

THE VOWS OF RELIGION: II

Religious Obedience

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IT'S *very simple, you just have to do what you're told, and because you're told to do it*. But the religious does sometimes meet situations in which he legitimately hesitates whether he ought to obey or not. And then what becomes of 'doing what you're told because you're told to do it'? And if hesitation can sometimes occur, how is the religious to know when this crucial moment has arrived?

'Of course, religious obedience is not like what you find in the army. Religious obedience has got to be voluntary and interior, not just a matter of external discipline.' But there is a sense in which obedience can never extend beyond external behaviour (*Sum. Theol.* II-II, 104, 5), and if this kind of statement only means that religious obedience must come *from* the will it is difficult to see that army obedience or any other should do otherwise, at any rate if it is to be dignified by the name of obedience.

'You must see with the eyes of faith that it is God who speaks to you in the voice of your superior.' But superiors may conceivably speak against the law of God, or (without iniquity, but indiscreetly) outside their legitimate field, and what change of intonation is there then to notify the subject that this is then no longer the voice of God?

'By his vow of obedience the religious gives up the greatest human good that he has, his own will. Thenceforward he will leave it to his superior who represents God to take the decisions; he simply obeys.' But if he has given up his will he has given up the possibility of deliberate and wilful action, and what he does can be neither meritorious nor blameworthy. And if he is to leave the decisions to superiors, what kind of decisions are we to expect from superiors in their turn, if, until the moment of their assuming office, they have never been exercised in taking decisions?

'The good religious gives unquestioning obedience to his superior.' But if he never questions, ~~at any~~ his own mind, what sort of counsellors will superiors ~~be~~ ~~acting~~ their subjects, when it

becomes a matter of their being required by Canon Law to take counsel? Does the subject, at that moment, for the first time begin to allow his mind to range over the complexities of policy that affects the community good? And may he even then speak against the superior's known views? If not, is the superior to be surrounded by yes-men?

II

From this sample of conventional-type remarks, and the difficulties they may raise in any thinking religious, it will become obvious that the rather abstract considerations concerning the fundamental nature of obedience of the previous article in this series were not without justification. It will be useful to recapitulate the points there made.

Obedience is something that involves a relationship of persons, it is not directly submission to law; and to forget this makes for legalism, which is the setting up of the inert letter of the law as the immediate motivation of human behaviour.

Further, obedience is not submission to arbitrary will, but to the superior's will regulated by reason, and ultimately by the wisdom of God. Otherwise there is no difference between tyranny and authority.

Next, obedience requires full human responsibility, the intelligent participation by the subject in carrying out the law. The subject is not to be turned into an automaton, or reduced to the status of an infant, i.e. one in whom responsibility is not yet recognized. There is no place for paternalism in the superior.

Lastly, the authority vested in men over other men, and the establishment of positive law, of 'rules of life' comes about in order that men may achieve together in society a personal fulfilment that, out of society, they could not reach. Their obedience is therefore an expression of charity towards one another, that they may help one another to achieve this 'bonum commune'. But this is very different from saying that they must lose their own personalities for the sake of some impersonal achievement of the society in which they live. To make this mistake is to open the way to the ugliest kinds of institutionalism.

Legalism, arbitrariness, paternalism, institutionalism—these are all the enemies of true obedience, and unfortunately the conventional kind of remarks at the beginning of this article, for all the

half-truths that they may contain, may very easily lend countenance to one or other of those evils; and may do so under the appearance of religious piety.

Before we go back to examine them in more detail, we ought to establish the specific character of the obedience required of religious by comparison with that required of every law-abiding and Christian man.

The religious binds himself by vow to obey. He makes a solemn promise to God and before God that he will obey his superiors according to the rules of his institute. He does this for a number of reasons, partly because he believes in the value of obedience, partly because he believes in the usefulness of setting it under the seal of a vow. We need to keep these reasons clearly distinct.

He believes in the value of obedience, taught by what we may call the Church's centuries-old meditation on the obedience of Christ. Here we may draw out two chief reasons—and it is to be understood that these are reasons for valuing an obedience wider than that which is incumbent on every man as subject to God and a member of society. The first is that it provides the antidote to the waywardness of his own will, the waywardness of the sons of Adam. 'As by the disobedience of one man, many were made sinners, so also by the obedience of one, many shall be made just' (Rom. v, 19). The answer to the rebellion of Adam against God was the perfect obedience of Christ to his Father, and to the instruments of his Father's will: 'Whereas indeed he was the Son of God, he learned obedience by the things which he suffered' (Heb. v, 8). 'My Father, if it be possible, let this chalice pass from me. Nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt' (Matt. xxvi, 39). 'Then said I, Behold I come. In the head of the book it is written of me that I should do thy will' (Ps. xxxix, 8). One might say that Christ met by an excess of obedience the excess of Adam's disobedience, as if to put to rights by one extreme what had been thrown into disorder by the other extreme. In the abstract no doubt it would be sufficient to repair things by simply coming back into bare submission to God and to one another in society. But man does not live in the abstract; and in the concrete men win mastership over their own waywardness most effectively by a submission much more extensive than what the niceties of an abstract consideration require. So the first reason that the religious has for valuing obedience as a way of life is that he may achieve,

