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STUDIES

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Joy and Judgment in Religious Obedience

David B. Knight, S.J.

Published by the American Assistency Seminar on Jesuit Spirituality,
especially for American Jesuits working out their aggiornamento
in the spirit of Vatican Council II

THE AMERICAN ASSISTANCY SEMINAR ON JESUIT SPIRITUALITY

consists of a group of Jesuits from various provinces who are listed below. The members were appointed by the Fathers Provincial of the United States. The purpose of the Seminar is to study topics pertaining to the spiritual doctrine and practice of Jesuits, especially American Jesuits, and to communicate the results to the members of the Assistancy. The hope is that this will lead to further discussion among all American Jesuits -- in private, or in small groups, or in community meetings. All this is done in the spirit of Vatican Council II's recommendation to religious institutes to recapture the original charismatic inspiration of their founders and to adapt it to the changed circumstances of modern times. The members of the Seminar welcome reactions or comments in regard to the topics they publish.

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Vol. VI

April, 1974

No. 3



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JOY AND JUDGMENT IN RELIGIOUS OBEDIENCE

by

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Introduction

A. Obedience and Government

The first draft of this paper left readers wondering whether its topic was *obedience* (addressing subjects) or *government* (addressing superiors). I think that that ambiguity is the key to the problem of religious obedience today. We are beginning to see that the reality described as "religious obedience" is not just the act of a subject, something one hundred percent within his power to make real if he is just submissive enough, but rather something that depends for its very existence on the activity of two (or more) persons: the subject who obeys and the authority who governs. If government is not authentically "religious," then the submission of the subject, no matter how total it is, will not be, and cannot be, authentically "religious obedience" either. The faith-inspired submission of one's activity, will, and judgment to the authority of another in the scope envisioned by religious vows cannot truly be "religious" obedience unless both government and obedience proceed in fact from the same principles of faith and the same response to grace. (We will qualify this statement later.) What the saints and spiritual writers extol as "religious obedience," and what we have been used to looking upon as simply a virtue of the subject, is in fact not merely a virtue but a *relationship*. The reality known as "religious obedience" is a relationship between an individual subject and his community (his religious community and the wider community of the Church), mediated through the governing authority, which establishes him in a real, and particular, relationship with God. We will develop this

statement in the pages which follow. For the moment we only wish to lay down the working principle that it is simply impossible to speak intelligently of religious obedience--or of any obedience--except in terms of the government to which it responds. The same identical act of submission might be perfect obedience given to one type of government and perfect nonsense given to another. In other words, truly religious obedience is not something the subject can just make exist; he can only make it exist when certain conditions are present, and the most indispensable of these conditions is that he have a truly religious government to respond to.

Many objections to such a thesis present themselves immediately, both from the example and teaching of the saints, and from our theology of law. I believe the objections will disappear as we go on, especially if we make a very real distinction between the three classical levels of obedience: obedience of execution, of will, and of judgment. This paper does not call into question the obligation to give obedience of *execution* to every legitimate command. It makes no difference what kind of person or persons are endowed with the power to govern, or how they might be exercising in fact their authority. If the command is something they have the right to ordain, and if it is not sinful, then the subject must obey. But this is not integrally "religious obedience." It may be an obedience a religious is bound to give because his vow has made him subject to these particular authorities in this particular religious society, in the matters concerning which they command him; but it is not the obedience that justifies the vow, or the good for the sake of which the vow is made. In fact, when St. Ignatius of Loyola argues for this kind of obedience, the justification he gives for it is that text of St. Paul which instructs slaves to obey their masters.¹

There are times when the common good, the value of order and unity, or the need to avoid scandal would require a religious to obey a command he is convinced is ill-advised. Then he obeys to avoid a greater evil (for example: rebellion, disunity, expulsion from the community) or to protect a greater value that only appears on the wide screen of the total picture--such as the greater good of unity and love which takes precedence

over the particular good made impossible by this particular command. Or he obeys just because he is juridically and morally obliged to do so by his vow, and in this sense it is the "will of God" for him, as the only concrete alternative to sin. When a religious obeys in this manner, he is doing something good, and perhaps heroic in faith and love, but he is not achieving the fullness of the good envisioned by his vow, the full blessing of religious obedience as such. He is obeying as any member of human society must obey the authority that exists in his social grouping, whatever it be, and he is obeying with faith in the teaching of St. Paul that "all authority comes from God" (Rom. 13:1-2). As a member of a religious community, he accepts the authority of that community--just as Our Lord instructed his people to accept the authority of the Scribes and Pharisees (Matt. 23:2) and St. Paul instructs slaves to obey their masters (Col. 3:22)--without affirming thereby that it is a desirable thing to be a slave, or a good thing to be governed by Scribes and Pharisees. Obviously no one would take a vow of obedience unless he had reason to believe that normally he would not be treated as a slave or governed by a Pharisee. And therefore we must look to something more than the obedience of execution if we want to understand the nature, the purpose, and the good of the religious vow. In doing this, however, we do not call into question the obligation to give obedience of execution even when we cannot console ourselves with the conviction that our obedience is authentically, properly, and fully "religious" obedience.

B. A Failure in Experience

At this particular moment in history, someone has said, we should not speak of a "crisis of obedience" so much as of a "crisis of authority." The prevailing mood regarding obedience is disillusionment. There is a feeling that we went along blindly accepting everything we were told, and that we were duped; that it just "didn't work." But our mistake in reaction to this was to call into question the teaching of the saints and masters regarding obedience, instead of going to the source of the problem and re-examining their teaching regarding religious government. An assumption of this paper is that no one in our day has the right to be

disillusioned about religious obedience because no one in our day has experienced it. As Chesterton said of Christianity, it has not been tried and failed; it has just never been tried. As far back as most of us can remember, the job description of superiors--what the community really expected of them--was one thing in the books and something completely different in reality. Superiors were named, theoretically, to govern their communities. In fact they were named, as a general rule, to administer institutions. There is simply nothing deep or very spiritual in the tradition of religious obedience which applies to the relationship of a busy college president, for example, (also named to be rector and religious superior) with the hundred or so men he is supposed to govern. The most we can say about this situation is that religious obedience requires the same order and cooperation that would be demanded by political society, by business, or by a football team. When the *size of the community* combined with the *burden of administrative duties* makes truly personal knowledge of each individual impossible for the superior, then the relationship of religious superior to religious subject no longer exists, and nothing written about that relationship any longer applies except what is confined to the purely juridical level, the level of prompt and self-effacing obedience of execution.²

If we add to this picture the strong current of *legalism* that has flowed through so much of religious and ecclesiastical life in our era, catching up superiors and subjects alike and sweeping them helplessly along in its own narrow, unswerving channel, then we understand why we cannot really even talk about "religious government" in the context of our past experience. True government presupposes freedom of choice, plus the authority to decide. When a superior's freedom of decision is subjected to the dead letter of the law, his practical judgment cancelled out by the a-priori's of remote and detailed legislation interpreted absolutely, then in fact there is no superior, just a class secretary who reads the notes of the principal to his schoolmates. No one enters into personal dialogue with the town crier or the traffic cop because these just proclaim and enforce the law without any authority to discuss it, interpret it, or adapt

it to individuals. When a superior's function is reduced to insisting on the Rule Book, then in practice the office of superior has been abolished, regardless of how solemnly the title might continue to be bestowed, and a beadle has been substituted in his place.³

It is of the very nature of religious obedience that it be given to a living person or persons, that it be a relationship between free men able to respond with judgment and flexibility to one another and to situations--men whose action and interaction is free to be, and strives at every moment to be, an open response to the call of God since God calls freely and unpredictably to whatever he chooses to desire. The vow of religious obedience can never be confined to the dead letter of a law because, as we shall see, the core value of such a vow is precisely to establish a real relationship between oneself and other human persons on this earth, through which one gives to one's relationship of submission to God a new and expanded reality. But relationships between persons--between two open-ended freedoms as such--are not expanded through confinement to the dead letter of a law.

C. Mission versus Monasticism

A second ambiguity that might appear in any treatment of obedience is the confusion of *mission* and *monasticism*, and of the obedience we tend to associate with each. The classical treatises on obedience are mostly monastic in tone; that is, they envision the relationship of a subject-disciple to a superior who is a spiritual master, and the goal of the subject's submission is just his own spiritual progress, to be guided into the way of the Spirit by his master. Contemporary treatments of obedience stress more the element of mission, the note of being sent by one's community, in the name of the Church, as a witness expressing the truth, the love, the concerns of the risen Christ acting in his mystical body on earth today.

Both of these elements, the apostolic and the ascetic, belong in any treatment of religious obedience. Even within the most enclosed monastery every monk is an apostle; every one is assigned his work, each has his mission specified both within the community and with regard to the Christian and human community at large. And in the active orders the obedience of

mission depends for its very soul upon the kind of relationship that exists between the subject who is sent and the superior who sends. Both must be interiorly free, not only to respond to all that God might ask, but also to communicate to each other all that helps in discerning God's will. Superiors must know their subjects, and take their strengths and weaknesses into account in sending them on missions. Subjects must make themselves known to superiors, as a prerequisite for being governed personally and according to the graces each receives. Mutual confidence and trust must exist between them, and they should be united in deep respect and love. This need in the apostolic life for freedom and openness between the governing and the governed and for the radical detachment from all mundane things that is their foundation, makes the ascetical tradition of obedience (which came to us through monasticism, although it is not limited to monasticism) as essential for the apostle as it is for the monk, if not more so. In the last analysis, perfect obedience in apostolic life is impossible without deep faith in the guidance of God through superiors, just as perfect obedience to a spiritual director is impossible without deep faith that God is guiding one's growth through the director.⁴

The distinction between apostolic and ascetical obedience is helpful, both for intelligent government and for intelligent obedience. But the distinction should not be made the basis for *choosing between* the two kinds of obedience as if an either-or choice were permissible. Religious obedience is always both apostolic and ascetical because religious communities are always dedicated both to the common good of the community, the Church, and the world, and to the individual good of every member. Fidelity to our vocation demands that we accept obedience both as a means to more effective apostolate and as an ascetical discipline in its own right, one that envisions total surrender and dedication of one's person to God. We cannot brandish the banner either of "monks" or of "mission" as a justification for exempting ourselves from either aspect of religious obedience.

