

Obedience as sacrifice and blessing

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A very real issue for vocation promoters is the tension between the vow of obedience and the American way of life. In spite of this tension, I'm convinced that the vow entails both sacrifice and blessing for those who embrace it. A close look at Scripture and my congregation's constitutions sheds light on how obedience demands suffering—demands that we sacrifice—while doing so ultimately enriches and blesses us. Guided by the examples of Abram, Mary and Jesus and the wisdom of my congregation's constitution, I will look finally at how vocation ministers might address this tension between the vow of obedience and American culture.

The call of Abram

First I begin with the Hebrew Scriptures, where, amid numerous examples of obedience, I want to focus on Abram. In Genesis 12:1-2, we read: "The Lord said to Abram, 'Leave your country, your family and your relatives, and go to the land I will show you. I will bless you and make your descendents into a great nation. You will become famous and be a blessing to others.'" These two verses from Genesis are very rich in what they have to say about obedience. If Abram is to be obedient to God's call, he must unconditionally leave behind much of what is dear to him—not an easy task for a man advanced in age as Abram was. And yet the next two verses tell us that Abram obeyed and left with his wife Sarai. Why? Why would this man of many possessions leave all behind to follow the Lord? Why would he sacrifice family and land and move out of his comfort zone to embark on an unknown path? Undoubtedly Abram is a man of trust and faith. Upon arriving in Canaan he immediately builds an altar where he can worship the God he so faithfully follows.

In the call of Abram God is clearly the one who guides, while Abram is without doubt God's obedient servant. Again I ask why Abram would blindly follow God's lead? Perhaps it is because of God's promise to Abram that he and his descendents would be blessed and turned into a great nation. This indicates that to be obedient to the Lord, to sacrifice all for God, though difficult, is also rewarding. Placing our trust and faith in God leads directly to being blessed. To be obedient as Abram was is to sacrifice; it is to leave behind that which is familiar to us; it is to follow one greater than ourselves, trusting that this following will lead to ultimate blessing. We know from the story of Abram that along the way there will be many obstacles and struggles which will threaten and test our resolve to remain faithful to God's plan. But, we also know that it is in the struggle of our faithfulness to God that we truly discover God's faithfulness to us, and as such, we come to realize that God's faithfulness is unconditional and uncompromising.

In working with young people who are discerning God's call in their lives, it is important to be honest when speaking about the vow of obedience. Obedience requires sacrifice. Each of us who has joined religious life has left something behind—family, friends, possessions, and much more—just as Abram did. In addition, by joining a religious congregation, we give over the ability to completely determine the circumstances of our lives to our religious leaders. By professing the vow of obedience, we trust that in being obedient to the call of the Spirit in our lives, we too will be blessed. We trust that in seeking to do God's will, we too will be rewarded for our sacrifice, that is, blessed for our faithfulness.

My community's constitution takes this view of obedience. The Congregation of Christian Brothers Constitution number 22 reads: "Our obedience to God present in the people and circumstances of our lives will at times require of us deep personal sacrifice. To the extent that we embrace the discipleship which Jesus offers us, we will be able to accept radical self-giving, joyful in the knowledge of his fidelity. In assuming personal responsibility for our lives and in discerning dialogue with our designated leaders, we open ourselves to a mutual discovery of God's will."

In speaking with young people we must be willing to share some of our personal sacrifice, our struggle and radical self-giving, and we must remind them that they too will experience their own sacrifice and loss—sacrifice that they must embrace if they are to accept personal responsibility for their lives and for their search for God's will. We must be willing also to share our blessings and rewards, the blessings and rewards inherent in living a religious life that is obedient and faithful to God's call, for the blessings and rewards will be theirs as well, but again, only if they embrace and accept the discipleship which Jesus offers. If nothing else, the call of Abram shows us that obedience is about accepting and embracing sacrifice which leads to ultimate blessing.

