

THE VOWS OF RELIGION I.—OBEDIENCE

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MEN and women in religious congregations are traditionally spoken of as occupying a state. By this we mean a permanent status to which they are tied for some fixed period, usually for life. It is by the three vows of religion that they are established in this state. And so the vows tend to be thought of absolutely as what make religious what they are. There is a danger in this way of thinking of them, as if they were something in their own right, for their own sakes. It can be forgotten that the vows are only a means to an end, and have always to do with what is vowed. One comes on queerly used distinctions between, for example, the vow and the virtue of obedience, as if the thing known as religious obedience under vow was something quite different from the virtue of obedience. One even comes on treatments of the subject that lead one to imagine that, for religious at any rate, there are certain obligations arising from the vow of obedience, after fulfilling which they may, if they like, go on to the practice of the virtue. All this is a queerly muddled use of perfectly legitimate distinctions. For this reason it may be useful, in the four articles of this series, to attempt a loosening up of our ideas about the vows, and a setting of the vows in the context of religious life as a whole. So I shall deal quite simply with the place of obedience in human and Christian life before going on to the difference that is made by taking a vow concerning it. And in the same way I shall deal with the role of chastity and poverty in Christian life before dealing specifically with the vows made about them. After all, a vow is quite simply a promise made to God, and promises are 'to do something', and one cannot talk sensibly about particular promises if one does not know anything very much about the things one is promising. When St Thomas treats of religious life in the *Summa Theologica* he very sensibly deals first with the question whether religious ought to practise poverty, chastity and obedience before he goes on to ask about their taking vows concerning them. (II-II, 186.) The vows establish religious in a permanent state of practising these counsels; but it would have been perfectly possible for no such state to have been established and still men and women could have given themselves to such practices from day to day.

Obedience is part of every man's life. It governs the personal relationship that ought to exist between him and his superiors. It is easy to fall into thinking of obedience as submission to laws and regulations. Primarily, it is not this. We do not obey an abstract code of laws, we obey *people*. Law has its essential place, but it is not as the object of obedience. Obedience is given to people and their commands, is given to the will of the superior. Law must direct this will and command (otherwise they become arbitrary impositions) but it is the will and the command that we submit to in obedience.

The very words (*obaudire*, and its Greek and Hebrew equivalents), with their etymological suggestion of 'hearkening to' 'giving ear to' suggest this personal quality of obedience. Holy Scripture inculcates throughout a personal obedience to God; and even in places where the Law is most to the fore it is seen predominantly as the commands of God, the will of God, the testimonies of God. Our Lord, the model of Christian obedience, obeys his *Father*, does his *Father's will*, enjoins upon his followers to do '*my commandments*'. And it is in perfect keeping with this Scriptural approach that religious profession is made in the form of promising obedience to superiors rather than to rules.¹

The same personal quality of obedience is attested by the whole way in which St Thomas treats of it in the *Summa*. He deals with it in the context of justice, of the virtue precisely which regulates men in their personal relationships, ensuring that to everyone is given what is his due. There are some relationships in which what is due to a person cannot exactly be given. The creature cannot give God his full due, neither can the child his parents; in these cases there is no way of fully paying back what has been given. These relationships are regulated therefore not by justice in the full sense, but the one by religion, the other by piety. So also, in the special relationship of subject to superior, there can be no precise allotment of what is due, and St Thomas assigns the regulation of this relationship to *observantia*, a virtue of knowing how and when to pay fitting respect. This virtue of 'respectfulness' has two kinds of virtue contained under it, the one '*dulia*' (which

¹ In the Dominican form of profession, in which the subject places his hands within those of his Superior in a feudal gesture of allegiance, the personal bond contracted is admirably underlined.

knows how to pay honour where honour is due), the other *obedience*. Thus obedience is set fully and squarely in the context of the virtues that regulate personal relationships of one kind or another. (II-II, 80-104.)

The particular business of obedience is to submit the subject to the commands of the superior. There are two reasons for such subjection, one much more fundamental than the other. The fundamental reason is the whole order and hierarchy of all that is; things are not created all on a dead level, nor do they stand on an equality with their Creator. All through we have to recognize the higher and the lower, the greater and the less, the source of influence and the recipient of it. And 'in human affairs', says St Thomas, 'the way in which superiors influence those below them is by their wills. . . . To impel by reason and will is to give commands.' (II-II, 104, 1.) 'The divine will is the first rule by which the wills of all rational creatures are regulated. And following an order divinely appointed these created wills are closer to or further from the divine will. So the will of one who gives orders can be a kind of secondary rule for the will of one who obeys' (ibid. ad 2). The fundamental reason why men have to obey lies in the sheer authority of God. In the words of the Psalmist: 'Come and see the works of God; who is terrible in his counsels over the sons of men. . . . Who by his power ruleth for ever' (Ps. 45). God claims by absolute right the obedience of men. We shall have to see later how one man can claim the obedience of another, and in what sense created wills are nearer one than another to God's will, so as to found this claim.

