

OBEDIENCE AND DISCERNMENT IN THE LIFE OF CONSECRATED PERSONS

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Abstract

This piece has studied the meaning and nature of obedience and discernment, and the interaction of obedience and discernment in the life of consecrated persons. Circumstances have arisen that requires that the Consecrated life takes a fruitful journey of renewal. In this process of renewal, the elements of obedience and discernment are fundamental. The challenge to examine our fidelity to our consecration and to the mission entrusted to us must be done in the spirit of obedience and discernment. In this piece, Consecrated persons become the locus or locale for a theological reflection on the dialogue between obedience and discernment.

Keywords: Obedience, discernment, consecrated persons, religious institutes, poverty, chastity.

Introduction

The very fact that the religious life is centred on the search for the will of God, a sincere and profound response to it makes obedience and discernment very important accompaniments in a sincere search for the Divine purpose. Hence, in the Consecrated Person's search for the truth, a discernable practice of obedience requires a reflective and contemplative manner of life. This becomes more important as the Religious is burdened by the responsibility of distinguishing among internal voices, including his or her own self-centred and resistant one³¹. Herman Hesse describes the complexity of the voices in the world thus:

The soul that waits in silence needs to disentangle the voice of God from the noise of other voices, the ghostly whispering of the subconscious self, the luring voices of the world, the hindering voices of misguided friendship, the clamour of personal ambition and vanity, the murmur of self-will, the song of unbridled imagination, the thrilling note of religious romance. To learn to keep one's ear to so subtle a labyrinth of spiritual sound is indeed at once a great adventure and a liberal education. One hour of such listening may give us a deeper insight into the mysteries of

³¹ Janet Ruffing, *Discernment and our vow of obedience*. The MAST Journal, vol. 14, No. 1. 2004, 21

human nature, and a surer instinct for divine values, than a year's hard study or external intercourse with others³².

In the daily exercise of the fundamental responsibility of waking up the world, circumstances have arisen in the life of consecrated persons that has called for a deep reflection on the dynamics of obedience and discernment within the parameters of the consecrated life. In this piece, Consecrated persons become the *locus* or *locale* for a theological reflection on the dialogue between obedience and discernment.

The Theology of Consecrated Persons

By consecrated persons, it is meant the members of the Religious Institutes and Societies of Apostolic Life. They are lay persons or clerics who assume the evangelical counsels by means of a sacred bond, and become members of an institute of consecrated life according to the law of the church³³. They totally dedicate themselves to God with the goal of pursuing perfection in charity by faithfully embracing the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience. In this sense, consecrated persons respond freely to the invitation of the Holy Spirit to follow Christ the poor, the celibate, the obedient son, more closely, thus becoming in this life a sign of the life to come. "The evangelical counsels of chastity dedicated to God, poverty and obedience are based upon the words and examples of the Lord. They were further commanded by the Apostles and Fathers of the Church, as well as by the doctors and pastors of souls"³⁴. These counsels are referred to as evangelical because the religious vows are central to the life of Jesus and message and also because religious consecration is founded on baptismal consecration³⁵. The consecrated life is also traceable to the post-apostolic church, especially to those early Christians who dedicated themselves to a gospel-oriented life-style, to a radical following of Jesus Christ. The first person in this line was Anthony of Egypt. He was followed by a line of disciples, until it became an institution in the Church³⁶.

Very significant is the idea of consecration. It is derived from the word 'holy' or 'holiness'. In Hebrew it is *qadash* and in Greek *Hagios*; these are translated to

³² Herman Hesse, *Steppenwolf*. New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963, 43.

