

The Heroic Virtues of Francis Pfanner by M. Annette Buschgerd CPS 2005

Heroic Virtue necessary for Beatification

Sanctity in the Catholic church is established on the basis of either martyrdom or heroic virtue and miracles. The virtues include faith, hope, love, chastity, poverty, obedience, wisdom, perseverance, and humility. We propose Wendelin Francis Pfanner (Wendelin was his baptismal, Francis his religious name) as a candidate for beatification because we believe that he practiced these virtues to a heroic degree.

Heroic

In common usage, heroism is defined as the quality that characterizes a hero, marked by bravery, nobility, enormous strength. It is altogether something exalted and larger than life. In the plural, heroics denote pretentious, extravagant, or melodramatic talk or action, meant to seem heroic.

This meaning changes radically when the term is applied to religious virtue. The Church speaks of heroic virtue, when by the grace of God a person's surrender to God grows and bears fruit, in a more or less total response to God's call, and in such a way as to become a distinct component of the holiness of the Church. By beatifying such a person the Pope declares that he is infallibly certain of the person's holiness and his/her model character for the Church.

Virtue

In Catholic doctrine, virtue is more than moral excellence or goodness of character. Rather, it is defined as the power (competence) to accomplish moral good, especially to do so gladly and with constancy, even against opposition without and within, and even at considerable sacrifice. The Church distinguishes between natural and supernatural virtues. Natural virtues are acquired good habits that perfect one's natural character and are a natural defense against domination by instincts. The most basic and comprehensive natural virtues are called cardinal virtues (prudence, justice, fortitude, temperance); the virtues infused by God and elevated by sanctifying grace are called supernatural virtues. Scripture (Cor 13:13) and Tradition single out three such supernatural virtues as theological – divine – because they are directly ordered to God as he is in himself: faith, hope, and love. Through them God gives to the human being who lovingly and obediently accepts revelation the capacity for personal fulfillment in the beatific vision and union with God.

In the Process of Beatification three sets of virtues come under special scrutiny by the Congregation for the Canonization of Saints. The first three – faith, hope, love – order a person's moral and religious acts to direct participation in the life of the triune God. The next three – poverty, chastity, obedience – are the evangelical counsels vowed by men and women religious. The last three – wisdom, perseverance, humility – belong, like the cardinal virtues, to the category of acquired good habits.

The following observations regarding Wendelin Francis Pfanner's practice of virtue do not intend to anticipate the official investigation by the Congregation for the Canonization of Saints; they are merely meant as a preliminary guide to help us look at his life from the point of view of the Church's beatification process. We bear in mind that what counts is the spirit of Francis Pfanner (the Founder), not so much his character; his spirituality rather than his biography. It may also be good to remember that success in life and holiness are not synonymous.

Faith – Hope – Love

Karl Rahner recognizes a twofold vocation, towards God and fellow human beings, as constituting the universal call to holiness. The Christian should be able to understand his or her earthly calling as a heavenly vocation ... All divine vocations ... are summonses, vocations, to complement the descent of the eternal God into flesh. They are always vocations ... to enter into solidarity with the poor and the "short-changed" ... Only through the performance of this task as a mission to "those below" does the Christian really accomplish his or her radical surrender to God's incomprehensibility as a beatifying surrender through faith, hope and love.

Here in scholarly language is expressed what Wendelin Francis Pfanner practiced in the ordinary circumstances of his life. That he understood his priestly and monastic/missionary vocation as a participation in God's incarnation in Jesus is evident from his written legacy. But he also showed a preferential love for people who were overlooked and despised (Mt 25:40). Sharing his life with them to the extent he did was possible only because his spirituality was deeply rooted in faith, hope and love.

