

Existential Obedience

I would like to present obedience in a very elemental way, largely from the heart, without reference to the usual distinctions made in defining it: the dissection of it into its component parts, the noting of its specific differences from other virtues, and its relationships to other virtues in the theological scheme of things. I want to regard obedience as it relates to living our life in union with and after the example of Christ, seeing obedience as a dynamic of our existence as creatures and children of God.

The common denominator of anything said about obedience is this fact of Christian reality: obedience was the leitmotiv, the basic, underlying theme of Jesus as Son of God.

"Here I am to do your will, O God."

The Word was made flesh in obedience to God's plan, and Jesus as the incarnate word lived his life in obedience to the unfolding of that plan as revealed by the Spirit of God. Obedience provided the very sustenance of Jesus' life. He declared that the Father's Will was his very food and drink. He also described obedience to the Father as the criteria by which he qualified our love for Him: if you love me, keep my commandments.

From the example of Jesus during his existence on earth we can discern this: obedience is always an individual's response to God's Will. To be obedient as Jesus, I must choose to conform or be uniform with what God desires of me. Another more basic way of saying the same thing is that obedience is my response to the truth and its demands manifested moment by moment in the fulfillment of my nature as created by God in order to live out the unique life He has provided for me by His Will. The contemplative poet and priest, Ernesto Cardenal wrote: "As the Body of Christ is hidden beneath the appearances of bread and wine, so God's Will is hidden beneath the appearances, the bread and wine, of day-to-day happenings."

More specifically, this existential obedience directs my will to making those choices that will conform my life to that image of the Son the Father desires me to be. I let go of my own desires for holiness in obedience to becoming holy as God desires me to be.

My obedience involves being attentive to the "revelations" about the reality and mystery of this my life, which are manifested to me through the circumstances, opportunities, demands, and consequences of my choices, especially the choice known as "my state in life." Very often the most telling of these "revelations" are the disclosures provided by my weaknesses, failures and way of imperfections. For the truth is always subject to being disguised by the illusions I develop about myself sustained by pride and false witness of the world about me. Nothing can shatter such illusions better than the revelation of how weak, wrong, ego seeking and sinful I can be in my choices and actions.

Discernment and self-knowledge then are important elements in coming to this, "my" truth. However, the truth will not set me free until I acknowledge it as it is and surrender my will to its implications. Obedience, which is this response of surrender to and acceptance of the reality of

my life as willed for me by God, is essential for the experience of true freedom. Such conformity to what God in His Providence wills for me normally is discovered by the exercise of my reason enlightened by Faith. Much of who I am is a mystery and can be apprehended only in Faith. My effort to understand what Faith enables me to perceive is sustained by Hope in God who alone can provide the means by which I can be obedient to what I perceive as God's will for me. Motivation and strength for obedience to what God desires of me in fulfilling "my destiny" comes from Charity. The Love of Christ urges me on, impels me to the truth, and strengthens me in my resolve to become who/what the Father desires. Only in so far as the will is strengthened by this love can it overcome its propensity to obey the dictates of ego interests and the "flesh," rather than the urgings of God's Spirit.

If I had lived before Christ, my obedience would be to the truth of whom I was as a creature of God governed by what is known as the natural law, basically expressed in the Decalogue. However, as a baptized Christian I must be obedient to the truth contained in the reality that I am not only a creature of God, but God's son or daughter as well. My brother Jesus who calls me to follow Him as the Way, the Truth and the Light of my life established this filial relationship with God.

Furthermore, my Carmelite vocation is my choice to follow Christ according to the example and teaching of Teresa of Jesus and John of the Cross. The Constitutions, which now serve as my guide, has become a part of this, "my truth." Inspired by the Holy Spirit, I discern and then proclaim, that I am responding to God's call and make a commitment "to tend toward evangelical perfection in the spirit of the evangelical counsels and the Beatitudes." One of the evangelical counsels of course is obedience, and one of the "be"- attitudes that must characterize my obedience is meekness or docility. Obedience inspired by and directed by the Holy Spirit is docile. To be docile is not to be a doormat but a child of God. I acknowledge and accept my total dependence upon God, particularly in the order of Grace and relative to salvation and sanctification. Docility is characteristic of such childlike obedience. No matter how old I am, how rich, powerful, sophisticated and smart I become - when it comes to myself and who I truly am in relationship with God, I am essentially His creature, and, by redemption and pure gift, His child. My greatest distinction is to have God as my Father.

