

Bishop Barron 'Listening to a Higher Voice' Homily

God intended life, and life to the full, for His human creatures, giving them practically free reign over the garden of Eden. He gave extraordinary permission. The only prohibition was against the eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They were not to be making the criterion of right and wrong of themselves. They fell precisely in that measure that they stopped listening to the voice of God, and listened instead to the tempter, and the voice of their own desire; fundamentally the desire to make themselves the criterion of good and evil. They were indeed disobedient – not along the lines of a little child's disobedience, but as a refusal to properly listen.

God does not want us stuck in sin. He wants us fully alive. His rescue operation is called 'The People Israel'. He wants to affect our salvation with our co-operation. He is going to form a Holy people, Israel, after His own heart and mind, who will form a 'healthy contagion'. From Israel will spread God's way of thinking, God's way of acting. They would become a light to the rest of the world.

How did this whole thing start? Gen 12:4 "Abram went as the Lord directed him". An invitation to walk by faith and not by sight. It that little phrase we find what makes all the difference. The trouble began when humans refused to listen to the voice of God. The solution begins when one human being listens.

When you listen to a higher voice, you quell the voice of the ego and go on an adventure. Then you become a member of the family of Abraham, our Father in Faith. Faith is an openness, a willingness to listen. One becomes part of the solution that God continues to propose to a sinful world.

Father Stephen Freeman

At its heart, obedience is not the destruction of the will, or simply 'doing what you are told'. Obedience requires a union of trust with God in which we recognize that the direction of our life is a gift rather than a choice of our own devising. It is a movement of the heart toward God rather than an assertion of the self. This cannot be coerced.

The Kingdom of God is not a goal toward which we strive, something we are 'building up' in our midst. Rather, the Kingdom of God has already burst forth in our midst in the coming of Christ. It is inexorable in its presence, not subject to our choices or preferences. Classical Christianity is thus not a 'project'. It is not something we are building or working on. It is an obedience to the reality that is already present revealed in Christ. It is a way of life that lives in response to what is given in the Kingdom.

Obedience by Father Raniero Cantalamessa

6 – If obedience constitutes a problem today, it is not one of docility to the Holy Spirit – on whom, indeed, all seem willing to call – but rather that of submission to a hierarchy, to a humanly expressed law or authority

10 – The obedience of Christ is not only the most sublime example of obedience, but it is its very foundation. It is the ‘constitution’ of the Kingdom of God.

16 – God wants obedience for itself whereas he wants sacrifice only indirectly, in relation to the first. What God seeks, in sacrifice, is obedience! The sacrifice of one’s own will is the means of conforming to the Divine will. It is not so much the death of Christ that saved us, as his obedience unto death.

22 – Christians are children of obedience, because they are born as such from the obedience of Christ and from their own decision to obey Christ. Like little fish born in water, so Christians, born in obedience, that is, in a state of constant and loving submission to God in contact with the Paschal mystery of Christ.

51 – St Gregory the Great: ‘God at times admonishes us with words and at other times with actions, that is, with events and happenings’. There is an obedience to God – often the most exacting – which consists in simply obeying situations. When we see those difficult situations, which may even seem absurd and spiritually harmful, do not change despite all our efforts and prayers, we must stop ‘going against the grain’ and look on them as the silent but resolute will of God for us.

59 – Obedience to superiors is the visible sign of obedience to God just as love of one’s neighbour is the visible sign of one’s love for God. The first commandment remains the ‘first’ commandment, because the source and reason for all is the love of God; but the criterion on which this is judged is the second commandment: ‘How can you love God whom you do not see, if you don’t love the brother you see?’ (1 Jn 4:20)

Divine Intimacy by Father Gabriel of St Mary Magdalen

342 - Charity will be perfect in us when we govern ourselves in each action – not according to our personal desires and inclinations – but according to God’s will, conforming our own to His. The will of God is expressed in His commandments, in the precepts of the Church, in the duties in our state in life; beyond all that, there is still a vast area for our free choice, where it is not always easy to know with certitude exactly what God wants of us. In the voice of obedience, however, the divine will takes on a clear, precise form; it comes to us openly manifest, and we no longer need to fear making a mistake. By obeying our lawful superiors, we can be certain that we are obeying God.