Faith

Faith always entails a personal relationship. The Founder believed God's self-revelation in Scripture and he also believed in God as Abraham and Mary did. From the time he recognized God as the God-for-him who would be his surpassing final goal, he allowed God to lay claim to his life. Thus, his faith was not only the expression of his confidence (Rom 4:24) and hope (Gal 5:5ff.) in God, but also of his firm acceptance of the truth about God (Acts 6:7; Gal 5:7ff; Rom 1:5) and of his duty to confess this truth (Rom 10:9ff.). Wendelin Pfanner was privileged in having his Catholic faith nurtured by the example of a deeply devout family in a Catholic setting and by excellent Catholic educators. When at the age of twenty-one he decided to be a priest, he embarked on a journey that would take him progressively deeper into the mystery of faith. His choice to follow the priestly vocation was made from his clear understanding of the need for good priests to mediate the faith to people who were losing it as a result of atheistic tendencies in many sectors of society, influenced by socialism, Marxism, and communism. From this time on, all his life's projects were undertaken in the spirit of faith and for the promotion of the faith. It is this inner dynamism, not the works for which he is well known, that counts in the investigation of his virtues. His faith unfolded during the twelve years he spent in the diocesan ministry, as parish priest, catechist, spiritual guide, and confessor. Labor in God's vineyard was challenging then as it is now. For some he was too demanding when with a strong hand he brought the lapsed back to full participation in the communion of the faithful. After nine years his parish was transformed and a vibrant Catholic life yielded fruits of faith and charity, particularly vocations to the priesthood and religious life.

Not content with enjoying his success, and at the same time failing in health (tubercular condition), Fr. Pfanner felt called to enter into a more intimate faith-relationship with God. He joined one of the most austere religious orders in the Church – the Trappists. By a life of prayer, penance, and manual labor he wanted to make reparation for his own sins and the sins of others and so follow more closely Christ's example of obedience to the Father. His monastic vocation was severely tested from the start, but he never looked back. After four years and with valid vows, he was told to leave the order. On the advice of the leading canonist at the time he went to Rome to contest the illegitimate order and won the case. Though he would never again enjoy personal acceptance or recognition in his order, he obeyed authority and embarked on missions that called for a rock bottom faith.

Sometimes Fr. Francis Pfanner grew weary of ecclesiastical bureaucracy, but believing that Christ was working through the various institutions, his faith in Christ grew irresistibly in filial loyalty to Christ and to the Church. He learned to abandon himself to God, matured in virtue, and discovered that faith enabled him to bear whatever difficulty ensued. He was blessed with afflictions interiorly and exteriorly: times of near-despair, sickness (malaria), jealousy, intrigues, etc. But undaunted, he proceeded to found the monasteries of Mariastern in Bosnia and, ten years later, Mariannahill in South Africa. His confidence in God was now boundless and most daring as is expressed by his motto borrowed from St. Paul, Apostle of the Gentiles: Run, so as to obtain the prize (1 Cor 9:24), and his favourite saying: God will provide. His only resource was the charity of benefactors and the support of many Trappist brothers. In 1885, the same year he was elected abbot of Mariannahill, he founded the Missionary Sisters of the Precious Blood. But already in 1892 he was removed from office because he was giving priority to evangelization rather than to certain incompatible observances of the Trappist rule. From 1894 to his death in

1909, he lived in his self-chosen exile of Emaus Mission. Here his faith in God and the church was purified like gold in the fire (Zec 13:9).

Was this faith ever tempted? Surely indeed, just as Jesus suffered temptation (Heb 4:15).

Holiness is determined by the measure of faith grown strong in affliction, and by the intensity of one's love of God and others. Not unquestioning, but obedient to the end, Abbot Francis died on 24 May 1909 (Our Lady Help of Christians) to receive the reward of the faithful servant (Mt 25:21). Not only during his life, but especially after his death, his faith has upheld the faith of many. His example and intercession have helped many to discover for themselves the truth of the Church and their own vocation in it.

Hope

Like faith, hope is a virtue infused by God at Baptism and it effects acts of hope in the recipient. Many have sung the praises of hope in the face of insurmountable obstacles; even humanly speaking, hoping against hope is a celebrated virtue. Mary, by one of her many titles, is called The Hope of the Hopeless. The French philosopher, Charles Péguy, who knew the abysses of despair, called hope faith's dearest daughter ... the little girl walking between her big sisters, Faith and Love. Christian hope finds its certainty in the person of Jesus Christ (Col 1:27; 1 Tim 1:1) because in Christ, God has assumed humanity and the human destiny. Through Christ, history has become salvation history making Christian hope truly right and fitting, as we pray at Mass.

Hope is the everyday virtue by which one does what is possible and dares God to do the impossible. As was true of his faith, so also was the Founder's hope able "to move mountains." How often he was tempted to give up! When he did not have the wherewithal to finance his many initiatives, he simply got started, hoping that the widow's mite was already on the way to pay his bills. When the disapproval of the timid threatened to take the wind out of his sails, or when his own endurance and vision failed to carry him forward, he threw himself with even greater trust upon the God of his hope. Only God knows how many may have taken fresh hope from him.