What should matter to us in being obedient to God's Will is not abstract ideals, but profound love and surrender to the concrete "judgments of God." God judgments are our life and our light, inexhaustible sources of purity and strength. As baptized Christians we surrender our will in obedience to the judgments of God as revealed in the Scriptures, especially the New Testament, and the teaching of the Magisterium of the Church. As Baptized, our obedience is characterized by filial love since we become God's children through Baptism. When we are professed as Carmelites we surrender to the judgment of God that he is calling us to live out our Baptismal covenant by following the Constitutions given to us by the Order. We make our Carmelite promise to God of course, but explicitly we offer them to the Superiors of the Order, to the Constitutions provided by the Order and to each other. These are generally the instruments God employs in revealing His Will to us. These "instruments." we accept as the means by which the concrete Judgments of God are revealed, manifesting how we are to become holy, as He desires us to be.

We can look to Therese for an example of this kind of obedience.

In writing the story of her life under obedience, Therese explained: " Our Lord has made it clear to me that all he wanted of me was plain obedience."

The substantial force behind and sustaining Therese's obedience was the truth. Therese said toward the end of her life: "... I can nourish myself on nothing but the truth."

"I never acted like Pilate who refused to listen to the truth, " she wrote, "I've always said to God: O my God, I really want to listen to you; I beg you to answer me when I humbly say: What is truth? Make me see things as they really are. Let nothing cause me to be deceived."

Her obedience was a surrender to the truth of her reality. She learned to listen to God in the circumstances and demands of her life as it unfolded in the light of this truth. Her obedience was to what was required of her by her vocation. She was attentive to the ordinary day-by-day demands made of her through her rule and the dictates of her superior. "We must pay attention to regular observance," she admonished. Therese lamented those in her community "who do nothing or next to nothing, saying: I am not obliged to do that, after all.... How few there are who do everything in the best way possible! And still these [who are obedient] are the most happy...." She observed: "... it gives God much pain when we rationalize much."

Selective obedience is game playing with the truth. "I made the resolution," Therese said, "never to consider whether the things commanded me appeared useful or not.... it is love alone that counts. Forget about whether something is needed or useful; see it (the demand, rule, obligation, etc.) as a whim of Jesus." Indeed, because of our Carmelite Promise we should be striving toward an obedience that goes beyond merely following the commandments. Ours should be an obedience to the very "whims" of Jesus, to His desires for us. To know these desires we must not only hear and listen to the Word, but also like Mary, ponder His words and actions. Also, we must be attentive as she was to his revelations unfolding in our life, as already explained.

Therese revealed in her last conversations: "I formed the habit of obeying each one (referring to requests, demands made by her sisters) as though it was God who was manifesting his will to me." Recall that we make our Promises not only to God, the superiors of the Order, but to each other. The needs of others in community can be a matter of obedience. I am present in community, for example, not only because it is required by the Constitution, but also because a brother or sister in my community may need my example and support. In being there, I am being obedient to that need. We should strive to be so sensitive in our obedience that we endeavor to obey not only the letter of the law, but primarily its spirit. The spirit of the law, Jesus taught and demonstrated, was/is Charity. That is why, as already mentioned, he designated obedience as the proof of our love for God.

An essential attitude for obedience is humility and, as we know, humility is truth. Part of the simple humble truth is, as we said, the realization of our dependency upon God, and in the order of Grace, our filial relationship with God. Part of that truth too is that we have natural and acquired temporal and worldly talents. It is the simple truth, not to be denied, in word or in action, that I may be intelligent, knowledgeable, skilled manually, artistically, verbally,

physically etc. If I deny such talents and gifts in living out my life, I am being disobedient to the truth of who God wants me to be. As long as we realize with St. Paul and Therese that everything is gift, and that the natural or acquired skills or talents that we possess are to be used for the glory of God and in the service of others, then we remain in the truth. St. Therese warned against using "false currency" in the practice of virtue. Certainly, false humility is a counterfeit coin in the spiritual exchange of the Christian life.