Jesus Himself, when entrusting to His disciples the mission of converting the world, said, “He that heareth you, heareth Me; and he that despiseth you, despiseth Me” (Lk 10:16)

St Teresa of Jesus: “Help me, O God, to pass over all the human aspects of obedience and to put myself in contact with You and Your divine will. Just as in the Eucharist I do not halt at the created species of bread and wine, so I ought not in obeying to consider the person of my superior, but only Your will, which reaches me under the appearance of a human order or command. O Jesus, what a great mystery! The Eucharist gives me Your Body, Your Blood, Your divinity – such is the power of the Sacrament which you have instituted. Obedience gives me Your will and makes me communicate with it – such is the power of the authority you have established”

Lumen Gentium

37 - The laity should, as all Christians, promptly accept in Christian obedience decisions of their spiritual shepherds since they are representatives of Christ as well as teachers and rulers in the Church. Let them follow the example of Christ, who by His obedience even unto death, opened to all men the blessed way of the liberty of the children of God. Nor should they omit to pray for those placed over them, for they keep watch as having to render an account of their souls, so that they may do this with joy and not with grief.

39 - The holiness of the Church is unceasingly manifested, and must be manifested, in the fruits of grace which the Spirit produces in the faithful; it is expressed in many ways in individuals, who in their walk of life, tend toward the perfection of charity, thus causing the edification of others; in a very special way this (holiness) appears in the practice of the counsels, customarily called "evangelical." This practice of the counsels, under the impulsion of the Holy Spirit, undertaken by many Christians, either privately or in a Church-approved condition or state of life, gives and must give in the world an outstanding witness and example of this same holiness.

CCC 912 - The faithful should ‘distinguish carefully between the rights and the duties which they have as belonging to the Church and those which fall to them as members of the human society. They will strive to unite the two harmoniously, remembering that in every temporal affair they are to be guided by a Christian conscience, since no human activity, even of the temporal order, can be withdrawn from God's dominion.’

Gal 2:20

‘I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.’

1 Peter 2:18

‘When he was reviled, he did not revile in return, when he suffered, he did not threaten, but he trusted to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.’

Rev John Chryssavgis

It has already been noted that the Fathers do not speak of obedience in terms of normative requirements. Obedience transcends mere submissiveness, with which it is commonly confused. The virtue of obedience occurs within the context of loving trust and personal relationship between two people in Christ, which in itself reveals the presence of Christ (cf. Mt. 18:20).

All too often authority is confused with power, meaning the ability to compel others to do something. What happened in the case of Adam and Eve, where the harmony of mutual relationship was destroyed, also extended to the people of Israel, where the harmony of a people uniquely guided by the will of God degenerated into disobedience and unfaithfulness. By analogy, what frequently occurs in male-female relations may further occur in the Church, where obedience is turned into subjection and domination. Yet to be obedient (Greek: yp-akouo) is not to be subjected to the will of another who is more powerful; it is to wait upon God, to listen (Greek: akouo) and to hear, to be all ears; ultimately to obey is to love.

The whole life and ministry of the Church should be based on the person of Christ, whose Body it constitutes in space and time. Throughout history, it is persons, the saints, who have manifested this attitude of Christ. They have exercised their responsibility for the other and in response to the needs of the other "with all their heart and with all their soul and with all their strength and with all their mind" (Lk. 10:27). Authority, therefore, means, above all, love towards one's neighbor "with one's whole power" (Mk. 12:30). It is not control over others, but commitment to them, even to "the least of one's brethren" (Mt. 25:45).

Father Alexey Young

Obedience to a spiritual Father is not so much a question of commanding and obeying as of leading and following. In other words, a spiritual Father must never see himself as one who issues edicts, but as one who leads the lay person given to his care by God; he leads by word and deed. So many examples of this abound in the lives of the Saints that it would be pointless to begin citing them here. It need only be said that the relationship between a layman and his spiritual Father is not a legalistic one; it is not based on a vow of obedience (although, by grace it could be very binding on a particular spiritual Father and child). Rather, it is a living bond between two living souls, one more experienced than the other, one capable of showing the way because he has already begun to travel it, the other willing to trust and follow. The late Schemamonk John, for many years the Father Confessor of Valaam Monastery, who also had many non-monastic spiritual children, put it this way: "The wise spiritual life was explained with precision by the Holy Fathers in their writings, but what they wrote can be best understood by being lived.

Rev. Gregory Jensen

To be obedient means to live as a member of a community in which we work together for the flourishing, sanctification, and salvation of each other. It is the end of mere individualism and the beginning of life patterned after the Holy Trinity.

The Freedom of Obedience

Dr Philip Kariatlis

Introduction

Obedience is normally understood in terms of submission, which presupposes the resignation of one's will to that of another higher authority. Or it is usually perceived in terms of conforming to some external rules or regulations enforced upon by another more dominant power. Indeed, today, obedience has become synonymous with subjugation, and it is believed to demand the total renunciation of one's will and 'blind' submission to that conglomeration of rules enforced upon that other higher reality.