Mary's obedience

Mary's fidelity to God's call echoes our own personal stories and the call of Abram. Luke 1:26-28 tells us that: "God sent the

Who wouldn't be? Who wouldn't be frightened by the unexpected appearance of an angel? Recognizing Mary's fear, the angel continued: "Do not be afraid! God is pleased with you, and you will have a son. His name will be Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of God Most High. He will rule the people of Israel forever, and his kingdom will never end" (Luke 1:30-31). I can only imagine that this discourse must have frightened Mary even more than she already was. As we know, Gabriel pressed on, and Mary, instead of succumbing to her fright, humbly responds: "I am the Lord's servant! Let it happen as you have said." Why? Why doesn't Mary tell Gabriel to get lost, to take a hike? Perhaps because— as we learn following Mary's visit to Elizabeth, who was also miraculously with child—Mary recognizes God's goodness to her. In her Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55), Mary proclaims the greatness of the Lord; she rejoices in God, her Savior; she recognizes that God has looked favorably upon her and that she is his humble servant. As the angel told her when she first encountered him, "she was truly blessed."

And so just as with Abram, Mary's fidelity to God's word and her willingness to sacrifice were rewarded with tremendous blessings. Mary placed herself at God's service and took on the awesome responsibility of bearing God's son. By being obedient to God's call, Mary became blessed among women; she became filled with God's grace. Again, "she was truly blessed." But let's not lose sight that this blessing came with great sacrifice, for after all, the birth of Jesus was not without its difficulties. Remember there was no room at the inn; the Son of God was born in a stable; the antics of King Herod forced Mary and Joseph to take the child to Egypt, and Matthew 2:19 tells us that it was not until after Herod's death that they were able to return to Nazareth.

The tremendous sacrifice of Mary is well illustrated in John 19:25 where we are told: "Jesus' mother stood beside his cross." What greater pain can there be than to witness the execution of your only son? What greater sacrifice can be made than to experience the pain and suffering of your offspring at the hands of corrupt rulers? Clearly Mary's initial yes to the Lord and her faithful and unwavering obedience to God's plan for her and her son came with huge sacrifice.

But let us not forget that it also came with great blessings, for Mary is indeed blessed among all women; she has received God's grace; her name is holy; God is with her. And so once again we realize that sacrifice leads to blessing. In recounting Mary's Magnificat we learn that obedience to the call of God in one's life embodies both sacrifice and blessing. We learn that to be faithful to God's call does not alleviate pain and suffering; it does not make us immune to hardship and tribulation. Rather obedience requires of us that we enter fully into whatever experiences God deems necessary for our growth and development. Obedience demands fidelity, and with fidelity comes both sacrifice and blessing.

The first line of CFC Constitution number 21 states: "Obedience grounded in faith and motivated by love unites us to become men living in the freedom of God's graciousness." This is certainly how Mary lived, grounded in faith, motivated by love. Mary was faithful to God, and God was faithful to Mary. That's not a bad message to deliver to today's young people!

The obedience of Jesus

Jesus followed in the footsteps of Abram and his mother in living in obedience. Examples of it are rampant throughout the Good News, with one of the best illustrations being Jesus' experience in the Garden at Gethsemane. At the end of his public ministry, Jesus entered the garden to pray. Luke 22:41-42 tells us that: "Jesus walked on a little way before he knelt down and prayed. 'Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me, but let your will be done, not mine.'" We are then told that Jesus was in great pain and that his prayer was so vigorous that "his sweat fell to the ground like drops of blood" (Luke 22:44).

In Philippians 2:6-9, Paul tells us that: "Christ was truly God, yet he did not deem equality with God something to be grasped at; rather, he emptied himself, taking on the form of a servant, being born in our likeness. He humbled himself in obedience to God, accepting even death, death on a cross."

Jesus' obedience to God is complete. It is without conditions; there are no strings attached. Jesus' proclamation that "not my will, but your will be done" comes with full knowledge that he will have to undergo great suffering that will lead to his eventual death. There is no watering down what Jesus will experience. If he is to be obedient to God, he will have to pay with his life; he will have to experience pain and humiliation at the hands of his persecutors. And yet we know that the essence of the paschal mystery is that passion and death lead to eternal life. This is what Jesus' obedience, his sacrifice, his faithfulness win for us—the promise and the blessing of eternal life.

