

THE VIRTUE OF OBEDIENCE *

Obedience may seem to be an unnecessary burden because we are naturally free to direct our own actions, and sometimes we prefer the things which we can accomplish by ourselves to greater things which can be accomplished only with the help of others. But in accordance with the divinely established order, there are superiors who have authority from God to command their subjects and so to move them by reason and will. Hence by the natural and divine law subjects are obliged to obey their superiors. Obedience is necessary for the common good, and is reasonable if freely rendered to lawful commands out of reverence for the authority of God and of our superiors under God.

Although at first sight obedience may not seem to be an attractive virtue, still it has its brighter side. By the mercy of God the same powers which can bind on earth can also loose, and thus free us from burdens which at times may be too heavy to bear, or which may impede other goods. Furthermore, obedience keeps good company. It does not live to itself alone, nor die alone. St. Thomas remarks that it is only by faith that we can appreciate the sublimity of the divine authority by which God has the moral power to command us (II-II, q. 104, a. 3 ad 2). By holy hope we rely upon the omnipotence of God for the help which we need in order to accomplish what we are obliged to do, and thus to fulfill all justice. Among all the helps which God gives us, the greatest is charity, by which we love Him more than self, and our superiors also as taking His place over us. Charity makes all burdens light, especially those of obedience. It is sweet and easy for us to obey those whom we love, and we honor them even by anticipating their lawful wishes. Seen in this light, obedience does not restrict our freedom, but rather perfects it. Obedience relieves us of solicitude about the right thing to do, and often preserves us from evil. Even though the command of our superior does oblige and in a sense constrain us, still we can exercise our freedom by freely obeying, and the more promptly and willingly we do so the more praiseworthy and meritorious is our action.

* Points suggested by Father Kane for discussion in place of the discussion originally scheduled.

The Committee on Current Problems suggested that we discuss the virtue of obedience under the following heads: (1) the nature of obedience; (2) the relation of the superior's will to God's will; (3) obedience as a positive virtue.

(1) THE NATURE OF OBEDIENCE

According to St. Thomas (II-II, q. 104), obedience is a special virtue, related to justice, by which we pay our superiors a special honor which is due to them by reason of their excellence of authority, namely, the fulfilling of their precepts or commands. The material object is the thing commanded to be done by us, which may be something indifferent in itself, or may pertain to some other virtue, such as fortitude or temperance. The formal object is the thing commanded as such, that is, to be done precisely because it is commanded and is according to the will of the superior however manifested, either expressly or tacitly. Obedience is not an intellectual virtue, nor a theological one, but a moral virtue respecting the fulfillment of precepts as such. It stands midway between excess and defect, regarding only those who should be obeyed in all their lawful commands. Obedience is essentially of one kind or species with respect to the commands of superiors, but it proceeds from distinct causes or motives inasmuch as superiors are of different rank and therefore should be honored with different degrees of reverence. Obedience out of reverence to prelates is included under the virtue of observance, whereas obedience to parents pertains to piety. Obedience out of reverence to God is contained under religion and pertains to devotion, which is the principal act of the virtue of religion. Hence religious obedience is not simply obedience, but holy obedience or religious sanctity by which the commands of superiors are fulfilled for the honor of God. Obedience is very close to charity, whether for God or for other superiors. Charity requires a union of wills in mutual, benevolent love or friendship, whereas obedience maintains and fulfills this union from a motive of reverence for the superior. This is why no man can serve two masters who are opposed to each other.

(2) RELATION OF THE SUPERIOR'S WILL TO GOD'S WILL

God's will is the supreme rule of conduct. All that He commands is good, and He commands principally the greater goods. He does not command the impossible, but the perfect; and He helps us to obey, especially by infusing good faith and understanding, piety, and humility.

The superior's will is a secondary rule, subject to God and to higher authority. His rule is limited to certain persons and matters; he does not always principally command the greater goods; sometimes he commands what is relatively impossible, or at times fails to command; he does not always facilitate obedience by suitable explanations or other possible helps.

(3) OBEDIENCE AS A POSITIVE VIRTUE

Obedience is blind to extrinsic considerations, but not to its proper object. It is prompt to fulfill the will of the superior, not only in matters of obligation but also in everything licit.

Obedience proceeds from charity and reverence for the authority of the superior to rule for the common good under God as supreme ruler. This is the proper reason why every superior should be diligently obeyed. The common good, which is our true and higher good, cannot be obtained without obedience. Holy obedience under vow for the honor of God shares the dignity and merit of the virtue of religion. This is the greatest offering which we can make to God, and the best means to perfect charity. The vow of poverty, either included in the vow of obedience or taken with it, gives the dignity and merit of the virtue of religion to the observance of poverty. Under the vow of obedience, the observances of poverty may be commanded by the superior, and thus they become matters for the virtue of obedience as well as of religion. The motives of charity and humility as well as of reverence for God and imitation of Christ urge us to complete and perfect conformity with the divine will and the divine example.

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