Accordingly, in most people's consciousness, obedience by extension means to submit to a group of regulations or laws set by a superior authority (which incidentally may not always necessarily be religious – for example it could be ideological or political) and not ask any questions. Hence, we have the well-established misconception of 'blind obedience', which stipulates 'doing what you are told' and for this reason it is thought to be enslavement. It follows from this that obedience comes to be seen as a weakness and a contradictory concept for the 'enlightened' or emancipated person since their freedom is brought into question.

Understood in such a superficial manner one can perhaps appreciate why people would even go so far as to point out the utter absurdity of obedience. Believing it to be a feature of the psychologically bound, timid and naïve, these people conclude that the practice of obedience is only for the backward and conservative. Indeed, in the Hegelian-Marxist dialectic, God is seen as the enemy of freedom since He is perceived as a frightful authority figure who must be obeyed. This inevitably leads to the atheistic syllogism that: 'since I am a free human being I need not obey. If I obey, then I am not a free human being'. Unfortunately, this attitude to obedience has not only made its way into contemporary society but also into the Church where many can no longer discern or even appreciate the spiritual, let alone the practical significance of this virtue. For this reason, a reflection on obedience is required to rediscover its organic link with freedom and life-giving communion.

However, before turning out attention to examine the Church's understanding of obedience it must be pointed out that the reality of this virtue in contemporary society is not as foreign and detestable as it might first appear. For example, who would question the importance of the obedience displayed by athletes to their trainers as they set out to prepare for forthcoming events? Surely their carefully regulated practice sessions coupled with other rules (dietary etc), which permeate all facets of their lives constitutes a kind of 'blind' obedience to the personal judgement of their coach.

One also sees the practice of obedience in those students who have an earnest desire to excel at school. They therefore know that they must put themselves entirely in the hands of their teachers if they want to succeed in their studies. Indeed, the conscious or sub-conscious significance of obedience is seen in all facets of human existence right from little children whose faith and trust in their parents help immensely in their psychological growth to that of the elderly who entrust

their entire well-being daily to their doctors. All these examples serve to illustrate the degree to which all people have surrendered themselves to obedience. Indeed, it is the practice of obedience which serves to bring about psychological growth and maturity on the part of the obedient person.

The Church's Experience of Obedience

In the Greek language, the term 'obedience' (hyp-akoe or in its verbal form hyp-akouo) is derived from the preposition 'hypo' meaning 'under' and the verb 'to listen'. That is, the preposition 'hypo' shows the vertical direction in obedience – that is, between the heavenly realm and that of the world. And so, obedience is to be understood in the context of an encounter between God and the human person where God 'speaks' and the human person actively listens. Consequently, far from implying a passive attitude to life, obedience is an active function since the action of listening requires a level of attentiveness and focused concentration to discern what is being said, especially when this relates to the transcendent yet immanent God.

Ultimately obedience implies eagerly awaiting upon God so that with 'ears to hear' we may listen (cf Mk 4:23). In this sense, the meaning of obedience, as it is experienced and lived out by the Church is entirely foreign to any forms of 'passiveness' or fatalism since it occurs ultimately within the context of a personal relationship with God. On the contrary, obedience is less concerned with the submission of the conscience to external rules as it is with an inward transformation where life is surrendered to God corresponding to the 'ascent' towards heaven as it is found in the spirituality of the writings of the entire ascetic tradition, an example of which is St John Climacus' Ladder of Divine Ascent. That is to say, it is only when the will of the ego is abandoned that that person can truly begin to unite and share in the eternal life of God.

Indeed, in obedience the will is buried (not destroyed) so that the 'spirit' within every human person can be resurrected and become attuned to the 'voice' of God as it is revealed in Jesus Christ and by the Holy Spirit. Far from being negative, obedience as absolute trust in God becomes the means to a life infinitely greater than one's mere biological existence. It becomes clear already that obedience essentially is a fact of communion with God and so only those who cling to this communal mode of existence and strive to live it out can claim to have entrusted themselves to, or become obedient disciples of, God. And in so doing, God begins to indwell or be in an intimate communal relationship with them. Not only does God listen to these faithful people (cf Jn 9:31) but makes His dwelling place in their hearts:

All who obey his commandments abide in him and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us (1 Jn 3:24).

The significance of God remaining with the obedient ones becomes even more apparent when we realize, that being the source of life and freedom (primarily freedom from the bounds of death) God calls all out of an isolated existence so that they can enter a relationship with Him. And if communion with God constitutes life, then obedience is that dynamic towards that life. Before further reflecting on the 'freedom of obedience' some brief remarks on the New Testament vision of obedience will be offered, especially as they relate to Christ's filial obedience to God, His Father, followed by some examples of obedience from the Patristic ascetical tradition.

