

# **Don't be so humble**

**By Bishop Paul V. Marshall**

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*This is Bishop Paul Marshall's November column for secular newspapers, usually different from his column in Diocesan Life. The column is sent to newspapers throughout our 14 counties. It is published by The Morning Call, Allentown, on the first (occasionally, the second) Saturday of every month. The combined circulation of papers that publish the column regularly is about 400,000. More than 110 columns have been published over the past ten years.*

Randy is eight years old and well on his way to an emotionally troubled life.

He is very bright and does exceptionally well in school and the many activities into which he has been propelled. His parents have high standards and goals for him, but have decided not to tell him that all tests of both his potential and his achievement mark him as a prodigy.

He knows he is different, but does not know why.

The parents' reason for not telling him has nothing to do with Randy but comes out of their own fantasy world. His mom said, "I hate it when people brag about being the smartest person in the room." She does not want her son thinking he is smarter than his peers (or his parents).

Her son will live in a kind of emotional agony because of her fear and insecurity, and paradoxically may end up bragging precisely because of the uncertainty about himself that the family is installing in his mind.

Sad to say, it got worse. There was a bit more parental bragging about the boy: in religious instruction classes his written list of things about himself that needed improvement was more than twice as long as his assessment of his gifts. For this he received praise. At a tender age he is encouraged to be overscrupulous while living with an uncertain sense of

his place in the world.

Beyond my concern for a young man who is being destined for a lot of emotional pain, I find it very sad that yet again religion is being used to reinforce that pain.

Christians often misread St. Paul's admonition that nobody should "think more highly of themselves than they ought" as meaning they ought not think highly of themselves. This misreading is odd. Of all the characters in the Christian scriptures, St. Paul most clearly had a high esteem for his own gifts. What he asks of us is realism about ours.

There is an alternative to the destructive and conflicted sense of humility being installed in Randy's thinking. It comes from a story about blind ambition to which Jesus gave new sight.

When two of the twelve disciples, James and John, were bursting for recognition and greatness to the irritation of their companions and demanded to be seated at his immediate left and right, Jesus did not squelch their ambition or advocate a false humility. He redirected ambition. "Whoever would be great among you, must be servant of all," was his response, adding that he himself came to serve rather than to be served.

On these terms who dares not to be great?

Human ambition and drive can be conflicted, infantile, and power-obsessed. That same ambition and drive can be directed towards accomplishments that contribute to the common good – here, Jesus baptizes ambition. There is nothing wrong with being the best; there is everything right with being the best when your best makes a contribution to the world.

I suggest that the word to Randy needs to be two-dimensional.

The first is to let him celebrate the truth about himself so that he can rejoice in his gifts without being suspicious of them. If he is that good, he should exult in what he has been given. The second is to help him use his gifts to make a contribution to the world around him, an attitude that brings quiet and very deep joy that requires no bragging.