³³ Canon 573.2

³⁴ Lumen Gentium 43

³⁵ Fleming, D. L., Understanding a theology of Religious Life. In G. A. Arburckle and D. L. Fleming (Eds.). *Religious Life: Rebirth through Conversion*. New York: Alba House, 1990, p. 22

³⁶ Mary-Sylvia Nwachukwu, *Consecrated: A Vision of Religious Life from the Point of View of the Sacred*. Lagos: Change Publications, 2010, pp. 34-35.

mean 'to consecrate' (Lev 15:31; Ezek 14:7). In Numbers 6:5-7, 12, the Nazirites were referred to as consecrated because of their vows to God. This makes the person holy, a consecration that separates the person from others. Thus the word consecration implies a setting apart or a separation. This separation does not in any way imply superiority³⁷, or complete severance from those the consecrated are called to serve³⁸. The Second Vatican Council Document says, "The state which is constituted by the profession of the evangelical counsels, though it does not belong to the hierarchical structure of the church, nevertheless, undeniably belongs to the life and holiness of the church"³⁹. The document continues, "The holiness of the Church is fostered in a special way by the observance of the counsels proposed in the gospel by the Lord to his disciples. An eminent position among these is held by virginity or the celibate state"⁴⁰. Thus, another Second Vatican Council Document exhorts consecrated person thus, "Members of each institute should recall first of all that by professing the evangelical counsels they responded to a divine call so that by being not only dead to sin (cf. Rm 6:11) but also renouncing the world they may live for God alone. They have dedicated their entire lives to his service. This constitutes a special consecration, which is deeply rooted in that of Baptism and expresses it more fully"⁴¹.

Obedience and Consecrated Persons

Obedience derives from the Latin "*oboedire*" – *ob*: towards and *oedire*: "to hear". Put together, it means "to hear or listen towards". In popular English usage, it means to follow, heed, comply with commands or injunctions within a sphere of jurisdiction. It is from this perspective that obedience developed a law-based interpretation, meaning rule-keeping, commandment compliance, performance according to precepts, etc. In studying religious obedience, the concepts of authority and law are still of great relevance. However, it derives from the teachings, example and commands of Jesus in the Gospel⁴². Thus, obedience as a vow identifies the religious with Jesus and his life.⁴³ It is that general submission, which religious vow to God, and voluntarily promise to their superiors, in order

³⁷ Myers, A. C. *Holiness*. The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1987, p. 493.

³⁸ Myers, A. C. *Sanctify, Consecrate*. The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1987, p. 493.

³⁹ Lumen Gentium 44

⁴⁰ Lumen Gentium 42

⁴¹ Perfectae Caritatis 5

⁴² As clearly affirmed by the Vatican II Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life *Perfectae Caritatis* 5, these are the common element to the consecrated life.

⁴³ Cf. D. J. Ward, OSB, *Monastics : Life and Law. Reflections of Benedictine Canonist*, edited by Renée Branigan, OSB, The American Benedictine Academy, 1998.

to be directed by them in the ways of perfection, according to the purpose and constitutions of their Order or congregation.⁴⁴

In the Old Testament, obedience is expressed through the Hebrew word “*shema*” which means “*to hear, listen, obey*” and is abundantly recurrent in the Old Testament. God made obedience a *sine qua non* for belonging to his people: “*If you obey My voice ..., you shall be My possession.*” (Exod. 19:5). And after Moses received and transmitted the Decalogue to Israel, the people eagerly promised: “*All that the Lord has spoken we will do; we will be obedient.*” (Exod. 24:7). The Lord still insisted on obedience as listening in the book of Deuteronomy: “*Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one...*” (Deut. 6:4). Still through the Prophets, Yahweh told the rulers that he prefers obedience to any sacrifice they may offer: “*to obey is better than sacrifice*” (1 Sam. 15:22). At disobedience of Israel, God expressed his disappointed at them: “*My people did not listen to My voice; Israel did not obey Me*” (Ps. 81:11). So right from the Old Testament, Obedience has been at the heart of the relationship between God and his people.

In the New testament, obedience involves: freedom from ambition, which leads a person to choose a position of inferiority. It implies a spirit of humility, which esteems others as superior, and willingly yields them the first place; the sacrifice of independence and will; the spirit of self-denial and mortification, which keeps the passions under control; readiness to accept a common rule and direction. However, these are possible only through the obedience of Christ. Saint Paul teaches that believers should live by “*taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ*” (2 Cor. 10:5).