Obedience in the New Testament

Reading the New Testament one can easily discern, throughout the entire life of Jesus, the conscious obedience which He displayed towards God His Father. Indeed, Christ's obedience involved the unwavering adherence to His Father's will in all moments of His life. In his letter to the Philippians St Paul urged the community to live their life not out of "selfish ambition or conceit" (Phil 2:3) but primarily in humility taking Christ as their example who was obedient to God even to the point of death:

Who, though he was in the form of God... he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross (Phil 2:6-8).

Such radical obedience, even to the point of death cannot be explained by any logic but will only be appreciated if it is seen from within the radically intimate relationship of profound love and trust that Jesus had to His Father. Indeed, all four gospels emphasize this point as can be seen from Jesus Himself who in the gospel according to St John said:

For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me but raise it up on the last day (Jn 6:38-39).

In this case, we see the extent to which St John went to emphasize Christ's ministry and teaching in terms of His resolute obedience to all that God His Father had shown Him and given Him to do and speak. Indeed, what is even more profound is that the Scriptures' insistence of Christ's obedience, not only to God but also to other people, including his earthly parents:

Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was obedient to them (Lk 2:51).

By example during His earthly ministry Jesus showed the significance of obeying the commandments of God even as they are mediated through elders, in this case His earthly parents. As we shall see, this is important especially when it comes to the obedience between two people – that of a disciple to an elder. Now, the reason for the importance of obedience is clearly stated in the New Testament. It was only in this perfect obedience to God that Christ was able to become the source of the world's salvation. In the letter to the Hebrews, we read:

Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him (Heb. 5:8-9).

Just as Christ's obedience to God was the source of all glory and life, so too, our invitation to obey the Lord becomes our opportunity not only to show our love for Him (cf Jn 14:21-24), but above all to be graced with the gift of freedom in becoming "the glory of God's children" (Rom 8:21). Already within the writings of the New Testament we see the importance of obedience as the means for our ultimate glorification and freedom as God's children.

The sayings of the Desert Fathers on Obedience

Beyond the New Testament, the entire ascetic tradition emphasizes the importance of obedience for the Christian life. 'The Gerondikon' or 'The Sayings of the Desert Fathers' gives abundant examples of the significance of obedience in the Christian life and is indeed a major theme in the Sayings of the Desert Fathers. A well-known anecdote recounts the story of John the Dwarf, who, upon entering the desert, was told by his spiritual elder to continue watering a dry stick, which had been planted into the ground, and to keep on doing this until it bore fruit. Indeed, the story is intensified when we are told that the novice had to travel throughout the whole night to collect water, something, which, besides being irrational would have been physically and mentally exhausting. The pinnacle moment of the story is reached when we discover that one morning, in the third year, upon going to water the "dead" stick, John found that it had flowered and produced much fruit. It is said that his spiritual elder took it to the community and told the brothers: "Take and eat the fruit of obedience!"

Another story relates the perfect obedience of a disciple, who, having been called by his spiritual father, responded immediately, not even completing the letter of the alphabet that he had been writing whilst copying a manuscript. From this, we can see that all sayings in the Gerondikon seek to emphasize, in the strongest of terms the importance of obedience for a person setting out to live a monastic life. At this point one may be tempted to ask: "whatever happened to the freedom of that human person?"

All such stories will not only seem to be a stumbling block for "logical" or "rational" persons but also absurd, if not at the very least ambivalent, unless they are seen as the only effective means of disarming pride and one's autonomous self-orientated existence. Indeed, the extremities of obedience described are nothing other than the powerful antidote or remedy needed for the extremity of the world's fallen state. The Gerondikon is clear in stating that the practice of obedience, even when it may seem at first "irrational" acquires a profound meaning only when it is understood as a means of training the soul of the novice. Just as disobedience was the cause of the fall of the first Adam, so too, obedience becomes the means, by which the human person can be restored to their primordial state of existence. That such a teaching is Scriptural can be seen from the letter of St Paul to the Romans, which relates to Christ's saving obedience as an example for all human persons:

For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous (Rom 5:19).

Just as Christ, through His obedience opened the door to Paradise through to God the Father, so too will all human persons be led to the glory of God through their obedience (cf 2 Cor 9:13). That is, the self-seeking ego, which entered human history with the fall of Adam can only be transformed to a communal manner of existence - that is, a life in communion with God and the world around - with the daily struggle to become obedient in all things. And it is precisely for this reason that the practice of obedience is placed over charitable acts which a monk may perform by his own will. As such, obedience is considered to be "the first of virtues." In an age of radical individualism, where the human person has become the measure of all things, such stories relating to ascetical obedience become even more important as inspiring examples which

can lead to our freedom from our “crowded solitude”, which is nothing other than a dead existence even before we die.

