these instances there is certainly question of the virtue of humility.¹ The problem is,

¹ D. Erasmus, *Supputatio errorum in censuris Bedae in Opera* (Basel, 1540), vol. 9, p. 493. Cf. F. Zorrell, *Lexicon Graecum Novi Testamenti* (Paris, 1931), s. v. ταπεινῶσις. Lowliness and humility are interchangeable in English in the sense that lowliness is defined as humility and humility as lowliness. But they can be applied to different things: lowly estate and the virtue of humility.

therefore, not primarily philological, although most modern exegetes treat it as if it were.

Cardinal Cajetan in his commentary on St. Luke translates *tapeinosis* "smallness" or "littleness" and adds: "the Greek word translated "humility" does not mean that virtue of the spirit which we call humility, but signifies the state of being lowly, small, or little. The meaning is that God has deigned to regard the littleness or, if one may say so, the insignificance of His handmaid. But we should not find fault with the translator [of the Vulgate], because, strictly speaking, to be humble is not to have the virtue but to be lowly. Still theologians use humility for the virtue of the spirit. Note that in these words of the Blessed Virgin the virtue of humility, although not signified, is exercised. And this fits in more with the humility of the most Blessed Virgin than to say that her virtue of humility has been noticed by God. This would mean that God regarded the merit of her own virtue. To say this is not at all like a humble person. Still the humility of her heart is shown in act. For she explains the greatness of the divine benefaction in her regard by saying "because he has looked upon the littleness of His handmail." She was not content to say merely that God looked upon His handmaid but added "the littleness of His handmaid." And littleness should be referred to her merits. She, indeed, considered herself to be nil in merit and virtue. Nor was this attitude put on or false. She was thinking merely of herself, not of God's gifts in her."²

Desiderius Erasmus in his commentary on St. Luke asserts that the Blessed Virgin was deeply conscious of her weakness

² Thomas de Vio Cajetanus, *In quatuor Evangelia et Actus Apostolorum Commentarii* (Lugduni, 1639), p. 180 f. Cardinal Cajetan, O.P. (1469-1534), was one of the initiators of the great theological revival of the sixteenth century and an exegete of independent originality and great penetration. The last phrase of our quotation reads: "Quoniam considerabat seipsam ex parte sui non ex parte donorum Dei in ipsa, haec enim consideratio mater est humilis cordis, cum in anima radicata est."

and extolled the magnitude of the divine benefaction with greater fervor the less she thought of her own merits. "Whereas I was of the lowest condition of all, He in His goodness regarded His insignificant handmaiden."³ Noël Bédá, celebrated theologian of the Sorbonne, took Erasmus to task on this point, maintaining that it was under compulsion of the Holy Spirit that Our Lady spoke of her humility. Erasmus in answering asserts that the introduction of the Holy Spirit is an evasion of the difficulty: "Why should the most unassuming of women proudly boast that she merited the divine maternity?" He goes on to assert that the word *tapeinosis* signifies not the virtue of the spirit but, if referred to external things, lowly estate, and if referred to things of the spirit, vice. Even if he were to grant that the word could mean humility, still Our Lady's use of it in that sense is excluded by the context. "She had," Erasmus explains, "begun by saying that she was going to magnify God. Now this is not done when one extolls one's own merits. Again she would not be called blessed by all generations if her exaltation were merited and not a free gift. Moreover she said: 'He who is mighty has done great things to me,' not 'He who is just.' Nor does she say that God rewarded her. A little later she adds 'He has put down the mighty from their seats and has exalted the humble.' Here she contrasts the humble with the mighty. Mary's modesty was, of course, most pleasing to Christ and, I maintain, it prevented her from acknowledging her own virtue." Erasmus also argues from "Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Be it done to me according to Thy word." This means in his paraphrase: "Unwaveringly I hold that God can do all He desires to do and that He makes no false promises. If He has deigned to choose me, the meanest maiden of all, to serve Him in this mystery, I can lay claim to no merit or grace because of it.

³ *Paraphrasis in Evangelium Lucae*, in *Opera*, vol. 8, p. 222.