We should likewise avoid a too facile *subordination* of one aspect of obedience to the other, so that the ascetical becomes "only a means" to the apostolic, or the apostolic only a "by-product" of personal, spiritual

growth. The lives and activity of human persons can never be made "just a means" to anything, not even to the greater good of human society as such. Nor can any human being just look to his own good and expect society to prosper therefrom, like the sum that grows from the increase of the parts. Obedience is a personal relationship between an individual religious, his superior, his community, the whole Church, and his God. The good of all the persons involved must always be respected; and no person or persons must ever be made simply a means to the good of another, whether in the name of asceticism or of apostolate.⁵

D. Superior or Chairman?

A kindred question to this is whether obedience is to be understood theologically as a relationship with the individual superior, or as a relationship with one's community. It is both, of course, but the question is: Is it the community as such which mediates God's will to the subject, with the superior as the representative of the community? Or is it the individual superior who mediates God's will both to each single member and to the community as such over which he is established? In terms of concrete, contemporary experience in this day of "open forums" and "community consensus," is God's will for the individual expressed through what the community decides on, or through the decision of the superior? It is not really enough to say that if the superior accepts the community's decision, that resolves the practical issue. The case is not unknown in which a superior will make it quite plain that he does not really agree with the community's decision, deploras it, and perhaps even considers it destructive, but feels he is simply not in a strong enough position, humanly speaking, to oppose it. In such a case should the individual subject write off the superior's opinion as noticeably out of contact with the will of God mediated through the community, or should the individual feel uneasy about a situation in which the community has brought the superior to approve of what the community desires? The peace, or lack of it, one feels in following the community in opposition to the superior, or vice-versa, will depend a great deal on how one understands the will of God to be mediated and expressed to the individual under religious obedience.

The scope of this paper does not allow us to take up directly the question of obedience to one's community as contrasted with obedience to the superior. But indirectly it will probably throw light on the question. In what regards obedience of execution, the practical issue is clear: one is obliged to follow the juridically established authority, whatever it be. Normally, except for those things left to the decision of chapters, the Church invests the individual superior with the authority after listening to his community to "decide what must be done and to require the doing of it."⁶ When the superior abdicates his responsibility, it is usually in the direction of permissiveness rather than of obligating any individual to do something he finds less generous or demanding in terms of his religious ideal. But when we come to obedience of will and judgment, in which the real blessings of religious obedience are found, things are not so simple. The thesis of this paper is that certain conditions must be realized in the governing authority before obedience of will and judgment can be--or even should be--attempted. On this level, whenever strict juridical obligation leaves one free to "go along" or not to go along with the decision of either the community or the superior, the perfection of obedience will consist in following whatever voice is best accredited as being the more likely instrument of God's expression. This does not mean that one should just follow the opinion one agrees with, or do whatever one feels inclined to do. Although there are many cases where this is legitimate, since authority abstains from imposing an obligation, still in many of these cases one might nevertheless aspire to the values of obedience, of subordinating one's personal preferences or opinions to a will and judgment other than one's own (we will take up the *rationale* behind this later). When this happens, there can be something of obedience either in following the community's consensus, or in following the preference of the superior. And one should choose between them in the light of those objective signs that indicated whether this or that person or group really seem to be adequately informed, and searching honestly and freely for the will of God, or for that which is most to God's glory.

E. A Vision of Faith

Finally, we have to ask whether it is not an anachronism to speak still in our day of "religious obedience" as if it had anything to do with what our predecessors understood by that term. Many Jesuits, for example, wonder if Ignatian obedience is still feasible in our times. And in no gathering of religious can one just take for granted that an expression such as "the will of God interpreted to me by my superior"⁷ will be acceptable. Is it theologically defensible, in this age of demythologization, to speak of "God's will" for an individual being expressed authentically through any human authority, whether it be through an individual superior or a community?

This last question must be the heart, it seems to me, of any treatment of obedience which sees in this vow an unambiguous expression of faith. The Thirty First General Congregation of the Society of Jesus declared itself "convinced that the way to the grace of our vocation will be opened not by natural means alone, whether philosophical, psychological, or sociological, but ultimately under the light of faith alone, 'with the eyes of the mind enlightened.'"⁸ We must expect, then, that the justification of our obedience, whatever it be, will be such that it is intelligible only through the Christian faith, and foolishness to any without this faith. In answer to the question of following God's will through obedience we will let the following pages speak for themselves.

I. THEMATIC APPROACH: OBEDIENCE AND JOY

A. Obedience in Scripture

Obedience, in the Scriptures, is presented as a source of man's joy. Creation rejoices at the voice of God and exults to do the will of him who sets limits, establishes order, and gives a direction and purpose to all things. Obedience to God's design is not a confining of created being, but the way creation enters into enjoyment of the fullness of its being. It was man's disobedience that made creation unfree, bound down under the law of sin and groaning for deliverance. And it was by the obedience of Jesus Christ that all things have been set free again to respond with joy

to the voice and purpose of God.

The joy of obeying God's law is first of all the joy of *being one's self*, that is, of living and acting according to one's nature, in harmony with the rest of creation, and in proper relationship with one's Creator, a relationship of well-ordered submission, reverence, and love.⁹

The vow of religious obedience creates a specific relationship between oneself and God, a relationship of submission that goes beyond the general obligations of law by placing one's whole life and activity at his disposal in a very real and concrete way. By thus intensifying one's submission in love and reverence to God, one intensifies one's joy in the gift of creation and of graced life. The fruit of religious obedience should be increased joy in a newly found freedom to live one's life as a fullness of response to God.

B. Human Relationship the Key

The key to this relationship with God is the relationship one establishes by vow with concrete, human authority--ordinarily vested in the person of a superior. Every Christian must aspire to a loving, reverential submission to God that is total in desire and is growing toward the actuality of total gift in practice. But there are various ways of realizing total gift of self to God. The way of vowed religious is to establish themselves in a state of vowed surrender to another human person (or persons), precisely to enable that person to command them in the place and in the name of God. This differs from other forms of obedience--civil or marital, for example--in the *reason* that motivates the submission, and in the *extent* of what is submitted to another's will.

C. The Motive of Religious Obedience

We cannot say that religious obedience differs from other forms of obedience through the fact that it is motivated by faith. All obedience, to whatever authority exists on earth, is given out of love and reverence for the authority of God (Rom. 13:1-7). But religious obedience is motivated by a faith more specifically Christian than this; it differs from every other kind of obedience in this, that the human person obeyed is not

constituted in authority simply by the needs that arise from communal living or working in society--as are, for example, civil authorities or even the heads of families in the micro-society of the home--but rather by the free desire of persons who wish to have someone over them to whom they can surrender their wills as a way of surrendering their lives to God. Religious obedience is not just an obligation that results as a natural consequence from the commitment to live and work in a particular kind of society. Were it this, one would obey the religious superior the way one obeys every other authority on this earth, recognizing that his power to command is required for the sake of good order and harmonized action, that the superior's right to command is just the indispensable corollary of his obligation to promote the common good, and that the God of reason and order, who never wills the end without willing the means, desires obedience to this superior in the same way that He desires everything else that is for the greater good and order of the universe.

It is true, of course, that the reasons just given apply also to obedience within a religious community, just as they apply to every other society. Religious obedience includes all the reasons above, but is not based on them. Its own *raison-d-êtré* is something much deeper, rooted in specifically Christian faith, in the Incarnation of the Son of God, and in the sacramental nature of the Church which is the risen body of Christ upon earth. It is based on a desire to do everything "in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Col. 3:17), and on the belief that it is possible to interact humanly with the Lord on this earth through his risen body, the Church.

The theological foundation of religious obedience is a faith-vision that sees in the person of the superior (or in the community, should that be the case) the person of the risen Jesus made present: commanding, inviting, and receiving service, obedience, reverence, and love. We vow obedience for one fundamental reason: to be more really and completely surrendered to the person of Jesus Christ.¹⁰

Whether this faith-vision is justified, and how it is justified, is a question we will take up later. Here we just posit as a thesis that this vision of relationship with Christ through one's relationship with

the superior is the foundation of the religious vow, according to both its apostolic and its ascetical aspects, whether mission or monasticism characterizes the community to which one belongs.

C. The Extent of Religious Obedience

Because the very purpose of the vow is a relationship of more total surrender and availability to Christ, religious obedience differs from all other obedience also in the *extent* of what is subordinated to another person's will. All other obedience is for the sake of something else: right order, a task to be harmoniously accomplished, or the like, and thus the obedience promised is limited by the requirements of its end. Religious obedience is an end in itself: it is given for the sake of obedience and surrender itself. Even under its apostolic aspect, as the obedience of mission, the vow is not measured by the demands of some concrete mission to be accomplished or some corporate unity to be achieved. Rather, the vow establishes one in a state of total availability to Christ, and of desired union with his will, so that one can be used in every way that conduces, directly or indirectly, to the realization of the Kingdom of God. That Kingdom is not a concrete task to accomplish on earth in the sense of something that can be produced by human efforts. It is rather the total subordination of all things to Christ the Head, as Christ is subordinated to God. Obedience, then, in a sense *is* the Kingdom. And so the "obedience of mission" does not stop at chores like the building and staffing of schools, the burden of teaching, preaching, serving the sick and poor, or altering social structures. Religious obedience is not just a practical means to doing these things more efficiently and well. The mission to which religious obedience consecrates us is that of "restoring all things in Christ," within ourselves and in others, and our first step in this direction is the vow that puts our own persons in a real relationship of total submission to Christ through a submission to human superiors that aims at being as total as possible. Hence, whatever may be true in the political dictum, "The best government is the least government," the very opposite is true in the ideal of religious obedience. Provided that government does not foster immaturity, or bind up

the free exercise of intellect, practical judgment, and decision-making responsibility (a very large proviso, as modern history teaches us), it is true to say that the ideal of religious obedience would be to be governed in a way that makes the most demands possible on one's generosity, humility, faith, and love; in the way that requires the most constant and profound surrender, in fact as well as in desire, to the will of Jesus Christ made operative on this earth through superiors.

Here the apostolic and ascetical aspects of obedience are united: the asceticism of obedience is the goal towards which all apostolate strives, just as the mission of subjecting all things to Christ is the goal of all asceticism. Obedience is desirable as a *state of being*, not as a means to getting some job done; and therefore the "need" for obedience is not measured by function or practicality. In this, obedience is similar to contemplation. That is, obedience is not a *motion towards* something, a motion that is finished when its object is attained; rather, it is a relationship with God that in a sense is never completely attained, because it is the subjecting of all of one's being to all of his desire. It is a state of being desired for its own sake, which when attained will simply endure and intensify itself.

D. The Need for a Human Voice

How does the person of the human superior fit into this relationship? The root problem of obedience today lies here: in what sense and in what way is the religious superior, be he individual or communal, the "representative of Christ," so that subjection to a human being is subjection to Christ, and fulfilling a human will is fulfilling the will of Christ?

