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I. Obedience - Learning to Listen

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LIVING THE VOW OF OBEDIENCE TODAY

I. OBEDIENCE – LEARNING TO LISTEN

1.1 DIALOGUE OF THE DEAF AND CONSTRUCTIVE DIALOGUE

Who hasn't experienced endless meetings from which no concrete decision emerges? Each participant arrives with his own ideas and makes no effort to listen to the arguments of the others. Or else, when problems arise, each one has his own opinion on the question and refuses to listen to the explanations of others. Besides, it can happen that many insist on speaking at the same time and this prevents any dialogue taking place. This is as true in the case of a married couple who are not getting on as it is in politics featuring completely opposite tendencies. Do we not see this in a dialogue between a confrere and his Superior? It is every bit as true in a religious community where the atmosphere is marked by tension. Either we argue with one another or else we no longer speak to each other!

Fortunately, other possibilities exist – such as sitting down together and striving to understand what others are saying. It is probable that the other speakers are going to be in opposition to my own particular way of thinking and perhaps will induce me to change my opinion. But at least it is possible to envisage new paths. Is it not the role of chapters or of councils

at every level to facilitate a climate of listening and dialogue which will give constructive answers to the questions which are presenting themselves or to new challenges? The hours of mutual sharing and listening to each others' views will result in decisions which will be owned by the decision-makers.

1.2 LOOKING AT THE OBEDIENT CHRIST

*T*he evangelists all describe the scene: Jesus withdraws to a lonely place, sometimes without his disciples even knowing, and there he prays. Saint Luke mentions this prayer before all the major acts in his ministry (Lk 6 12-13). We do not know the exact content of this encounter with the Father but we can guess it from the attitude and determination of Christ. He sets himself to listen to his Father in order to do his will. For his part, the Father listens to his Son and confirms him in his mission (Jn 11, 41-42). "May your will be done"; this request of the "Our Father" repeated so many times by Christians reflects first of all the prayer of Jesus himself. He has discerned and deepened the meaning of his mission and has accepted all its consequences in the context of sustained prayer. The Gospels make frequent mention of this availability.

It is in this way that Jesus shows the path of obedience – a free acceptance of God's plan, making his own life an act of service of the Father and of the Father's plan for the world. For Jesus, as for all of us, this path is marked with setbacks. Did he not "learn obedience through what he suffered" (Heb. 5, 8) by saying and doing only what the Father gave him to say and do? He encountered a lack of understanding from the members of his own family who concluded that he was "out of his mind" (Mk 3, 21). He had to face conflict from the religious practitioners of his own land and had to endure being

treated as a blasphemer. The scene in the Garden of Gethsamane highlights the dilemma – “Not what I wish but what you wish” (Mt. 26, 39). To persevere in listening to the Father at that particular moment becomes a real interior struggle, an “agony”. By becoming “obedient to death, the death of the cross” (Ph 2, 8), Jesus does not engage in blind obedience but rather his obedience is the liberating act of a free person.

1.3 LEARNING TO LISTEN

Obedience, as the etymology of the word reminds us, is a long period of learning to listen. It calls us to listen deeply to each other as equals in an authentic dialogue in which individualism has no place.

Developing the Sense of Listening

Developing a sense of listening will not be the least of the challenges that face us. Very often there are obstacles which prevent real dialogue from taking place. These include personal preoccupations, prejudice, and a lack of understanding rooted in what has happened in the past. There are so many ways in which what the other person is trying to say can be short-circuited.

To live religious obedience means listening in faith. It is a call to become “listeners of the word.”

This call becomes authentic in listening to the word of God. In this essential exchange, each of us feels called and invited to give a response. Benedict XVI insists on *Lectio Divina* as a means to make each of us better capable of “listening and responding.”² Just as it was for Christ so for us it is a matter of

² Cf. Benedict XVI *Verbum Domini* no.22, Post-Synodal Exhortation, Rome 2010.

seeking the will of God. After reading, meditation, prayer and contemplation, *Lectio Divina* achieves its essential dynamic in action.³ Thus it was for those who listened to Peter's discourse after Pentecost when they asked "What must we do?" (Acts 2, 37).

This call becomes more authentic still in fraternal dialogue where what others have to say opens up horizons and offers opportunities to imagine what the future might be. This is not mere polite listening which provokes no enthusiasm. Each one is called to develop his skills for real and open communication.

Learning to Discern

To move from listening to discernment is a step which we can take only when we let the Holy Spirit become active. The beauty of our vow of obedience is to be found in its underlying principle - the discernment, carried out in the Spirit, of the will of God for us as individuals, communities, and as a Congregation. An attentive listening corresponds with a response to God's plan.

Learning to discern begins very early in our family environment and from the first stages of initial formation. In silence, in prayer and in dialogue with a guide, the candidate becomes aware of the needs of the world, of the Church, of the Congregation at the same time as he comes to an awareness of his own talents. God's will reveals itself progressively, just as conscience is formed as much through the events of daily life as through new challenges and a reading of the signs of the times.