It will be entirely due to the divine goodness and divine power. I offer myself as a handmaiden to the Lord.”⁴

The Protestant exegetes under the leadership of Luther went much further than Erasmus in their explanations of the meaning of “humble handmaiden.” Indeed their interpretation is a classic example of what may be extracted from a text when it is tortured. In their pages we find it asserted that Our Blessed Mother was by birth of lowly condition, the daughter of the meanest and most wretched kind of parents, that she was the laughing-stock of the neighbors and of the villagers, having been reared in a hovel and always employed as a cook and a menial servant in milking cows, washing pots and pans, and performing all kinds of mean and filthy tasks. The attitude of these writers, justified in their opinion as a reaction to the supposed Mariolatry of Catholics, led them to do all they could to obscure the dignity of the Blessed Virgin. They thought to increase the glory of God when they denied any force or efficacy or praise to the great virtues, actions, and merits of Mary, even when these were held to proceed from divine grace. What they were really aiming at was to show that, according to early Protestant doctrine, Mary was blessed for faith alone and not for good works.⁵

⁴ *Opera*, vol. 9, p. 493. At one point in his argument Erasmus remarks: “Sed modestiae, inquiet, causa sic locuta est Maria. Sed non modestiae causa mentita est opinor”—a retort that might perhaps be turned against Erasmus and those who hold his opinion.

⁵ Cf. S. Petrus Canisius, *De Maria Virgini Incomparabili et Dei Genetrice Sacrosancta*, liber IV, caput VII. St. Peter cites with references a dozen authors including Calvin and Luther. It is to be noted that after the first fervor of their rejection of Catholic devotion to Mary wore off, many Protestant exegetes hastily backed water in this connection. W. Fulke in his *New Testament* (London, 1617) writes: “It is slander that we make the virgin Mary no better than other vulgar women. For we acknowledge that she was blessed above all other women in that she was chosen to be the mother of our Saviour Christ, and that she was full of the graces of the Holy Ghost, but yet a woman, no goddess, a sinner, no Saviour, and yet as free from sin, as the infirmity of man’s nature could be” (p. 162).

Most of the great Catholic commentators of the sixteenth century embraced the opinion of Cajetan, while, of course, they sedulously avoided the excesses of Protestant exegesis. Maldonado argues that Mary possessed the virtue of humility in its perfection and that the humbler she was, the less likely it was that she should talk about it. He does not believe that the truly humble realize their humility, let alone proclaim it. Humility is the only virtue which does not know itself. Our Lady would never maintain that by her merits she became Mother of God but rather would declare herself altogether unworthy of such a blessing. When she uses the word "humility" she means her unworthiness in comparison with God.⁶

Alphonsus Salmerón in his celebrated commentaries on the New Testament takes quite a different view. "Although it may be maintained," he asserts, "that the interpretation of Erasmus and Cajetan has some truth in it, still it does not seem to be the genuine meaning nor adapted to this verse." After showing that the *tapeinosis* is used, at least in Holy Scripture, to designate the virtue of humility, Salmerón denies categorically that God looked down on any littleness or smallness in Mary. In comparison with her all human greatness of nature or grace is small and little. If God were looking for lowliness, there were innumerable creatures more insignificant in blood, possessions, and qualities of soul and body than Our Lady. Moreover God does not note the condition, lowly or exalted, of men but He considers their acts which proceed from

⁶ J. Maldonatus, *Commentarii in Evangelium D. Lucae*, caput I, v. 48. Cornelius Jansenius Gandavensis, *Commentarii in suam Concordiam ac Totam Historiam Evangelicam* (Lovanii, 1571) holds for lowliness but admits: "Plerique accipiunt [significationem humilitatis] intelligentes hic significari virginem electam in matrem Domini propter virtutem humilitatis eius." F. Lucas of Bruges in his *Commentarius* (Antverpiae, 1606), defends "lowliness." Cornelius Jansenius Iprensis in his *Tetrateuchus* (Lovanii, 1677), p. 299 writes: "Commodior tamen videtur sensus ut humilitas significet abiectionem personae."

virtue and these He rewards. Among virtues it is especially humility which draws His attention.

Salmerón will not admit that there is any force in the objection that it is not like a humble person to proclaim her humility. If she were to do it out of pride and vanity, it would be wrong. But it is quite a different thing if she does it in a spirit of love under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to the praise and glory of God. This is especially true if it is done as in the case of the Blessed Virgin by one who is well acquainted with God's goodness and the comparative nothingness of creatures. We should never forget either that Our Lady did it to edify St. Elizabeth and all others who would come to know her hymn. She was imitating the dispositions of Our Lord when He said: "Learn of Me because I am meek and humble of heart" (*Matthew* 11, 29).