after the example of Christ, the total mastering of his own wilfulness by which he may return into the divine order, and share in Christ's own redemptive obedience. (And let it be noticed in passing that it is only by such discipline that a man really frees himself from random wilfulness, and can be sure of an objectivity and self-mastery that makes him strong against arbitrary whimsicality. Which is why it is very true that only one who has learned to obey is able both to resist tyranny with assurance that he is not being merely self-willed, and to rule.)

A second reason for valuing obedience is that by obedience a man receives instruction. Every man lives in a kind of moral darkness, his conscience requiring to be instructed by the law of God. But the Christian particularly is aware of this need because he is aware of so much greater a source of enlightenment in the revelation of Christ than the natural man knows of. And the Christian believes that by submitting his every action to the direction of those appointed by Christ and by Christ's Church for his guidance he will learn all the more deeply the mind of Christ. Of course, such an attitude presupposes that he finds in the institutions of Christ's Church, in the Orders and Congregations canonically approved, divinely appointed sources of spiritual instruction. Not only as a novice, but in the whole living of his life, the religious finds in obedience the continued instruction of his conscience in the ways of the Spirit. In the words of St Thomas: 'The religious state is a kind of exercise and discipline by which a man comes to the perfection of charity. . . . And anyone who is instructed and exercised . . . has to follow someone's direction. . . . And this is why obedience is needed for reaching the perfection of religion' (II-II, 186, art. 3 and 4).

So there are Christians, anxious to hold closely to the example and teaching of Christ, who find in obedience a way, second to none, of Christian perfection. Their goal is the same as that of every other Christian—perfect love; but they choose a special way—the way of obedience. And yet, it is important to notice, their obedience does not differ, as obedience and in principle, from the obedience of other men. It is only more extensive. They bring their whole lives under obedience; there is a universal quality to their obedience (cf II-II, 186, 5, ad 1 and ad 4). But they remain responsible in their obedience; their obedience is personal, not legalistic; it is limited according to the law of their institute;

it is for their own personal development in Christ, not for the greater efficiency or advancement of their congregation. They are not to be treated as children, or as unintelligent; rather they are giving everything about them, their intelligences included, to the services of Christ. And these set over them have the duty, in Christ, of making possible the full expansion of this gift to Christ. It is not made possible by cramping their potential gifts, by petty secrecy which keeps them from an intelligent share in work to be done, by imposing a kind of stultifying fideism in place of a vigorously inquisitive faith. Religious have chosen a way of self-discipline and instruction in Christ, not a way of repression and infantilism.

But they have not only chosen a life of obedience; they have made it the subject of a vow. Here again we may notice in particular two reasons for their choice. They desire to consecrate their lives entirely to God in the following of Christ; but men live out their lives in time, and there is no moment at which they can say: This now is the whole of my life; their lives spread out unknown in the future. So it is only by gathering up this unknown in the single moment of a promise made to God that a man can completely, once for all, make the gift of his life. The vow extends to all that may come 'until death'. And the effect of this promise of constant obedience is to consecrate to God every action that is done under obedience thenceforward. As an act of obedience it remains like any other act of obedience, virtuous; but being done under a vow to God it becomes also a kind of prayer, a worship of God, the carrying out of sacrifice. More than this (and we come now on the second reason for taking a vow) the effect of so solemn a promise is to give a certain constancy of resolution to the one who has made it. Fickle creatures as we are, drawn now by this now by that attraction of the moment, or driven by this or that fear, it is only by making contracts and giving undertakings that we to some extent steady our purposes. Of course, the contract made, the promise given, we are still free in fact to break it; but a moral bond has been laid upon us, which has an effect both interior and exterior. Interiorly all our moral force is brought up to rule out, from the beginning, breaches of faith. Exteriorly we may be held by shame and the fear of dishonour among men, which is none the less a potent safeguard of right doing for being among the least worthy of

motives. So the vow settles and fixes a man in the chosen way of obedience. And for this reason a man may choose to seal his obedience by vow.