In various cultures, different answers might be humanly satisfying to the people of their day without really answering the question. If, for example, it is taken for granted in one's culture that God's voice comes down to his people through the pyramid structure of authority, God speaking to the highest superior, and the highest to those immediately beneath him, until finally the word reaches those on the bottom, then it will be enough to know that a superior is constituted in authority, and that he is in submissive contact with higher authority, for his decisions to mediate

and transmit the will of God to the subject. In such a system the surest guarantee of acting in union with God will consist in being able to demonstrate that one is only carrying out the decisions of higher authority.

In a more democratic culture, such as our own, the assumption might be that what the community agrees on must be the will of God--because there is "consensus." In this case, security will rest on the assurance that everyone has been properly consulted. And since every democracy recognizes that mere majority does not guarantee enlightenment, the technique used to consult people will be the one which, in that culture, can be most confidently accepted as a technique which filters out the bad opinions and lets through the good. In the political system of early America, this was free speech plus the poll tax. In many religious communities the most trusted technique used to be to prohibit all discussion of a particular issue, and to consult individuals in secret. In some cases the procedure was to invite all the members who had reached a certain age or status in the community to discuss the issue and vote by secret ballot. We have come to recognize these procedures as being more oligarchic than democratic, and so the system most trusted today is to invite all the members--all, at least, who are interiorly free enough--to engage in a process of communal deliberation. According to the process used, those who are not "free" as this is understood in the culture, will either find themselves psychologically unable to participate in the process, or their efforts to participate will be so manifestly hamstrung that their opinions will not have any disturbing effect on the others when it comes to declaring a "consensus." Obviously, the justice and efficaciousness of the system will depend a great deal on whether the process used really does make a valid equation between the opinions that are "good" and the people that are "free," as freedom is understood in the cultural group.¹¹

It is not the scope of this paper to debate whether God's will is authentically manifested "from the top down," through superiors, or "from the bottom up," through consensus. It is only our purpose to point out here that religious do generally agree in accepting a human mediation of God's will for them; but the security they feel in obeying depends a great

deal on whom their culture presents as the most authentic representative of God, whether it be the individual superior or the community as a whole. But regardless of how happy people might feel in their day (which resolves the pastoral problem), the theological problem remains: in what sense, and in what way can religious expect the will of God to be mediated to them through human authority, just in virtue of a vow they have pronounced? I would like to propose a double clarification of this problem, in terms of surrender and of discernment.

II. OBEDIENCE AND SUBMISSION TO CHRIST

A. Transcendent and Objective Presence of Christ

In terms of surrender, the vow of obedience aims at a more complete subordination of oneself to the person of Jesus Christ. But the Jesus who sits at the right hand of the Father is transcendent; he is beyond the boundaries of normal human interaction; he does not exist as a concrete, attainable object of direct human activity on this earth. This is not to say he is not directly attainable, that we cannot "reach" him immediately as an object, but only that we cannot reach him directly through human activity as such. In prayer we encounter the living God in his reality, but this is all the more purely a direct encounter with God himself in the measure that there is less mediation of human activity through discursive meditation, concepts, images, etc., and more contemplative resting in the "dark light" of faith. When it comes to the level of human interaction, it is simply a fact that we cannot, for example, wash the feet of Jesus as Mary Magdalen did, or let our feet be washed by him as Peter did in obedience to his spoken word. Even the invitation to "Leave all things and follow me" is not spoken to us in human words, on the level of human interaction, by Jesus of Nazareth. It is spoken to our hearts by the indwelling but transcendent God in faith, and confirmed in another way (which is the subject of this paper), which is on the level of real, human interaction, by the real Body of the risen Christ on earth, which is the Church.

In other words, while our God is always near, and attainable through faith, on the level of the life of grace which is deeper than our hearts, he is nevertheless remote to us when it comes to concrete, human interaction;--or he would be remote if it were not for the reality and mystery of his risen Body on earth, his mystical body, the Church. In the members of Christ on earth we have real, concrete human beings still acting in history, subjects and objects of human activity within this intramundane sphere. Human interaction can take place between ourselves and these other men still embodied in place and time. But the mystery of the risen Christ is that in these members of his body we interact with the living Jesus, that through the mediation of his body on earth, Jesus of Nazareth is still present in history, still made present in time and space, as subject and object of human interaction with all those who believe.¹²

When Jesus said to his Apostles, "He who hears you hears me" (Luke 10:16), he did not simply extend through time and space his own activity of teaching, healing, and ruling, in the sense that we would always have him as an acting subject in our regard. He also made himself present to all men, through all ages and places, as an *object*, as one who *receives* submission of mind and will and heart. He made it possible, not only for us to receive his word in a human way, but also for us in turn to respond to his word, and to him, in a human way. He gave us a human voice to respond to, human decisions to submit to, human persons to give our allegiance to, human wills to which we might subordinate our own. In other words, he gave himself forever to man as a human presence, in which and through which men of all times might give to him their homage and their love.

B. Relations Depend on Action

All real relationships between persons are founded on interaction.¹³ In order for the relationship to be real, the interaction must be real. If we are to have a real relationship of submission to Jesus, there must be real interaction of commanding and obeying between ourselves and him. The submission of all Christians to Jesus is founded on his historical action of teaching and commanding while on earth, and on his real action

of teaching and commanding today through his Church. But our submission to the word of Christ recorded in the Gospels and interpreted or adapted to changing circumstances by the Church is submission to the *general* teaching and commands of Christ; it is not a submission of our whole persons and lives in detail, because the law of Christ addressed to his Church does not and cannot specify God's particular will for each individual. If one desires a relationship of real submission to Christ in all the details of one's personal, individual destiny, one must find the way to really submit these details to Christ through another human will commanding on this earth. To simply *say* (and really mean), "Lord, I want to do your will in all things" is not enough to make this submission a reality. The fact is that Jesus has not *expressed* in the Gospel his particular will for every individual in detail. If no command is expressed, no real obedience can be given. Nor can we rely on the inspirations of our hearts as sufficient manifestation of his will. It is not really obedience when a person figures out, as best he can, what the authority over him would probably desire, and then carries that out. This might be loyalty and generosity, but it is not obedience, because he is not really being commanded. And in reality we know that when it comes to simply obeying the commands of God addressed directly to one's heart, in the secret of one's heart, we rationalize more than we receive. Even psychology teaches us that when a train of thought which we do not wish to board is coming down the track, our unconscious mind is often able to see it and shunt it off onto a side track long before it ever comes into the range of our conscious vision or choice. This is all the more true of the ordinary inspirations of grace, which are usually gentle, quiet, and easily just not registered by hearts that are not making particular efforts to be surrendered and alert. Real receptivity to the inspirations of God is the fruit of much asceticism, purification, and prayer.¹⁴ To make a vow, therefore, of "doing God's will in all things" without long and intense previous spiritual growth would be an empty formula. It is a vow very few take, and that none should take without the approval of a wise spiritual director.

Let us be clear. We are not saying at this point (we will take up

the question later) that God can more easily, and with less risk of distortion, relay his own desires and will to us through the person of a superior than he can through inspirations addressing directly our own hearts. Nor are we taking up the question of how, in fact, God has chosen to communicate with individuals, whether directly, or through a hierarchical chain of command, or both. (We certainly do not espouse what might be called the Bostonian concept of authority, according to which subjects speak only to superiors, and superiors speak only to God). What we are concerned with immediately is not how God can communicate with us, but how we can establish ourselves in a real relationship of more total submission to God. We are concerned with the foundation of a real relationship of submission to Christ that delivers and subjects to him more of our own persons and lives than we find addressed by his general law. His law, to take one example, does not send us to work in one place rather than another. If we really want, therefore, to place ourselves so completely at the disposal of Christ that we can be sent wherever he might desire, in what real way can we constitute ourselves in such a state of concrete availability other than by placing ourselves at his disposal through another real, present human will that is still a part of the ordinary interaction of human history? The question here is not how or whether, from his side, Christ can "break the sound barrier" of his transcendence on special occasions and by particular enlightenment communicate his desires and will to us. The question is rather whether, from *our* side, we can in any real sense place ourselves in a constant state of real and truly extended submission to Christ if we are not in fact subjected with the same reality and extension to another present human will, able to command us in a human way on this earth. In order to be really subject to Christ, we have to be really subject; and we cannot be really subject, as human beings, unless there is someone on this earth, existing on our own level of human interaction, who is able to receive our subjection and command us.¹⁵

C. Superiors and the Church

The vow of religious obedience is an affirmation in faith that it is

possible, by entering into a relationship of more total submission to the body of Christ on earth, through representatives (superiors, or a community) recognized by that body, to enter into a real relationship of more total submission to the person of Jesus Christ. It is another way of bearing witness that Jesus is truly risen and living and attainable still in his mystical body on earth. Thus the vow of religious obedience is founded on an act of faith that is specifically Christian.

We still have a question to ask: Granted that the Church can mediate and receive submission to Christ, since this is established in Scripture, what right have we to put a religious community or superior in the position of mediating and receiving our submission to the Church and to Christ? The Scripture does not say, "He who selects another Christian for his superior and hears him hears me," but "He who hears you [the Church and Apostles] hears me" (Luke 10:16).

The answer to this question is historical rather than speculative. The belief that a more all-embracing, voluntary submission to human superiors in the Church is a real submission to Jesus Christ is not a belief that grew up on the drawing boards of theological architects. It is a belief that grew out of the inspired practice and graced responses of the saints, and which received as it grew the official approval of the Church. The theologians came along later to project onto their drawing boards the plausible doctrinal substructure that seemed to be holding up what was already there. Men in various times and places, giving various culturally-influenced theological explanations for their actions (even as we do today), simply followed the Holy Spirit in vowing obedience to one another. And the holiness of these men was recognized by the Church: Their way of life was approved; and the vow of obedience was accepted as a valid Christian action. Theologically, the vow of obedience is submission to Christ through the mediation of the Church as such, because it is always made in a religious community recognized by the Church, to superiors authorized by the Church. In the beginnings, going back to the desert and early religious foundations, this recognition by the Church may have been more implicit than explicit, more popular than official.¹⁶ But however ecclesiastical recognition might be petitioned or expressed, it is obvious that the vow

of religious obedience depends for its theological significance on the fact that it is in some way accepted by the Church as such as a bond of relationship and submission to the whole body of Christ on earth, and as a valid expression of the life of that body.

