

# Obedience

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Let's begin with the case against obedience, I mean the case against obedience in general. There is a very widely held view that obedience is a necessary evil. I think more of the sisters and brethren subscribe to this view than would admit to it, even to themselves. The view is not confined to people at the receiving end, those who have to do the obeying; it is shared by quite a lot of people who do the commanding. 'I don't want to make this a matter of obedience'. To put someone under obedience is thought of as a sort of last resort. We ought to be able to get along without obedience but, the world being what it is, and interests conflicting as they do, we just have to use it from time to time, like war or surgical operations.

The root of this opinion is a certain view of what it is to be a human being. The view that we are each unique individual subjects with our own personalities and desires and talents and that the good life consists in each one of us developing her/his individual personality as far as possible. As far as possible; because the full and complete development of the personality of Sister Ermytrude may turn out to be incompatible with the full and complete development of the personality of Sister Gladiola: they therefore have to find some kind of compromise, a little give and take on each side. And if Sister Gladiola is reluctant to compromise it may be necessary for some third party to compel her, and this is what authority and obedience are for.

The ideal is that my will should be done and your will should be done and her/his will should be done. It is because this ideal cannot be realised in practice in this sinful world that we have a superior's will to sort out the conflicts.

Notice that on this view it doesn't matter very much what you will; so long as it is your will, you have a *prima facie* right to it unless it conflicts with someone else's will. All this is known as freedom. Any other position is authoritarian or, in extreme cases, totalitarian. This notion of the human being as the individual subject with his/her autonomous will is a relatively modern invention. It is characteristic of western European and American society, what we call the 'free world'. It is built very deeply into our culture and ways of thinking, so deeply that we don't question it or usually even think of it, we just

take it for granted, as we take it for granted that food consists of meat and vegetables or that society involves the use of money.

When we hear from anthropologists that, for example, traditional African societies have no such notion of the autonomous individual and indeed when confronted with it find it puzzling if not hilarious, we naturally tend to think of them as quaint and primitive—they haven't yet grown up into modern liberal societies. When we notice that the Old Testament seems short on the notion of the autonomous individual we think what a good thing it was superseded by the New Testament which is all about the free development of the individual and all against law and authority and what not.

Now, I hope to persuade you, though perhaps you do not need persuading, that this idea of the individual, which forms the very basis of our society, the society we are prepared to defend with nuclear missiles, is completely mythical; there are no such animals. Perhaps I ought to add that in a different way this same myth lies at the basis of the society we would be throwing the missiles at.

Notice that it is all about sheer will and its freedom. Our society does not care what a man thinks or believes but will fight to the death for his right to do what he wants or say what he thinks. Our society thinks it would be actually *wrong* for it to concern itself about the goodness or badness of any individual's behaviour, the truth or falsity of any individual's opinion; the only thing that matters is that a man should be free to do what he wants and express whatever he thinks, provided he leaves the same freedom to others. The only crime is to interfere with an individual. Our society thinks it is a free market of wills as it thinks it is a free market of goods.

I'm sorry for this crude essay in sociology and politics, but if we are going to talk about religious life we need to recognise what kind of a world we are living in and talking in, we need to recognise what kind of presuppositions we brought to our religious life, presuppositions formed by the world we were born into, a very different world indeed from, for example, that of St. Dominic. Such notions as that of *community* and *obedience* were forged in a quite different world from ours and we shall not be able to understand them or to reformulate them without taking a critical look at some things that *we* take for granted.

I have been saying that the case against obedience is that it is a limitation on freedom and on the development of my individual personality—perhaps a necessary limitation but a limitation all the same and therefore a bad thing. This case is based on the idea that I have an individual autonomous personality and that, whatever it is, its development is the most important thing in life, indeed *it is* life.

As I have said, it is all a matter of sheer wills. Whose will is to

prevail: my will or the will of the superior? There are religious institutions which grew up in the modern world which quite explicitly see their structure and spirit in these terms. My brother and his wife were one day talking to a Sister who was headmistress of a school (not a Dominican one, may I say) and their small daughter for some reason went into a tantrum. 'Ah!' said the headmistress, 'another little will to be broken'. That idea, the idea that religious life and obedience is a matter of breaking the wills of subjects, is *not* the opposite of the liberal individualist view, it is just the other side of the same coin. Both take for granted the central importance of will, as such.