Salmerón goes on to say that God wishing to honor Mary began by laying in her soul the foundations of profound humility, by giving her a true knowledge of herself. The more through this virtue she humbled herself and thought little of herself, the nearer she approached to, and the fitter she was to receive the privilege of, the divine maternity.⁷

St. Peter Canisius has, in his great defense of the Blessed Virgin, a complete treatment of this verse and is decidedly on the side of Salmerón. Canisius is especially concerned with the Protestants and does not mention Erasmus, Cajetan or the other Catholics who hold for the lowliness of Our Lady. He begins with the teaching of St. Ambrose that humility may rise from afflictions as well as from virtue and that not forced

⁷ Alfonsus Salmerón, *Commentarii in Evangelicam Historiam et in Acta Apostolorum* (Coloniae, 1612), vol. 3, p. 104 ff. On page 105 we read: "Falsum est Deum respexisse ad exiguitatem vel parvitatem status Mariae. Deo enim excelsa et magna apud homines parva sunt. Et comparatione Virginis sive gratiam sive naturam spectes, omnia minora invenirentur; quare illi praelatae fuissent prope innumerabiles creaturae quae ipsa magis parvae et obscurae erant genere, divitiis, vel dotibus corporis vel animi."

but voluntary humility is pleasing to God. Catholics, St. Peter points out, would not object very much to Protestants if they merely held that Our Lady was referring to the insignificance of her merits before God and attributing the great blessings she had received to God's goodness. Some of the early commentators understood the text in this way. But he will not admit that Mary was, humanly speaking, lowly, especially not in the manner which the Protestant exegetes described. She was of the royal race of David and, according to a tradition which he finds acceptable, daughter of parents distinguished for wealth and station as well as by virtue. She received her education in the Temple at Jerusalem and her subsequent practice of poverty was quite voluntary. Now even if we hold this, we can and should admit that Our Lady knew that before the sovereign majesty of God any creature, no matter how exalted, is small and mean. It was with this in mind that Our Lord asked: "Why dost thou call Me good? No one is good but God only" (*Mark* 10:18). Consequently Our Lady may *also* have been referring to her lowliness when she used the word which is translated into Greek as *tapeinosis*. But to draw from this single word that Our Lady was despised by her neighbors because of her mean condition is a tragic exaggeration. Our Lady's humility was not forced nor the result of affliction and insult; it was spontaneous. By it she demeaned herself before God, thought of her prerogatives as divine benefactions, considered herself unworthy of such favor and as the least of God's servants. While Canisius is willing to admit that there may be in this verse a confession by Our Lady of her lowliness, understood in this way, he asserts that the teaching of the Fathers and ecclesiastical writers force us to admit that there is, primarily at any rate, question of the virtue of humility. He quotes passages from a number of ancient writers and gives special prominence to one from Origen. He then

consecrates an entire chapter to the study of Our Lady's humility.⁸

At the end of this summary investigation, a brief conclusion will be in order. Undoubtedly the Rheims Version of the New Testament used "humility" instead of "lowliness" because of the manner in which Protestant exegetes abused the latter interpretation. Not improbably Goodspeed's reference to "slave" and "humble station" was written under influence of the traditional Protestant position. The Confraternity Version is not to be carped at, perhaps, if it has fallen in with an interpretation of the verse which has always been defended by Catholics, especially by those devoted to philology. It is, however, still very doubtful that Our Lady meant "lowliness" at all, let alone principally. Those who maintain that she did, really object to her awareness of her humility. And yet when we consider how theologians exalt the knowledge of Mary, we find it hard to admit that she did not clearly realize that the foundation of her privileges was laid by the divine gift of humility. With the perfect balance which the absence of original sin guaranteed her, there was no danger that she would fall into disordered self-esteem or undue desire for the esteem of others. In fact, her perfect virtue implies that her joy was directed to God as the author of her graces and that it was God's esteem she sought by referring to His sweetest gift, her humility. Finally, it is clear that the modern commentators who reject "humility" are led principally by philological considerations. It is certain that they do not give adequate attention to the solid theological arguments against their position advanced by Canisius and Salmerón.

REV. EDWARD A. RYAN, S.J.
Woodstock College
Woodstock, Md.

⁸ S. Petrus Canisius, *loc. cit.* This valuable work is found in *Summa Aurea de Laudibus B. V. M.* (ed. J. Bourassé, Paris, 1862), vol. 8 and 9.