IV. OBEDIENCE AND DISCERNMENT OF GOD'S WILL

It is very clear that the vow of religious obedience--if we take it as understood by St. Ignatius, at least--is not to be understood solely as a means of submitting oneself more totally to other human beings in order to abnegate one's own will and judgment more totally before God, a way of making a "holocaust" of oneself for ascetical purposes. The vow is also understood to be a way of uniting oneself more surely to the actual will of God, a way of letting oneself be moved more unerringly by God himself to accomplish the purposes for which God wishes to use one.¹⁷

A. The Superior as Holding the Place of Christ

St. Ignatius represents the classical tradition of obedience when he exhorts religious to see their superior as the "placeholder" (lieutenant) of Christ, for example, in *Constitutions*, [242]. But a superior can be "in the place of Christ" in at least three ways, which it is important to distinguish.

First, the superior can represent Christ in the sense of *making Christ present to receive* the submission, reverence, and love of those who have vowed obedience in order that they may give themselves more completely to him. It is in this sense that we have spoken of the value of obedience so far in this paper. And if we look at obedience from this precise point of view, the subject is not primarily concerned with what he is being commanded to do, or how well-advised it might be, but just with the fact that he is being commanded, and is thus enabled to surrender himself more entirely in obedience. Before we conclude too quickly that such an attitude is an exaggeration of faith to the exclusion of reason, we should reflect that there are very many things a religious is told to do--and

probably these are the great majority of all the commands he receives--in which there is no real question of discerning the will of God. To be asked to accept some small element of life-style which one dislikes, but which will do no harm to work or health; or to be asked to run an errand or respond to a call at an inopportune time, or even to be sent to a different city when one has no particular spiritual (but perhaps a great deal of natural) inclination to be in one place rather than another--all these burdens or assignments may be in themselves rather "neutral" in terms of God's will for the individual. But the religious who wants to be entirely at the disposition of God, and to express that availability concretely in his life with the unambiguous sincerity of action will welcome decisions of authority that go against his own inclinations and self-will just because they provide him with the opportunity to give more of himself away and to live out his commitment to God in deed rather than in words alone.¹⁸

A second sense in which the superior acts "in the place of Christ" is through being the *effective voice of decision* in a community where decisions have to be made. In this sense the superior speaks with the voice of God in the way that any legitimate authority--ecclesiastical, political, or familial--speaks with the voice of God. He is the spark plug: when the gas is assembled in the chamber and lifted and compressed by the piston until it is ready to fire, his voice is the spark that converts all preceding action into forward motion. The "superior" in this case would not have to be an individual person; decision-making authority could be invested in a representative group, or be exercised by the community as a whole. But in a society dedicated to working for the Kingdom of God as members of the risen Christ, submissive to Christ as head, obedience to the necessary and legitimate authority within that society must be given as to Christ himself. And it should be given with love.¹⁹

If we stopped with this second sense, according to which "placeholder" of Christ just means that someone in a society of men must make decisions definite, and that the religious superior does that in a Christian religious society as speaking with the authority of Christ, then we would still be speaking only of the first level of religious obedience,

which is obedience of execution; or at most, of obedience of execution and of will, so that we do what is commanded and do it promptly. But we would not have supplied any basis for obedience of judgment which depends on our being able to believe not only that Christ wants us to carry out this command for the sake of unity and order, but also that this is the actual command that Christ himself wants given, the command that expresses Christ's own desire with regard to the course of action that the obeying subject or community should follow. A religious gives obedience of judgment when he affirms in faith that what the superior has decided is most likely a faithful discernment of what God himself is moving the community, or himself as an individual, to do.²⁰

The final--and fullest--sense, therefore, in which the superior is "in the place of Christ" is by his being *the one through whom Christ's real will*, and not just Christ's will as changed or modified by the superior's actual decision, comes through to the subject or community. It is in this sense that we find it hardest to accept superiors today as being "in the place of Christ." It seems to make superiors enjoy an infallibility more extensive and more constant than the pope's! It gives rise to the "direct line" theory, which sees the superior as the only one who is plugged in directly to God, while the rest of the community must plug in to the superior if they want to get the message at all. To substitute the community as such for the individual superior does not alter the picture; the theological problem is the same whether one obeys a single person who is in charge or a whole community of bosses deciding by consensus. The difficulty is to provide some reason or justification for believing that any human authority can actually tell me what God has in his mind.

B. The Role of Superiors in God's Providence

The key to St. Ignatius' belief that God will guide subjects faithfully through their superiors is found in the following Ignatian overview. The world in its complexity and the Church in her hierarchical order are divinely constituted in such a way that through God's providence things of a lower scale and persons of a lower responsibility are moved by those that are higher, and the higher by the highest until we come to the highest,

single, human instrument who in the Church is the pope.²¹

This vision is not exclusively a faith-vision; the influence of St. Ignatius' culture, from the political ordering of society in his time, is evident. There is also a strong element of plain, solid reason behind it. As he himself argues, there simply is no order without subordination and obedience. He appeals to the example current in his day (and in our own!) of other religious congregations who were failing to be what they should be because their superiors did not have or exercise sufficient authority in government. And he appeals to the universal common sense and practice of mankind, who avoid confusion and disorder in society by subordination to superiors and by respecting the "principle of subsidiarity," following the chain of command, and not bypassing intermediate authorities. This is simply common sense in any organization or society of any size, and we do not normally expect Divine Providence to show less common sense than we do.²²

Ignatius and his companions believed that the higher authority was in a better position, naturally speaking, by reason of his office and responsibility, to see the whole picture and make judgments regarding the greater good. Blessed Pierre Favre tells us that what determined the first Jesuits to submit themselves to the pope's judgment and will was "our conviction that he has better knowledge of what is the right thing for universal Christendom."²³

We would miss the whole point, however, if we stopped with this common sense view of things. It is because order and subordination stand out as necessary for the right direction of the universe that Ignatius believed that Divine Providence endorsed this order of things and would, by logical necessity, give special graces to superiors for the right performance of their appointed function. Ignatius' faith, however, was not just in the fact that certain human beings are better placed to receive information and make judgments about the greater good, but in the God who gives light and movement to those human beings because of this position they are in. He trusted that God would not fail to provide for his Church through the instruments he himself had set in place, or to maintain and govern the

Church according to the system and order he himself had established. Ignatius teaches subjects to respect the order of divine providence and to expect that normally the graces required for governing will be given to the governors rather than to the governed. And thus he does not hesitate to call the superior the "interpreter of God's will," because that is a role the superior is required to fulfill in the community by virtue of his decision-making authority, and St. Ignatius takes for granted that God will not refuse his graces to one whose office requires them.²⁴

It would be simplistic, however, to conclude that all government is left to superiors and all obedience to subjects. The Holy Spirit acts throughout the Church and throughout all the members of a religious community. If God in his providence respects the order and subordination of hierarchical society, he is still not limited by any structure: his contact with the community is not restricted to the top of the pyramid, nor is his action within the community constricted to the channels of command. Superiors must listen to their subjects and be ready, in their turn, as interpreters (and not authors) of God's will, to obey the voice of the Holy Spirit speaking even through the last and the littlest member of the community.²⁵

This is why the titles of "placeholder of Christ" and "interpreter of God's will" should not be given to a superior except in conjunction with another Ignatian title which is "head of a community" of persons. The superior decides nothing as an isolated, autonomous individual, but everything as the head of a community of discerning persons, all seeking God's will through prayer and daily exercises in alertness to the movements of God's graces within them.²⁶ This, too, is part of the order of divine providence, that the superior should seek and discern God's will in community. For this reason the Jesuit Rules of the Provincial (no. 15) and of the superior of a professed house (nos. 15, 16)²⁷ imply that *consultation* with other members of the community is one of the most appropriate means for knowing the will of God, according to the sweet dispositions of divine providence. The responsibility of decision is left with the superior, but his place in the order of divine providence is not to sit on

the top of a pyramid, communing with God alone and passing the word down to his community. Rather, his position is more like the focal point in a funnel where the wide end enters the spout: All that is poured into the funnel, into his whole community, comes to him; and as the one finally responsible for discerning and interpreting God's will, and for deciding what must be done, he is also the one who finally determines what and how much of the input will pass into action.

C. The Need for Spiritual Government

It is because the religious superior must be the discerning head of a community of prayerful persons that so much is required of him. Since the inspirations of the Holy Spirit come to the community through subjects as well as through superiors, government in every religious community must be "spiritual government," or government that looks for and discerningly accepts the movements of the Holy Spirit in every member. This is precisely where the difficulty of spiritual government is found: in the necessity of respecting and harmonizing two distinct currents of inspiration, those given to superiors, more universal in their concern, and those given to subjects, more particular in their insistence.²⁸

And this is also the factor of religious government that renders all distinction between "apostolic" and "ascetical" obedience irrelevant when it comes down to explaining real vocations. Since no superior is simply an administrator, or even an ecclesiastical empire-builder of a chain of apostolic institutions, but rather the interpreter of God's will and the head of a community of inner-directed, spiritual persons, the superior's ability to relate on a deep, spiritual level with each individual subject is just as important--in any community--as his ability to envision and organize vast apostolic undertakings. Superiors must listen before they command, and subjects must speak as well as obey. If for any reason subjects cannot be, or will not be, perfectly open with their superiors about their spiritual movements as well as about their opinions, manifesting their consciences as well as contributing their information, then the proper relationship between subjects and superiors, even in the assigning of missions, breaks down. And consequently the trust that God is authen-

tically guiding the subject through the superior loses its necessary foundation. Superiors and subjects must be united and able to communicate confidently with one another on those levels where the Spirit acts in the heart or else all government and obedience of mission will degenerate into a merely human and superficial administrative rapport. The Holy Spirit himself cannot function--according to the ordinary dispositions of God's providence--to unite in the finding and doing of God's will two people who simply have no communion with each other on the level of spiritual life. And "communion" here does not mean just the divine reality of being united in grace, but the Christic, divine-human reality of grace that is able to be activated on the human level in mutual communication, understanding, and expression.²⁹

The proper relationship between subjects and superiors is a relationship divine providence depends on--not in the sense that God cannot work miracles, but in the sense that ordinarily he does not let them become the order of the day. As Jacques Lewis puts it:

It is quite true that the Holy Spirit gives special assistance to authorities; St. Ignatius gives full expression to this. . . . It is not true, on the other hand, that God multiplies miracles for fun by infusing revelations. As a general rule, providence plays by the ground rules of the nature created by that same providence, and adapts its action to the concrete circumstances. Man must always dispose himself for God's intervention, by the natural and supernatural means available to him; if not, he puts God to the test and he runs the risk of discrediting God in the eyes of others.³⁰

Hence we cannot confidently trust that God is directing our apostolic assignments if we cannot trust that God is able to act through our superiors for spiritual government as well.

