



Revisiting Obedience

Roderick Strange, in his book on Cardinal John Henry Newman, *Newman 101*, offers this description of obedience: “For the Christian, obedience is not about a regulated response to a command, but instead it is about a life lived in fidelity to the demands of the gospel.” Of course, obedience in that sense is required of every follower of Christ. But what about religious obedience, the obedience promised by all who enter religious life? Father Strange recounts an experience he had some years ago while chaplain at Oxford. Planning to preach on obedience, he visited a bookshop known to be well stocked with books on religion and theology. He asked for anything on obedience. He was told, “Nobody’s writing about obedience these days.” It seems not much has changed in that regard.

In the past fifty years, both the understanding and practice of religious obedience have undergone a significant change. There was a time when rather stan-

dardized retreat conferences and articles on obedience were routinely accepted by men and women religious. The basic idea was that God’s will was manifested concretely and specifically through the rule and the directives of superiors. Then came a time when that idea was strongly challenged. Currently we simply do not hear much about obedience; other themes dominate. The current style of religious life and a democratization of religious governance have significantly altered the classic understanding of obedience and lessened emphasis on it.

It seems important, then, to recall one aspect of the classic interpretation of religious life, namely, that the vow of obedience is what truly establishes a person in religious life, making it the pre-eminent vow. Three reasons support that view: (1) By the vow of obedience more is offered to God than by the other vows. (2) Obedience includes the other vows. (3) Obedience most closely associates religious with the goal of their institute and therefore has the greatest importance.

While religious life is countercultural in various ways, it cannot escape its surrounding culture. In fact, it contains sizable elements of that culture. It can hardly be denied that obedience runs counter to one of the most deeply embedded values of Western culture, namely, personal freedom. An ever greater personal freedom has been a major focus of modern striving, and that striving reinvigorates desires for freedom. As the primary value in our culture, freedom eclipses truth. All claims, including religious claims, become subjective. Objective truth is sacrificed for the sake of subjective freedom, the freedom of choice by the autonomous self. People are skeptical of, if not hostile to, any truth that is not validated by personal choice. Virtually all of our contemporaries experience repugnance for the



least restriction of thought or expression. Religious are not immune to such cultural influences, and that repugnance reverberates in the minds and hearts of religious. It is a spirit that is ubiquitous, and difficult to assess in its ramifications.

The penchant for personal freedom not only inhibits people from choosing to vow obedience to religious superiors, but also influences what they think religious obedience entails. Of course, making a vow of obedi-

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ence is a personal choice. Identifying the content of the vow, however, is not a matter of personal choice. While there may be legitimate variations in describing it, the content is not soft clay to be shaped according to individual whims.

In older presentations on obedience, despite the best intentions and efforts of spiritual authors, the vow of obedience often took on the appearance of something restrictive, repressive, and somehow foreign to the American mentality. Many religious found the classic doctrine on obedience, especially on obedience of the intellect, outdated, if not incomprehensible.

One way to look at the challenge of obedience is to see it as one manifestation of the tension that exists for anyone pursuing a religious vocation. Religious place themselves in a countercultural stance. They choose to pursue certain gospel values in preference to other values: poverty rather than independent control of material

goods, celibacy rather than marriage, obedience rather than autonomy. This is not a “rejection” of “worldly” values as negative but a distinctive stance toward this world. It is not a stance of condemnation but aims to give witness to values that might be called otherworldly in contrast to values that might tend to exclude the other world. By the vow of poverty, religious give up the ownership and independent enjoyment of material goods; By the vow of chastity, they give up a life of mutually committed love with another person in marriage and sexual relations; By the vow of obedience, they give up various good experiences of this world that are otherwise available to free choice.

Through religious obedience, religious give up control over two important choices in human fulfillment, the choice of means to their self-development and the choice of the specific contribution they want to make in the world. Through obedience, they submit their lifestyle and their work to the direction of others. Thus religious obedience can take on the appearance of a renunciation of human fulfillment. Renunciation of positive values never has meaning or justification except for the sake of a higher value. To give up control over one’s destiny in two such important areas of life is truly a self-emptying.

While renunciation of a positive value for a higher value is one kind of tension, there is also the sense in which a religious, like every follower of Christ, lives in tension with the world taken in a negative or pejorative sense. Religious, by their commitment, experience this tension more keenly. It is the tension implied by Jesus’ description of his followers as being in the world but not of the world (Jn 17). Consider, on the one hand, the message of St. John:



Do not love the world or what is in the world. If anyone does love the world, the love of the Father finds no place in him, because everything that is in the world—disordered bodily desires, disordered desires of the eyes, pride of possession—is not from the Father, but is from the world. And the world with all its disordered desires is passing away (1 Jn 2:15-17).