The less fundamental, but not unimportant, reason for the subjection of one will to another is that the subject has to learn from, be instructed by, the superior. (II-II, 186, 5.) The command of the superior in some measure has to inform the conscience of the subject; here again the superior's will becomes a rule for the will of the subject.

But a will can only provide a rule, only has the character of law and is regulative when it is the instrument of reason. Law is found in reasonableness (I-II, 90, 1). Things are not in the law simply because they have been willed by anybody, not even by God. They are in the law because they are right in reason. They are in the law of God not because God has arbitrarily willed them so, but because they are just right, just so, in the eternal wisdom.

It is true that the reason can only pass into effectiveness by bringing in the will (we all know the kind of person who knows what he ought to do but for lack of willing does not put it into action). Still, it is the reason which must decide, must give the orders, and if the will does take on the character of a rule, this is only when 'it is itself regulated by some reason. It is in this sense that the will of the ruler has the character of law. Otherwise his will would be not a law, but an injustice' (I-II, 90, 1 ad 3). The law must enter, not because obedience is subjection to law but because it is subjection to the will of another *according to* law. Law provides the framework within which obedience of one man to another may take place. Without law a man's will acts blindly, and its imposition is tyranny; outside the law there is no scope for obedience.

Law is not opposed to freedom. The rather prevalent assumption that to accept law is to accept (however necessarily) a restraint and curtailment of our natural freedom arises from that fragmentary view of human nature which took possession of western minds from about the sixteenth century, according to which man in a state of pure nature is an animal with naturally free instincts, ignoble or noble according to your realist or romantic viewpoint; his freedom is the untrammelled play of these instincts, and reason, laying the fetters of law upon him, only comes in from outside, somehow alien to his nature. But in a greater tradition of Christian and pre-Christian thought, reason was not seen as alien to his nature. It was seen as an integral part of his nature, growing up from within, the very principle of truly human living and fulfilment. A man's freedom was found in the fullest possible development of the responsibility and self-mastery that this possession and use of reason gave him. Law, far from being a fetter laid upon him, was his reason's formulation of the rules which he discovered within his own nature, and which he could implement for its complete fulfilment. Law was the instrument of his freedom.

There are two kinds of law, natural law, and positive law. For anything to be used and developed to its fullest possibilities it must be used according to its nature, its make-up. One cannot, for example, effectively use the nib of a fountain pen for unscrewing small screws; at best it will prove ineffective, at worst it will break. Its make-up sets the rules for its use, and if the manufacturer

draws up a list of rules these ought not to be arbitrary 'fiats' prescribed by whim but the expression of what is fixed by its nature. The same is true of human nature, but with important differences. Fully to realize his possibilities man must act in keeping with his nature. But his nature includes being reasonable. And more than this, the very fact of being endowed with reason and will puts him in a position in the following out of his rules which is held by no other material creature. He, and he alone, is not blindly impelled to follow his rules. He alone both takes conscious cognizance of them, discovers them for himself, and has the power to frustrate or fulfil them as he will. In this sense he has a responsible share in the legislation for his nature; within limitations, he is his own lawmaker. Even though God, his maker, may give him a code of rules (the Ten Commandments) like the manufacturer printing his rules for use, these are only the formulation of what is already built-in to his nature and what he can in principle discover for himself. His own conscience bears witness to the natural law within him. His is a responsible personality.

But he has need of positive law too. Within the framework fixed by the natural law, there are alternatives of conduct not fixed by his nature, and yet requiring to be decided one way or another if he is to achieve fulfilment. His nature demands some decision but does not fix which. It is the function of positive law to make these decisions. If men existed entirely on their own such decisions could be taken by each man for himself; but in loneliness a man can neither come into being nor reach the full development of his powers. His nature demands that he live in society, and positive law has to be made for society as a whole. This entails the acceptance by men in society of a legislative authority, and of an executive by which such laws shall be brought to bear. Such acceptance does not involve the curtailment of the individual's freedom any more than does his recognition of natural law. Rather it is an acceptance by which he provides for his freedom, an acceptance that comes from a reasoned working out of what is required for the fulfilment of his personality within society. This acceptance of positive law, and of an executive to which obedience is voluntarily given, is in fact an expression of the 'charity' of a society, an expression of the consideration to be shown by every member of the society to every other member.

For if there were no rulings made to fill the gaps left by natural law life in society would become impossible. The rulings are made, the positive law is established for the common good, meaning by this not some monolithic achievement to which the interests of individuals must be sacrificed, but that further fulfilment of their human personalities which is alone possible within the structure of society. It should never be forgotten that the business of society and of authority in society is always to promote the fullest development possible of the persons in society; it exists for them, not they for it.