D. The Need for Human Cooperation with Grace.

Here we arrive at a principle which is fundamental to all Christian theology and spirituality which is that everything Christic must be at the same time fully human and fully divine. The reality of religious obedience and government requires for its very authenticity that both God and man do their part. All that the spiritual masters say about the blessings of obedience must be accepted with the understanding that nature

(in subject and superiors alike) is presumed to be cooperating with grace. It is true that God can, and often does, supply for the defects of his instruments--especially when those instruments are doing the best they can--and that the God of providence knows how to write straight with crooked lines; but it is simply contrary to Catholic theology to expect simplistically that God will so "guarantee" any system or structure, even ones established by himself, that it magically cannot fail of its effect no matter how defective his ministers are. There is no magic in Christianity. No matter how much we yearn for a foolproof set-up, a fail-safe formula that we can rely on with the absoluteness of faith in God himself, it simply does not exist in the incarnational, divine-human reality of the Church of the risen Christ. We do have a guaranteed action of God in the infallibility and ultimate triumph of grace in the Church herself, and in the self-expression of Christ through the sacraments. But even the sacramental action of God depends so much on the graced cooperation, dispositions, and right intentions of those who receive and administer the sacraments that one can never be absolutely sure that the words spoken in a particular instance have infallibly produced their effect.

We must not, then, distort the general principles of the saints and spiritual masters into absolute guarantees contrary to the context of Christian theology in which they are found. This is especially true of principles of obedience when they are presented, as they most often are, in exhortations addressed to subjects urging them to obey. If we want the saints' doctrine on the way God works through superiors, we must study, not only what the saints have to say to subjects about obeying, but also what they say about the care to be used in selecting superiors, about the qualities required in superiors, and about the guidelines they must observe in governing.³¹

A thesis of this paper is that it is not only impossible but illegitimate and contrary to the teachings of the saints and spiritual masters to give obedience of judgment to a superior who manifestly does not possess the qualities prerequisite in a superior or does not follow the methods in governing that reason and faith alike require. Such a thesis may seem obvious to some and scandalous to others, but it is rooted in the

very scandalous fact that God has obviously limited himself through the Incarnation--and even more through continuing that Incarnation in us, the very feeble and sinful members of his mystical body on earth. The mystery of grace is the mystery of God acting through human natures--with the consequent glory that his will has appeared upon earth, and the consequent scandal that sometimes his will is not done, even in the body of his risen Son.

Religious obedience is not just a virtue of the subject--like patience or purity, for example--which depends for its perfection on nothing but the grace of God and the subject's good will. Religious obedience, if we look at its real nature, is not just a virtue, but the activity corresponding to one term of a *relationship*. Religious government is the activity corresponding to the other term. If either government or obedience is not what it should be, the relationship is not what it should be, and both terms of the relationship--subject and superior alike, as well as the common good they serve--are going to suffer. In other words, religious subjects and superiors are mutually dependent on each other--inescapably interdependent, in a way we have not sufficiently emphasized in the past--in order to bring into existence that reality which is the goal and integral value of the vow of religious obedience.

E. Joy and Conformity of Judgment

The reality envisioned by the vow of obedience is *joy*--the joy of a more intimate, surrendered relationship with Jesus Christ, with God himself, through the concrete reality of the relationship of religious obedience on earth. It is the joy of being able really to believe, and to experience in one's life the fact that God has accepted the total offering of one's person, gifts, and work, and that God is intervening in the direction and employment of one's energy and time. It is the joy of a closer and more secure unity with Christ and with his Church experienced through the union one enjoys with one's community under the headship of the superior.

This joy is only possible if one is able honestly and in faith to make a judgment that God is truly guiding one through one's superior.

And this judgment is not based on the fact that one agrees with the superior's opinion, but rather on the fact that one can be satisfied that those ordinary human conditions are present which are the normal prerequisites for God's grace to act. If man is doing what can be humanly expected of him, we can trust God to supply for man's defects. And if God calls a man to submit to himself through another in obedience, we can trust that God will not fail to direct that man's life, provided that His human instruments are basically what they should be and right procedures in government are observed. God's grace does not require--in most situations--saints or geniuses as its instruments. But religious tradition has left us certain norms that can be accepted as generally indispensable in spiritual government. If these norms are not fulfilled, both in the qualities of a particular superior and in his manner of governing, the counsel of the saints is that it is folly to submit oneself to the spiritual government of such a man. One must obey, of course, on the juridical level, which is the level of non-disobedience. One must execute all legitimate commands. The good of unity and order requires this. But it would be rash and theologically groundless to believe blindly that, in spite of all missing prerequisites, every given superior must be faithfully discerning and expressing the will of God in his government, and to try to conform one's judgment to his. And it would be foolish to expose or surrender freely to the direction and government of such a man more than one is obliged to.

We must then recognize, however, that in the measure one cannot or should not manifest one's conscience entirely, or surrender all of one's judgment and personal life to the spiritual government of a superior, one loses in that same measure the fullness of the blessings of religious obedience and government. In particular, the blessing of obedience of judgment--the joy of being "one mind and one heart" in community and with one's superior--is lost when there is not sufficient confidence in the superior's spiritual depth and manner of governing to let all the members of the community be perfectly open with him about themselves and trust that God is working through his decisions. Obedience of judgment has no meaning without adequate communication between subject and superiors. And where we

cannot be open, or where the superior is not open to the values one is basing one's own judgments on, communication is not a fact. And without real, trusting communication between subject and superior, both obedience of judgment and personal, spiritual government become impossible.³²

F. Spiritual Government in Apostolic Orders

It might be objected that we are confusing spiritual government with spiritual direction here, or the obedience proper to monasticism with the obedience that looks to mission. It is worth repeating, therefore, that if the government and obedience of mission is going to respect the spiritual integrity of persons, it is going to have to be based on a deep spiritual understanding and relationship between the person of the superior and the person of each one of his subjects. This is a prerequisite for even attempting to govern a community according to discernment of the will of God. We do not suppose that one superior general can have intimate knowledge of every member of a vast religious order; and this is precisely why it is so important that there be regional or provincial superiors, and local superiors who can know each man on the depth that corresponds to the level of government each superior is responsible for. The first Jesuits, after they had already decided to submit themselves to the pope in an obedience of mission, recognized the need to submit themselves also to one of their own members in obedience (there were eleven of them at the time). Five of the reasons for this decision have come down to us. A religious superior is necessary: (1) to be responsible that ministries are actually carried out in execution; (2) for the survival and perseverance of the group in unity; (3) to make possible virtuous acts that are heroic and constant; (4) as a help to counteract pride and arrogance through obedience; (5) and finally, because "in questions that concern the particular circumstances of our life, which are countless, it would not be fitting for the pope to concern himself, even if he could."

What we find here is a recognition that even the most apostolically oriented obedience (such as that of the first Jesuits to the pope) cannot survive without a relationship of ascetically inspired obedience between persons who are sufficiently close and intimate with each other to allow

for true, personal, spiritual government. The final decision to elect one of themselves superior summed up the reasons thus:

so that we might be able to carry out our original desires of fulfilling the divine will better and more perfectly, so that the Society might be more surely preserved, and finally so that proper provision might be made for the working out of ordinary particulars, both spiritual and temporal.³³

Clearly, the government of mission, with the apostolic obedience that corresponds to it, is condemned to failure from the very start if it is not founded on intimate, personal knowledge of the spiritual strengths and weaknesses of those who are to be sent. This is undoubtedly one reason why the individual Jesuit was forbidden to offer himself directly to the pope for particular missions, but was instructed instead to "depend on the judgment of the Society or its superior, to whom he should make his inclination known."³⁴ It is also the reason for the manifestation of conscience that is so crucial to the whole Jesuit system:

Likewise, the more completely the superiors know these subjects' interior and exterior affairs, just so much the better will they be able, with greater diligence, love, and care, to help the subjects and to guard their souls from various inconveniences and dangers which might occur later on. Further still, in conformity with our profession and manner of proceeding, we should always be ready to travel about in various regions of the world, on all occasions when the supreme pontiff or our immediate superior orders us. To proceed without error in such mission, or in sending some persons and not others, or some for one task and others for different ones, it is not only highly but even supremely important for the superior to have complete knowledge of the inclinations and motions of those who are in his charge, and to what defects or sins they have been or are moved and inclined; that thus he may direct them better, without placing them beyond the measure of their capacity in dangers or labors greater than they could in our Lord endure with a spirit of love; and also that the superior, while keeping to himself what he learns in secret, may be better able to organize and arrange what is expedient for the whole body of the Society.³⁵

The Ignatian passages that treat of manifestation of conscience leave no doubt that the obedience and government he envisaged were to be built on deep, personal, intimate, spiritual knowledge of subjects by superiors.³⁶

An equally convincing proof is found in the *personal qualities* Ignatius requires in those who are to be appointed superiors. Space does not permit us to develop this topic here, but a study of pertinent texts³⁷ reveals a very significant parallel between the qualities Ignatius required in a superior and those that tradition requires in a spiritual

director. The texts we have referred to above from the *Philokalia*, from St. Francis de Sales, Teresa of Avila, and John of the Cross (see footnote 32) present *personal spiritual experience, prudence, and learning* as the indispensable qualities of a spiritual director. St. Ignatius writes of the superior general of the Society:

And although learning is highly necessary . . . , still more necessary is prudence along with experience in spiritual and interior matters, . . .³⁸

Of the six qualities Ignatius proposes to guide the selection of a superior general, the first two concern personal union with God and holiness, the third is prudence--but a prudence rooted in spiritual experience and discernment of spirits--and the last three concern the health, energy, and prestige required in a leader of men.³⁹ And they are listed in order of importance.

Finally, Ignatius insisted on a *method to be observed in governing* that would faithfully express, and not falsify, the understanding both subjects and superiors alike were to have of the superior's role. As interpreter of the will of God, the superior must take care to listen to his subjects, and in particular to their natural and spiritual inclinations, and discern how God is leading them so that he might govern them according to God's will and not his own.⁴⁰

As placeholder of Jesus Christ, the superior should try, as much as possible, to express in his own person the person of Jesus Christ. He does this above all through love, and for this reason Ignatius requires that in the superior, "charity should be especially resplendent."⁴¹ He must never give the impression of just "using" persons, no matter how exalted the purpose might be, because this would give a false expression and image to the relationship Christ desires with the individual. Our Lord calls persons to cooperate with himself in loving freedom, not as servants but as friends, and for this reason any subordination of person to function or to institution must be seen as a betrayal of the Master. At the same time the superior must show the same concern that Christ feels for the total, personal, spiritual growth of each member of his community. The role of Christ is to give life, and to prune solicitously that each

might enjoy more life.

