

#### 14. OBEDIENCE AND FRATERNAL CHARITY

Our basic christian obedience acquires a special dimension at religious profession. However, even more than the other evangelical counsels, religious obedience takes on special characteristics according to the charism and spirituality of the Institute in which it is practised. Its exercise has also been strongly influenced throughout history by the sociological background of the times. « This is why the Benedictine monastery acquired the traits of the roman family; the organization of feudal society passed into the Cistercian abbey; the Dominican community reflects the democratic ideal of medieval communities; the Company of Jesus reproduces the internal architecture of a strongly centralized ecclesiastical society. » (1). These orders have their own way of adapting the practice of obedience to suit the mentalities of different generations. Such adaptation is necessary. Ways of speaking about obedience which were once quite acceptable are displeasing today. « With regard to evangelical content neither christian obedience nor, more particularly, religious obedience has

---

(1) J. M. TILLARD, « *Problemas en torno e la obediencia* », in *Vida Religiosa*, Vol. 42, N. 327, (1977) p. 444.

anything to do with the obedience of an *automaton*, a *disciple*, a *slave*, a *child*, a *son*, a *soldier* or a *subject*. » (2).

It is important not to put religious obedience into wrong socio-cultural categories. It can be confusing and unproductive to look too much to Benedictine or Jesuit concepts in order to work out what our 'religious obedience' ought to be. Here we need to recall the vital importance of a text already quoted:

« Those who enter our Society can very well let others surpass them in knowledge, mortification and poverty; but when it comes to *obedience and mutual charity*, they will allow no one to do better than they. » (3).

As Fr. Vermin points out (4), here we get an essential insight into Fr. Chevalier's view of how his Society was to live and operate. It is worth repeating that Fr. Chevalier « does not say that as MSC we can leave the mortification and poverty to others while we have a relatively easy time of it paying attention to obedience and mutual charity. He indicates rather that we embrace the mortification and accept the personal poverty implied in a dedicated living of obedience and mutual charity. » (5). Obedience is seen in the context of mutual charity, the context of community generously lived. I therefore believe that the primary field for ascetical effort for

---

(2) J. Alvarez Gomez, « *Diversas formas de obediencia religiosa* », *Vida Religiosa*, Vol. cit. p. 431.

(3) *Formula Instituti*, par. 4, 3.

(4) « *Le Père Jules Chevalier* », pp. 374-375.

(5) cf. Ch. 12.

an MSC must be that of being a member of the MSC community, belonging to the group, giving himself to and through the group, renouncing all independent action, helping to build community.

It is clear that for Fr. Chevalier obedience and community (in the sense of *koinonia*, fellowship, brotherhood) were inseparably bound together. As elements of our MSC vocation they must be lived as essential and as complementary. An MSC who does not really live as one who « belongs » to the group is not living the kind of mutual charity which Fr. Chevalier wanted. If he does not see obedience and the exercise of authority as operating within the 'mutual charity' of community and brotherhood, he has falsified the Founder's view of obedience.

This is one more instance of how Fr. Chevalier's fundamental insights are adaptable to different times while remaining substantially unchanged. The following passage could well be a commentary on Fr. Chevalier's view. It is, in fact, a proposal of « some conclusions regarding the way in which we should live the permanently valid values of evangelical obedience »:

« a) Religious obedience should be lived as availability to community life. In reality obedience is no more than a dimension of community life which consists in listening, giving attention, freely accepting, consenting (*sentire cum*)... That is, obedience is the manifestation of the relations of religious with other religious, and naturally with the one who, in the community, is the sign of the life of communion and fraternity of all.

b) Religious obedience has to be lived as availability to the service of men. The *being* and *doing* of religious has a very special characteristic: availability to the call of all men. The witness which religious try to give is expressed through a service which they have not chosen, but to which they have been called, as Christ was in receiving a mission from his Father. Logically, this radical availability includes an obedience to the service which the community has to give. Obedience to authority within the community is justified in the measure that authority has to unify this decision of service. In turn this signifies that, within the community, all make their contribution to seeing more clearly which is the best way to serve.

c) Religious obedience demands personal commitment and responsibility. Certainly, to obey is to accept certain rules of operation which are necessary wherever reasonable beings want to live reasonably together. However such acceptance is not to be merely passive as could have been the ideal in a not too distant past. Today obedience is expressed through the co-responsibility and the personal commitment of all the members of the community, not only of the one who exercises authority.