The Freedom of Obedience:

From the above, it has become clear that the issue of obedience is extremely important both in the Scriptures and the Patristic ascetical tradition as a means for life-giving communion and freedom. If one were to give some working definition, it could be said that within the life of the Church, obedience is fundamentally both a gift of communion with God and the dynamic realisation of that communion which can only occur in freedom and which leads to freedom. Understood in this way, obedience does not only signify the gift of fellowship bestowed by God on the obedient person, but also that person’s striving to make this mode of existence a permanent reality in their life. That is to say, obedience is not only a gift bestowed by God leading to communion with God but also the active response by the person towards God.

Ultimately obedience is a gift from above which is bestowed upon humanity as the effective means for beginning the struggle to cease living in isolation, opting instead to allow our life to be governed by the freedom of a life in Christ which leads to life eternal (cf Eph 2:14). Indeed, this can only happen in the first place because Christ has opened the way for it and bestowed upon the world this gift of communion with God. But it also requires our free acceptance in humility and obedience upon recognizing that we no longer wish to isolate ourselves from the fullness of life. Consequently, it becomes apparent that the freedom of obedience comes to be seen as both a gift and goal of our Christian life. In this way, our life must be characterised by a daily struggle to receive this gift from God in all humility and increasingly offer our life willingly back to God.

Understood in this dynamic way, it becomes evident that obedience is inseparably linked with the notions of “communion” and “freedom” whereby the absence of one of these elements inevitably leads to a misdirected understanding of this virtue. Accordingly, obedience is in contradistinction to any tendency for a self-centred, self-serving, and non-communal existence, which inevitably can only lead to death even though we may be “alive” on a merely biological level. Obedience becomes an attitude to life, which enables the radical transformation from an individually centred existence to that of a communally focused mode of existence. That is, in the practice of obedience, it becomes possible for persons to experience, here and now, even by way of foretaste, the existential event of God’s communal mode of life. And this cannot happen unless human persons willingly (notice again the will is not destroyed) cease to draw their existence from their individuality, which is corrupt and mortal and can therefore only lead to death, but instead, realize that the source of life is from God. In this way obedience emerges as a power beyond the human, which can destroy the barrier of egotism and isolationism, opening instead a taste of the fullness of life offered as a communion of love. Obedience therefore implies a communal way of life, which arises from a relationship of co-operation thereby creating real bonds of co-existence.

The life of the person who has freely decided to lead an obedient life – i.e., one in communion with God – does not become diminished but on the contrary is enriched and built up. Indeed, obedience is practiced so that the person can become free, free from simply acting out of instinct. Obedience ultimately says that true freedom is born from the moment that one decides not to be

conformed to one's self-seeking will, choosing instead to draw the fullness of life from God. It is only within the context of selfless love, which is nothing other than one's commitment to obedience, that freedom is borne within. Far from becoming a slave or leading a docile life, the obedient person is made free in so far as he or she is liberated from a captivated state of an isolated existence by destroying the wall raised between them and God. Paradoxically, true freedom, which is liberation even from the confines of death, can only take place in precisely the same manner as that of Christ – that is, it is only in surrendering our own self-will, by burying it since it has become alienated from God and has deluded itself into believing that it is self-sufficient and self-regarding, that it will be resurrected by being conformed, by grace to a communal life in God, which is eternally free. Therefore, it has been clearly shown to what extent obedience can be truly seen within the context of communion and freedom.

Obedience to a Spiritual Elder:

In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, the path to freedom through obedience takes place within the context of a spiritual elder. That is to say, far from being an acceptance of a set of faceless rules which are to be adhered to, obedience is realised within the communal context of an intimate relationship with one's spiritual elder. That the experience of faith in God takes place within this context of obedience is seen clearly in the letter of Jude:

Beloved, while eagerly preparing to write to you about the salvation we share, I find it necessary to write and appeal to you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints (Jude 3).

