

Kenosis

Kenosis is a Greek noun which means an emptying, depletion and even applies to the waning of the moon. It's best known through the famous passage in St Paul's epistle to the Philippians 2.5-11 which could have been part of an early Christian hymn. *Kenosis* covers the whole life of Jesus Christ, not just his birth but his death. However, what we have in that hymn and in a few other Pauline epistles is not the noun but the verb from which it's derived, *kenoo* which also can mean to make void, deprive of force and to be of no effect...in sum, as something quite negative.

With that definition out of the way—and obviously it requires some fleshing out—first some words about approaching the subject at hand. A good place to start is the **Rule of St Benedict** which has formed a way of life for monks and nuns for some fifteen centuries. Enshrined within this book is perhaps its most important chapter, *On Humility*, which comprises twelve steps.

Humility in and by itself is pretty much out of fashion nowadays (actually it never was in fashion) and has a fairly negative connotation. Yet as we know from personal experience it's a valuable asset...actually a virtue...to cultivate and results in an abiding sense of peace and contentment. Over the long haul humility enables a person to live in harmony with others or at least far more so than if you didn't cultivate it. So if you decide to go this route, the **Rule** offers plenty of sound advice, but reading it straight-forward in English can be less than appealing. Ideally it's appreciated best in the original Latin. An even better approach is to single out the scriptural citations, string them out in their larger contexts and see how they relate to undertaking the practice of humility.

Because the **Rule** is both practical by nature and backed up with plenty of scriptural references, it's a good starting place. An aide in this matter is a document on this homepage entitled **Twelve Steps of Humility**. More precisely, the verb *kenoo* from Philippians 2.8 is found in the Third Degree which reads in full as “And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.” As for the text of the **Rule**, it runs as follows first in Latin and then in the English translation:

Tertius humilitatis gradus est, ut quis pro Dei amore omni oboedientia se subdat maiori, imitans Dominum, de quo dicit Apostolus: Factus oboediens usque ad mortem.

“The third degree of humility is that a person for love of God submit himself to his Superior in all obedience, imitating the Lord, of whom the

Apostle says, ‘He became obedient even unto death.’”

Note that the Philippians¹ verse is within the context of a monastic superior or *maior* being the comparative (‘greater’) of the adjective *magnus* or great. That makes it hit home all the more, for no one likes to be subject to another person, especially when that person has pretty much total control over your life. Concretely speaking, in most cases that isn’t as hard as it seems. Still, there remains the possibility of being asked to do something contrary to your will.

As for the adjective *omnis* (all) as attributed to obedience, it’s a total form of listening, *oboedientia* having as its root *audio* or to listen. Such listening is *ob-* or for the purpose of, on account of, which here is God. It is a precise form of listening equivalent to being under one’s superior (abbot), *subdo*, literally as to place under. Practically speaking, this is one way to manifest or imitate the *kenoo* of Christ and why it’s brought up. And as noted above, no one likes to be under the control of another person yet many people find themselves in such circumstances. Thus the Third Degree is a fine starting point for an understanding of the Philippians passage. With this in mind we can begin with an examination of Philippians 2.5-11 as follows, examining the Greek original word by word.

Vs. 5. Have this mind among yourselves which is yours in Christ Jesus,

This verse comprises the first of three full sentences which continue through vs. 7. *Phroneo* is the verb with a wide variety of meaning such as to have understanding, have an opinion of, to be wise, feel or simply to think. While important in and by itself, *phroneo* here is communal, “among yourselves” or *en humin*, literally as “in yourselves.” The preposition suggests presence-in with regard to *phroneo*...in not only with regard to an individual but the community as a whole.

“This” (*touto*) has yet to be described. Paul finds it more important to have it literally “in you” first and second—not in the sense of sequence—but concomitance. Then he can make the jump over to Christ Jesus who has the same *phroneo*, if you will. The whole idea is to align both verbs, *en humin* and *en Christo*.

Vs. 6. who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped

¹The following words are lifted from the **Twelve Steps** document.

Here the *phroneo* of the previous verse begins to be spelled out starting with Jesus Christ as being in the form or *morphe* of God. The verb “to be” is *huparcho* which literally means to begin (*archo*) from below or underneath (*hupo-*). It has the sense of coming forth as well as being ready or at hand. Such implied readiness is related to *morphe*, that by which a person or thing is seen; i.e., the external appearance. In a way, this noun applied to God is a misnomer because God is generally considered as not having form. Rather, he transcends form because form intimates the making of a representation or image.

One way of looking at the idea of *morphe* is not through representations of God—strongly frowned upon in Jewish tradition—but as through the written word in Hebrew. Letters and hence words certainly have a visible form but in a unique way which continuously point beyond themselves. Also words which are written come later in history, having been transmitted orally for a much longer time. Even if one doesn’t read Hebrew, just looking at it appears exotic or in a word, transcendent. It’s as though the letters and words drip, even hang, from a continuous horizontal line.

