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Canons Regular of Jesus the Lord...

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**Most Holy Mother of God Catholic Parish
Volodarskovo 22
690001 Vladivostok, Russian Federation**

September 29, 2005

Dear "Searchers,"

Happy Feast of the Holy Angels, Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael. I'm always happy on the angels' feastday, and it is always a joy to celebrate mass on this day. After all, the archangels are the clergy of the temple of heaven, and so we canons share a ministry with them! We are the clergy of the temple of the Lord on earth, but the Lord is the same Lord, and the work is the same: praise, prayer, and being sent as defenders, messengers, and healers of God's people. Surely the Holy Angels share our joy, and provide us with the same defense, inspiration, and health that they give to others. St John's Apocalypse provides the insight into the congruence of the heavenly and earthly liturgy, and it is fun to read Scott Hahn's book on that subject, "The Lamb's Supper", even though the book is written in somewhat of a ragged way—Maybe that is better for the average reader. I'd suggest that you read it if you haven't.

I'll keep this letter short because I'm attaching an article by our friend Doug McManaman about obedience. Obedience is one of the three counsels of the Gospel, so it is worth reflecting on for those thinking about religious life.

God bless you. Yours truly,

V Rev Myron Effing, C.J.D.

The Nobility of Obedience

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D. McManaman



Whenever I ask my students what comes to mind when I mention the word "obedience", their response is invariably, "dog". Obedience, in their minds, is a canine trait, and thus well below the dignity of the human person. The idea that freedom means doing what you want to do and not what another would have you do, and that happiness is directly proportionate to one's individual freedom, is so ingrained in the minds of young people that the very suggestion that obedience is a virtue is met with a look of genuine perplexity.

But obedience is not really a specifically canine trait at all—even in dogs. Far from being below us, obedience is actually well above us. Through it, we

become more than what we are without ceasing to be what we are. Allow me to explain.

An obedient animal is one that is trained to obey the will of its master, a human person endowed with reason. The master's intention in training the animal is to render its behavior more "reasonable". A dog that has a natural propensity to bite people, to defecate anywhere it feels, or to chase down whatever moves, is one that needs to be trained if it is to live among human beings in a household setting. An obedient dog will not bite, or run out onto the street and attack pedestrians, or defecate in the house. It will sit, or approach when called, etc. Its powers are disposed to act in accordance with reason, which exists not in him, but in the person who trains the dog to obey.

And so even though the obedient animal remains a non-rational brute, its behavior has *a semblance of reason* by virtue of the training of its master. That is why an obedient animal is much more likable than a disobedient one; for it behaves well without its being aware of it. But most importantly, its behavior exhibits a quality that exceeds the animal's natural capacity. The significance of its behavior is beyond its ability to appreciate or understand. Its powers are disposed by a power that it does not have, a power that is superior to all its natural powers, namely reason. Thus, an obedient animal is more than what he is (a non-rational brute animal having a semblance of reason) without ceasing to be what he is (a non-rational brute that does not understand himself or what he is doing). A disobedient animal, one that simply does what it desires, is less than an obedient one, not more.

Obedience in a man is of a different nature than obedience in an animal; a man obeys like a man, not like a brute animal. The latter obeys as a result of a memory association between a behavior and a subsequent experience of pleasure or pain. But a fully human obedience is rooted in intelligence and will. And since prudence is the mother of the virtues, obedience, in order to be truly virtuous, must be prudent, intelligent, and carried out willingly. That being said, it is similarly the case that just as an obedient animal is more than what he is without ceasing to be what he is, so too, a man *obedient to the law of God* is more than what he is without ceasing to be what he is. Just as an obedient animal contains within himself a supra-animal quality, so too a man obedient to *divine law* carries in himself a supra-human quality. An obedient man is therefore much more than a disobedient one, not less. Hence, obedience is not below our dignity, but well above it.

Let's consider this from another angle. Genuinely human love is loving another human person *as another self*. We quite naturally will the best for ourselves, but a genuinely unselfish love involves willing the best for the other *as if he were another me*, despite how I might feel about him. By learning to love another in this way, we expand and enlarge as human persons; for in a sense, I have become this person and that person without ceasing to be myself. Selfishness, on the other hand, is a refusal to expand and enlarge humanly and morally.