So I suppose it comes as a surprise to find St. Thomas Aquinas saying that *imperium*, the act of commanding or ordering, is not an act of the will but of the intelligence (though of course it presupposes the will). It is the act of one who understands what is to be done. You must have heard a thousand times that *obedire* comes from *ob-audire*, to listen. Even the English phrase, 'doing what you are *told*' conveys, if you think of it, the same notion. To obey is first of all to learn something, to share in another's practical wisdom, (*Prudentia* or Providence).

The contrast between what I have called the modern and the medieval view is clearly seen when you ask what would a bad superior be? What makes a command a bad one? For the modern view it is essentially an unnecessary one, one that interferes, without proper cause or excuse, in the freedom of the subject. For the medieval view a bad command is a stupid one. For the medieval view, which is our tradition, the first duty of a superior is to be intelligent—to have what Jane Austen calls 'good sense'. Obedience is first of all an act of *learning*, though not learning an abstract or speculative truth, as when you learn biology or physics, but learning a practical truth, what is to be done, learning how to live.

For the modern view, to obey is, temporarily, to give up your will, submitting reluctantly or joyfully to the will of a higher power; for the medieval view it is first an openness of mind such as is involved in all learning. In the modern view if someone says 'Although I disagree with you absolutely, I will do what you command', this is a specially perfect form of obedience; a pure submission of the will. For the medieval view it would be a kind of caricature of obedience; for nothing has been learnt here, so nothing has been taught. Obedience only becomes perfect when the one who commands and the one who obeys come to share one mind. The notion of blind obedience makes no more sense in our tradition than would blind learning. It would be like the pupil who simply learns his lecture notes off by heart and parrots them in the exam. A teacher who wants or expects this does not want his pupil to learn.

This point is well made by the Master General in *Confidence for*

*the Future*<sup>1</sup>:

The fundamental law of democracy is majority rule, but it is not the same with us, in spite of our frequent voting. Our law is *unanimous* rule ... the prior should not look for a quick vote, but should try to have the question threshed out so that everyone has his say; and a common debate will lead to an agreement which is as near unanimous as possible.

The democracy of majority rule (or in some cases minority rule) is characteristic of the modern capitalist world; the kind of process the Master General describes is the *palaver* typical of, say, traditional African societies.

Perhaps we can go back now to what I said at the outset. 'To put someone under obedience is thought of as a sort of last resort. We ought to be able to get along without obedience ...' In our tradition that has to be written quite differently. What is referred to here as 'putting someone under obedience' is hardly obedience at all, it is the pale shadow of obedience which consists in doing what you are asked without understanding it to be a good thing. This indeed should be a last resort. As the Master General says it is not always possible for the community to be absolutely unanimous about what ought to be done. But the real obedience is to be found in those who share the common agreement; the others, on this occasion, have to make do with something less than obedience. A totally obedient community would be one in which no one was ever compelled to do anything.

What I have called the modern view, which centres on sheer will, and submission of the will, makes an essential division between superior and subject. There is obedience precisely when this division is most marked, when the subject is not following her own mind but doing what the superior wills. In our tradition, on the other hand, which sees obedience as a kind of learning process, a matter of practical intelligence, obedience is something that brings people to share a common mind. For our tradition it matters that the superior should be right. She too has to learn, to be obedient. For the modern style an obedient house is one in which the will of the superior prevails over that of her subjects. For our tradition an obedient house is one which has got as near as possible to the truth, in which there is general agreement about what is to be done, so that the will of the superior hardly enters into it. The job of the superior is not to make her or his *will* prevail, it is to play the central role in an educational process by which the good for the house becomes clear to everyone, including her. Our motto, remember, is Veritas: Truth. Obedience, then, for us is not simply a matter of efficiency in getting something done but of fraternal unity, and it would perhaps be better if instead of speaking of a vow of obedience we spoke of a vow of solidarity, for that is what

we mean. The Dominican life is solidarity with the brethren in a task; the task of preaching the gospel. As the Master General puts it:

Fraternal unity and mission: for us these two realities are permanently linked together and define for us our way of following Christ. As opposed to other institutes who lay stress on one or other of these two, the Order wants to keep a perfect balance between them, just like the Church, which is at once unity and mission. No surprise, then, that these two shape our notion of authority and government...

and thus our notion of obedience.