In this situation are we to say that every time a religious fails in obedience he has broken his promise? It is here that people begin to make the distinction between what is required by the vow, and what is required by the virtue of obedience. We are told that something may go against the virtue of obedience without the vow being broken, and a kind of casuistry is entered upon to determine how far a religious can go before his vow is broken. The virtue comes to be thought of almost as a matter of supererogation, to say nothing of what is referred to as the 'spirit of obedience'. Admittedly vow and virtue, and what is required as a minimum for the preservation of virtue and what is required for the full deployment of its spirit, are distinct things; but it is surely a mistake to separate them. A religious has promised to be obedient, and he fulfils his promise only by being obedient, and fulfils it perfectly in the measure that his obedience extends to its utmost limits. But obedience, as we have seen, is essentially concerned with his personal relationship to his superior, not directly with the carrying out of a law. So his obedience may be partial, imperfect in detail, may fail in this or that instance; but unless he withdraws himself from the personal relationship that he has promised to observe, he cannot be said to have broken his promise. It is one thing to carry out a promise defectively (it is a human thing), it is another to go back on one's promise. Only by some deliberate act of defiance and contempt, or by a breach of obedience so serious as to be incompatible with owning allegiance to the authority requiring obedience, can a man be said to go back on his undertaking of obedience. Not that this should be taken as an easy and lax attitude to what has been promised; every failure, even in detail, of obedience is an undermining of the relationship entered; every disobedience makes in the direction of the final and disastrous rupture. There can be no condoning disobedience on the ground that 'it does not break the vow'. Indeed, unless a religious carries his obedience beyond the minimum required for his fulfilling not only his vow, but the virtue itself, unless he have also the spirit of obedience, there can be no hope of his persevering in the difficult way he has chosen.

III

It is time to go back to the conventional remarks with which we began. '*The religious has to do what he is told, because he is told.*' This is as true, and no more true, of his obedience as of any other's, only with the wider field that his obedience covers. The motive for obeying is always because the superior requires it, not because the thing commanded commends itself on its own merits. But such obedience is always within the regulation of what is right, and within the clearly delimited field of what comes under the superior's jurisdiction. It does not justify arbitrary *fiats* on the part of the superior. It may be useful occasionally to test a subject's obedience by telling him to do something for which there can be no other motive than that he is told to do it; but to make this the whole obedience, and the whole training in obedience, is surely to promote one aspect of all that is involved into the whole. And in present conditions, when the whole nature of obedience is so little understood, it seems to be a way of courting disaster. '*Religious obedience has to be voluntary and interior.*' Like any other obedience, it must be the response of a responsible human being. But like every other obedience, it has implications both for the personal fulfilment of the individual and for the good order of the society in which he lives. And sometimes the second consideration, which is bound up with the first, may require that obedience be forcibly exacted where it is not willingly given. But where this happens, there has been a breakdown. The breakdown is even more lamentable in a religious society, whose whole purpose is development of each person within it to the full maturity of his Christian personality, than in such a society as for example a military organisation whose principal aim is the efficient furthering of an aim largely irrelevant to the individuals comprised within it. For this reason religious superiors should be prepared to make large sacrifices of efficiency and good order to persuade the subject rather than to force him. '*It is God who speaks to you in the voice of your superiors.*' Certainly it is, to the extent to which they are the approved superiors of institutions within the church of Christ; and from them, the religious, as we have seen, receives instruction. But there is no direct inspiration in all this, and both subject and superior are under the obligation of using all their human prudence in the exercise of authority and obedience. '*The good*

religious gives unquestioning obedience. Certainly he does not at every order question its validity; but it is part of his obedience that he should give the co-operation of his intelligence. And this may involve not only the right, but the duty of making representations to his superior when it may appear that there are factors known to him that might affect the superior's decision. *'The religious gives up his own will . . . leaves it to the superior to take the decisions.'* As we have seen, he gives up the wayward inclinations of a will disposed to rebel against God; but he does this to gain a mastery, a wilfulness and purposiveness that he will gain in no other way. The religious is not a man without will; he ought to be a man with the strongest will in the world, a will strengthened by the will of God. Certainly, the superior takes the decisions, but the decision to put those decisions into effect remains, and must remain, the subject's. *'He simply obeys.'* But what a wealth of complexity there is in that simplicity.



SECULAR INSTITUTES: I In the World

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YOU live in an age that is twisted out of its true pattern and among such people, you shine out, beacons to the world, upholding the message of life.' (Phil. ii, 15.) These words of St Paul to the Philippians might be addressed to members of Secular Institutes at the present time. It would be difficult to find in the world a nation, a city, a family, living its life according to the true pattern, the pattern of Christ. He is 'the Way, the Truth and the Life', yet how small is the number, even amongst Christians, of those who follow him. The message of life is unheeded, unrecognized even, jammed as it is by powerful propaganda, lies, secularization, false values and materialism—the message of death. The profound meaning of the Incarnation' the 'sanctification of the profane', the divinization of humanity, this has become obscured and mankind throughout the world searches gropingly and often unwittingly for the realization of