Exploring three dimensions of the vow of obedience

By Howard Gray S.J.

Go Back

A *New Yorker* cartoon once showed two dogs talking about their respective owners, represented by two pairs of human legs. The one dog said to the other, "Yeah, I went to obedience school too. It made him feel good about himself." The irony of the cartoon runs in many directions, but its cultural presumption is that obedience is something the supposedly more powerful impose on the imagined less powerful. Obedience as imposition; obedience as animal management; obedience as behavior modification—these are some of the ways that our culture thinks about obedience.

Within religious life, obedience has become a process of negotiations between a leadership team and individual community members with a desirable outcome of only minimally asking anyone to do anything he or she does not want to do. Consultation, creative fidelity to the common mission, consensus—these have become the substitute for what many older religious remember as the ultimate asceticism of doing what the legitimate superior told you to do in your mission and in your community life.

Within the secular community that influences us and within the religious community that defines our apostolic character, obedience has become an awkward term for an ambiguous reality. We do not want to live in a totalitarian culture, much less in a totalitarian subgroup. We do not want to abandon our personal responsibility to answer to God for ourselves. We want to feel that our experience is an important component in determining what we do and how we will live.

So the challenge for vocation ministers is how to present obedience to a candidate to religious life today. Let me disavow any definitive statement about this vow. Let me also add that as a Jesuit, obedience has a rich and truly liberating meaning for me, uniting me to the expectations of a mission that is richer than my individual spiritual ambitions and more universal than my individual pastoral and apostolic experiences. I need obedience to feel authentic as a Jesuit. But I do not want to use my religious charism as a norm for other religious. In this article I am trying to keep the focus general, answering the question, "What are some of the common values we can present in explaining obedience as a dimension of contemporary religious life?" I am going to outline three: the human, the evangelical, and the cultural.

The human dimension of obedience

From the outset of self-reflection on what it means for me to be part of the human community, I encounter a radical, existential obedience that allows me to live and to develop. We learn to listen to our needs for food, shelter, identity, knowledge and love. This list is not exhaustive but suggests the sophistication of what goes into being human. Life calls us to obedience. This obedience is a creaturely acceptance both of my aspirations and desires and of my isolation and my limits. I ignore the call to obey, to acknowledge the call to assert myself and to surrender myself, at my own psychological, social and spiritual peril. As a human being, I learn to listen to my body, to my mind, to my imagination and to my heart.

One of the most helpful tools in learning the humanity of obedience is great literature. The narratives that have shaped us as a community and as individuals tell us that the energy of life cannot be ignored, that the dynamics of our powers are empowerments only if we learn to work with them, not against them. For example, if I believe that I can only become my own person by defying the claims others place on me, then I will become odd or isolated or violent. For we become adult only through mutual acts of obedience, only by learning to listen to the needs and requests of others and then only by honoring them in shaping the way we choose to live. The inter-subjectivity of obedience is part of life. Human experiences teach us the radical obedience that glues our community together.

In discerning the call a man or woman may have to religious life, we frequently talk about the need for "life experiences." It is a phrase saturated with ambiguity. It has to mean more than simply living a long time. It has to mean more than having been in many places and having held a number of jobs. "Life experiences" mean that within the pilgrimage of becoming human, a woman or man has reflected, found patterns of meaning, and uncovered directions for some kind of commitment. Life as a personal history makes me want to stand for something and with someone. "Life experiences," then, call us to be obedient to what we have learned to cherish as good and true and worth the investment of our time, our energy and our future.

This is where I would start in vocational discernment. I would ask a person considering religious life questions like these: How obedient are you to your humanity? Beyond and beneath your aspirations and your needs, how does God call you and

The Gospel dimensions of obedience

Within life experiences the Christian looks toward the Gospels as a privileged place for meaning and direction. Central to the Gospel revelation is the obedience of Christ. In his perceptive essay, "Living in the Meantime: Biblical Foundations for Religious Life," Donald Senior, CP emphasizes that among the three traditional vows of religious life, obedience is "the one with the strongest and most evident biblical roots." Understanding obedience in its most radical form as "faithful listening to God's voice as it comes to us through the community, through our teachers and leaders, and through the events of history, then we tap into a characteristic of faith most blessed by the Bible." It is this faithful listening to God that governs the life, teachings and mission of Jesus.[1]

> Paul spelled out the cost of Christ's fidelity in Philippians 2: 5-11:
> Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
> who, though he was in the form of God
> did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,
> but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,
> being born in human likeness.
> And being found in human form, he humbled himself
> and became obedient to the point of death—
> even death on a cross.
> Therefore, God also highly
> exalted him
> and gave him the name
> that is above every name
> so that at the name of Jesus
> every knee should bend,
> in heaven and on earth and
> under the earth,
> and every tongue should confess
> that Jesus Christ is Lord,
> to the glory of God the Father.

