

## RELIGIOUS OBEDIENCE

### II. THE VOW, DEVOTION, PIETY AND JUSTICE

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**R**ELIGIOUS obedience differs from ordinary obedience by being vowed. The vow is an act of worship of God, and dedicates the controlling faculty in man to him, and so the whole of the future life is under the vow. The power to choose is subjected and consecrated to God and his ministers, so that everything done thereafter in execution of the vow has the value and merit of the virtue of religion as well as of obedience.

As in the case of the virtue, there is a difference between the subjective and the objective extension of the vow. It is generally agreed among theologians, and is usually expressed in the constitutions of religious institutes, that there is only objective obligation under the vow when a proper precept binding under sin is given, and commonly only when the vow is expressly invoked in the precept, in a more or less fixed formula. Otherwise there is no sin of sacrilege against the vow, whatever other sin there may be. So that sins against the vow coincide with those against a formal precept.

But while there is no objective intervention of the vow in observing the rule and ordinary orders of superiors, there is normally a subjective intervention. The original intention of the will persists, virtually or explicitly, and all the acts of carrying out of the rule and of orders are intended as a carrying out of the obligation of the original religious profession. All are acts of worship of God. Even if the rule or order is carried out for some other motive than submission to authority, so that it is only material obedience, and the virtue does not come into play, the vow can still function, for it can still be a carrying out of the oblation to God. The vow is not to perform things for any special motive or from obedience, but only to perform them, and that is done. So that the vow extends more widely than the virtue, and the whole of religious life is religious, that is, is

an oblation of the will to God by carrying out of what is prescribed by his ministers.

#### DEVOTION

The act of the virtue of religion which immediately comes into play in religious obedience is devotion, the will to do promptly what concerns the service of God. For the religious practically everything in life can be approached from this angle. The will to serve God by doing his will, leads directly to the will to do what he wills through rule and superiors. Charity or love of God leads to devotion to his will and service, and devotion and service leads to more love.

It is the consideration of the divine goodness which leads to devotion, and the consideration of the divine goodness in the commands of superiors that gives the devotion of obedience. In this connection it must be remembered that the divine goodness is infinite and only analogous to our goodness. It is able to attain its ends and a higher goodness by means and ways which to us seem and are less good, or even by permitting evil. And it is in the sphere of obedience, that of the wills of men, where freedom reigns and where sin ravages, that this almighty goodness, which attains good by permitting mistakes and sins, will be most evident. The mistakes of superiors, whether apparent or real, do not interfere with the object of obedience, though they may provoke passions and judgments which render it difficult. For the superior is not obeyed for his wisdom, personal judgment or goodness, but for his authority alone. This authority infallibly manifests the will of God in a particular case, however much the superior may err or even sin, so long as he does not command a manifest sin. This is the lesser good which God wants here and now: somehow it must be ordained to a greater good than the immediately wise things would secure. The judgment that the superior is prudent does not form part of the motive of obedience, but only the judgment that he has authority. But a judgment that he is imprudent should not be lightly allowed, and credit must be given for special knowledge and wisdom, and special guidance, otherwise obedience can be made difficult and endangered.

But there can arise a case where the fact of a mistake is quite evident. Prudent means should be used to enlighten the superior. But if these fail, the command can still be obeyed with devotion and the subject do his best to enter into the mind of the superior so as to carry out the command as the thing willed by God. Yet evil is not to be called good in the name of obedience, nor is error and sin, because permitted by God, not to be acknowledged as such. With obedient devotion must go calm sadness at the hurt done to truth and goodness and perhaps to others. Yet it is easy in such a case to create a false trial of obedience. Prejudiced judgment, rash opinions, private passions, irritation, can lead to an extension of the precept or prohibition, in the mind of the subject, in such a way that zeal and activity seem to be suppressed. This is not honest. All precepts are limited and can be obeyed honestly and fully, and yet zeal, charity and activity can continue to function within the limit set. To cease to act in a mood of hurt anger can be an offence against duty to God and to others, as well as against truth and goodness. To combine the obligations of charity and obedience may often be very difficult, and a searching test of intellectual and moral honesty and integrity. This is especially true if an attempt is being made not merely to obey the explicit precept, but to carry out the will of the superior however perceived. In the interests of charity and often of duty to others it is necessary to distinguish as clearly as possible between what the superior really wills as superior, and what is more of the nature of (possibly erroneous) wish, counsel or opinion. While obedience obeys the true will, charity will often have to make full use of the attitude allowed by non-obligatory forms of thinking and willing.