His hope, in fact, was so great that, at a time when the Missionary Sisters of the Precious Blood were experiencing many difficulties, he prophesied that the Church would establish them as a congregation. At 82, he wrote to Sr. Paula whose hope was crumbling: As long as we live, there is always hope. The most foolish thing is to give up hope this side of the grave. He was also confident that on account of the many struggles which Mariannahill had endured, it would bring forth much good.

Like his hope, Francis Pfanner's optimism was indestructible. In one of his darkest hours, Dietrich Bonhoeffer said of Christian optimism that even if it errs a hundred times over, it ensures that life remains healthy: It is possible that Doomsday comes tomorrow; if so, we shall gladly put our work aside, but not before. According to Bonhoeffer, people who believe in chaos escape their responsibility for survival, reconstruction, and the future generations. The founder was convinced that hope for eternal life that does not induce one to be vibrantly alive in the here and now does not deserve its name. He would have agreed with Teilhard de Chardin's – and John Paul II. – call to hope: the future belongs to those who give the next generation reason for hope.

Indefatigable in hope, Abbot Francis found it hard to submit his will and judgment to the less farsighted and daring. He wrote: It is hard for me to believe that they [his many ideas for evangelization] are all but so many "miscarriages", good for nothing except to be thrown on the pyre. Suffering mistreatment and rejection at the hands of his own people, he was certain of his vindication. In the end he was able to say like Job with bitter tears: I can wait until the Last Day, for I know that my Redeemer lives (Job 19:25). He steadfastly looked death in the eye and foretold its time of coming. The fearlessness of his temperament – I know no fear was perhaps

rooted in his unbounded hope in God whose will he had aspired to do from his youth: O you Saints of God, obtain for me the grace always to do the will of God ...

Love

God is love. It belongs to God's nature to give himself freely and completely. The perfect human response to this love is the love of self-sacrificing generosity or benevolence, rather than the love of desire. Benevolent love is the third of the theological virtues received at Baptism. According to Catholic teaching it must also be understood as charity or "agape", because human love depends on God's condescending love prodigally and selflessly giving itself to his lowly creature. This love must be enfolded in other virtues such as faith, justice, and repentance in order to be concrete, convincing, and growing. Genuine self-growth occurs only in the give-and-take of unselfish love, which realizes the limitedness of all human love, in contrast to the infinite fulfillment to be found in God alone (Cor 13:13).

How loving was Wendelin Francis Pfanner? Both his severest contemporary critics and modern-day critics alike give him a low rating on love in ordinary human relations. Their observation seems to rest solely on external perception. His contemporaries had to rely on what they saw: a man of austere appearance seemingly endowed with little patience, compassion, or kindness, and displaying a rather high regard for himself. The monastery confines and the rule of silence made it impossible for them to get to know him better. So one picture has come down of someone callous, arrogant, and unapproachable. From this perspective, one might hesitate to ask the question which must yet be asked: Did Francis Pfanner practise the virtue of love heroically? But if measured by Gospel love, the answer is a resounding yes.

Abbot Francis must be considered in his socio-historical context. Moreover, he does not fit into a mold. His contemporaries tried to do this and failed. He writes: Several people have advised me to take Francis de Sales as my role model in the guidance of souls. I reply: First, I am not Saint Francis and, secondly, I am not Francis de Sales, but Francis of Mariannahill. That is to say that I am the superior not only of religious women as he was, but also of monks, men of penance in penitential garb, who need not be handled with kid gloves. My rule instructs me: "Argue, increpa!" (Admonish, reprimand). Furthermore, de Sales was a Frenchman. Now, a Frenchman is more delicate than a German and must therefore treat his nation with more sensitivity than I must treat mine. A French Trappist may even prefer it when his abbot makes his orders more savory by wrapping them in "S'il vous plait." But I believe that a superior, religious or secular, had better omit the "if you please" if he does not wish to sound ridiculous when at times he has to say, "Keep quiet," "Hold your peace," or "Scram."