Similarly, obedience brings about an expansion and enlarging of the self; for it requires that we give up our own will (self-will) and freely adopt the other's will as our own. My will becomes his will. As long as his will is not contrary to divine or natural law, to adopt it is to transcend oneself, that is, to become more than oneself without ceasing to be oneself. To obey someone who exhorts us to choose contrary to the natural moral law is indeed below us, because such choices are self-destructive and contrary to our nature. In this case, obedience does not enlarge the human person, but shrinks him.

But genuine obedience in the human person involves at the same time a host of other virtues. First, it requires the intelligence to recognize that someone has a superior quality that we lack, for example, a certain charisma, or perhaps that he or she is smarter, or holier, or wiser, or has more experience than we have and can probably see things that we cannot at this point in our lives. It also involves humility, which in turn requires the intelligence to know our own limits, and is the

ability to moderate the love we have of our own excellence and accept our known limitations. Hence, there is very little nobility in doing one's own thing in life, that is, in being one's own master or one's own god.

Obedience and the Church

Obedience in the human person is never entirely blind--otherwise it would not be a *human* virtue. But there is a very real element of "unknowing" in it. To obey another is often--perhaps not always--an act of trust in another; for example, a child who obeys his mother and brushes his teeth every day does not fully understand why he ought to do so, but he trusts her all the same. The child's obedience contains an element of ignorance, which is part and parcel of this virtue. Moreover, this lack of understanding contributes to the merit of obedience; for his obedience raises him above his ignorance in a certain sense. That is why every young Catholic is given a glorious opportunity, by means of obedience, to achieve a nobility that exceeds his or her natural capacity at the moment. How many young people, for instance, fully understand why non-marital intercourse is morally wrong? And how many young married couples trying to have children, but cannot do so for some reason, fully understand why *In Vitro* Fertilization or Artificial Insemination are wrong? There are a host of moral questions that at first most of us are not able to fully resolve on our own. All that is left for us, initially at least, is either to obey the Church or not. If God has definitively revealed Himself in the Person of Christ, and if Christ is intimately united to the Church, His Mystical Body, then to obey the Church without fully understanding is to become more than what one is without ceasing to be what one is.

There are a number of theological principles that bring us some assurance that our obedience to the Church is not misplaced. Firstly, the Church has had two thousand years to study God and man; a young person has had 14-28 years, a large portion of which was devoted to learning the multiplication table and how to spell. Moreover, Christ commissioned the Apostles to go out to all nations and teach them "all the commands I gave you" (Mt 28, 19-20). He also assured them: "I am with you always; yes, to the end of time" (Mt 28, 20). Jesus also said to his Apostles: "I shall ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you for ever, that Spirit of truth whom the world can never receive, since it neither sees nor knows him (Jn 14, 16-17). But the Church has received him: "But when the Spirit of truth comes he will lead you to the complete truth" (Jn 16, 13).

In fact, it is not possible to have faith in God and obey Him unless He tells us something about Himself. The reason is that faith means accepting as true something somebody tells you because you have evidence that the speaker is well informed about the subject and is honest. Unless God reveals something about Himself that exceeds the grasp of reason, thus requiring our trust, then faith, strictly speaking, is not an option. Christians believe not only that God has the ability to reveal Himself, but that He has in fact done so completely and definitively in the Person of Christ. This self-disclosure in the flesh accords with man's specific mode of knowing; as Aristotle would say: "Nothing is in the intellect that is not first in the senses".

But genuine obedience is not so much obedience to an idea as it is to a person or persons. Man can obey God because He has revealed Himself; he can obey God because He has become flesh and dwelt among us. And so, unless the risen Christ makes himself corporeally present to us within history, we cannot acquire the glory of obedience in the fullest sense of the word. We believe, however, that He is corporeally and intimately present to us in His Mystical Body, the Church. For he told us: "Whoever listens to you, listens to me, and anyone who rejects you rejects me, and those who reject me reject the one who sent me" (Lk 10, 16; Cf 1 Co 12: 12-30).

