On humility and public life

Andrew Cameron

A measure of the ingenuity of this book is to ask how humility can be expressed for those in the public eye, and to use the complex and contradictory figure of Bernard of Clairvaux to examine this question.

Bernard, who joined the reforming Cistercian order that sought to rediscover the humble community of Benedict’s Rule; but who couldn’t function properly there due to his excessive zeal, ultimately drawing attention to himself in the rigours of his asceticism.

Bernard, who became the chimera, the self-confessed monster, the contemplative monk who doubled as lobbyist, activist and political bully-boy.

Bernard, an inspired choice for throwing the spotlight on the contradictions possible in the humble life of a Christian in public view.

Foulcher knows the risks. Bernard’s rhetorical performances polarises commentators, with his protestations of unfitness to write this or that work, even as he then proceeds to dazzle with his intellect and intimidate with his critiques; or in his self-recriminations about the performance of this or that public role, even as he forcefully intervenes in clerical politics, or recruits for the second crusade, or then distances himself from its failure.

The chapter never quite resolves these contradictions nor does it decide for Bernard as a hero of faith, or against him as a charlatan or hypocrite. I appreciated Foulcher’s tacit recognition that nothing can be simple in reclaiming humility, or (rather) in its reclaiming of us, and that we might never bridge the gaps between what matters to us most, and the roles we are called upon to perform.

And within this ambiguity, Foulcher displays a real affection for Bernard and his theology, and finds in his reflections on humility a genuine guide for our own participation in the life of God, and with each other.

She engages closely with an early major work, *On the Steps of Humility and Pride,* Bernard’s phenomenology of increments into effortless sins of

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pride—and his converse recommendations on finding love, for God and the other, that has blossomed into a ‘warm’ humility. (That is as opposed to the cold, formal humility that characterises humility pursued deontologically as a normed virtue, as a project and as an end in itself.)

Ironically, Bernard observes, freedom from fear is experienced most fully at both the top and bottom of the ladder of humility. One can either effortlessly sin or effortlessly love. ... Those who find themselves midcourse, by contrast, experience the pain of being pulled in both directions.

Bernard also knows the end-goal of his journey as truth, not humility as such, but with humility arising from proper attention to the truth of Father, Son and Spirit. In this respect we are reminded of the dominical word, ‘Learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart’ (Matt. 11:29).

There are two sobering anatomies of pride presented in this chapter. The first (pp. 184–87) pictures the young monk at the beginning of a long slide, eyes darting about in curiosity, to see how approval is measured. There is a crossover here with the second anatomy of pride (pp. 220 ff), this time given in the context of an exhortation to a bishop. On this account the public figure becomes gripped by the disorder of love we call vainglory—that ongoing fixation on the degree to which we are approved. In the former case I was reminded of the young academic or the politician and her polls; in the latter, of chief executive and his stock ticker. Each of these anatomies of pride rely on a kind of faculty psychology that has long since fallen out of favour, but which I think remains a serviceable guide to our interiority. We cannot but see ourselves in them.

Foulcher then proceeds from this psychologically and mystically astute early work through the Cistercian vision of monastic community that blesses wider society by way of what I imagine as ‘ripples’ of blessing, into a world that cannot know truth until receiving the practices that inhabit it.

But her treatment of On the Conduct and Office of Bishops takes us to Bernard’s account of the regular vices of high clerical office, and the disorders of reason and of love that corrupt us there. It picks up on some typical traits. The person whose arrogance makes them unable to alter their opinion; or whose vainglory gives rise to impressive clothing and to that insatiable obsession with honours, accolades, position etc.
The main focus of this work is to distinguish between ministry and rule, and to cause the bishop to attend to the chastity, charity and humility that arise not from attention to these virtues as such, but by attention to Christ—and, in the case of humility, by meditation on Mary as an exemplar of humility. There are some other helpful cameos, such as Bernard’s celebration of Bishop Malachy, who surrounds himself with a community in his leadership; and correspondence to Oger where, for Foulcher, Bernard ‘reflects theologically on failure, not as a means of minimizing its seriousness but in order to embrace it as an inevitable part of leadership’ (p. 233).

Inevitably I found myself thinking about the ‘use’ of this material for today. Foulcher regularly observes the impropriety of ‘using’ this monastic tradition, which embedded in its own life under the Rule cannot be abstracted into mere rules of thumb or personal pietistic projects. This insistence is our first clue: that humility comes to reclaim us in a life together under God, and is sustained by that life. Like the Cistercian hope for a ‘ripple effect’ into the wider community, only a thick conception and practice of our ecclesial life can sustain people for properly humble lives in the nakedly proud, and sometimes very terrible, public contexts where we find ourselves.

I notice too how lives like those of Bernard’s confront the split between our public lives and our ‘private morality’, with the church and its ministers regarded as little more than cheaply paid chaplains to sometimes troubling emotions. When Jane pauses on Bernard’s insistence on the bishop’s chastity as part and parcel of his ministry in the world, we’re reminded of the failure of our recent decades, as if we once believed, in a kind of Christianised political libertarianism, that there would be no spill-over from a person’s private lusts to their public carriage. Bernard is straightforwardly Augustinian in his account of desire: it will either spill out into personal lusts for pleasure and public lust for domination, or it will find its proper home in the life of God and of love for the other. Like Augustine, his faculty psychology actually offers a seamless way to monitor and regard ourselves, and protects us from the anthropological conceits that divide us into a plurality of modules that function separately within our personal relationships, our professional skillsets, our public and political aspirations, and so on. Bernard may not have been able to ingrate the aspects of his monster self to his satisfaction. But he straightforwardly expected the God who created him to make such a hope thinkable, and liveable.
This awareness in turn left me wondering about the life of Jesus Christ. ‘Learn from me,’ he says, ‘for I am meek and humble of heart.’ Bernard expects to do so. But was Jesus Christ humble in public life? In some respects, and, using our conventional measures of humility, perhaps not. The Jesus of Matthew 23, who delivers woe to the Pharisees, may not seem so. I notice too how Jesus took upon himself no temporal authority, and only after his vindication is pictured later in the New Testament as bestowing differentiated aspects of his Kingly authority on various forms of secular rule and ecclesial ministry. That the one incarnate as humble does so, is all that can protect our conceptions of proper authority. These are complex matters for consideration if, with Bernard, we look to the humble one; and made more complex by the necessity to discover the proper limits of authority given to those in public life, and even of their permission to coercion of the unjust, if they are to serve victims and the vulnerable.

In some respects Bernard can’t help us with these complexities, because the institutions he served had not always found a way refract the authority of the humble and merciful Christ into what we today name as ‘ministry’ and ‘public service’. I wonder if in the absence of better institutions, he had little option other than to be that chimera.

Despite our brokenness and the ongoing struggle for proper self-knowledge and knowledge of God in every age, and despite the excesses that we see in modern Australia, I wonder if our institutions do bless us with more options for a truly humble public life, and furnish us with less excuse than we might allow to Bernard of Clairvaux.