The verb *hegeomai* for “did (not) count” also means to consider or take into consideration and hence be a matter of deliberation. And deliberation implies a period of time to weigh the pros and cons of an action about to be undertaken. Here *hegeomai* with the negative suggests that Christ brushed this to the side almost casually, that it didn’t enter his mind. That applies to his being equal with God (*to einai*, to be), the adjective *isos* or on the same plane with respect to everything. The object of *hegeomai* is *harpagmos* which can be applied to a prize or booty, something you’d rush in and snatch as quickly as possible before anyone else gets it. Another way of looking at *harpagmos* is that it’s completely alien to Christ. Already he is *isos* with God as far as his *morphe* goes and doesn’t need to be aware of this equality.

Vs. 7. but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.

Alla or “but” reflects the verb *hegeomai* with the negative *ouk* with regard to Christ’s focus on himself and leads into the key verb *kenoo* or “emptied” with regard to himself. Temporally speaking, there’s no time gap between *hegeomai* and *kenoo* or better, it simply doesn’t exist but is put this way as a means of spelling out *phroneo* of vs. 5, “have (this) in mind.” To a certain extent *kenoo* existed beforehand, present between Christ and his Father although the latter isn’t mentioned explicitly. So to extend this in the realm of

human affairs would be pretty much the same as he had been doing all along.

Keno assumes (*lambano*, to take, lay hold of) the form or *morphe* of a slave, *doulos* meaning someone not even considered a human being but a disposable thing. Thus we have an exchange, as it were, of two extremes when it comes to *morphe*: *morphe theou* for *morphe doulou*.

After *lambano* or the taking of *morphe doulou* there comes Christ being born in the likeness or *homoioima* of men. Implied is that Jesus presented himself in accord with the outward character of other people. Note the plural of *anthropos*, men. *Eikon* or image in the sense of a living representation isn't used which would make Jesus a kind of semblance with regard to being human. The verb *gignomai* (to come into being, be born) re-enforces this humanity.

8. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.

This verse shifts from *morphe* and *homoioima* (form and likeness of vs. 6 and 7) to *schema* or form in the sense of shape, figure, character and used with the noun *anthropos* or man. *Anthropos* is singular compared with the plural of the previous verse, this time being more specific. The verb *heurisko* (to find) implies discovering something that had not been known or revealed thus far. *Morphe* and *homoioima* already had been discovered or has become common knowledge, if you will, but not this human *schema* which is a newly introduced element.

Schema is the revelation of *tapeinoo* or to bring into a humble condition or to be assigned a lower rank which Christ assumes on his own accord, this tying in with him as *doulos* or slave. As for being obedient or *hupokoos*, it suggests being submitted to the authority of another person which ties in with the verbal root *hupakouo* (literally, to listen under). Here being *hupokoos* lasts until (*mechri* or as far as) death. Implied is that such obedience came into existence much earlier, all the way back to birth. As for death, it's specified by association with the cross.

9. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name,

The small *dio* or "therefore" (also, on which account) introduces a shift from Christ as emptied-humbled-obedient-death just delineated to an entirely different plane which wouldn't be possible unless the just mentioned four had

not happened. Now God has exalted Christ highly or *huperupsoo*, the preposition *huper* meaning over, above or beyond being lifted on high. Once this has happened, God gives him a name or *onoma* above (*huper* again) all other names, *charizomai* also as to bestow freely or to act graciously. The other names can be taken as spiritual powers as noted in Eph 1.21: “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come.”

10. that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

In the previous verse the name above every name isn't given, for it's first important to stress that is *huper* or above. Now this *onoma* is given as Jesus which, when heard, will cause every knee to bow. Such words are lifted partially from Is 45.23 which is quoted here in full: “By myself I have sworn, from my mouth has gone forth in righteousness a word that shall not return: ‘To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear.’” The verse at hand adds to this three locations, if you will: heaven, earth and under the earth.

11. and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

This verse includes part of Is 45.23 cited above, that is, with respect to “every tongue” located in the three places of heaven, earth and under the earth, all implying rational or super-rational beings. *Exomologeō* means to acknowledge freely and openly, implying exercise of *parresia*, originally the exercise of free speech by a citizen of a Greek *polis* or city state. “Since we have such a hope, we are very bold” [2Cor 3.12].

The preposition *eis* is used literally as “into the glory of God.”

As far as other New Testament uses of the verb *kenōō*, they are as follows:

If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. [Rom 4.14]

For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel and not with eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. [1Cor 1.17]

For I would rather die than have an one deprive me of my ground for boasting. [1Cor 9.15]

But I am sending the brethren so that our boasting about you may not

prove vain in this case. [2Cor 9.3]

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