

RELIGIOUS OBEDIENCE

I. How far does it bind under sin?

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RELIGIOUS obedience, as it has been developed during the centuries, especially in the West, is a special form of the virtue of obedience, determined by a religious rule, and by a vow. It therefore involves the normal elements of the virtue, and others arising from the vow. The chief elements of religious obedience are, therefore, the virtues of respect and obedience, religion and its act, devotion, the gift of piety, and social justice.

RESPECT

The virtue of obedience is a species of respect (*observantia*). Respect in general is due to a person's possessing a certain dignity and authority. The reason for the dignity and authority lies in a share in the Fatherhood of God and natural fatherhood, by responsibility to care for others in secondary matters and a more limited sphere than God and natural parents. This dignity and authority is conferred either by God directly, or by the community concerned, which designates its holder. While the element of dignity corresponds to the part of respect called honour, that of authority calls for obedience, which is therefore the kind of respect which the authority of a superior demands.

The person to whom obedience is due must, then, be a true superior, lawfully established in authority as the delegate of the community and God. Otherwise the motive of obedience is not present, for this does not lie in the person of the superior or his personal good qualities, but in his authority received from above. If this is absent there remain only personal motives for following his will, such as friendship, respect for wisdom, loyalty, fear, etc.

OBEDIENCE

Obedience is the application of a general natural order in all things, by which the lower is moved by the higher. In human beings, where action is by free choice, the natural movement of the lower by the higher takes place by the superior using reason

and will to issue a command, and the subject using reason and will to carry it out.

The object of obedience is therefore a command of the superior. There is a fundamental difference between a will to command and a will to advise, recommend, or counsel, or a mere wish. The difference lies in the obligation imposed on the subject. There is a real will to have something done by another who is in a position in which he is obliged to do it. A counsel, request or suggestion does not intend to have the thing done in this way, but presents motives for a certain course of action as to an equal. A will to command need not be expressed explicitly. It can be tacit, and it may use the verbal form of a wish or recommendation. But if it expresses a real will in the superior (and this is in most cases evident) it is the equivalent of a command, and a sufficient object for the virtue of obedience.

But where there is quite clearly a mere counsel or wish, and it is certain that the superior does not desire to use his authority, to follow it is not precisely obedience. But such an act can partake of the virtue of obedience if it is done from a motive of exercising the will in obedience, and it can even exceed obedience when the slightest indication of the superior's will, before any command has been thought of, is carried out. For this is to render submission to the very source of all obedience, the will of the superior.

Obedience can thus extend far beyond the limits of orders explicitly imposed. But objectively it has strict limits. The sphere of authority of every human superior is restrained. In general he cannot command the interior act of the will, except in so far as it is connected with an external act: he is concerned with the external arrangement of human actions, and not with the internal motives. So long as the external act is performed, obedience is satisfied, though the subject may, in relation to God, be obliged to make acts of many other virtues in order to fulfil the command properly. The obedience due in virtue of religious profession is also well defined by rule and constitution, and the powers of lower superiors limited by higher and by the law of the Church.

The religious community is therefore like any other human society, in that it exhibits the natural order in human things ordained by God, and its members are obliged to obey their superiors within the limits of their authority. But the scope of that authority is different from that of other human societies. For it is

very extensive, covering not merely practically the whole of the subject's life, to an extent fully equal to that of a parent in relation to small children, but also extending to works of supererogation, which for secular persons are only of counsel, and cannot normally be imposed by any superior. Looked at thus, it would appear to impose an impossible burden and to lead to innumerable and continuous sins against obedience. For this reason it has become a normal feature of practically all religious constitutions that they do not of themselves bind under pain of sin, but only to a penalty.¹ Such 'penal laws' can be regarded as true laws. The difference between law and counsel lies in the obligation imposed. In the natural order of things this obligation expresses a necessary subjection to the superior, so that if the law is not fulfilled, the subject is either deflected from his final end by mortal sin, or at least retarded in its attainment by venial sin. But the whole source of this obligation lies in the will of the superior to oblige another, and he can modify this obligation. What of its nature would bind under pain of mortal sin, he can impose only under pain of venial sin. He can go further, and express his will to have the thing done merely by the imposition or threat of a temporal penalty, with an explicit exclusion of any real moral fault. The object of obedience remains intact: the precept of a superior. But the mode in which it obliges is modified by the will of the superior.