Clearly for St Jude, the experience of faith took place within the context of obedience, namely that each faithful member of the ecclesial community entrusted themselves to specific persons who had gone before them. In the case of the letter of Jude, the integrity of the faith was maintained when it was received by concrete personalities who were responsible for 'taking' the faithful by the hand in order to lead them to God. Clearly therefore, the relevance of this passage for today is that it affirms the fact that since our faith is something delivered to us and not something which is discovered by ourselves then we need to entrust ourselves, that is obey, those consecrated people responsible for upholding the integrity of the faith. Indeed, the insistence, by the Orthodox tradition, that obedience is not given to any abstract collective, whether they be canons or any other form of ecclesiastical law, but to concrete persons is also stressed in the letter to the Hebrews:

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls and will give an account. (Heb 13:7)

In accordance with the letter to the Hebrews, the Church has always taught that the integrity of obedience is expressed decisively through concrete personalities acting of course within the parameters of the true faith. Furthermore, within the ascetic tradition of the Church as a whole, so fundamental was this relationship of obedience between elder and novice that it constituted distinct areas of study for many spiritual writers. One such example is St John Climacus who in his presentation of the Christian life considered obedience to be a foundational virtue without which one could not advance spiritually in their journey to encounter God. Or to put it another

way, according to Climacus it would be delusional to assume that one's endeavour to meet the living God could be realised without the spiritual elder. From both the Biblical and Patristic witness, it becomes clear that since the Church has always had a specific group of people divinely appointed not only to express the full deposit of the fullness of the faith of the Church but also to spiritually 'form' the faithful, it is for this reason that the faithful must entrust themselves freely to these people with their obedience.

The Eastern Orthodox tradition would claim that the spiritual elder sacramentally makes present, as a living icon, God Himself and does nothing more than speak the word of God to his children. It is for this reason that even to this day, one hears monks on Mount Athos saying, 'give me a word' precisely because in that 'word', from their elder they perceive the very 'Word of God'. And so, the spiritual elder becomes the living voice of God and not simply one from whom one receives valuable private opinions. Bishop Kallistos Ware beautifully described this relationship in the following way: "In reality, this relationship is not two-sided but triangular, for in addition to the abba and his disciple there is also a third partner, God."

It is this charismatic dimension of 'spiritual guidance' that has the power to transform the obedient person leading to a freedom in God beyond the confines of this transitory life, riddled with corruption and death. Consequently, far from inhibiting one's freedom, or being reduced to mere submissiveness, obedience is that virtue which occurs within the context of loving trust and personal relationship between two people in Christ, which reveals the presence of Christ. It follows therefore that, as a fellow servant of God, the spiritual elder acts as a guide and a friend along the way. It is precisely for this reason that the spiritual elder is often depicted either as a guide who, like Moses, can lead and direct a person out of servitude and into the promised land of God's kingdom; or as a physician who knows, through the gift of discernment how to remove the ailing wounds of the vices from the faithful thereby restoring them to spiritual wholeness and integrity. Finally, the spiritual elder is compared to a teacher, who takes the disciple by the hand thereby initiating them into the mysteries of God. With these images, the Church has wanted to emphasize the importance of the spiritual elder in liberating the faithful from their spiritual ailments. But for this to occur, the faithful must freely abide by the teachings of God as expressed through their spiritual directors.

From all that has been said above, a point of clarification is needed so as not to leave room for any misunderstanding. That obedience is important for all faithful Christians and not simply for monks is undeniably evident. This means, those leading a married life are equally called to live a life of obedience. And so, for example, husbands and wives would need to listen to, and obey, their spouse. A monk once advised the husband of a couple who had just been married to listen and obey his wife when it came to doing tasks that she might happen to suggest around the house – even menial chores like taking out the waste without saying that he would do them later or not at all – as this could not but be one important ingredient for a blessed marriage. In emphasizing the importance of obedience for all however, it would not be entirely mistaken to make a distinction between the obedience of monastics who have formally taken a special vow of obedience and the faithful in general living in the world. Perhaps it could be said that, just as the responsibility of all within the Church, clergy, laity and monastics is one and the same; that is, to be saved within the communal experience of the ekklesia, even though each person has a varying degree of that same responsibility within the life of the Church, so too the voluntary obedience to

the will of God is one and the same for all, even though each member of the Church is called to live this out in a uniquely distinct, and therefore infinitely diverse manner.

Viewed within its communal relationship with God, what must be emphasized is that the obedient person comes under the grace of God and not under the law. Indeed, in this daily struggle to be obedient (each in his/her own unique manner), what is certain is that the person's free will must not be destroyed. According to St Barsanuphius: "Do not force people's free will, but sow in hope; for our Lord did not compel anyone, but He preached the good news, and those who wished hearkened unto Him."

Far from destroying the freedom of the person, the spiritual father (or mother) is there to help his or her disciples to discern the truth for themselves so that they can truly become all that God created them to be. As such obedience becomes the door to freedom and communion.

