

WORKSHOP: THE VOW OF OBEDIENCE IN A PLURALISTIC CHURCH

To clarify the meaning of the vow of obedience in today's Church is no simple task. There is no way within the limits of the time for this workshop to give a systematic comprehensive treatment of the question.

Because of the relatedness of one vow to the other it is somewhat difficult to speak of any one of the vows in isolation. Also, divergent views of world culture, diverse images of Church, competing theologies of religious life and changing perceptions of the role and purpose of canon law all contribute to the complexity of the problem.

It seems important then not to attempt to explore the question except within a broad conceptual framework. A cursory glance at changing patterns in society and Church across this century, together with different conceptions of what religious life is from a theological point of view, will serve as a context for reflecting on the vow of obedience in our changing world Church.

At the beginning of the twentieth century the Church was preparing itself for the codification of its law. The dominant world view described as "classical-based," presented a picture of unusual stability, with tradition as normative. Even though there were efforts to move with a spirit of liberalism at the turn of the century, the traditional view more often than not prevailed in society and Church. This view, still held by many today, maintains that nothing changes fundamentally. In describing interpretative models of the dynamics of change within society, Joseph Holland defines the governing principle operative in the traditional model as authoritarian or hierarchical.¹ The strong influence of this particular model can be seen in movements within the Church in the early part of this century.

It was precisely in the year 1900 that the Church, for example, centralized its administrative structures in Rome. It was in 1901 that the *Normae* were promulgated for religious. With the further promulgation of the Code of Canon Law in 1917, the unifying influence of the law was notable in the life of the Church. Pyramidal structures, typical of the traditional model for governance, with strong control at the top and little participation from the bottom, testified to the influences of society on the Church as well as on religious life itself.

The Church struggled with the question of how to be faithful within its structure, law and tradition. The function of theology was to interpret, deepen and safeguard the Church's grasp on tradition. There seemed to be no conscious response to justice issues and apparently little or no

¹ J. Holland and P. Henriot, SJ, *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice* (Washington, D. C.: Center of Concern, 1980), p.13

awareness of sinful social structures. The concept of world Church, other than legislating for it, was not in view.

The theology of religious life in this era, according to Thomas E. Clarke, S.J., was derived from the Church's understanding of itself. Emphasis was on the monastic form. Uniformity was considered to be basic to unity. The public value of religious life was immediately related to the concept of separation; vows, a means of distancing. Obedience in the traditional model was the dominant vow.²

Between the years 1900 and 1960, when the traditional model in itself was dominant among religious congregations, the image of obedience was one of *submission*. In face of the legitimate exercise of authority the individual religious was limited to one of two choices: (1) compliance, signifying obedience; and (2) non-compliance, signaling disobedience . . . **with regard to commands, directives, rules, community policies or whatever** may have been defined by prescription.

It is a fact that the traditional image of religious life was dominant in this century until the close of the Second Vatican Council. At that time the Church, like society, found itself face to face with rapid change towards a technological society. With John XXIII's call for "a pastoral Council," the Church began to discover and to move toward greater realization of its responsibilities in an era of social change, proclaiming a transition from the Western Church to the world Church.³ The theology of the Council is a theology of transition; its role defining a shift from exegesis of traditions to the development of a method; an effort to enable theologians to integrate the changing human experience and the traditions of the Church.

The evolving theology of religious life is obviously Vatican II based. For those congregations whose tradition roots them in active apostolic life the transitional image is that of *unraveling the monastic model*. The traditional form of religious life, no longer dominant, has been replaced by what is commonly referred to as the transitional model. Religious obedience, no longer immediately identified with authoritarian mandates and hierarchical structures, is described as a call to listen to persons, events, circumstances, signs of the times in today's world . . . a call to discern the will of God . . . a call to dialog with others.

Perceptions, understandings, beliefs about obedience have undergone radical change with the coming of a pluralistic Church. Consistently changing structures of human interaction witness to a new image of religious obedience: a shift from an image of *submission* to one of *communion*. Based on conciliar principles of shared responsibility, consultation, subsidiarity, participation and collaboration, the process of

² Thomas E. Clarke, et al., *LCWR Seminar Papers: Religious Congregations Within the Church* (Silver Springs, MD.: Leadership Conference of Women Religious, 1982), pp. 2-4

³ Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations XX* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), p. 78

discernment has come to be recognized as key to decision making, to valid expressions of the vow of obedience in this changing era.

Sociological shifts in the culture point to the emergence of new forms as old forms die. So, too, with the world Church and with religious life as such. The traditional theory of obedience is inadequate to the present reality. Based on Vatican II principles, a new theology of obedience is evolving, a new form of religious life emerging.

Often referred to as prophetic, the model for tomorrow's Church, as well as for a new form of religious life, will call for a radical response to gospel values. The role of the poor will be key in shaping this model. Theology will be increasingly concerned with the method of integrating the experience of life with the Church's experience of tradition, with enabling the Church to become a genuine element in the life and history of all cultures, all nations: a world Church. The Church, according to Rahner, will be "built up and sustained from below." Basic communities, not content simply being cared for by the institutional church in the future, if not now, will take an active part in forming the Church.⁴

Women and men religious who today identify with the salient features of this new model of Church, no longer immediately identify with either the traditional nor the transitional form of religious life. Evangelical poverty has become basic to their commitment and obedience for them consists primarily in a radical response to the gospel through transforming action and the work of justice in the world.

Religious obedience will not be expected to lead to a series of specified actions, but will rather reflect an image of a habitual posture toward reality encountered in one's life and experience.⁵ Acts of civil disobedience, of non-compliance rather than compliance with unjust laws, will more and more be experienced as radical obedience to the Word of God.

Even though different orientations to religious life have their roots in a particular cultural milieu peculiar to a given period in history, it is clear that the *traditional*, *transitional* and *semblance of the prophetic* model all exist today. It is also clear that these three models are not mutually exclusive. It is common to find side by side within a given religious congregation members whose preference is that of the traditional form of religious life, those who are obviously most comfortable with transitional structures as well as those whose life style, ministry and witness to the vowed life identify them with the prophetic model.

To make a distinction between the various orientations is not to deny the values inherent in each mode. Neither is it to deny the positive influence the various models have had within the broader Church and society in different eras. This review of the various approaches to religious

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 128-129

⁵ Lora Ann Quinonez, C.D.P., "Obedience and Disobedience: Some Reflections," ed. by Rita Hofbauer, G.N.S.H., *Civil Disobedience: An Old Voice in a New Age* (Silver Springs, MD.: Leadership Conference of Women Religious, 1984), p.3

life does, however, focus the reality of conflict not uncharacteristic of an era of social change. The areas of divergence among the three models or forms of religious life have specifically led to the surfacing of conflictual attitudes toward law and to diverse expectations with regard to what constitutes valid expressions of obedience in a pluralistic Church. It is difficult to envision that in the near future common expectations with regard to valid expressions of religious obedience will exist between and among members of religious congregations. Neither is it reasonable to think that such will be the case between religious congregations in general and the institutional Church.

Agreement on what constitutes fidelity with regard to obedience in a pluralistic Church will rather flow not only from an acceptance of the fact that ours is at once a pluralistic and a world Church, but also from a willingness to deal with the tensions implicit in the implications of this reality.

BARBARA LAWLER THOMAS, S.C.N.
Nazareth, Kentucky