Finally, in the birth of Jesus, the Way and the Truth became incarnate. God really and truly came to share our life and His Life with us. In so doing God exemplifies for us the M.O. (modus operandis) we are to follow relative to our commitments to Him. The promise to obedience that we make can remain an abstraction. If I am to practice this evangelical counsel "divinely," I must incarnate it in "my" life. I must reflect upon its meaning in terms of who I am in my particular day by day life situation. The matter for obedience may not be that unique. The Constitutions, the provincial statutes and the prescriptions of my community's council generally will be the same for me as everyone else about me. However, the form, or the "how" of my practice of obedience may provide unique opportunity for expression. By form of obedience, I mean the way I individually respond to prescriptions of authority. Certain requirements may be temperamentally easier or more difficult for me personally. A particular requirement regarded as a demand of insignificant consequence for one person, may be most difficult for me. I may experience repugnance or reluctance to obey a particular prescription, and so be tempted not to do what is required in order not to be "hypocritical" in practice. However, what counts is faithfulness to my commitment, my intention, and the consistency of my choice. I may find attendance at meeting, for example, generally a burden temperamentally and, perhaps, more often than not, irrelevant to my needs. Even so, I choose to attend meetings regularly as a concrete expression of my obedience, as a sign of my faithfulness to my commitment, as a defense against a possible form of subtle pride which insinuates that I am above others, as a practice of charity sustained by the hope that my presence which may seem useless to me may be in fact a valuable witness to others. The form of practice means too that my practice of a rule such as attendance is not just resignation, but involves a real effort to make my conformity viable. In attending meetings (to follow through on our example), I strive to be attentive to what is going on, to be active in my participation in discussions, and to be responsive to material communal needs presented by volunteering to serve.

In summary: existential obedience is my response to God's will as revealed to me in the here and now, moment to moment, "demands" of my state in life which includes the opportunities and consequences of my choice to follow Christ according to the Carmelite Rule of Life and example and teachings of Teresa of Jesus and John of the Cross. It involves a response of NO to all that God's Spirit reveals to me as obstacles to fulfilling God's will for me as His unique son or daughter, but above all, it is a response of YES in imitation of Jesus who St. Paul describes as being always a YES to the Father. This obedience reaches perfection when it is followed through even unto death - death on the cross. For us usually this means death to the Ego which tends to be in conflict, or at cross-purposes with the truth of our identity in God which we may call the Self. When we face this cross, this conflict, in its truth, and submit our wills to its anguish as Christ did, then by that obedience is the conflict profoundly resolved and we are liberated into a share in the Resurrected life of Christ Jesus. Normally this "final" conversion is a gradual process resolved finally at death and perhaps through what is referred to as purgatory. For some

it is resolved in life and finalized through the passover of death. In any case, be obedient to the truth of who you are and the truth shall set you free.

Further Reflections:

St John of the Cross has said, "God wants from us the least degree of obedience and submission, rather than all the works we desire to offer Him" (SM I, 13).

Why? Because obedience makes us surrender our own will to adhere to God's will as expressed in the orders of our superiors; and the perfection of charity, as well as the essence of union with God, consists precisely in the complete conformity of our will with the divine will. Charity will be perfect in us when we govern ourselves in each action -- not according to our personal desires and inclinations -- but according to God's will, conforming our own to His. This is the state of union with God, for "the soul that has attained complete conformity and likeness of will (to the divine will), is totally united to and transformed in God supernaturally" (AS II, 5,4).

- cf. *Divine Intimacy*

St. Paul does not hesitate to exhort: "[Subjects] be obedient to them that are your [superiors] ... as to Christ ... doing the will of God from the heart " (Eph 6,5.6). That is how we are to respond in obedience: by doing the will of the authority, of the "rule," of the one in charge as the will of God, and doing it FROM THE HEART.

If you are the work of God wait patiently for the hand of your artist who makes all things at an opportune time.... Give to Him a pure and supple heart and watch over the form that the artist shapes in you ... lest, in hardness, you lose the traces of his fingers. By guarding this conformity you will ascend to perfection.... To do this is proper to the kindness of God; to have it done is proper to human nature. If, therefore, you hand over to Him what is yours, namely, faith in Him and submission, you will see his skill and be a perfect work of God.
St. Iranaeus (Adversus Haereses, IV, XXXXIX.2.col.1110)

O God,

as docile and as tractable to your artistic spirit
as media is to the artist who uses it,
so that the design the artist has in mind may be brought to completion,
so obedient may I,
to you, my Creative Father,
BE.