We saw that through obedience the Christian person can reverse the movement towards an existentially autonomous mode of existence (which results in death) thereby beginning to restore their human nature as it was originally meant to be, that is, in communion with the grace of divine life. Experienced as such by the Church, it was shown that obedience represented the unique potential for salvation from a lonely, alienated existence and a parallel co-existence in which there is no convergence either with the world around or let alone with God. Consequently, obedience becomes even more important in today's society which tends to live in total isolation having a false sense of security in its supposed autonomy. On the contrary obedience liberates the person from becoming enclosed in his/her hardened shell of an individualistic existence (*incurvatio hominis in se*), which can only deprive that person from the fullness of life.

Accordingly, the divine gift of obedience is a radically new communal reality, which offers that person a participation and share in true freedom, that is, a gift of freedom from God even from death. Yet, in so far as the gift of obedience needs to be fully manifested and lived out in each person, it constitutes a postulate which will be fully realized in the age to come. However, already in this life, in putting their trust in God, as this is mediated through a spiritual guide, the obedient ones can be assured that their soul will continue to dwell in God. And so, unlike the proud who are not only a law unto themselves but are dictated by their instincts, the obedient ones, in surrendering themselves entirely to God will have been blessed with the eschatological gift of freedom from God, already from this life.

Fr. Yohanna Meshreki

Who do we obey? I ought to obey he who loves me, and hopes for my success, well-being, and edification. I obey who cares for me and my happiness. Is there anyone other than God that has these qualities? Thus, the Bible teaches us that: "*We ought to obey God rather than men.*" (Acts 5:29) After that, I also ought to obey those who have these qualities, like my parents, my father of confession, ministers, teachers, friends who bring me close to God, and anyone who gives me a genuine advice that doesn't contradict with the Bible. Thus, we ought to learn when to say no! This is an important principle in life. Not all things are appropriate and not all things edify.

Dr John Lamont

There is one factor that has not been widely discussed or understood, but that has had an effect that is second to none in giving rise to the scandalous situation that now engrosses our attention. This is the influence within the Church of a conception of authority as a form of tyranny, rather than as being based on and constituted by law.

The intellectual origins of this conception of authority and obedience are largely to be found in nominalist theology and philosophy. William of Ockham notoriously came down on one side of the Euthyphro dilemma by asserting that good actions are good simply because they are commanded by God, and that God could make idolatry, murder, and sodomy good, and abstention from these actions evil, if he commanded that they be performed. This conception of divine authority lends support to a tyrannical understanding of authority in general as based on the arbitrary will of the possessor of power, rather than on law.

A law-based understanding of authority, in contrast, holds that law derived from the nature of the good provides the source of the authority of a ruler, and delimits the sphere in which a ruler can give commands. Scholars have long known that the dominance of nominalist thought in the fourteenth century left its mark on Catholic thought for centuries,

Catholic theologians and philosophers during the Counter-Reformation all held that law and moral obligation are to be understood as resulting from the command of a superior; Suarez gave a characteristic description of law as 'the act whereby a superior wills to bind an inferior to the performance of a particular deed.'

Restoration of discipline among clergy and religious was one of the main goals of the Counter-Reformation. These principles embodied a tyrannical understanding of authority, and a servile understanding of rightful obedience as consisting in total submission to the will of the superior. The most influential formulation of these principles was given in the writings of St. Ignatius Loyola on obedience. The key elements of the Ignatian notion of authority are the following: 'Everyone of those who live under obedience ought to allow himself to be carried and directed by Divine Providence through the agency of the superior as if he were a lifeless body which allows itself to be carried to any place and to be treated in any manner desired, or as if he were an old man's staff which serves in any place and in any manner whatsoever in which the holder wishes to use it.'

St Ignatius's doctrine on obedience was intended to provide for an initial training in discipline, of the kind practiced in the military profession that he had once followed. Once this training was completed, it was also intended to ensure that Jesuits on independent missions internalized the objective that their superiors had sent them to accomplish, so that they would correctly and wholeheartedly carry out the missions they had been given. But St. Ignatius did not intend to give religious superiors a totalitarian control over all the thoughts and actions of their subordinates.

Unfortunately, the interpreters of his works read his writings literally, and credited him with upholding a totalitarian control of this kind as the model of religious authority. Some expositions of his teaching described obedience to an order than one suspects but is not certain to be immoral as an especially high and praiseworthy form of obedience.