Christ’s first and last words in the Gospel of Luke clearly express the whole content and meaning of Obedience: “*Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?*” (Lk. 2:49) and “*Father, into your hands I commend my spirit*” (cf. Ps. 30:6; Lk. 23:46), an echo in history of the words of the psalmist (Ps. 39:7-9) which the author of the Letter to the Hebrews puts on the lips of Christ from the very beginning: “*When Christ came into the world, he said ... ‘See, God, I have come to do your will, O God’*” (Heb. 10:5-7).⁴⁵

In the Lord’s prayer, Scripture says: “*Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven*” (Mt. 6:10). This is repeated in anguish at Gethsemane: “*Not what I want, but what*

⁴⁴ A. Vermeersch, *Religious Obedience*, in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 11. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911. 27 Apr. 2015 <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11182a.htm>>.

⁴⁵ Cf. J. Rovira, CMF, *Authority and Obedience in Religious Life. On the Instruction “Faciem Tuam,”* in UISG n° 138 (2008), 6-7.

you want” (Mt. 26:39,42). It is exercised in the midst of trials: “He learned obedience through what he suffered” (Heb. 5:8), an obedience “to the point of death– even death on a cross” (Ph. 2:69), ever real like daily “food” (Jn. 4:34). As a result, on the cross Christ could say: “It is accomplished” (Jn. 19:30). He was the Father’s “yes” to humanity (God’s fidelity to humanity) as well as humanity’s “yes” to the Father (total obedience) (cf. 2 Cor 1:20; Acts 1:4-5; 3:14). Such obedience is “not servile but filial ... a reflection in history of the loving harmony between the three Divine Persons.”⁴⁶ So, eagerness to do the will of God in all things is a mark of the obedience to God which led Christ to say “I do always the things which please my Father” (Jn. 7:29).

In professing obedience, the religious offer the full surrender of their own will as a sacrifice of themselves to God and so are united permanently and securely to God’s salvific will.⁴⁷ Thus, Obedience to God becomes:

The path of growth and, therefore, of freedom for the person because this obedience allows for the acceptance of a plan or a will different from one’s own that not only does not deaden or lessen human dignity but is its basis. At the same time, freedom is also in itself a path of obedience, because it is in obeying the plan of the Father, in a childlike way, that the believer fulfils his or her freedom⁴⁸.

The Church does not distinguish between those who command and those who obey since all actually obey. Thus, Saint Augustine of Hippo referred to his flock as his fellow disciples on the way⁴⁹. He constantly regarded himself as a labourer in the vineyard working with his flock with the strength provided by the Lord.⁵⁰

The Meaning of Discernment

Discernment is from the Greek words *dia krisis*, which is a compound word taken from the verb *krinein*. It also has a Latin root *discernere*. From both Greek and Latin origins, it means to separate, to sift, to distinguish. To achieve this would mean that the person who discerns have a special capacity to weight a thing or a situation and draw the right conclusion from it. It is a process that helps a person to see without ambiguities the right in the process of making a choice or taking a decision⁵¹. Theologically, it is a “conscious experience of God’s grace drawing

⁴⁶ St. John-Paul II, *Vita Consacrata* 21d.

⁴⁷ Cf. *Perfectae Caritatis* 14.

⁴⁸ CICLESAL, *Faciem Tuam*. 5

⁴⁹ Cf. Saint Augustine, *Sermon* 134, 1.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 49, 2.

⁵¹ Fidelis Ogbunu, *Understanding God’s will and discernment of spirits*. Enugu: Snaap press, 2004, 4.

one to a course of action or exposing the influence that a projected course of action will have on one's relationship to God in Christ"⁵². In sum, it is "disentangling the voice of God from the noise of other voices"⁵³. It is an insertion into a process of finding and owning the will of God, or in other words of Christian decision making. Thus, Bill will write that "a discernment which does not lead to a decision is incomplete, has been aborted somewhere along the way. When a decision has been reached, it becomes a concrete expression, an incarnation of one's desires to respond to God's love and to serve his kingdom"⁵⁴.