Obedience, then, for us, is displayed in the community united in agreement about how the gospel is to be preached, and the centre of that unity is the prior or prioress. He or she is only acting as superior to the extent that a common mind grows up around her/him. Without this there is no true obedience and no true authority.

Thus obedience is not something an individual can cultivate for herself; obedience belongs to a community and from thence belongs to an individual. There are religious houses in which it is not possible to be an obedient subject, in which the only thing to do is toe the line, conform to the will of the superior (or not as the case may be). It is in just that sort of community (which is not so much a community as an agreed cessation of hostilities) that obedience gets itself a bad name: it becomes the necessary evil of toeing the line.

Thus for the Dominican tradition it is never in the least use exhorting individuals to be obedient—that would be like exhorting someone to give the right answers in an exam. What we have to do is build the kind of communities in which obedience is possible. In fact building such a community is what obedience is.

Just as what I called the modern view is based on a certain notion of the human being as an individual of sheer autonomous will whose life is the development of her individual personality (the view we call liberal individualism), so our view is based on another notion of the human being, a more ancient notion, perhaps a more primitive notion, but anyway I think a more accurate notion. For the modern view society is made of individuals, for our view the individual is made of societies. There is simply no such thing as the sheer me existing prior to, and in isolation from, the very many societies or communities in which I have a role. I came into existence as the fruit of community, the union between my parents which itself depended on a social community to which they belonged. My process of growing up and developing the personality I have was the process of being brought into, having a role in a whole succession of communities, family, school, church, university, the political and economic world, the Dominican Order. These are all networks of human relationship, which is to say that they are forms of love, for love is that specifically

*human* relationship. In so far as a school or the political order succeeds in being a form of love it is a good school or political order; in so far as it doesn't—it isn't. The political order is not the *same* form of love as the family, and if it tried to be it would fail to be a form of love altogether. All these are different forms of love, each valid in its own way.

All this means that I find myself, my unique personality, not in dividing myself off from others, not by looking for some unimaginably private *me* existing prior to my relationship with others, but precisely in my relations with others. I discover myself not by standing back from but by entering into community. I *am* my membership of community—not of course just one but many. For me to exist is for me to be a citizen of the Irish Republic, a Dominican, a teacher in a university, the brother of my various siblings, the friend of these and these men and women, a creature of God, a child of God. There is no me apart from all that. As St. Thomas says:

Since a man is a part of a family, or a city, he has to consider what is good for him in terms of his good sense with regard to the good of the community. For the good disposition of a part depends on its relation to the whole.  
(ST 2a. 2ae 46. 10.)

The relevance of all this to our topic is that our obedience, our solidarity with the community, is the way in which we find *ourselves*. Obedience for us is not a denial of self but a discovery of self. For—to say it again—obedience is not the suppression of our will in favour of someone else's, it is learning to live in community, in solidarity, which is simply learning to live. Of course, to discover yourself is to unlearn as well as to learn; it is to abandon a notion of yourself that you had before in favour of a new and deeper one. The process of the novitiate and beyond is the process of realising that you were wrong about who you were, as well as the sometimes exciting process of realising what you can be. We always have to keep dying to the old self as we rise to the new. Any human relationship, any love, is a giving yourself away, a sacrifice, a kind of dying. That is familiar enough. Only he who loses himself will find himself.

There is a kind of spirituality which takes its starting point here: 'we gain ourselves only by losing ourselves'. It proposes that a person may be brought to perfection by completely denying his or her own will and submitting in all details to a spiritual director. Not so the Dominican tradition; for us, the way to perfection is through common life, through learning how to live in community, through obedience. It follows, of course, that in our communities obedience is as much a matter for the Prior as it is for the rest. A Prior who sets himself outside the common mind of the community, a superior who simply follows his/her own will rather than entering into the learning process

of the community meetings and discussions and all the lengthy palaver that the Master General describes, is failing in obedience as much as any other member might do. To quote the Master General again:

According to the traditional formula the Prior's relationship to the brethren in his house is that of first among equals (*primus inter pares*), a very Dominican expression, if ever there was one. It expresses very accurately indeed his fraternal attachment to his community while safeguarding his authority.