The imitation of Christ is not an option within Catholic religious life but an imperative. Granted the imitation of Christ has to be unhinged from the sexist and androcentric biases often embedded in traditional Christology and its spirituality. Granted the dominant white-Western approach to Jesus must be recast to reflect other ethnic and cultural experiences. And granted that the imitation of Christ has been shamefully distorted to promote an asceticism of prolonged adolescence. Nonetheless, Christian vocational discernment remains focused on the person of Christ. To develop into mature Christian disciples, every man and woman has to wrestle with the fact that Christ was faithful to God's leadership and asked for fidelity from those who followed him. For their part, vocation ministers must take seriously their twofold task: to recast the imitation of Christ so that his Gospel imperatives of reconciliation and service be seen as acts of love and invitations to love and, secondly, to help women and men appreciate the role of renunciation in living out Christ's example of love. Obedience is a privileged experience of coming to know and to follow Christ truthfully. Obedience leads to the ultimate question: Can God call me to love unconditionally in the specific earthy reality of my life? Like the obedience of Christ this is a call to love with an expansive and generous heart. Like Christ this is also a call to love in a specific and historically defined way. Christian obedience as the following of Christ is both a disposition to serve and a commitment to serve here and now, at this moment of my history and in these particular realities of my life.

The cultural dimensions of obedience

Obedience is also an experience that demands maturity, healthy self-identity, and a willingness to dare great enterprises for the sake of the kingdom preached by Christ. Today the individual man or woman contemplating religious life comes with a high regard for his or her autonomy. Freedom of spirit, mobility in lifestyle, creative options in education, work, living arrangements, and leisure time—these are personal flexibilities that contemporary men and women have come to value as humane, part of being a full human being. These are not luxuries, the entitlements of an economic or social aristocracy, but the way most people negotiate their humanity in our culture. As a consequence, making a permanent commitment is difficult because it limits freedom, mobility, and creative options. For example, people will talk about "relationships," in ways that imply involvement without any strings attached. Relationships become, then, a process of mutual accommodation, not of commitment.

But the Christian understanding of relationship is tougher and more demanding. We use the term relationships to talk about how the mystery of God dwells in a community constituted as Father, Son, and Spirit. We use relationships to describe

just and peaceful society, relationship stands for the mutuality of responsibilities that hold this increasingly fragile world together.

Obedience as a counter-cultural experience does not deny human autonomy but situates human autonomy into a set of significant relationships. I think that this is the contemporary rub in obedience. Everyone faces times when he or she has to wrestle with threats to autonomy. For example, the college professor demands I follow the syllabus and pass the exam. If I want to take this particular course, then I have to abide by the rules of the game. Or I want to travel to a country that demands a visa. No visa, no trip. I want a particular professional opportunity in the firm of my preferred choice. But the only way to begin the process of advancement is to start with unexciting work that tests my ability to belong to this company. People understand these specific areas of restricted autonomy. I am not as free as I would like to be, but I can tolerate this for the delayed greater good I hope to have someday. Most of the candidates to religious life understand this kind of "living in the meantime."

Religious obedience is a kind of "living in the meantime." It is living in the time between call and fulfillment, between promise and realization, between the world as we know it and the community of the blessed we hope to join. Obedience reminds us that we are laboring for a kingdom yet to come, for a peace always in process, for a justice always being worked out, for a love still being developed. All Christians are eschatological personalities even when they try not to think about that dimension of their religious identity and spiritual destiny. On the other hand, eschatological identity does not release us from living also in profound relationships as Christians. We are supposed to take this world and its complex reality seriously. We care about art and music and technology and science and business and leisure and family and neighborhoods and everything that is human because our founding relationship is the Word that was made human. God so loved this world that God came into it and asked us to follow him in laboring to make it better, to continue to finish creation, all the while knowing that it will not be finished in our lifetime.

Our culture challenges the balancing act that we are supposed to have as Christians and as religious, to live in this in-between time. We need to be obedient to life, to become ever more deeply in relationship to this world of ours, to obey the way it calls out to us to care for it. In other words, we need to live. But we also need to live obedient to the way Christ taught that life must be lived, in serving one another out of a mysterious and heady reality he called love, a relationship of never giving up on anybody—not a Pilate, not a Herod, not a Peter, not the Romans, not his own beloved people. We need, finally, to be obedient to the culture that forms us here and now. We need to listen to its craziness and to its challenge, to its fads and to its wisdoms. We need to be obedient to the discernment of our times.

To help others make vocational choices is to help them look at their personal histories; that is, the situations and people that have defined them by leaving an indelible mark on their characters and spirits. People have to be obedient, to learn how to listen to the directions which the Spirit breathes into their spirit from life, from the Church, from their God who comes through the Spirit but is also Father and Son. The direction of a Christian life towards religious life means, in large part, that obedience, as a way of listening in relationship, is indeed possible for this man or woman, this candidate.

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1. Senior, CP, Donald. "Living in the Meantime: Biblical Foundations for Religious Life," *Living in the Meantime, Concerning the Transformation of Religious Life*, edited by Paul J. Philibert, OP, New York/ Mahwah: Paulist, 1994, pp. 59-60. Howard Gray, SJ is presently Rector of the Jesuit community at John Carroll University in Cleveland, Ohio and Assistant to the President for University Mission and Identity. He has filled a number of formation roles for the Jesuit community.

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