Finally, as head of a community of persons, the superior's concern must be to form community, to foster the greatest interaction and sharing of gifts and graces between the members of his community. He is not to separate each glowing ember until all is coldness and control, but to bring the warmth and fire of each one's heart into contact with others that all might burst into flame. He should consult with others and encourage representations. His function is to discern, but not to extinguish the Spirit. He should respect subsidiarity and leave great freedom of judgment to local superiors and individuals who are in closer contact with particular circumstances. All of this requires personal, spiritual government, no matter how apostolically orientated a community may be.⁴²

CONCLUSION

The theology of religious obedience, as it has been presented in this paper, leaves us with two options.

One way of seeing obedience is to consider it as limited to obedience of mission, to apostolic obedience, without this requiring any significant measure of personal, spiritual government. Under this option obedience would be somewhat demythologized, or at least the superior's role as representing the person of Christ would be played down. The important value would not be union of mind and will and heart with one's superior, on the person-to-person level, but a generous subordination of one's self to the values of unity within the religious community, and to the demands of the community's apostolic endeavors. Within this option one could dedicate oneself wholeheartedly to obedience of execution and of will, but it would be illegitimate to attempt obedience of judgment. Obedience of judgment presupposes a context of discerning search for the will of God. For a community really to judge that God is guiding it through the superior (or through its own decisions and consensus) would be rash and unjustified in Catholic theology unless from the side of human nature and activity the normal prerequisites for seeking and finding God's will are there. But

under this first option the prerequisites for such an effort cannot exist. From the community as a whole, such an effort demands a way of life characterized by faith-vision, prayer, and very deep, solid asceticism. Above all it demands radical openness to the will of God whatever this might be, and detachment from every particular thing, work, inclination, or vested interest. From superiors it demands the personal qualifications we have described briefly above, and a method of governing that is truly personal and growth-oriented with respect to every individual and is spiritually discerning. From subjects it demands open, trusting manifestation of one's interior life--inspirations, difficulties and possible illusions--to the superior. Without such a context, and above all without personal spiritual government, it would be a form of idolatry to commit one's judgment in obedience to whatever one might be commanded to do in community. It would be to make a simple identification between the will of God and the projects of one's community or superior. This would be the obedience of a football team for whom the ceiling of values is the right functioning of the team: the highest value for the individual being to contribute to the effort of the team; and the highest value for the team being to run rightly whatever play they have decided to run. No play has, of itself or from outside the team, any more value than another; the only question is: Will it work? And if every player does his part perfectly, theoretically every play is good for a touchdown.

It is possible for a religious community, consciously or unconsciously, to fall into this attitude. God's will for the individual is unquestioningly taken to be the doing of whatever he is assigned to do, and the doing of it well, because that is his contribution to what the community is doing. And what the community decides to do is as far as one should look.

This option may be a valid one provided it does not pretend to be the obedience presented and praised by the saints and spiritual masters and does not try to base itself on their principles or practice, but just stays on the level of the obedience one owes to any organization or society in which one lives and works. But to call it obedience to the real will of God when the necessary means for seeking and being open to the will of God

are left out of the picture is nothing but corporate pride and idolatry.

A second option is obedience which is not only of mission, but which has this in common still with the monasticism out of which active religious life evolved: that it is an obedience chosen for its own sake, as being a means in itself of more total union with God through Christ, head of his mystical body on earth. This is an explicitly ascetical, as well as an apostolic obedience. It demands personal, spiritual government as its counterpart or it becomes impossible. It also demands sincere and purposeful manifestation of conscience. Where such government and communication between subjects and superiors are basically what they should be, and man is doing all he can to dispose himself to discern the will of God, and is taking the classical means to discern it, then subjects can and should strive to conform not only their execution and their wills but their judgments also to the decisions of superiors. Just as obedience of judgment is illegitimate where the human prerequisites are ignored or neglected; so it is justified and even called for where those prerequisites are realized. For God does not deny his grace to those who are doing their best; and providence can be expected to work through the order of things inspired and established by that same providence through the enlightenment of the saints and the approval of the Church, especially when the individual religious has entered into this order of things in response to God's personal call, and through the covenant of his vows. Within this second option the superior is truly respected as standing in the place of Christ. And because it is recognized that grace will not act without free, human cooperation, the community that embraces this second option will take care not to place anyone in the position of superior unless he has the personal gifts and qualities, and follows those principles of spiritual government which are the prerequisites for any human being's mediating and interpreting the will of God to others. The community will also take care not to make the superior's job impossible by burdening him with administrative duties or a community so large that spiritual government becomes an unrealistic dream.

Within this second option it is difficult to conceive of a community without an individual superior. Group government, to be spiritual govern-

ment, would require deep manifestation of every individual conscience to the group as a whole. God might inspire some religious community to adopt this as a way of life, and raise up a saint to begin it; but there is no precedent for it yet in those communities founded by the saints we know of and approved by the Church so far.

The joy of that religious obedience which strives to be total--obedience of execution, will, and judgment--is the joy of establishing oneself in a deeper, closer, more all-embracing relationship of unity with God through the reality of a relationship with other concrete human beings that allows the offering of oneself to God to be more than just words, intentions, and desires. It is the joy of knowing that one truly has made real a more extended subjection of oneself to God and to Christ through the reality of subjecting oneself more extensively to his present and acting mystical body upon earth. It is the joy of being able to trust in God's active guidance of one's life through superiors because of a deep conviction and belief that God has personally called one, as an individual, to submit to their government as a way of being more completely available to his every movement and desire. When one sees the grace of God manifestly appearing in the life and conduct of one's own community and superiors, and experiences time and time again the intervention of grace in one's own life through the government and decisions of superiors, proving itself in its results, then it becomes easy to believe that God's providence is truly acting through the government one receives and the obedience one is moved to give. When one has confidence in one's superior as a man of prayer striving to be totally open to God's inspirations through every ordinary means of the spiritual life, and dealing with each individual subject with an expectant faith that looks for the movements and messages of God, then it is possible and even consoling to conform one's judgment to the superior's provided there has been no refusal on one's own part to be open with him and to represent the whole truth of a particular question as completely and clearly as possible.

When from the side of both superiors and subjects the relationship of religious government and obedience is made real, then one has no need

of theological papers on obedience because one has experienced for oneself, through the reality of obedience, the truth of the action of God.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 See St. Ignatius' classical letter on obedience, March 26, 1553, in *Selected Letters of St. Ignatius of Loyola*, tr. W. J. Young, S.J. (Chicago, 1959), pp. 289-295, (abbreviated hereafter as *LettersIgn*). The Spanish text is in *Obras completas de san Ignacio de Loyola*, ed. I. Iparraguirre, S.J., y C. de Dalmases, S.I., *Biblioteca de autores cristianos* (Madrid, 1963), pp. 808-816.
- 2 An extreme case, but typical in its basic elements, is that of the rector-president of a large religious university who had on his door a sign saying, "I will be available for members of the community from eight to eight-fifteen every morning; otherwise by appointment." If you called him (i.e., his secretary) for an appointment she would say something like, "Father will see you at three-fifty in the afternoon on Tuesday, six weeks from today." And likely as not you would receive a call on the Monday before your appointment saying, "Father has been called on business to Chicago; can you wait another three weeks?" Obviously, to speak of a "religious superior" in this context is to use a word that refers to nothing in reality.
- 3 The story is told of a French Jesuit Provincial who authorized a group of scholastics to take a summer trip against general policy. He received a letter from Father General's secretary instructing him without discussion to revoke the permission. In reply he telegraphed the General, "Since when have the Fathers Provincial become the beadles of Father General?" (*Les Pères Provinciaux, depuis quand sont-ils les bidelles du Père Générale?*) The Father General apologized; or so the story goes.
- 4 Teilhard de Chardin provides a good example of apostolic obedience in faith. The writings that he really considered his life's work were judged by censors to be unworthy of publication, and he was not allowed by superiors to publish them. They were still unpublished when he died. He had no way, during his life, of knowing that what he believed to be his contribution to the Church would actually, someday, be given to the People of God. But he continued writing his manuscripts, and he persevered in obedience until the end. It is easy for us, with hindsight, to say that God knew the time and manner that were best for his writings to appear, but for Teilhard to say this was a pure act of faith, and "hope against hope."
- 5 Sometimes it is said that the asceticism of obedience consists precisely in one's dedication and subordination of self to the common good. There is truth in this, of course. Apostolate is a means to personal growth, just as personal spiritual growth is a means, and the only ultimately valid means, to Christian apostolate. The Constitution on the Church, no.41 (p. 68 in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. W. M. Abbott, S.J.) points out that priests are to grow in love for God and neighbor through their apostolic ministry. But neither asceticism nor apostolate can be reduced to *just* a means to serve the other. One can neither rely solely on apostolic dedication for the fulfillment of religious obedience, nor can one

just "use" apostolic projects--and the people, therefore, to whom one is sent--as a means to realizing one's personal spiritual ambitions or to creating oneself according to the image that appeals to one's aesthetic spiritual taste. Subordination of self to the common good, to be real, is an ascetical as well as an apostolic reality; and it cannot dispense with either ascetical or apostolic means, according to the acquired, traditional understanding of these terms.

- 6 *Religious Life*, no. 14 (p. 477 in Abbott, op. cit.).
- 7 See Ignatius' Letter on Obedience, in *Letters Ign*, p. 290, *General Examen*, [90-93], and *Constitutions*, [284, 547-552] for Ignatius' doctrine on the superior as interpreter of God's will. See also Jacques Lewis, S.J., *Le gouvernement spirituel selon S. Ignace de Loyola* (Montréal: Desclee de Brouwer, 1961), pp. 38-40, 60-62.
- 8 17th Decree: "The Life of Obedience," in *Documents of the Thirty-First General Congregation* (Woodstock, 1967), p. 52.
- 9 See Xavier Leon-Dufour, S.J., *Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (New York, 1967), "Obedience," p. 351, for this theme of obedience in the Scriptures.
- 10 I do not mean to deny the fact, if it is one, that some religious communities might understand their vow or promise of obedience in no deeper or broader way than just as obedience to necessary authority as this is commonly understood in every human society; namely, in the purely functional sense of a required means to the achievement and maintenance of right order within the community, and to a more efficient, coordinated, and effective apostolic effort by the community as a whole. I am just using the term "religious obedience" in this paper to refer to the more extensive, and theologically more profound, obedience that has been traditional in religious life from its beginnings and is found in the writings of the spiritual masters, the saints, and the great founders. But since the obedience I have in mind is really that of the Society of Jesus, I will often use the term "religious obedience" when I really mean the kind of obedience proposed or inspired by St. Ignatius. I hope I can be excused from qualifying this each time, and that the context will make clear what I am referring to.
- 11 Let us give just two examples of what freedom might be understood to mean. In a group that uses sensitivity sessions as a process (not to deliberate directly, but to identify with the group that is deliberating), "freedom" will mean the psychological freedom to express one's feelings openly and trustingly to the group. In another body, using a process of "communal discernment," it is recognized that spiritual freedom, or true interior detachment, is a prerequisite to success; but in the process itself, a person must also have the psychological freedom to express, not just his feelings, but his deepest spiritual movements--and sometimes this freedom can depend to a great extent on the spiritual trials a person is or is not going through at the moment.
- 12 We are familiar with this idea from the viewpoint of the text "As long as you did it to the least of my brethren, you did it to me." But what is

true of serving the Christ who suffers need in his members is also true of other ways of relating to Christ present in his members.