But Genesis tells us God saw that every day of creation was good and, after the creation of Adam and Eve, that all that had been made was very good. Genesis and 1 John seem to be in conflict, but they can be seen as compatible if we keep in mind that sin intervened between the account of creation and John's seeming condemnation of the world. Because of sin all of us are left in a state of tension. We face the dilemma of how to go toward the world without making it our center and how to go beyond the world without despising God's creation or neglecting the good works to be done in and for the world.

Just as no monastery has walls high or thick enough to effectively keep the world from entering, so no religious congregation's organization keeps out the negative aspect of the world. The reason is simple. The world—what we might call worldly desires, feelings, and attitudes—enters with each person who enters the monastery or the religious institute. Every monk, every religious, must struggle to be transformed, to live by a very different set of values.

Clearly many contemporary views of the human person and of human values are at odds with the values of religious life. Clearly, also, those views exert an influence on religious life. The existentialist view of the human person has pervasively influenced contemporary thought, even when unnoticed or unavowed. In existentialism's view, to be is to be human. However,

human nature is not thought of as something stable and determined but as created by a person's choices. There is nothing beyond experience of this world. Existence is fundamentally absurd. Freedom in the sense of complete autonomy is the Existentialist's supreme value.

That existentialist view appears diametrically opposed to the religious concept of obedience. A classic description of obedience presents religious as having no will of their own—as not only accepting but desiring subjection to the will of another, of a superior. “True monks,” says St. Benedict, “live not according to their own will nor pursue their own desires and pleasures, but, remaining in monasteries, live according to the command and direction of another, and want to have an abbot over them.” For the contemporary mindset, such subjection is incomprehensible, an affront to anyone's human dignity. How can we justify what seems to be a forgoing, even a debasing, of the exercise of the highest human powers, the intellect and free will?

Another example of contemporary culture's influence on religious life comes from certain pervasive psychological theories that emphasize the need to develop one's own identity and to accept and affirm one's self. Programs and workshops based on those theories have proliferated. Many priests and religious, with the best of intentions, became permeated with that way of thinking. Emphasis on personal development grew out of proportion to emphasis on spiritual development, as though the two were opposed. Many left religious life. When asked in a survey why they left, a large number of former nuns checked off “inability to be myself” as the main reason. For them the subjection, the sacrifice of autonomy represented by the vow of obedience, had become incomprehensible and unacceptable.



A paradoxical question is being raised here: Is personal identity and development ever achieved within religious obedience? Is personal freedom compatible with the subjection of the will implied in obedience? Paradox or not, there is a plain answer. If I am what I am by my own choice, I am free, and as long as I continue to be what I am by my own choice, I continue to be free. It is of the essence of religious commitment that it be undertaken freely. And it is essential that the free commitment be renewed constantly, reaffirmed with all the generosity I can muster.

Just as has obedience, so, too, has commitment become subject to re-evaluation. In today's culture, people welcome options, and they fear commitment, especially permanent commitment. Some have asked whether permanent commitment is even possible. That may be a somewhat complex theoretical problem, but on the practical level the answer is obviously yes, for many people have successfully made permanent commitments. The cemeteries of religious communities are full of them.

Another significant way in which the concept and practice of obedience are influenced by changes in contemporary thinking is in the context of what constitutes power and authority and how power and authority are experienced today. Frequently the church and its official representatives (Vatican, Curia, Chancery) appear or are depicted as authoritarian, unwilling to share power, lacking in compassionate understanding. That perspective is easily transferred to the authority exercised in religious life. We have all heard of, if not personally experienced, confirmations of that view of authority. Rather than list and analyze any particular instances, it might be more helpful to recognize a few general principles or truths.

1. As sociologists have pointed out, there is a tendency for institutions to centralize, to consolidate power. Religious institutions are not an exception.

2. This tendency is in itself not bad. It comes from the need for institutions to define themselves, to mark themselves off from others, and consequently to exclude those who are incompatible with the nature and purpose of the institution. An institution that cannot do that ceases to exist as an identifiable entity.

3. Institutions need to keep definitions, teachings, and policies intact and true to their origin.

4. Religious institutions meet that need by developing dogmas, laws, rubrics, rules, and sanctioned practices.

5. There is a need for a recognizable guardian of the institution's traditions, which is to say an authority.

Problems begin to arise only as we move beyond those general principles to questions of how they are to be applied in concrete circumstances. Problems become acute when centralizing and consolidating and excluding go too far, provoking a reaction that tends to subvert the very tradition the guardians of the institutions are trying to maintain.