In the Old Testament, the word 'to discern' appears about 23 times and is used in the context of judging between two things. Many of the instances of its usage include: Moses explaining to Jethro how he sits in judgment and decides cases between disputes (Exodus 18:16); Solomon asks God (1 Kings 3:9) for the charism (divine influence) of an understanding mind or hearing heart to distinguish between right and wrong in the government of his people when hearing judicial cases (v.11); officials are appointed to judge Israel (1 Chronicles 26:29); and as judges Israel's priests are to decide in accordance with God's Law (Ezekiel 44:24). God himself is also presented as Judge: he will judge between the idolatrous and faithful in Israel (Ezekiel 20:35-36); as Shepherd of the flock of Israel he will judge or separate out the good and bad sheep, particularly their leaders, (Ezekiel 34:17, 20) and judge the nations for their treatment of his people (i.e. judge between the two; Joel 4:2, 12 LXX). In the heavenly realm God is presented as judging angels (Job 21:22) because God presides over the heavenly court (Psalm 81:1 LXX). From the foregoing, the usage of the word 'to discern' is within the context of judgment: to discern between two opposing choices in a judicial sense.

In the New Testament, it refers to the ability to distinguish or differentiate between good and evil, which is the basic message of Hebrews 5:11-14. It is possessed through training the human will like an athlete practices in this way, the person trains himself, through constant practice to distinguish between good and evil. It is the mother of all virtues as well as their guide. It clears the vision, deepens understanding and regulates the inner life. However, there are two basic conditions for discernment: the first is freedom, that is, freedom of the will from

⁵² Bill Schock, *A collection of readings Vol ii*, Bangalore, Saint Pauls, 1997, 119.

⁵³ Herman Hesse, *Steppenwolf*. New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963, 43.

⁵⁴ Bill Schock, *A collection of readings Vol ii*, Bangalore, Saint Pauls, 1997, 119.

disordered affections, for their presence opposes the freedom of the will⁵⁵; secondly, divesting oneself of self-love, self-will and self-interest⁵⁶.

Religious Obedience Nurtures Discernment

Just as the sun produces light, obedience enhances and brightens discernment. Hence, where there is no obedience, there can't be discernment. If discernment is about an insertion into a process of finding and owning the will of God, to find this will, a person must be open to that will by being ready to give up his or her own will for the divine will. The true measure of our obedience determines the level of our discernment. Our refusal to follow God's leading or direction would obstruct the revelation of his will for us, for obedience is searching for the will of God to fulfil it. This understanding, a very strong link between obedience and discernment is established, such that to fail in obedience would imply a failure in discernment. At the base of both obedience and discernment is spiritual poverty, which helps us to recognise God as God and his will for us. Spiritual poverty would, therefore, mean the complete emptying of ourselves so that we may embrace God's saving action.

Religious Obedience Leads to Discernment

In religious obedience, the Major Superior who is obeyed through his instructions and teachings helps the religious to discover the will of God for himself or herself. Saint Augustine in his rule would therefore instruct the brothers: "The superior should be obeyed as a father with the respect due to him so as not to offend God in his person, and even more so, the priest who bears responsibility for you all"⁵⁷. In obeying the Superior, the divine will for the particular religious is discovered and followed. The Major Superior is there to see that the precepts of the particular congregation, which has been put in place to help the members discover the will of God for them is followed. According to Augustine: "But it shall pertain chiefly to the superior to see that these precepts are all observed and, if any point has been neglected, to take care that the transgression is not carelessly overlooked but is punished and corrected"⁵⁸.

Discernment, Obedience and Sycophancy

⁵⁵ St Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, 23.

⁵⁶ St Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, 189.

⁵⁷ Rule of Saint Augustine, Chapter VII, No. 44.

⁵⁸ Rule of Saint Augustine, Chapter VII, No. 45.