These points are not an overstatement. Consider that if God loves us and wants us to do His will, it

is reasonable to expect that He reveal it. And if He is omnipotent and limited by nothing, then He is able to preserve uncorrupted all that He has revealed about Himself (the deposit of faith) throughout history, even through the instrumentality of unworthy and sinful hands. And it is fitting that He preserve the deposit of faith within an institution made up of unworthy members because the fall of man came through an act of disobedience, that is, through self-exaltation, the pursuit of self-will, and a rejection of our status as "children", dependent upon God. Man's salvation, accordingly, comes to him through obedience, that is, through self-abnegation and the surrender of self-will, and the willing acceptance of our permanent status as "children": "Unless you change and become as little children, you will never enter the kingdom of God" (Mt 18, 3) As St. Alphonsus of Ligouri writes:

For our greater merit, the Lord desires to lead us to salvation through faith, and for this reason, he does not speak to us Himself; rather He manifests His will through the commands of superiors... Thus, it is more meritorious to obey man out of love of God, than to obey God Himself (*The Route to the Highest Perfection*)

The Difficulty of Obedience

But obedience to God--let alone to the Church composed of sinful members--is especially difficult for the human person; for man has an inclination to sin. We carry within us the wounds of Original Sin, which among other things is a propensity to choose our own will over "Thy will". It is a propensity to arrogance. Obedience is so difficult that human beings continue to go to great lengths creating complex systems of religious thought that have only the appearance of religion, nothing more. Such is the New Age, an age old deception that is both anti-dogmatic and thoroughly pantheistic. Genuine religion requires obedience, but if God and the self are identical, there is no real requirement to obey anyone, for one's will automatically coincides with the divine will. Deepak Chopra, modern New Age guru writes: "You transcend life. You transcend death. You are the spirit that always was and always will be" (*The Spontaneous Fulfillment of Desire*, 258). Further on he writes: "You are the luminous mystery in which the entire universe with all its forms and phenomena arises and subsides" (*Ibid.*, 261). Caroline Myss, a New Age author whose pantheism is less conspicuous than Chopra's, will often speak of the importance of "surrendering to the divine", but the final lines of her *Anatomy of the Spirit* give her away: "We contain the scripture. We contain Divinity. We are Divinity" (290).

And of course, the anti-dogmatic character of New Age thinking is rooted in nothing other than man's propensity not to put up with anyone telling him what to do--even God; hence, Chopra's distortion of an important biblical principle: "Jesus says: 'Ask and you shall receive. Knock and it shall be opened unto you. Seek and you will find.'...So learn to ask the truth of yourself. Learn to knock on the door of your own being. This is what is known as intuition, creativity, vision, and prophecy" (*Ibid.*, 282).

But Christ never exhorted anyone to obey a divine principle that is identical to one's self--as if there is such a thing--, nor to find truth within oneself, much less to knock on the door of one's own being. Rather, he calls us to obey him: "If you wish to be perfect, go and sell what you own and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." He also says: "I am the light of the world; anyone who follows me will not be walking in the dark; he will have the light of life" (Jn 8, 12).

In following Christ, we are following one who is himself obedient, and perfectly so. He alone is divine, the Second Person of the Trinity, and yet his life is one of perfect obedience to the Father: "I have come from heaven, not to do my own will, but to do the will of the one who sent me" (Jn 6, 38; Cf Jn 8: 28-29). The perfection of his obedience is manifest on Calvary: "He humbled himself,

becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross" (Phil 2: 9).

It seems most of us are not called to the perfection of the Evangelical Counsel of obedience (obedience to a superior of a religious order), but we are certainly called to obey God as he makes Himself known through the history of his covenanted people, Israel, and ultimately through the Person of Christ, who is present in the Church that he established on Peter. And just as an obedient animal has opened up before it a host of opportunities and experiences that would otherwise be closed off to it (trips, shows, parades, human companionship, etc.), so too a person qualified by the virtue of obedience enjoys a freedom that surpasses anything that would otherwise be open to him. Be young, certainly; but be wise. Submit to God and trust the Church.

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