In such a case the act against the precept is not a sin, but a moral imperfection. It is not disobedience, but imperfect obedience. Such a diminished obligation, in virtue of the religious's will to perfec-

¹ This system originated with the Dominicans, and is found in their constitutions in a universal form, applying to the rule, the constitutions, the ordinations of all superiors and all their utterances, excepting only when a formal precept in a fixed form, which invokes the vow, is used (or where the matter is otherwise binding under sin owing to the three vows or to a law of God or of the Church). This is so even where words implying sin may be used (as occurs in some older formulae in the constitutions of the Preachers). There is not full agreement about the precise explanation of this provision. The theory of Cajetan is here given, elaborated at a time when the matter was under special discussion among the Dominicans (1513-18) and when he was Master General; it may therefore be presumed to be well in their tradition. For Cajetan laws and precepts binding only to a penalty are true laws obliging the virtue of obedience, and yet not binding under pain of a sin of disobedience; nor does an imposed penalty for transgression bind under sin. The application of this theory to other religious institutes may be more limited, and particular constitutions must be consulted. Among theologians there are three other chief theories. Some hold that the subject is bound under sin *either* to obey *or* to undergo the penalty if imposed; others that such laws bind under sin, but that the subject can dispense himself for a good cause; others that they are not true laws but counsels. (cf. J. B. Pasciak, O.P., *De obedientia religiosa sec. D. Thomam et Thomistas*. Romae, 1945. A doctorate thesis at the Angelicum, to which this article is much in debt.)

tion, with the sanction of a mere external penalty, is sufficient for the everyday working of religious life. It was introduced in order to evade the multitude of sins and scruples which any other course would involve, and is now normal in the Church. The obligatory force of the law or command is not done away with, for the superior can add penalty to penalty, and still not under pain of sin, and if the situation demands it can oblige under pain of sin.

It therefore follows that obedience to the rule and constitutions and to the ordinary orders of superiors, even where these do not bind under pain of sin, are acts of formal obedience whenever they are done from the motive of submission to authority, as they usually will be. The rule and orders of superiors appear normally as invitations and directions, calls to a higher good, infallibly indicating the will of God on the way of perfection. Obedience partakes of the nature of following of counsels and of a work of supererogation, except in the rare cases where a formal precept intervenes. The religious is thus at the same time in the situation of the child, for whom every word of the parent is an indication of God's will, and of the adult, for whom there are few commands which are strictly binding, and who acts normally freely and lovingly without compulsion.

The religious is even in a freer situation than most adults. For the subject of obedience in a religious institute is not merely the regular observance which would be of counsel only for others, but is the organised life and activity of the institute, which would normally and naturally bind to obedience under sin. For the religious it does not do so, if his constitutions contain a universal clause to that effect, extending to all the orders of superiors not given under formal precept.

All this refers, of course, to the thing commanded in itself. Sin will easily and frequently enter in from the motive, and this will be discussed below under disobedience.

DISOBEDIENCE

While obedience is a very wide virtue, extending to everything partaking of the nature of a command, disobedience, its contrary, is a very special sin. It is contempt of authority. For obedience is precisely submission to authority. Formal disobedience is only present when the non-fulfilment of the command is motivated precisely by a will not to be subject to authority: in other words,

out of formal contempt. In other cases there is only 'material disobedience'. Formal disobedience or formal contempt is always a mortal sin, even when the matter commanded is small, because it is a refusal to be subject to the authority of the superior. Its malice lies in the rebellious will rather than in the omission of the thing commanded. There is only room for venial sin when the rebellion of the will is not fully deliberate. Such first movements and venial sins of contempt of authority may be frequent, though full formal contempt is rare.