The Founder readily admitted that he was not accomplished in social graces: I know very well that my boldness has already degenerated into impudence, and even now [[was 63] it turns quite often into bluntness. This happens especially on two occasions: when I have to deal with obstinate Trappists or with sweetly sentimental sisters. Still he knew what Christ expected of him: To be like a child before God is to be "meek and humble of heart" (Mt 11:29), a virtue we must practice if we want to enter heaven.

He hardly spoke or wrote about love. But this was not uncommon for his time and in the culture in which he was brought up. When it came to letting his heart speak, he was a man of few words. The Trappist ruled, moreover, restricted verbal expression to what was strictly necessary, with sign language being the ordinary means of communication.

We are told that Abbot Francis had a heart of oak. But this heart beat with ardent love for God and sincere compassion for suffering humanity. His love of the Precious Blood in the Eucharist was so great that on at least two occasions he was not able to continue with the consecration at Mass because the realization of how much Jesus suffered to shed his precious blood overwhelmed him. The love of the Sacred Heart was the source of his unquenchable energy and fiery missionary spirit: If the burning love of the Sacred Heart cannot induce us to greater efforts

in the salvation of souls, then let the untiring activity of the devil shame us into it, for Satan never rests. As for his love of neighbour, the letters he wrote from Emaus testify to the friendships he cultivated with benefactors, relatives, and former fellow students. The concern he expressed for Ludwig Haitinger, an old classmate who lived estranged from the church, is quite touching. Nor did he hide his high regard for women – something unusual for his state and time. We would search his legacy in vain for treatises on love. What he had to say was brief and to the point. Aware that the life of perfection demanded battle, he taught: There is no perfect love without struggle, for self-love is a seven-headed dragon. And, a person is not what he/she wears; a dress can be taken off any time, but the soul has to be stripped of self-love which is rooted in hell. Again, I must will to love God, otherwise I will never love him. The love of God is love from the heart. One has to put aside all lukewarm ways and make an effort to serve God alone, but eagerly. More than his words, it is his life and actions that give proof of his love of God and fellow human beings. It was not selfish ambition that made him the troublesome perpetuum mobile (always on the move) as priest, monk, and missionary, but his over-bounding desire to spread the knowledge of Christ. In his eyes, evangelization was not an option but a demand of justice and a Christian obligation. All have been redeemed at the price of the Precious Blood. Therefore they have a right to know the one who loves them so much! Had he been ambitious for the sake of self-esteem and self-fulfillment alone – as he was accused – he would not have tolerated the rejection, misjudgement, and loneliness to which he was subjected. On the contrary, his steadfast love embraced the circumstances of his life as ordained for him by a loving God. God purified the heart of his servant, and his love was probably greatest in suffering.

Poverty – Chastity – Obedience

Poverty

Abbot Francis was not socially and economically poor or deprived; rather, his poverty was one of choice and consecrated to God. This voluntary poverty is intended to be a form of Christian asceticism and, like all obedience to the evangelical counsels, a sign of the Church's belief that the last days have begun ... By the vow of poverty the individual renounces possession. What the Congregation for the Canonization of Saints scrutinizes is whether Francis Pfanner lived the vow of poverty to a heroic degree, both materially and spiritually.

Perhaps the following quotation from the Founder's writings supplies a key to his own understanding of poverty: If for the sake of Christ I do not even call the pen I write with my own and I do this for the love of Christ, ... it is something great. What matters is the love of Christ, not possessions or the lack of them. He wanted to be free to live out his vocation to make Christ known. Everything else had to serve that goal. with one hand in God's hand and the other firmly on the plow, he encouraged his listeners not to clutter their hearts with worldly cares but to keep them open for the call of the Lord. By the example of his life he taught that the Christian's preference is for the marginalized while his/her eyes are fixed on the Lord.

Abbot Francis's life style was marked by stark simplicity. He also insisted on frugal meals and an honest day's work from his monks even when other monasteries relaxed these rules. He developed a great talent for adaptation and make-do solutions. As a rule, he initiated a new project – monastery, mission, school, society – before the requisite buildings to house the people he invited were up. His public talks and promotion literature were extremely popular and successful. They gained him scores of vocations, benefactors, helpers – and the envy of others. thus he was never without people, but often without the means to feed them. He did not possess money and money did not possess him. In his eyes, to save, hoard, or insure betrayed lack of trust in God. Often he spent what he did not have: I never had anything and I never lacked anything. St. Joseph was his trusted manager.