True obedience is not sycophancy, that is, of those who avoid any obstacle or hurt, who value their own comfort above all: obedience is truthfulness, an obedience animated by the enthusiastic energy of love, that is the true obedience which has made the Church fruitful over the centuries, freeing her from Babylonian temptation and bringing her back to the side of her crucified Lord. Obedience is demonstrated in the humble and opportune presentation of one's personal point of view in the sincere desire to seek the truth in love; in continual respect for everyone, including, therefore, those who exercise the service of authority with the expectation that others will respect differences among members; in the untiring effort to reconcile the demands of obedience to legitimate authority with the demands which cannot be abandoned in conscience: let us recall the words of Saint Paul (*Rom. 14-15; 1Cor. 8-10. Gaudium et Spes* teaches that:

Deep within their consciences men and women discover a law which they have not laid upon themselves and which they must obey. Its voice, ever calling them to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, tells them inwardly at the right moment: do this, shun that. For they have in their hearts a law inscribed by God. Their dignity rests on observing this law, and by it they will be judged. Their conscience is people's most secret core, and their sanctuary. There they are alone with God whose voice echoes in their depths. . . . Through loyalty to conscience, Christians are joined to others in the search for truth and for the right solution to so many moral problems⁵⁹.

This is based on the shared theology that God speaks through all of us and not just some of us. People who act with this attitude certainly serve the Church, and they help us know and accomplish the will of God⁶⁰, especially when an obedience that does not strengthen our commitment to the gospel way of love is demanded of the religious.

This does not mean that everyone should act based on his own conscience without reference to the community and the patrimony of the particular congregation. The religious must therefore engage in constant spiritual consultation with his confessor or others who could help spiritually. There is also the need to share one's spiritual experiences with the community in which a person lives since no one can really be sure of having arrived at the will of God.

⁵⁹ *Gaudium et Spes* no. 16

⁶⁰ Cf. *Lumen Gentium* 37a ; *Code of Canon Law* 212; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 907 and 911.

This was the way Paul acted despite the fact that he had received great revelations from God. He wrote: "Then I laid before them, though only in a private meeting with the acknowledged leaders, the gospel that I proclaim among the gentiles, in order to make sure that I was not running or had not run in vain"⁶¹. Sharing personal spiritual movements with an ecclesial community would help the individual religious to proceed with security.

Obedience and Discernment and Alienated Relationship with Authority

The vows that religious have made, has committed them to cooperate with legitimate authority within the limits defined by our various constitutions. And by legitimate authority, it is meant the entire governance structure of the particular religious Institute: the chapter, the Provincial and his Council, regional assemblies, regional leaders, local coordinators and those who hold delegated authority⁶². The relationship of a particular religious with the legitimate authority requires a sustained dialogue and an ongoing relationship. Obedience in this case would, therefore, imply openness, prayer, discussion and dialogue⁶³. However, if relationship with authority have been untrustworthy and deceptive, obedience and discernment would become difficult without prejudice. To avoid this kind of scenario that makes obedience difficult and insincere, leaders of religious institutes must strive to provide a leadership that stimulates fidelity to the charism of the particular institute and commitment to mission⁶⁴. Where there are imbalances in dialogue, it is incumbent on the more powerful to create the conditions of safety that foster dialogue and integrity of word and deed.

Conclusion

The foregoing has studied the meaning and nature of obedience and discernment, and the interaction of obedience and discernment in the life of consecrated persons. During this period marked by the Holy Father, Pope Francis as the Year of Consecrated Life, it is necessary that the Consecrated life takes a fruitful journey of renewal. This is a period marked out by the Bishop of Rome to be grace filled and marked by the presence of the Spirit. In this process of renewal, the elements of obedience and discernment are fundamental. The challenge to examine our fidelity to our consecration and to the mission entrusted to us must be done in the spirit of obedience and discernment.

⁶¹ Galatians 1:1-2

⁶² Janet Ruffing, *Discernment and our vow of obedience*. The MAST Journal, vol. 14, No. 1. 2004, 22

⁶³ Janet Ruffing, *Discernment and our vow of obedience*. The MAST Journal, vol. 14, No. 1. 2004, 22

⁶⁴ Kanu, Ikechukwu Anthony, *Echoes of Hope: The stand of the Conference of Major Superiors of Nigeria on Issues of Faith and Life*. Nigeria: CMSN. 2013, 39.