When “being good” becomes self-worship

INTRODUCTION: THE TRAP OF APPARENT GOODNESS

We live in an age where social media, public exposure, and the desire to be accepted have contaminated even the deepest spiritual spaces. In this context, virtue—which should be discreet, humble, and silent—easily turns into a spectacle. Sometimes, without realizing it, we use our good deeds not as service to others and the glory of God, but as fuel for vanity.

Can a seemingly kind person be acting out of pride? Can personal sacrifice become an altar on which the ego is worshiped? Can a well-executed virtue hide a disordered intention?

The answer is yes. And the history of Christianity is full of examples, warnings, and teachings on the matter. This article is an invitation to look within and examine—with the help of faith and reason—whether our “goodness” is genuine virtue or just a well-crafted mask to conceal deeply disguised pride.

I. VIRTUE IS NOT DISPLAYED, IT IS LIVED

Christian virtue, as taught by the Church’s Tradition, is not something to be shown off like a medal. It is, rather, a habit of the soul that remains hidden, like a seed beneath the earth, but bears visible fruit in charity, humility, and service.

Jesus was blunt with the Pharisees, whose behavior perfectly illustrates this theme:

> *“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.”*
> *— Matthew 6:1*

The “righteousness” Jesus speaks of is not just legality, but the entire set of virtues and good works. The warning is not against doing good, but against doing it with the intention of being

seen. And this is the heart of the problem: the **hidden motive**.

II. WHEN GOODNESS IS CONTAMINATED: EXHIBITIONIST VIRTUE

Exhibitionist virtue is not true virtue but a perverse imitation. It is characterized by:

- **Seeking approval** rather than obeying God.
- **Highlighting personal sacrifice**, hoping for admiration or sympathy.
- **Assuming the role of a martyr** without having truly been crucified out of love.
- **Controlling through good deeds**, making others feel indebted.

This phenomenon is often seen in family, community, or ecclesial environments where someone “gives everything for everyone” but quietly demands recognition. This kind of “self-sacrifice” is often a subtle form of manipulation: good is done, but not out of love, rather to gain emotional power.

III. HISTORY AND TRADITION: FALSE ASCETICISM

Since its beginnings, the Church has had to deal with spiritual deviations. Among them is **false asceticism**: the idea that the more one suffers, the holier one becomes. This led some to inflict unnecessary sacrifices on themselves not out of love for God, but to stand out as “more holy.”

St. Augustine strongly opposed such attitudes, teaching that **true sacrifice is interior**: “True mortification is that which, without showing itself, transforms the heart.”

The Desert Fathers also told stories of monks who, in their desire to appear virtuous, condemned themselves to the hell of pride. One of them said:

> *“There are those who fast so rigorously that they fill themselves with demons of pride. Fasting inflates their chests but does not open their souls to grace.”*

IV. THEOLOGY OF DISGUISED PRIDE

Spiritual pride is one of the most dangerous sins precisely because it hides behind virtue. St. Thomas Aquinas warns that **pride is the root of all sins**, because it is the disorder of the soul that refuses to submit to God.

When a person sacrifices “for everyone,” but then feels resentment because no one recognizes them, they reveal the true driver of their action: **the ego**. God was not the recipient of their effort—their own self-esteem was.

This doesn’t mean we should stop doing good. The point lies in the intention:
Are we doing good because we truly love God and our neighbor, or because we need to feel needed, important, or superior?

Sanctifying grace acts in secret, needing neither lights nor applause. St. Francis de Sales said:

> *“Humility is the mother of all virtues. Without it, even our best works are suspect.”*

V. PASTORAL APPLICATIONS: EXAMINING OUR GOODNESS

A concrete spiritual guide to avoid falling into this trap might include:

1. **Discerning our intentions**: Why am I doing this? Would I do it if no one found out?
2. **Avoid speaking about our sacrifices**: A sacrifice offered to God needs no narration.
3. **Accepting not being thanked**: If you did it out of love, ingratitude shouldn’t bother you.
4. **Confessing sins of spiritual pride**: It’s not enough to “do no harm”; we must also examine the root of our “good.”

In community life, it’s also vital to discern when someone “helps” or “serves” but generates tension, resentment, and division by turning their goodness into a kind of moral superiority.

This destroys communion and harms the Mystical Body of Christ.

VI. THE PATH OF TRUE VIRTUE: HUMILITY AND LOVE

The solution is not to stop doing good, but to **purify the heart**. Virtue doesn’t vanish out of fear of pride—it is strengthened when accompanied by humility. A true saint is one who considers himself an unworthy servant, even after doing all that was required (cf. *Luke 17:10*).

Christ, our perfect model, **never showed off**. His miracles were often followed by the instruction: *“Tell no one.”* In Gethsemane, when He offered His life for us, **He did not proclaim it to the world**, but lived it in the darkness of abandonment, entrusted only to the Father.

CONCLUSION: THE CHALLENGE OF INTERIOR PURITY

In a time where everything is posted, measured, and compared, being truly humble is countercultural. Holiness is not measured by the amount of sacrifice one accumulates nor by the goodness that everyone applauds, but by the ability to **disappear so that Christ may grow** (cf. *John 3:30*).

It is time to purify the way we do good. May our works not be a way to idolize our own image but a true reflection of God’s love, which gives without expecting, loves without demanding, and serves without publicity.

> *“Your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you.”*
> *— Matthew 6:6*

Guide for personal prayer:

- What hidden motivations exist in my “good” actions?
- Does it affect me when I am not recognized or thanked?
- Am I serving God, or feeding my ego?

Ask God to grant you a pure heart, free from vanity and eager only to love. May you be able to say with St. Paul:

> *“It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”*
> *— Galatians 2:20*

“Do good. Do it silently. Do it for God.”