Now what does 'first among equals' really mean? What can it mean? If all are equal how can anyone be first? It sounds like a piece of mystification. 'Of course the Prior is really boss but we make it sound better by saying "first among equals"'.

I want to suggest to you that 'first among equals' does have a perfectly precise meaning and if you reflect on it you will reach the deepest meaning of Dominican obedience.

Since for us obedience means solidarity with the community, the Prior is only prior as representing the community. I do not mean simply that he is elected, but that as prior he speaks for the community as a whole. It is his job to bring about and express the common mind of the community. Now, it might be thought that 'first among equals' means something like: First when he is wearing his prioral hat, but at other times, in other hats, equal to the rest. So he is superior just when he is exercising his prioral role, but the rest of the time he is just like anyone else. So, unlike the Father Abbot of a monastery, the prior is for most purposes and on most occasions indistinguishable from everyone else.

Well, this is true enough but it is not the *ultimate* meaning of 'first among equals'. The real meaning of this phrase is that our obedience is the obedience of Christ. Christ lived his whole life and died in total obedience to his Father and yet was equal to his Father. This is the mystery of the Trinity, the very centre of our Faith. Now, our obedience, our relationship to the community, is not just *like* the relationship of God the Son to God the Father; it *is* a sharing into that relationship.

Our obedience is the solidarity of friends with a common task, it is a question of human love, founded on a common shared purpose, but this human love itself is our life of grace. Because of Christ, the Incarnation of God the Son, human love is an expression of and a sharing in divine love. That is what we mean by grace. By grace the Father loves us as his Son, in his Son, with the same love that he has for his Son. By grace we love the Father as Jesus loves him; we obey the Father as Jesus obeys him; we speak to the Father not just as creatures but as Jesus does (that is what prayer is). By grace, in fact, we share in the exchange between Father and Son. This is what we call

the Holy Spirit.

The fact that Jesus was totally obedient to the Father did not mean, as Arius thought, that he must be less than the Father. True, 'The Father is greater than I' and that, I think, does not just mean that as *man* Jesus is less than the Father; it means that the Son owes his existence to the Father. Not, of course, as a creature, as made by the Father, but as proceeding from the Father from eternity. This fact of proceeding from the Father, just because it is not a matter of creation—of being made—does not imply that the Son is less than the Father; it is a kind of dependence but not the dependence of the lesser on the greater. Now, when this eternal dependence of equal on equal is, so to say, projected on the screen of history, when the Son of God becomes incarnate, this dependence shows itself as obedience. The obedience of Christ just is the eternal dependence of Son on Father, the procession of the Son from the Father, of true God from true God, projected into history, so we have the obedience of an equal. The fact that this obedience is an obedience unto *death*, even the death of the cross, is because the history on which it is projected is a sinful history, one in which to be really human is to be murdered. The dependence of the Son on the Father thus appears as the Father's command to his equal, his Son, to be human, and this, in our world, means he has to be victim.

Now, because our obedience, our solidarity in the community, is no mere human thing but a sharing into this mystery, it is also true both that *the community is greater than I*, and that *I and the community are one*. The dynamism of obedience, the common life of the community, is the dynamism of the Trinity. It is how we enter into the relationship of Son and Father, how we enter into the Holy Spirit. So learning to live in community, learning genuine obedience, is the exploration of God.

And this is why obedience is not a necessary evil. This is why it seems worthwhile trying to create communities in which obedience will be possible, communities in which the balance between mission and fraternal unity is maintained. It takes a lot more trouble for everybody, and needs a lot more patience from everybody, to create a community which comes to a common mind than simply to set up a chain of command and persuade people to do as they are told because that makes life easier for them. It is a lot more trouble but it makes a real obedience possible, and this is the eternal life of the Holy Spirit.

- 1 First published in *Each for All* No 45; republished here by permission, with minor amendments.
- 2 Vincent de Couesnongle OP (Master of the Dominican Order 1974—1983), *La confiance du futur*, ET *Confidence for the Future*, Dominican Publications, Dublin 1982.