In Philippians 2:10-11, Paul goes on to tell us that: "At Jesus' name every knee will bend—those in heaven, on earth, and under the earth—and all will proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord!" Again we are reminded that where there is faithfulness to sacrifice, there is also an abundance of grace and blessing from God. Now, while none of us expects to make the ultimate sacrifice as Jesus did, it is imperative that vocation promoters bring prospective candidates to an understanding that religious life does require sacrifice.

Throughout his life of obedience, Jesus' attitude remained humble—a quality essential to obedience. CFC Constitution number 23 tells us: "In the spirit and practice of evangelical obedience, we obey simply, humbly and joyfully." This is what Jesus did. He obeyed simply, humbly and joyfully. If people are to be happy in religious life, it is essential that they adopt this attitude of living simply, of witnessing humility and of portraying joyfulness. These qualities bring blessing not only to vowed religious but to all God's faithful. In recalling Jesus' fidelity to God we are reminded that if we do not die to all that keeps us from God's grace, we can not fully experience and enjoy God's ultimate blessing. This is the message for those

Witnessing obedience in America today

While Scripture and my congregation's constitutions clearly show the sacrifice and blessing involved in obedience, we cannot ignore the tension between it and our American way of life. Once again I turn to the CFC constitutions to illustrate a point. Constitution number 21 concludes: "Obedience frees our hearts to dialogue with the members of the community and leads us to detachment from power, prestige and privilege." Those three characteristics—power, prestige and privilege—aptly describe the American scene. They are the qualities Americans value. At the same time, the vow of obedience, like poverty and chastity, does indeed free our hearts and lead to detachment. Therein lies the tension between the way we live as Americans and what we profess as vowed religious. The vow of obedience cannot be watered down. We have seen in the lives of Abram, Mary, and Jesus how obedience demands sacrifice and leads to blessing. The vow of obedience must mean today what it has meant throughout history—sacrifice and blessing! When we as vocation ministers explain its relevance to prospective candidates, we must do so with unabashed openness and honesty. We must trace obedience in Scripture; we must search our constitutions; and in inviting young people to consider religious life, we must present obedience for what it is. We must speak openly of the tensions that exist between vowed obedience and American life. We must demonstrate that power, prestige and privilege are not the guiding forces in our lives but rather that we are fixed on Christ and the Gospel message. We must challenge young people to see the deeper meaning in living lives committed to obedience; we must speak of the prophetic, counter-cultural aspect of our religious life.

And above all else we must witness to it, for if we say one thing and live another, we do an injustice to those considering our way of life. If we do not hold ourselves accountable for the way we live and the witness we give, we deceive ourselves in believing that we can invite others to join us. We must be authentic not only in our words but in our actions as well. This is what obedience demands of us—that we be who we say we are. If we are to attract young people to religious life today, we must be willing to be part of the sacrifice. We must continually ask ourselves, "What do young people see when they look at us?" Do they see poor, chaste and obedient men and women, or do they see middle-class Americans who are set in their comfortable ways, unwilling to be challenged to grow beyond the comfort of their present communities and ministries? How can we invite young people to embrace obedience if we ourselves are not willing to be challenged in our daily lives—challenged to move to the margins, to change ministries, to change communities? The tension is not so much in what we tell young people about the vow of obedience but in how we live and witness to it.

It is clear from Scripture that obedience requires sacrifice. It is equally clear that those who are willing to sacrifice all for the sake of the Lord will be blessed beyond belief. This is what we must tell young people— that obedience demands sacrifice, and that sacrifice reaps blessing. It will not be easy, for not everyone considering religious life will be able to leave all to seek the will of God, and not everyone in religious life will be able to leave the comfort of their present lives to witness to God's call. But leave our comfort zones we must, for it will only be through continual sacrifice and obedience to God's will that we will fully experience the blessings inherent in doing so.

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