d) Religious obedience demands realism from all concerned: i.e. the acceptance of decisions taken by those in charge, decisions which will not always fit in with my own desires — this has to be taken for granted often enough. It is clear that, even after thorough consultation, there will be cases where there is no unanimity. This is when we have to be realistic, accepting all the consequences of a life in brotherhood and in communion. We have to take into account that, in the ultimate instance, religious

obedience is a practical reality not merely a speculative theory. And it will be easy to accept the sacrifice of self and of my own preferences only if a religious sees things in the perspective of the faith. When, in the demands of obedience, some things are difficult, there is no call to cry to heaven as if there were some question of injustice against one's own rights. Whoever has consecrated himself without reserve to the service of others, has, like Christ himself, renounced his own rights on the altar of service. This truth can be accepted only in the light of faith. In any other light it will appear to be without sense. Whoever sets out to follow Christ will have to accept being treated as he was. And Christ was the one without rights. (This of course does not suggest that the superior has *carte-blanc* to act as a despot).

e) The supreme meaning of religious obedience consists in allowing the grace of God to have full play in us. Only in this way will we be a sign of that liberty for which modern man hungers so much. However, religious have to show that they are free in the midst of a common life and that they *can* grow and develop fully within a submission which is accepted. » (6).

The community aspect of obedience is clear in this text. There is also a strong emphasis on service. Further comment is needed on both points. However, before such comment is made, it would be well to consider another text written by Fr. Chevalier: « The Master of Novices will endeavour to make them love, cherish and practise especially *obedience* and *humility*

---

(6) J. Alvarez Gomez, art. cit. pp. 432-434.

which should be the chief virtues of the order because they are those of the Heart of Jesus » (7). This text has been used by Novice Masters and Superiors to bolster an insistence that religious should be humble and do what they are told. This can be a trouble-saving device on the part of those in charge, but it would not seem to do justice to the spiritual richness suggested by Fr. Founder. Nor does it suggest the right approach to religious obedience. Furthermore it fails to situate obedience within the coherent vision and response of an MSC spirituality.

If we are to be more positive and constructive, we need to go back to the text of Matthew, 11, 25-30 which we have already discussed at some length. We saw that « humility », poverty of spirit, kindness, humanness were the qualities which typified the compassionate Christ who came to give rest to all who labour and are burdened. The 'obedience' to which we are called has the same source and the same scope. It is linked with service — with this special kind of service.

In a work of this kind there is no place for prolonged biblical exegesis. One quotation will have to suffice:

In commenting on this passage of St. Matthew, Feuillet writes of: « the allusion to the absolutely universal doctrinal mission of the Servant of Jahweh. This allusion is implied by the qualities which Jesus applies to himself as teacher: 'I am meek and humble

(7) *Règles and Formula Instituti.*

(8) A. Feuillet, « *Les Mystère de l'Amour Divin dans la Théologie Johannique* », Paris, Gabalda, 1972, pp. 164, 165, 71.

of heart... ' Jesus' attitude recalls above all that of the humble Servant of Yahweh, careful not to break the broken reed (Is. 42,3) who by his words strengthens the discouraged (Is. 50, 4)... The Servant declares that he is constantly listening to what Yahweh is saying to him to instruct and strengthen men... the Servant of Yahweh, the intimate friend of God, accepts to be counted among the guilty in order to ensure the salvation of a sinful world. » (8).

In the obedience of Christ the Servant of Jahweh, (even as indicated by this short text) there are three aspects which should be present in our own obedience as we follow Christ.

a) *Obedience as service*, where all that we have said about the mission of Christ is included, as well as what has been said about our sharing in that mission.

b) *Obedience as « listening »*. « In biblical language, obedience is 'to listen to the voice of someone', in reality to listen to the voice of God. It is to keep one's ears and heart open to the words of the one who speaks to us. Obedience is far more than conforming or submitting to a moral code. Obedience is a living response equivalent to a person's giving himself to the words of another (Jer. 7, 23-24; Psalm 81,12) It is a relationship between persons. Here lies the radical distinction between obedience and submission. Obedience in the sense of interpersonal relationship, of listening to the voice of another, is something co-natural to man.