- 13 C. Kossel, S.J., "Principles of St. Thomas's Distinction Between the Esse and the Ratio of Relation," *The Modern Schoolman*, XXIV (1946), 19-36, 93-107, and XXV (1947), 151-172, especially 161-167.
- 14 See G. Aschenbrenner, "Consciousness Examen," in *Review for Religious*, XXXI (1972), 14-21.
- 15 All subjection to the transcendent God is subjection mediated through something finite and created that expresses God's will to man: the natural law inscribed in creation, the Mosaic Law revealed in history, etc. Only when the person, God the Son, took flesh in finite, created form could we subject ourselves in any real sense to the free, personal will of the infinite God as such (and less perfectly before that through submission to the people of God in whom the living God spoke through the patriarchs and prophets.) What Jesus asked and demanded while on earth was not subjection to a code, a creed, or a limited number of precepts. He asked unlimited subjection of our minds and wills to himself--but to himself speaking in history. This subjection was to Someone concretely present in the flesh, speaking specific human words, giving particular commands to individuals on this earth. But this subjection was not limited to what had already been said and codified because the Person to whom subjection was given was still present, living, and able to speak and command again. What Christ demanded was unconditional and unlimited submission of our minds and hearts to all he had said, all he was saying (that men might not yet understand), and to all he *would* say. Such submission can legitimately be given only to Truth Itself, Good Itself, God Himself. But such submission is the only submission that can truly claim the Infinite as its object; that can really be, therefore, an act of man on that unique level of activity that is proper to God alone--the level of the supernatural in its theological, not popular, sense. No subjection of faith or love to anything limited, be it to creed, code, or to the written Bible itself, can be properly supernatural unless it is subjection to the living God still speaking with a living voice in history. That is why the submission of a Christian is not essentially to what has been written and codified (although it must include that also) but rather to the *living Church*, the risen Christ, to Jesus the head still speaking in his body on earth. Like the hearers of Jesus himself, we also surrender our minds and wills in faith unconditionally and without limits. We commit ourselves to believe and do all that the Church has taught, all that she is teaching today (which we may not understand), and all that she will teach in the future--knowing, of course, that her teaching will not contradict or go beyond the revelation already given in Jesus Christ. To surrender, then, to the Infinite precisely as Person--as still free and unpredictably interacting with us--we need a concrete *personal* reality on this earth, be it immediately the person of Jesus Christ, the person of a superior, or the personal reality of a community, to receive and mediate our surrender to the Person of God and make it real.
- 16 See the charming passage in *The Ancrene Riwe*, tr. M. B. Salu, London (Burns & Oates, 1955, p. 4.) telling the three anchoresses for whom it was

written how they should answer those who disparaged them for not belonging to an established religious order: "If any ignorant person should ask you to which Order you belong, as you tell me some people **do** (straining the liquid to get rid of a gnat and yet swallowing a fly), **say that** you belong to the Order of St. James. . . . If such an answer astonishes him, ask him what constitutes "order" and where in Holy Writ he might find religion more clearly and plainly described than it is in St. James' canonical epistle. There he describes religion and true 'order': 'Religion clean and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit the fatherless and widows in their tribulation and to keep oneself unspotted from this world.' That is how St. James describes religion and 'order.' The second part of what he says there applies particularly to recluses." It is also true, of course, that anchorites do not profess the same obedience that religious who live in community profess.

- 17 See Vatican II, *Religious Life*, no. 14 (in Abbott, op. cit., p. 476): "Through the profession of obedience, religious offer to God a total dedication of their own wills as a sacrifice of themselves; they thereby unite themselves with greater steadfastness and security to the saving will of God. In this way they follow the pattern of Jesus Christ, who came to do the Father's will."

It is significant that Ignatius did have the thought of simply making a holocaust of himself by subjecting himself to obedience in some corrupt religious order so as to suffer more in that order and possibly to help reform it, but he decided against it for the sake of greater apostolic service. See his *Autobiography*, no. 71.

- 18 St. Theresa of Avila gives an example of this kind of obedience in the *Book of the Foundations*, Chapter V: "I remember a monk telling me that he had made a resolution to which he attached great importance, never to refuse to do anything his superior commanded him, however much labour it might cost him. One day when it was very late and he was so completely exhausted by his work that he could no longer keep on with it and was going off to rest, his superior met him and told him to take his spade and go and dig in the garden. He said nothing, although he was so weary that he could hardly stand, but took his spade, and, just as he was about to enter a passage leading to the garden (which I saw many years after being told about this, for I was able to found a house in the place), Our Lord appeared to him, bearing His Cross, and looking so tired and fatigued that He made him realize very clearly how his own sufferings were nothing by comparison with His (*The Complete Works of Saint Theresa of Jesus*, tr. E. Allison Peers, [New York, 1964], III, p. 22-23).

The value in this act of obedience was not that Christ, as a matter of fact, wanted the garden dug at that moment, but that Christ wanted to let this monk give in deed the total surrender and love he had promised. It should be unnecessary to remark that if the superior had done this every day the monk would have been obliged to take steps to protect the health and the energy he needed for prayer. It *should* be needless to remark this, but a glance at the schedules of many, perhaps most, active

religious makes one feel the remark is not only needed, but hopeless.

- 19 Godfrey O'Donnell, S.J., in an unpublished seminar paper submitted in the School of Divinity of St. Louis University, 1973, entitled "The Concept of Ignatian Obedience, 1539-1556," argues that "Religious obedience for Ignatius, has supernatural and mystical foundations . . . but its necessity rests primarily on a natural and human basis. It is the essential condition of all well-ordered society" (p. 11). And he cites St. Ignatius's letter to the community at Gandía, 1547: "For no group can preserve itself intact unless it is united, and there can be no union without subordination, without a head to whom the other members should be subordinate through obedience" (*EppIgn*, I, 558; *LettersIgn*, p. 144). It is on this level where religious and civil obedience overlap that we speak of the superior as being the "placeholder" (lieutenant) of Christ in this second sense. If Christ desires this society to exist, then he wills that all who are in it should help maintain due order and unity by obeying the legitimate authority in the society as wholeheartedly as they would obey Christ himself in person.
- 20 When we speak of God's will or desire, we can mean either God's *antecedent* will, or his *conditioned* will. God's antecedent will means that which God actually prefers, would want, and presumably was trying to move the superior to command before the decision was finally made. His conditioned will means what God desires and wills the subject to do now that the superior has made up his mind and issued a command. If the superior has decided against God's antecedent will, then God's will under the circumstances, conditioned by the superior's *de facto* decision, is that everyone should obey. In the sense of God's conditioned will, one can always give an obedience of judgment. Slaves could give it to their masters, or the Jews in the time of Christ could have given it to the Scribes and Pharisees. But this is not the obedience of judgment we are speaking of, nor that which is proposed to religious as the perfection of their vow. It is in the context of obedience of execution, not of will and judgment, that St. Ignatius speaks of the obedience of slaves to masters, and of the Jews to the Scribes and Pharisees. When we speak, then, of religious obedience of the judgment, we mean that we conform our judgment to the *superior's* actual decision, and not just that we trust that *God* knows what He is doing in "letting this idiot command this." To conform our judgments to God's *conditioned* will is simply to submit our minds to the mystery and wisdom of divine providence, to trust and obey God as allowing stupid things to happen through human inadequacy; but it is not really to conform our judgment to the superior's in obedience to the superior as interpreter of God's real (antecedent) will for the community. But this obedience of judgment, as we hope to explain, is the real fullness, both of the perfection and of the blessings, of religious obedience.
- 21 See G. O'Donnell, *op. cit.*, pp. 24-26; Jacques Lewis, *Le gouvernement spirituel*, pp. 18, 42, 94-95; also, Ignatius' *Constitutions*, [84, 246-250] and the footnotes on them in the translation and commentary by Father Ganss (St. Louis, 1970).
- 22 Three texts cited by O'Donnell, *op. cit.*, pp. 12 and 25, exemplify St.

Ignatius' teaching on this point: the first two are from his letter to the Jesuits of Gandia in 1547: "If the failures and successes of others should serve as a guide for us, we see that in not a few congregations many faults of no little importance have been committed because they did not have superiors with sufficient authority to govern. On the other hand, in those places where all obey a single superior, the advantage is evident" (*EppIgn*, I, 560; *LettersIgn*, p. 145).

The second reads: "One of the many reasons I have (for insisting on the election of a local superior) is the unfailing example given us by all men who live in community under rule of some kind, such as we see, not only in states and cities but even in particular communities and their houses. This is true not only of the past but of the present as well. Their government is commonly united in a superior, confusion and disorder being thus avoided in the proper ruling of the multitude. For it is certain that, where men of judgment and reason are commonly in agreement, it will be on what is fittest, most natural, and proper" (*EppIgn*, I, 553; *LettersIgn*, p. 141).

The third, to a provincial, Diego Miró, states: "Do not let yourself be involved in the carrying out of orders, and avoid personal embarrassment. But, like the universal mover, operate and set into motion subordinate movers and you will get more done and get it better done, and more in conformity with your office than you would have achieved otherwise. Should they fail in any point, it will be less embarrassing than if you failed, and you will be in a better position to rectify the mistakes of your subordinates than they are themselves. And they will not have to correct the mistakes you make, which would happen if you meddled more than was right" (*EppIgn*, IV, 558; *LettersIgn*, p. 279).

23 J. Lewis, op. cit., p. 61. Lewis remarks on p. 62 that in this Ignatius was "urged by his sense of the Church, and convinced of the Holy Spirit's action in her," and so wanted "to live under the direction of the sovereign pontiff and thereby to achieve a good that would be *more universal and consequently more divine*" (emphasis mine).

24 See J. Lewis; op. cit., pp. 41-42, 49. Ignatius says that God uses the provincial--and in the context this would refer to every superior--as his instrument in bringing about the order, unity, and good government of the Society (Letter to the community at Coimbra, Jan. 14, 1548, in *EppIgn*, I, 687-693; *LettersIgn*, pp. 159-162).