³ Idem. no.87

Discernment is particularly facilitated with the help of a spiritual guide. The candidate enters this process with an open heart and with a willingness to clarify the motivations which are leading him towards the religious and missionary life. Without a climate of prayer, it is impossible.

The guide stands beside the candidate. He helps him to find the path he should follow and to name the obstacles which will eventually present themselves.

Most assuredly we must turn to Father Libermann who guided so many people and who helped so many young people to discover their vocation. He insists continually on seeking the will of God. It is this which “decides everything.”⁴ But he is careful to discard illusions which hamper this search. Without mincing his words, he writes to M. Clair who consulted him concerning his vocation: “You will easily see that it is an interior illusion which has been leading you all the time.”⁵

Accepting Mediation

Listening to and engaging in discernment to know the will of God is something that is learned over a period of time. Experience shows that we need to have recourse to mediation in order to reach that point. In addition to prayer, *Lectio Divina*, reading the signs of the times – all of which punctuate our daily lives – we also have, as religious, institutional mediation:

- The charism of the institute, recognised by the Church in which we have found our own vocation and our form of service;

⁴ Letter to M.le Vavas seur 03/12/11846, Notes et Documents VIII, p.364 (henceforth referred to as ND).

⁵ Letter of 13/12/1847, ND IX, p. 369 (see also p. 373). In the letter to M. Le Vavas seur quoted above p. 364, Fr. Libermann denounces the same dangers of illusions.

- The structure of government of the Congregation which recognises a distinction between the legislative aspect (Rule of Life, Chapters) and the executive aspect (superiors and their councils) and provides regulatory bodies (Enlarged Councils) and opportunities for reconciliation (SRL 166.2);
- Communities which are places of discernment;
- Superiors who are charged with putting into practice Chapter orientations in particular situations as these are lived by the circumscriptions.

It is essential that we be attentive to the way in which we use these forms of mediation. Above all else, they are a way of living the evangelical project which is at the heart of our charism and our spirituality.

The Capacity to Listen: A Criterion of Discernment

Attentive listening results in obedience when the individual allows himself to be challenged. This presupposes a solid human and spiritual formation. Thus the would-be Spiritan will display the openness necessary to living in solidarity without seeking his own interests. It has to be said that living the vow of obedience today is difficult! We have to get rid of the illusion that there is a painless way to be a human being or an authentic Christian. Unfortunately, it has become clear that some confreres who have scarcely arrived in their circumscription of appointment, ask to leave it at the first sign of difficulty.

A candidate for the Spiritan way of life has to be able to consider respectfully and with realism the authority of the Congregation. If he finds himself continually in conflict with authority, how could he positively live the vow of obedience?

To reach that point, he must depend on the witness of older confreres but also the possibility of living in the reality of listening and of constructive dialogue, especially during his period of pastoral placement.

Hearing New Calls: Ongoing Formation

Ongoing formation challenges each member of the Congregation. Discernment cannot end with the taking of Perpetual Vows. The unexpected hazards of life, missionary involvement, the needs of people, cultural shocks and the different situations that we encounter either open up new horizons or lead to serious doubts... It happens too often that confreres, overwhelmed by the urgency of a particular situation, forget to take time for reflection, prayer and reading. They do not participate in meetings to reflect, as a Congregation, on the situation or to reflect with other people engaged in a work similar to their own. Is this due to a fear of wasting time or a fear of being called to account?

The many possibilities offered by ongoing formation have as their ultimate aim the verification that we respond authentically to the call we have heard and that we make ourselves available to hear that call again and again.

1.4 SO WHERE ARE WE AT?

1.4.1 At a Personal Level

- Do I take time for prayer before engaging in discernment?
- How much time do I devote each day to reading the Word of God and to personal and community prayer?
- Do I have a spiritual counsellor to help me reflect and see things in perspective?

1.4.2 At a Community Level

- How frequent are our community meetings?
- Do they consist merely in planning for the week or the month or are they also occasions of sharing, reflection and evaluation?
- Do all the members of the community have the possibility of expressing themselves or does one person monopolise the meeting?

1.4.3 At Circumscription Level

- Do Superiors and their councils give sufficient attention to experienced and gifted confreres to be trained for discernment in helping candidates for the Spiritan life to discern their vocation?
- Within the Council of the Circumscription, do confreres have regard to the views of the members of the Formation team concerning the candidates who are making their requests to them?

II. OBEDIENCE, SCHOOL OF LIBERTY

2.1 FULFILMENT AND INDIVIDUAL LIBERTY

*W*e only have to open our eyes. The enticing images which are used by certain media outlets and advertising posters exalt individual liberty. Professional success, accompanied by important projects, result in a great freedom of action. Such images contribute to placing the stress on individual liberty, a liberty that is tainted by subjectivism. This