From this point of view one can not speak of any difficulty or sacrifice implied by obedience. Dialogue

is easy between persons who love one another, but only in the measure that they do love. The problem of obedience, basically, is a problem of personal relationships, not of submission. Any sacrifice implied in obedience is not that of doing what someone else says; it comes rather from the relationship which exists between the one who commands and the one who obeys. The same thing can be easily accepted if proposed by a person whom we love, but rejected as impossible or beyond our forces if proposed by someone from whom we feel distant. Evangelical obedience supposes communion and love. Only where there is a personal love-relationship is there obedience and dialogue. » (9) Here we are brought back to Fr. Chevalier's « obedience and mutual charity ».

c) *Obedience as sacrifice*. Christ's loving acceptance of the Father's will, his willing acceptance of his mission sent him into a sinful world. In order to undo man's disobedience, in order to lead men back to the way of life and listening to God, he became obedient even unto death (10). To speak of religious obedience only as sacrifice is to distort it. But to speak of obedience as if it could exist without self-sacrifice is to forget the 'mystery' of Christ's obedience into which we enter. It is also to forget the reality of being called to mission within a limited human church, within a human community.

« The true concept of obedience integrates both elements: obedience is sacrifice and service, it is

---

(9) Pedro Franquesa, « *Obediencia y Biblia* », in *Vida Religiosa*, Vol. cit. p. 414-415.

(10) Phil. 2, 8.

renunciation ad prudence (*recta ratio agibilium*) although not always in equal proportion. The ways in which the two elements combine are many and varied. However, both are always present in the exercise of obedience. Perhaps the key-point for the exercise of faith and reason here is to discover what service and what sacrifice are asked of us. At times the service we are asked for is simply our sacrifice, our renunciation, not doing what we think best, but doing what others think. This renunciation is a real service we give to the community » (11).

Obedience, fraternal charity, service, mission and community are realities which blend together in MSC life and brotherhood. Christ came to redeem men to make them children of God. There is no redemption in isolation. In a sense our mission is to « create christian community », to contribute actively and consciously to building brotherhood. While we do not want to establish « closed communities », the creating of a real religious brotherhood is part of our mission. Some of our members — provincials, other superiors and many brothers will have a special role to play in this or a special « care ministry » to exercise.

As we saw in a previous chapter, there are a number of factors which, in recent times, have contributed to a certain individualism inimical to true community. On the other hand, among younger religious there is a strong aspiration towards brotherhood. Good in itself, this aspiration is at times accompanied by 'idyllic' expectations which can not be realized.

---

(11) Pedro Franquesa, art. cit. p. 419.

Realism is needed to build community as much as it is needed for obedience. And faith is needed for both.

Many good things have been written on community today. The following quotation may well serve to conclude this chapter:

« ... it is important to remember that the christian community is a waiting community, that is, a community which not only creates a sense of belonging but also a sense of estrangement. In the christian community we say to each other, ' we are together, but we can not fulfil each other... we help each other, but we also have to remind each other that our destiny is beyond our togetherness.' The support of the Christian community is a support in common expectation. That requires a constant criticism of anyone who makes the community into a safe shelter or a cosy clique, and a constant encouragement to look forward to what is to come... It is of special importance to remind each other that, as members of the christian community, we are not primarily for each other but for God. Our eyes should not remain fixed on each other but be directed forward to what is dawning on the horizon of our existence. We discover each other by following the same vocation and by supporting each other in the same search. Therefore the christian community is not a closed circle of people embracing each other, but a forward-moving group of companions bound together by the same voice asking for their attention » (12).

---

(12) Henri Nouwen, « *Reaching Out* », Collins, London 1976, pp. 140-141.

## 15. A LOVE WHICH LIBERATES

Speaking to a group of Superiors General, Fr. Leouw proposed the following parable for our consideration:

« In the realm of nature, in the history of the progress of beings towards perfection, there existed at one time a type of being known as invertebrates. These were well-constituted animals, but for protection they needed a shell or a carapace. They had no backbone (for example, the oyster, the mussel, the lobster...) But then nature evolved. The vertebrates appeared, beings furnished with a backbone. They no longer had a shell.

I have known the time (he said) when we lived protected by shells: the cloister, the habit, the rule, etc. Life became such that the shells had to be discarded. However, if we do not effect the same evolution as in nature, if we do not replace the shell with a backbone, we find ourselves at the mercy of the first devouring fish that comes our way...

Secularization is the waltz of the shells, and the fish can go by the name of Margaret or Karl Marx: In either case, it will devour us.