Elizabeth Johnson points out that the discovery of Christ the Liberator evokes a new image of God, who is on the side of the oppressed with the aim to free them. She goes on to say that this throws into fresh relief the dignity of the oppressed, the focus of God's own care, and invites the disciple to enter into the way of Jesus with the poor. Long before Liberation Theology, Christian missionaries followed the poor Christ to the poor of the world. It is the reason why Fr. Francis came to Africa: I felt compassion for the bishop who was pleading with tears in his eyes for Trappists to help him spread the Good News to the poorest of his flock. And in another place he states, Jesus did not only share his word with the poor, but he went after them and sought them out.

Chastity

The consecrated life consists above all in the joyful living of perfect chastity, as a witness to the power of God's love manifested in the weakness of the human condition. The consecrated person attests that what many have believed impossible becomes, with the Lord's grace, possible and truly liberating. Yes, in Christ it is possible to love God with all one's heart, putting him above every other love, and thus to love every creature with the freedom of God!

Because consecrated chastity impinges profoundly on love as a theological virtue, the question here is: Did Francis Pfanner, with the grace of God, transform his human generative powers in a heroic manner? We can only conclude that he did indeed understand his life as a priest (vow of celibacy) and monk (vow of chastity) as a gift to the Church for the good of all. He was a trusted confessor and spiritual guide to men and women alike, and by his example encouraged many to choose this way of life also. Even while he insisted on personal and monastic discipline, his heart embraced the weak and the struggling. Defending his support of a certain priest who had fallen out of grace with his superiors, he wrote: It may be that Fr. X is not clean [failed in chastity] but Our Lord despaired of no one.

For Wendelin Francis Pfanner, chastity, like poverty, was a means, not an end in itself. Properly understood, chastity for a priest or monk is liberating, freeing him to be loving and giving. The recipients of the Founder's love and generosity were by preference the marginalized of society. He said that joy was the hallmark of genuine chastity. In giving of himself, his time, talents, skills, and strength, he was most inventive and although seemingly never short of energy, he was often sick, tired, overstretched, and also begrudged and calumniated, but he never tired of giving love. His powers of mind and body were refreshed and multiplied as he exerted himself for others. By being stretched to the limit he grew beyond himself. Consecrated to God by his vows, he in turn consecrated everything in his care, even the fields and forests of the mission, to God through Mary whom he venerated with ardent devotion. In this way, his chastity was fruitful and a blessing to many.

Obedience

Obedience is intrinsically tied up with life in a religious institute. Obedience is an essential part of permanent commitment to a particular form of life in the Church. It is the acceptance of a common religious life, under constitutions which the Church has approved as a true and possible expression of a life devoted to God, agreeable to the doctrine and example of Christ, the acceptance of an incalculable destiny. Walter Kasper elaborates on the aspect of Christian obedience as a means of service to others: Precisely by being the perfectly obedient one Jesus is at the same time the free Son. As the One who humbles himself, he is the exalted One. This opens up a new way of existing for others. Jesus initiates a new history of freedom. He is ready to embrace everyone who, in faith, abandons oneself to the project of Christ's life: Obedience to God in the service of others. On close scrutiny, it appears that the Founder's obedience was

mainly challenged when he feared in conscience that higher good – care for the less fortunate – was being sacrificed to a rigorous rule.

For Abbot Francis, obedience was the most noble but also the most difficult of the three religious vows. Perhaps it is not by chance that he prayed all his life to recognize God's will and do it. Perhaps he thought of Hebrews 12:6: God corrects everyone he loves, and punishes everyone he accepts as a son. He accepted God's corrections and was therefore able to correct others and demand obedience. He did this with unrelenting firmness. A number of his monks objected not to his authority, but to his manner of exercising it. Their protests were partly responsible for his removal from office in 1892, a measure that determined the remaining fifteen years of his life. Was the Founder's obedience heroic? In view of the severe tests to which it was subjected one is inclined to answer in the affirmative. What poses a particular problem, though, are his frequent conflicts with authority. These are not always as clear cut as the biblical directive, We must obey God, not people (Acts 5:29). Rahner speaks of a real difficulty distinguishing the duty to obey lawful authority from the duty towards one's conscience and calls it downright un-Christian to fall back on the amoral maxim "orders are orders." He insists on courageous solicitude that the greater [the divine will] shall not remain a mere theory or ideal. Given Abbot Francis's lifelong fidelity to conscience and a desire to do God's will, we may presume that his opposition to authority was, at least in essential questions, inspired by the greater good and therefore subjectively called for. This seems to be borne out by The Obedient Rebel's readiness to accept with humble resignation the disciplinary action taken against him: I do not feel at all sorry for myself but for those who on account of what is happening to me [his removal from the office of abbot] will also fall into disgrace. And again, I thank God that during the five months of my censure I have learned to bear it no matter how much evil others speak, believe, or write about me. I am in fact pleased to be thoroughly despised. If only I could endure more of this for God.