We may now return to the obedience which is exercised within the framework of law, and solve one problem left earlier without an answer. Our consideration of law has shown us in what sense one human will may be set over another, or, as St Thomas put it, be nearer the will of God than another. It is because society demands authority, and this demand comes from the divinely appointed social nature of man. But whereas God by his sheer eminence occupies the highest office of authority, one man only has eminence over another by reason of being entrusted with an office of authority (his title to office being established either by appointment of God, or by enactment of positive law). In either case, however, the subject is bound to obey, both by reason of the fact of authority, and because thereby he receives instruction in his own and the common good. The fact of authority requires that he obey simply because he is told, not because of any judgment that he may pass upon the expediency of what he is told. And yet this does not destroy his free responsibility, nor does it give unlimited scope to any human superior. It does not give unlimited scope to human authority, because the will of a superior only has the character of law for the subject so long as it remains itself within the law. As soon as it oversteps that framework or acts outside the area limited for it by lawful appointment, it ceases to have any claim on the obedience of the subject. And the subject's free responsibility is not destroyed. 'God made man from the beginning, and left him in the hand of his own counsel' (Ecclus. xv, 14), and St Thomas comments upon this: 'not that man may do whatever he wants, but that he is not compelled to do what has to be done by any compulsion of nature . . . but by free choice coming from his own counsel. And just as he ought to do everything else that has to be done at his own counsel, so too

has he to obey his superiors.' He has to do what he is told because he is told, but he does this humanly on his own responsibility. His obedience is as free as every other practice of virtue. As much as in anything else, he must consult his own conscience to determine whether it is right for him to obey. In the last resort he remains his own lawmaker.

In all this we have been concerned with the purely human obligation of obedience. Under the Christian dispensation, within the body of Christ, the principles remain exactly the same. But they find a new and heightened sphere. God's authority is found incarnate in Christ. The personal relationship regulated by obedience is between Christ and the members of his mystical body who are subject to him; and the relationship is transfigured by Christian charity. Within the Body, men are appointed superiors by the authority of Christ. Positive law, the commands of the Church and those of superiors within the Church, becomes the expression not simply of the 'charity' of one man to another, but of the supernatural charity that binds one member to another. 'Purify your souls in the *obedience of charity*, with a brotherly love, from a sincere heart love one another earnestly' (I Peter i, 22).

The principles remain the same, their outcome is wholly Christianized. Obedience no longer remains a means to the perfect building up of the human personality, it becomes a means to Christian fulfilment that 'we may in all things grow up in him who is the head, even Christ' (Eph. iv, 15).

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Obedience is a matter of the most delicate balancing of these various principles. If any one of them is lost sight of distortions inevitably result. Let its fundamentally personal context be forgotten and let it be supposed primarily to require submission to a code of law, and at once legalism results, either the legalism of the superior exacting conformity to the letter, or the legalism of the subject 'working to rule'. Let the superior for one moment suppose that his will alone is law, and his rule becomes to that extent an arbitrary imposition and injustice. Let the subject's human responsibility, the use of his own reason and will in obedience, be denied, and there results on the side of the superior a false paternalism and on the side of the subject infantilism. Let it be supposed that the aim of obedience is a 'common good' that is not the full development of each personality within the structure

of society but is instead the efficient management of a community, and there must result the evil of institutionalism.

It is only when the delicate balance and interplay of all the principles involved is observed that obedience restores the divine order and gives back to man, by integrating him within that order and instructing him in the law of God, the wholeness of personality that was his and was, by disobedience, lost.



THE RELIGIOUS VOWS AND THE HOLY WAR

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IT was our Lord himself who taught us that it is holy to be poor and chaste and obedient. But even as he spoke, and indeed for many years before his time, other Jews had already realized this independently, and had been striving in their own ways to practise these very virtues. The descriptions of the sect known as the Essenes in the records of Josephus and Pliny the Younger, and especially the new discoveries at Qumrân, all bear striking witness to this fact. Where then did the idea originate that man can enter into closer union with God through poverty, chastity, and obedience? Clearly it was in the Old Testament, the common source on which our Lord and the Essenes both drew. And when we attempt to trace the idea back to its Old Testament roots, the trail leads us not, as we might have expected, to the temple, or to the altar, nor even, in the last analysis, to the vows of the Nazirites, but beyond this still further back to the remote nomadic past of ancient Israel, to what was probably one of the oldest of her traditions, the tradition of the Holy War.

In those early days, before the first kings, there was no standing army in Israel. When an enemy menaced her existence, her menfolk left their small possessions, segregated themselves from their wives, and lived together in camp under the leadership of a charismatic chief. It was under these circumstances that a form of poverty, chastity and obedience was practised for the first time. The earliest religious community was a community of warriors assembled in camp to do battle on behalf of the people of God.