In several places he calls the superior the "interpreter" of God's will for his subjects, for example, in the Letter on Obedience (*EppIgn*, IV, 674; *LettersIgn*, p. 290) and in *Constitutions*, [619].

The *principle of subsidiarity* was likewise rooted, for St. Ignatius, not just in commonsense administrative theory, but in the very theology of religious government and obedience. Therefore higher superiors should leave local superiors great freedom of judgment. "Our Father based this on the fact that God our Lord concurs especially with the immediate, subordinate superior in particular matters which belong immediately and properly to his job. This means that if you want to box in these superiors, or make

a lot of general rules, you deprive them of their authority; and, as a result, you keep them from cooperating with this special grace of God. And this grace, being intended for a particular agent, has more efficacy than any other for the accomplishment of particular matters" (Gonçalves da Câmara, *Memoriale*, no. 271, cited in Lewis, op. cit., p. 84).

- 25 One of the most beautiful expressions of this principle is found in the Rule of St. Benedict, Chapter 3: "As often as anything of importance is to be done in the monastery, let the Abbot call together all the brethren and himself lay the matter before them. Having heard their counsel, let him prudently weigh it with himself and then do what he shall judge most expedient. The reason why we ordain that all be called to Council is that the Lord often reveals to the younger what is best" (Translation published by the Abbey of Gethsemani, Trappist, Ky., 1942, pp. 33-35).
- 26 See G. Aschenbrenner, "Consciousness Examen," *Review for Religious*, XXXI (1972), 14-21.
- 27 In *Institutum Societatis Jesu* (Florence, 1893), III, 75, 99.
- 28 Cf. J. Lewis, op. cit., p. 41.
- 29 We can apply to the search for God's will that takes place between subject and superior what is said about the prerequisites for discernment in community; namely, that it cannot even be attempted unless there is (1) *communio*, or a confident consciousness of truly responding to God together according to the same basic priorities; and (2) agreement on the basic *expression* of this communion in words here and now. It is not enough that people have, as a matter of fact, the same graced vision and love for God; they must also be able to share and express that vision and love to one another on the human level before they can use it as the basis of further action on the human level of satisfactory discussion and decision-making. But this human level of interaction is required and presupposed for the divine action that takes place when men discern God's will together. See John Carroll Futrell, S.J., "Communal Discernment: Reflections on Experience" in *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, IV, No. 5 (November, 1972), p. 168-169.
- 30 J. Lewis, *Le gouvernement spirituel*, pp. 64-65. We should not conclude from this, of course, that every apostolic assignment, or every command of superior to subject requires deep mutual understanding and discernment. I do not believe the distinction between apostolic and ascetical obedience is valid as characterizing different vocations in the Church, but it is valid as characterizing different particular commands or decisions within both the monastic and the mission-directed vocations.
- 31 St. Ignatius uses some very strong statements about the way we should trust that God is acting through the superior. One of the strongest, perhaps, occurs in his famous "Letter on Obedience" addressed to the Jesuits of Portugal in 1553. There he says: "The superior is not to be obeyed because he is very prudent, or very kind, or because he is very qualified through any other gifts of God Our Lord, but because he stands in the place of God, endowed with his authority, according to that saying

of truth eternal, "He who hears you hears me; and he who despises you, despises me." Nor, on the other hand, should we withhold obedience from the superior, in those things over which he has authority, because of the fact that the superior himself, in his own person, is less prudent. For the superior represents that person who is infallible wisdom, and who will supply for what is lacking in his minister. And the same is true if the superior should be lacking in kindness or other good qualities. For Christ Our Lord, after having said "the Scribes and Pharisees have sat and taught from the chair of Moses," explicitly goes on to say, "All things, therefore, that they command you, observe and do. But do not act according to their works" (*EppIgn*, IV, 671-672, freely translated by myself).

We should bear in mind when reading this, first that this passage occurs before or during the treatment on obedience of *execution*, and it is presented as an argument for *not disobeying* the superior (*ni . . . se le ha de dejar de obedecer*) rather than for conforming one's judgment to believe the superior is right. Secondly, it is bracketed between two Scripture texts, one of which refers to the authority of the Church herself, and the other to the kind of obedience owed to Scribes and Pharisees. The most one could make out of these texts as applied to religious obedience is an argument for keeping one's motive clear when one obeys any authority, and for not *disobeying* when one disagrees with the judgment behind a legitimate command. The prudence, or imprudence, of the superior should not be a motive for obeying or disobeying--and if his commands are foolish, divine providence will know how to straighten things up in the end. But we should not take the passage to mean, in any absolute sense, that God will so supply for the defects of his ministers that no bad effects will ever result from their government, or from the execution of their commands. The passage is not dealing with the question of how much of ourselves--mere execution, or will and judgment also--we should conform to the superior's decision, but rather with the motive that should underly whatever obedience or level of obedience, it is appropriate to give.

- 32 Classical warnings against entrusting the government of one's soul to any unqualified person can be found in the *Philokalia*: "If a man finds someone capable of teaching him, not only because he has learned from the divine scriptures, but also because he has himself had blessed experience of divine enlightenment--glory be to God. If not, it is better for a man not to accept these things, but to have recourse to God with a humble and sincere heart, regarding and calling himself unworthy of such honour and vision. . . . (*Writings from the Philokalia on Prayer of the Heart*, translated by E. Kadloubovsky and G.E.H. Palmer, London, 1967, p. 233). See also St. Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Part I, ch. 4: "'For this end [of spiritual direction] choose one among a thousand,' says Avila. I say, 'Choose one among ten thousand,' for there are fewer than can be imagined who are capable of this office. He must be full of charity, knowledge, and prudence. If any one of these three qualities is wanting in him there is danger." Similar warnings are found in St. Teresa of Avila, *Life*, ch. 13, and in St. John of the Cross, *The Living Flame of Love*, stanza III, no. 29.

- 33 *ConsMHSJ*, I, 1-7, esp. 7; the English is cited from G. O'Donnell, op. cit., p. 5.
- 34 Thomas H. O'Gorman, S.J., *Jesuit Obedience from Life to Law, The Development of the Ignatian Idea of Obedience in the Jesuit Constitutions, 1539-1556*, (Manila: Loyola House of Studies, Ateneo de Manila University, 1971), pp. 21-22, cited by O'Donnell, op. cit., p. 6.
- 35 *Examen*, [92], tr. Ganss.
- 36 Without such knowledge Ignatian government becomes simply impossible, and without Ignatian government it is meaningless to speak of Ignatian obedience. This may be a strong statement, but a page from Father John Futrell's dissertation (not yet published) on the role of the superior is just as strong as anything I have said or will say: "To make an apostolic community of love out of a group of real and diverse persons requires that the superior have an intimate personal knowledge of each companion. Otherwise, it is inevitable that the result of his efforts to unify their wills and their actions will be nothing more than "administration"--the ordering of an efficient, but bloodless, organization, rather than a vital, living union of companions. The *Constitutions* give much evidence of Ignatius' profound awareness of the absolute importance of interpersonal relationships between the members and the head of the Company, but nowhere more strikingly than in his employment of the manifestation of conscience. When this exercise is reduced to a mere formality without actual establishment of a relation of personal knowledge in the way that Ignatius conceived it, then, it has no meaning in the Company of Jesus. The exercise of the role of the superior posits as a *sine qua non* condition the intimate knowledge of *each* of his subjects. This is one reason why the hierarchical organization of the Company is of such tremendous importance. The physical impossibility of the general knowing intimately each of the companions is overcome through their immediate relationship to his "vicars," the provincials and local superiors. The superior of each community, through his personal relationship with each of his subjects, based upon intimate, individual knowledge of every single one, is able to unite all of them into a community of love. Through the hierarchical organization of the whole body of the Company, each member is then integrated into the entire body--united with one another and with their one head for the service of Christ through the aid of souls in companionship. *It is an obvious practical consequence that where the structure of a house or a province makes it morally or physically impossible for a superior to have this personal knowledge of each of his subjects, it becomes equally impossible for him to exercise his role of discernment. Under such conditions a man cannot be a truly Ignatian superior.*" (See John C. Futrell's dissertation, written for the Institute Catholique, Paris: *Making an Apostolic Community of Love: The Role of the Superior according to St. Ignatius Loyola* [1967] pp. 367-368, underlining of last two sentences my own.)
- 37 See *Constitutions*, [723-735; also 419-439]. See J. Futrell, S.J., op. cit., pp. 454-456.
- 38 *Constitutions*, [727].

- 39 Ibid., [723-735].
- 40 See J. Lewis, op. cit., pp. 85 ff., and also this incisive paragraph on pp. 55-56: "This title (of interpreter of the will of God) manifests the sublime dignity that is his, but at the same time it underlines his fearsome responsibility. An interpreter is required to be faithful to him whom he interprets; he only translates. The superior, then, has the strict obligation of seeking, by every means at his disposal, to understand what is truly the intention of God regarding his subjects. He has no right whatsoever crudely to believe that what he himself wants, God wants, and to give commands lightly or overconfidently, as if his appointment had made him automatically infallible. God supplies for the deficiencies of superiors, but he does not dispense them from their responsibility."
- 41 *Constitutions*, [725].
- 42 References for this section can be found in Lewis, op. cit., pp. 79 ff. It might help to point out here that the principle of subsidiarity, as applied to an apostolic order such as the Society of Jesus, makes personal spiritual government all the more essential. If we are to avoid *legalism*, then great freedom of judgment must be left to local superiors and to individual subjects to adapt the rules or the directives of higher superiors to particular circumstances. This immediately opens the door to *anarchy*, to confusion and disorder brought about by each person's doing what suits his own whim or fancy. In a strictly controlled environment, such as characterizes monastic life, it is perhaps less difficult to achieve uniformity without imposing legalism because circumstances are for the most part foreseeable and unvarying. But in an order such as the Society of Jesus, where individuals are sent to every conceivable place, to do every kind of work under all sorts of unpredictable circumstances, the only alternative to either legalism or anarchy is strong, personal government. The superior must know his men, know who is spiritually free and detached, who is endowed with prudence, and whom he can trust faithfully to carry out the spirit of his instructions according to the difficulty or complexity of this or that particular mission. And subjects must be inspired to obey with a will whose spirit is neither an insecure flight from responsibility nor a visored rigidity, but rather an authentic desire to be faithful to the mind and will of the superior according to the demands of changing situations. They must know, then, not just the superior's instructions, but the reason behind those instructions, and what he really wants to achieve through them. And this intention they must assimilate as their own, to be free to adapt it with sincerity and fidelity to every particular set of circumstances.

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