Wisdom – Perseverance – Humility

Wisdom

Wisdom is the first of the three acquired virtues that the Church will investigate in order to determine its heroic degree in Abbot Francis's life. The dictionary defines wisdom as the power of judging rightly and following the soundest course of action, based on knowledge, experience, understanding, etc. It is discretion or erudition. By this definition alone, Abbot Francis does not emerge from his biography as particularly wise. The criteria by which he judges and decides are not the ones underlying our common understanding of wisdom as following the soundest course of action but belong to the order of faith. Jesus initiated a reversal of such standards and rejoiced: Father, Lord of heaven and earth! I thank you because you have shown to the unlearned what you have hidden from the wise and learned (Mt 11:25). St. Paul echoes his words. He calls Christ the wisdom of God and explains that what seems to be God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom (1 Cor 1:18f). Wisdom is counted as one of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit (Eph 1:17). It is closely linked with faith and obedience.

It is not a matter of ascertaining whether this or that action of the Founder was wise, but whether his major decisions and general life style displayed the grace and virtue of wisdom. Two things can be said about Wendelin Francis Pfanner: first, that he allowed God to order his life in such a way as not to miss his final goal; secondly, that in his words and actions he had the ultimate good of others in mind. Basically, he followed not so much his own inspirations, but rather the guidance of the Spirit. He pleaded for a revival of the custom of having the Holy Spirit represented in churches in the form of a dove. He readily admitted that not all his decisions had been enlightened ones: Mistakes have been made, some of them unavoidable, for we must admit that we know very little.

Several of Abbot Francis's spiritual maxims express deep insight and come from a heart made wise by experience, specially that of suffering. Here is a sampling:

The art of speaking well is not learned by talking much but by often keeping silent.
I welcome opposition, for without it our cause could not be trusted.
To control oneself takes more effort than to govern many cities.
Blessed are the flexible hearts for they will not break.
It is truly something great to bear human misery with patience.

Perseverance

It is the defined teaching of the Church that actual perseverance to the end ... is impossible without a special grace ... the Christian is to pray for it and cherish the firm hope of it.

Abbot Francis was well aware that by his own power, he could not finish the race (1 Cor 9:24) successfully. He asked for prayer: Pray for me, my children, ... that I may fully resign myself to God's will. For: It is not enough to do everything for God, but one must also accept everything as it comes. The restless Fighter for God's Kingdom acquired the attitude of holy indifference only with great difficulty. Patience had never been his strong side. When I was younger I was so impatient that if it had been up to me I would have created the world in one day rather than in three, and so I would have picked a quarrel even with God himself. Towards the end of his life, however, he mastered his impatience. Those who knew him in his old age testify that he spoke little, cried a great deal, and never complained.

The Founder actively prepared for heaven. To his friend Haitinger he wrote about a projected rail link between Capetown and Cairo, musing that it would be fun to ride on that train. But as an octogenarian I better provide myself with a ticket to the hereafter from where no return tickets are issued. He did not want to go to heaven alone and jokingly told his Friend that he would love to meet him in the large waiting room of heaven.

The last leg of the Founder's earthly journey was the hardest. Like St. Paul he had to muster all his strength to keep running. I keep striving to win the prize for which Christ Jesus had already won me to himself ... The one thing I do is to forget what is behind me and do my best to reach what is ahead ... which is God's call through Jesus Christ to the life above (1 Cor 9:24).

Similarly, Abbot Francis wrote: I never look right, left, or back but always keep my eyes fixed on what lies ahead. Another time he said, I know that I am not a saint although I very much want to be one, but of one thing I am sure: that I am a favourite of God. It is not too far fetched to imagine that his final perseverance was due to the many sufferings he bore steadfastly to the end with God's grace.