When the command is disobeyed from another motive—for instance, from passion, from contempt of the personal and private qualities of the superior, from a certain contempt for the smallness of the thing ordered—there is not formal contempt of authority as such. The fact that there is a command renders the transgression venially or mortally sinful according to the importance of the matter and the will of the superior. A thing may be indifferent in itself, but the fact that it is commanded renders it obligatory. But the avoidance of the obligation or even resistance to it may arise from many causes other than formal contempt, and usually does so. In such a case of material disobedience there is a double sin: the sin of omission or transgression of the command, and the wrong motive which causes it.

But in the case of laws and precepts binding to a penalty only and not under sin, there is no sin in the transgression other than that of the subjective motive, if it is sinful. If it is not sinful, there is no sin. If the motive is formal contempt, it is mortally sinful. Transgression often is venially sinful. This sinfulness can consist in ill-regulated passion, such as anger, desire, fear, etc., and so the transgression is accompanied by, and usually the occasion of, an actual sin. It can also arise through negligence. This is not to say that the mere neglect to carry out the order or rule is sinful: that is excluded in penal law. But subjectively the omission or neglect can be sinful. There may be a general negligence or carelessness of mind and laziness, which comes into play in the omission, and is a venial sin. Or there may be particular negligence, as when a religious really has a will to fulfil the rule or an order in a particular point, but fails to will properly and effectively, so that he does not actually carry it out. This misuse of the will, or ineffective willing, is a sin of negligence. Had the religious definitely willed not to fulfil the law or order, his act could be sinless if he had a

good motive, or sinful if it was a bad one. But when he really wills to fulfil it, but fails to will properly, he incurs negligence.

Such penal laws therefore do not constitute a sin of disobedience when transgressed, in spite of the fact that they bind under the virtue of obedience and are acts of obedience when fulfilled out of submission to authority. This is because of an express will in the superior. Their transgression constitutes a moral imperfection, and an imperfection in the virtue of obedience, but not a sinful imperfection. The only sin lies in the subjective sins of the person concerned, his own passions and negligence, which will frequently be brought into play by the presence of rules and orders. In secular life they would also be brought into play by other circumstances of daily life. Perfection is acquired by eliminating the subjective sinfulness by submission to the rules and its applications by superiors.

There can also be a kind of excess in obedience, at least in appearance. A precept is either obeyed exactly, or not obeyed; there cannot be excess in the essential, but there can be in relation to circumstances. The wrong person may be obeyed, the wrong means used, the wrong thing done, the wrong reason sought, the wrong time chosen, the command carried out in a way not intended, and all this with complete adherence to the letter of the command or the rule. It is not sufficient to apply the mind merely to the command: all the attendant circumstances must be considered and the action so adapted to them that the superior's will is carried out. It may even sometimes be necessary to interpret the superior's will and deviate from the letter of the command in order to carry out his will. Honest obedience will avoid the sort of literal obedience which is really a kind of disobedience.

The immediate root of disobedience is vainglory, for the desire to show one's own excellence to others is expressed easily by refusing to be subject to authority. This applies strictly only to formal contempt. Vainglory is the immediate manifestation of pride, and pride, the inordinate love of one's own excellence, is in its negative aspect a refusal to be subject to God. Disobedience is, in its last analysis, a refusal to be subject to God's order of things, to the manifestation of God's authority in the will of a superior.

Besides contempt for superiors and their commands, which is common to all formal disobedience, the religious can also show

formal contempt for his rule or for perfection. These are not two distinct things, for the religious does not profess to be perfect, but only to tend towards perfection by certain definite means, the rule. Formal contempt of the rule or of perfection means a refusal to be subject to the rule, a refusal to tend to perfection by the means appointed by the rule. Normally transgressions of the rule do not proceed from such formal contempt, but from other motives. It is however evident that an habitual and deliberate practice of material disobedience, even to rules which do not bind under sin, gradually diminishes the respect for authority which is the basis of obedience, and disposes to formal contempt.

[II. THE VOW, DEVOTION, PIETY & SOCIAL JUSTICE—the conclusion of the article will appear in the October issue of LIFE OF THE SPIRIT.]

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