

# The Humility of Self-Compassion: A Very Benedictine Discipline

by Becky Van Ness

Humility invites us to recognize that as humans, we are “of the earth” (*humus*). In the Rule of Benedict, the fourth step on the ladder of humility speaks directly to the need to be at ease with our humanity. This fourth step calls us to patience and equanimity in the face of difficulties, including those times when we face painful criticism.

As a Benedictine oblate, I have found recent developments in the psychology of self-compassion very helpful in coming to a better understanding of this ancient teaching. To have compassion for myself means to allow myself to be human, to allow myself to fall short of high expectations -- just as I would compassionately allow another to be less than perfect.

Self-compassion also means being kind to myself when I notice my distress at falling short. First, I let myself feel my distress. Then I remind myself that I share the quality of being finite, being “of the earth,” with all other human beings. Then I offer myself kindness in a comforting gesture, words or image.

I have come to appreciate how the practice of self-compassion is much more than a psychological technique. Self-compassion a spiritual discipline, aiding my growth in humility and gently loosening the stranglehold pride can have on me. Pride too often lies at the root of the high expectations I have for myself. That pride can speak through a complaining inner critic: “How could you mess up like that? How foolish! How stupid!” Unfortunately it rarely works to try to silence that voice, or to turn a deaf ear. The inner critic only complains more loudly!

We can ask for the grace to change our relationship with that inner critic. In particular, reflecting on the Trinity can help us understand why and how we can better relate to that inner critic.

The theology of the Trinity expresses the mystery that God’s very being is defined by love, by loving relationship within God’s self. Out of that energy of love within the communion of the persons of the Trinity, God’s love pours forth for all of creation.

As a reflection of this divine image, we humans embody a communion of selves – some of those selves conscious and some not. As we grow in wisdom, these many selves are increasingly brought into loving relationship with each other. Of course, the energy of this truly whole-some love spills out into the world.

Self-compassion is a spiritual discipline that can help heal our relationship with that most difficult inner voice: the inner critic. Even that critical voice can be brought into loving communion with the wholeness of who we are. Out of self-compassion, we can say to that inner critic, "I hear your pain! I see my shortcomings! Now let's ease into accepting this God's gift to me of being human."

To prevent self-compassion from becoming yet another self-improvement project, it might be helpful to call to mind that wonderful and oft-repeated phrase in spiritual direction: "Look at God looking at you." We can find refuge in God's loving gaze, as we gently give ourselves over to the grace of self-compassion and to the freedom that humility can bring.

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