Humility

Theology describes Christian humility as the courageous and grateful acceptance of Jesus' emptying of himself in his incarnation and death as St. Paul teaches: He was humble and walked the path of obedience all the way to death (Phil 2:2-8). By his self-abasement Jesus elevated the little and weak of this world to become the great in the kingdom of God (Mt 18:4). Christ's example leads to humble self-acceptance of which Rahner writes that it is expressed particularly in acceptance (forgiveness, endurance) of the weakness of others and in readiness to serve them and God.

Francis Pfanner met the deprived and oppressed in a spirit of Christ-like solidarity. One may not view the human misery from above but on the same level in order to judge it with equity. While some may view solidarity as lowering their dignity, for Abbot Francis it was a dictate of truth and justice. One has to show that one means it well ... One must try to win their hearts with trivial things and, where possible, show that they are equal to us and count as much with God as

we do. Therefore, I cannot tolerate racial discrimination, as if the color of one's skin determined one's worth in God's eyes.

According to Catholic teaching, humility is more than modesty or the absence of pride and self-assertion. It is participation in that large-scale transformation that Christ has initiated by which all people of good will find their proper place in relation to God who alone is perfect. Humility is a flowering of all the virtues together. In the final analysis it is the acknowledgment of truth as it is, without wanting to twist or diminish it. A person of true humility says to God: you alone are worthy (Rev 4:11), not I. It has nothing in common with that unholy self-degradation which is an expression of pride. The early Christians spoke humbly in truth when they thanked God for having found them worthy to suffer for the name of Christ. Thérèse of Lisieux was humble in truth when in her final sickness she humorously told the sisters to collect the rose petals falling from her frail hands because after her death she would rain roses (graces) on earth for anyone who invoked her.

Abbot Francis said, Everything good we possess comes from God and to him alone belongs the honor if we accomplish anything. He had a special love for St. Joseph who exemplified humility. Abbot Francis had to struggle with humility just as he had to struggle with obedience. If at times he was indeed overbearing, arrogant, or ambitious for prestige, he was humble enough to acknowledge his faults, ask pardon of those he had wronged, and commend himself to God's mercy.

If humility is expressed particularly in the acceptance of the weaknesses of others, forgiving them and bearing with them, Abbot Francis was certainly humble. How often was he wronged and forgave! He endured not only his own weaknesses but also the failings of others that made his life hard. He tells of an episode involving the higher superior who had virtually expelled him from the order. He met him again after many years, and as was the Trappist custom, prostrated himself – not because I was in the wrong but because I had defeated him – and waited for the sign to arise. When it was not given, he got up quietly and went away. In retrospect, he called it a great thing, a conquest over himself. It is also known that every time he prayed the Stations of the Cross at Emaus, he asked pardon for himself and extended pardon to all his detractors and enemies.

The above pages have given some indication of how Francis Pfanner models a way of living the life of heroic Christian virtue for the sake of God's glory. As one learns more and more about his life, it becomes clear that all the above-mentioned virtues are interlinked. Growth in one virtue supports growth in another. Prayerful reflection on the example of Francis Pfanner can inspire us to live a life of heroic virtue in the particular way of life to which we are called. Through the intercession of Francis Pfanner, may we strive to do so for God's greater honor and glory.

Daily Prayer of Wendelin Francis Pfanner

O you Saints of God, Obtain for me the grace
which I ask through the Precious Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

Always to do the will of God.

Always to be united to God.

To think of nothing other than God.

To do everything for the love of God.

To seek in all things the glory of God.

To realize fully my own nothingness.

To recognize ever better the will of God.

And to preserve a spirit of recollection.

Amen

Prayer for the Beatification of Francis Pfanner

God, you inspired Francis Pfanner with such a desire for perfection,
that he renounced the world and its claims.

You tested his love with many humiliations and difficulties.

You favored him with unwavering trust and Christian fortitude in all trials of life.

From his youth you imbued him with the desire always to do your will.

You inflamed him with the ardent zeal of a true missionary,
for whom no sacrifice was too great for the salvation of all.

We pray, glorify your name in Francis Pfanner.

Through his intercession grant us help in our needs
and a spirit of total surrender to your divine will.

We ask you to bless all families,

and to give us holy and dedicated priests, religious, and missionaries,
zealous for the salvation of all people. Amen