Servile obedience is inculcated by subjecting the inferior to humiliating, pointless and unpleasant tasks, to a degree intended to break their will and self-respect. With individuals of strong will and high intelligence, however, this process can fail of its purpose. In such a case, what it produces is great toughness and endurance, together with rigorous self-control and the capacity to disguise one's thoughts and emotions. Such a process is often used in the initial stages of military training, to produce just these qualities. When this toughness and self-control has been elicited, however, the character of military training is changed to foster the qualities of initiative and intelligence that are required for successful performance. The demand for success in important tasks virtually requires subordinates to show initiative, and superiors to exercise actual leadership.

The full development of a tyrannical conception of religious authority and a servile conception of obedience can be found in Alphonsus Rodriguez S.J.'s *Practice of Perfection and Christian Virtues*. This work, the most widely read manual of ascetic theology of the Counter-Reformation, was published in 1609. 'To obey also with the understanding and judgment, adopting the same view and sentiment as the Superior, not giving place to any judgments or reasonings to the contrary.' According to this doctrine, there is no sin in doing any action that a reputable authority maintains to be permissible; and one's religious superior normally counts as a reputable authority. This conception of obedience did not remain a peculiarity of the Society of Jesus but came to be adopted by the Counter-Reformation Church as a whole.

The novelty of this understanding of obedience can be seen by contrasting it with the position of St. Thomas Aquinas. St. Thomas considers the proper object of obedience to be the precept of the superior (*Summa theologiae*, 2a2ae q. 104 a. 2 co., a. 2 ad 3).

A good person will be glad to carry out any suitable command, since such commands further the common good. Obedience is simply an act of the virtue of justice, which is motivated by love of God in the case of divine commands and love of neighbour in the case of commands of a human superior. These loves are both more fundamental and broader than obedience.

Monastic obedience had always been strict, and examples of monastic obedience were plentifully used by writers to illustrate the virtue of obedience as the Jesuits conceived of it. But these illustrations ignored the fact that monastic communities were governed by detailed Rules – those of St. Basil, St. Augustine, or St. Benedict. The authority of a monastic superior was limited by the rule of the community and had the purpose of bringing about the following of the rule. It was obedience to the rule, not to the superior as such, that was the fundamental tool of monastic perfection, and the object of monastic obedience. But the Society of Jesus had no rule. The decisions of the Jesuit superior were explicitly intended to take the place of the rule of life of the monastic community as the object of obedience and the path for spiritual perfection for the Jesuit. The primacy of law that was characteristic of monastic obedience was thus lost.

There is an explicit appeal to the wisdom and goodness of superiors in this doctrine of obedience. This appeal however ignores the characteristic effects of the exercise of tyrannical authority, which are no less deep – perhaps deeper – than those of the practice of servile obedience. Such authority has an intoxicating effect, producing overweening pride and megalomania. Superiors in the grip of these vices become both prone to giving unjust orders, and incapable of conceiving of themselves as sinful or mistaken.

This approach to authority had damaging effects on clergy and religious. The exaction of servile obedience from subordinates destroyed strength of character and the capacity for independent thought. The laity could not hope for advancement in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, so the effect of promotion of a servile understanding of religious obedience was to infantilize them in the religious sphere. The resulting dissociation between adult maturity and religious belief undermined religious faith and commitment among the laity and contributed to the steady secularization of Catholic societies.

This exposition of the history and nature of a tyrannical conception of authority in the Church explains many features of the crisis of sexual abuse. Superiors will not think of their own authority as bound up with the authority of the law, and they will not be inclined to respect and obey the law as such. They will have a strong incentive to conceal sexual abuse, because the authority of the clergy over the laity will rest on an infantilized conception of clerics as godlike father figures who can do no wrong.

The roots of the crisis go further back and require a reform of attitudes to law and authority in every part of the Church.

Father Christopher Pietraszko

The consumption of the Eucharist may be thought of as the consumption of Divine-Obedience. The substance of what we consume is obedience itself. Jesus in John 4 says, “My bread is doing the will of Him who sent me.” Uniting this notion of hunger for God’s will with the image of bread. He is clearly speaking not of a temporal food, but rather that of a spiritual food, nonetheless using the sign of bread itself.

In his commentary Aquinas writes: “This food is the obedience to the divine commands: my food is to do the will of him who sent me. Also, it is Christ himself: I am the bread of life; for my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed.”

Fruitful reception: here the Church offers us wisdom, especially through Aquinas, that at the heart of reception of the Eucharist is the opportunity to fling our will passionately, in trust to the providence and will of God with joy. We are surrendering our entire lives to His good judgment, and in docility, letting go of any type of inordinate control that exists in our own will.

When you receive the Eucharist this Sunday, imagine yourself in this movement of the heart towards obedience, not as a mere moral-precept, but as a relational entrustment of the mind, the heart, the body and the whole self to the care, instruction, will, of God. He is your captain.