#### THE GIFT OF PIETY

Obedience is also under the influence of the gift of piety. The virtue looks directly to the will of a superior. Above this, the virtue of natural religion looks to God as Creator and Lord, to be obeyed in his ministers, and supernatural religion looks to a Father who gives sonship and grace, and is to be obeyed as a benefactor. The gift of piety rises above all benefits, whether of creation or of grace, and seeks the

honour of God our Father in himself. It gazes on the divine greatness, glory and honour, and worships him solely for himself, quite apart from his gifts. The will adheres to God's will without any consideration of good or evil received from him, of honour or shame. Because he is holy and good in himself, his will is to be done whatever it may be. Such a point of view transcends obedience and is only possible under the special motion of the Holy Spirit enabling man to rise above human motives and act divinely. The gift of piety thus performs acts which are not obedience, but something far greater, and which contain all the good of obedience in their fullness.

The gift also causes acts of formal obedience to be performed, in order to show the honour due to God and to his children. In relation to all acts concerning the love of our neighbour piety impels to their performance as something due to God's adopted children. All the acts appointed by obedience become a service of God's family, without consideration of the human persons involved. But in the act of the gift of piety the object of obedience, a command, is swallowed up and perfected in an absolute adhesion to God's fatherly glory and honour, to be manifested in devotion to him or to his children. It is the glorious will of God: obligation, justice, personal good and evil are transcended in a loving adhesion.

#### SOCIAL JUSTICE

Connected with obedience is the virtue of social justice. Since the reason for obedience is that the superior represents God and the community as their minister, it follows that in all his laws and commands he seeks the common good. This is the common good of both the whole community and of the individuals, a sharing in a common good life, when the individuals share their goods, and share in the goods of all. Social justice is the virtue which aims at this common good of all. It is primarily in the superior, who must take the point of view which sees all that the individuals do as contributions to the good of all. While the superior must have the common good in view and therefore exercise social justice in all his commands, it is also required in the subjects in order to obey properly. For since the superior's will

is aimed at the common good, if the subjects are to obey his will as intended they must also have some perception of the common good and aim at it. Everything can be envisaged from this angle: poverty is the use of common goods for the common welfare, work is to be done as a member of the community, not in a too personal manner. If all is done in this spirit, so that the community can take it over, it will be lasting.

There is a social injustice: contempt for the common good. This leads to any and every sin, and all sins can be social injustice in so far as they militate against the common good. Where rules and commands do not bind under sin, this sin against social justice is also objectively excluded. But subjective sin can be very frequent and even grave. The good of the community can be contemned and neglected, the work of the community can be damaged and great harm done to others, the obligations of the community in justice or charity to those outside can be seriously sinned against. So that though the actual omission of what is ordered for the common good may not involve sin in itself, it will very frequently do so because of the motives causing it or the consequences involved, which imply sins against justice, charity or some other virtue.

Religious obedience, therefore, is planned in such a way that, as far as possible, the greatest opportunities are given for a wholehearted devotion to God's will and for progress in perfection, while the opportunities for special sins against either vow or virtue are reduced to a minimum. It is a means of perfection, constantly searching out the personal sins and weaknesses of the religious and inviting him to overcome them. It is the very application of the will to the business of becoming perfect by the practice of love of God and our neighbour.