In a discussion of the schema *De Ecclesia* during Vatican Counsel II, Father Joseph Buckley, then superior general of the Marists, made an interesting suggestion: "Since obedience is itself a perfection inferior to liberty, the incursions of obedience and so of authority into the realm of liberty ought not to be carried out without a proportionate cause." The implication is clear: what is sometimes referred to as a "crisis of obedience" might actually be a "crisis of authority."

Father David Knight in his booklet on obedience touches on what is sometimes called "loyal opposition," taking pains to distinguish it from disobedience.



The phrase itself, however, suggests a problem. Is it a combination of contradictory or incongruous words? Or is it, rather, paradoxical, reflecting elements of truth that are difficult to reconcile?

If we assume it is paradoxical, other questions arise. To what is the opposition directed? To what is a person being loyal? Loyalty implies unswerving allegiance, faithfulness, to an institution or a person to whom fidel-

ity is due. If such allegiance or faithfulness is easily abandoned, it scarcely deserves the name of loyalty. Opposing authority can, on occasion, bring about better governance and actually fulfill a role of service. It can bring about the recognition

of values which were perhaps being overlooked. Thus the vow of obedience is not incompatible with loyal opposition. Such a stance is not, however, appropriate for religious as a permanent attitude. To put that a bit differently, superiors are entitled to the benefit of the doubt. Practically, their decisions should not be subject to constant scrutiny and questioning.

Among the classic objections to obedience, three are directed not so much against obedience in the abstract as against specific, concrete directives of a superior. These objections usually assert that the directive is arbitrary or absurd or cruel, or perhaps all three. On that basis a conclusive argument is formulated. Even though this directive is arbitrary, absurd, and/or cruel, if I believed

it was what God really wanted, I could accept it. The implication is that in such a case a human superior has simply erred.

Paradoxically, when the Bible tells us that God directly and personally manifests his will in the form of a specific directive, the thing commanded seems to display exactly the characteristics of being arbitrary, absurd, or even cruel. The first instance of that is the description of the only recorded restriction placed on Adam and Eve. Their dominion was practically absolute. One thing only was excepted. The fruit of only one tree was forbidden. Adam and Eve might well have asked: "Why that tree?" Humanly speaking, it appears an arbitrary command.

A second instance was the order to Abraham to abandon his home and country for no apparent reason. When told he would have a son, he clearly thought it absurd. "He bowed to the ground, and he laughed, thinking to himself, 'Is a child to be born to a man one hundred years old, and will Sarah have a child at the age of ninety?'" (Gn 17:17). What religious has ever received a directive seemingly as cruel as God's command to the patriarch to sacrifice his only son? But Abraham obeyed in faith, and he called the mountain on which the drama was enacted "The Lord provides." Surely, the Lord provides beyond every command.

There are some rather obvious prerequisites to the practice of obedience: a certain distrust of self, the type of humility that recognizes and accepts one's limitations and fallibility, a deep faith that allows one to see beyond the human guise in which Christ presents himself and his will to us. The principles are clear, but the practice remains a great challenge.

For a model of obedience we should look to the Lord himself. To understand just how perfect a model

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Jesus is, we need only look to the cross. No virtue, as we understand virtues, required Jesus to submit to such suffering and death. Could not the demands of charity be satisfied without such an excess? No virtue required this except one, the virtue of obedience.

We cannot truly understand the relationship of Jesus as divine with the Father. We can only accept in faith the mystery of the Trinity. Scripture provides us with some insight into the obedience of Jesus as truly human and thus endowed with human free will: "He was known to be of human estate and it was thus that he humbled himself, obediently accepting death, death on a cross" (Ph 2:8). Scripture also tells us how Jesus struggled to accept his death in obedience to the Father's will. Three times he prayed in Gethsemane that the cup of suffering might pass by, yet always ended his prayer with "your will be done" (Mt 26:42).

In his acceptance of suffering and death in obedience to the Father, Jesus is the supreme, the perfect model of obedience. There is a very real dying in the practice of obedience, a dying to self. But, according to the fundamental paradox of Christianity, it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Jeremiah: A Messenger of God Caught between a Rock and a Hard Place

The book of Jeremiah, a very long book that is well known for its complexity, covers a crucial period of Israel's history ranging from the reform of Josiah (622 BCE) through the downfall of Judah and into the time of exile (598-586 BCE). The text of the book has come down in two ancient versions, one Hebrew (Masoretic Text) and the other Greek (Septuagint). They do not agree in size or arrangement of material. The Greek text is about one-eighth shorter than the Hebrew version, and the order of the chapters in the Greek text differs from that of the Hebrew, especially after chapter 25. The Hebrew version is the one that most Jews and Christians follow,

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