

OBEDIENCE AS TAUGHT AND MODELED BY JESUS,  
THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY, THE APOSTLES, AND CARMELITE FIGURES  
by Eugene Wehner, OCD

I am very sorry that I am not able to be with you in the flesh. The reason I am not is obedience - obedience to government authorities and my house superior regarding the restrictions surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic. A little over a week ago, I thought that the incidence of cases of infection would decline enough for me to present this retreat with my physical presence. With the use of masks, keeping social distancing, and employing daily temperature-taking for all participants, I hoped that it still might be possible for me to attend, despite my having to travel by air due to my not having a driver's license. With the touchless temperature-taking, we would make sure that, if any of us has a fever, that person would have to absent himself or herself and have be tested for the virus. If I had been physically present, I would have had to be quarantined once I got back to Washington, DC. Clearly it was not worth the risk.

Without further ado, I begin the first talk of this retreat with the words of the Blessed Virgin Mary: "I am the servant of the Lord; let it be done to me as you have said." (Lk. 1:38) Because of her "yes" to God at her call to be the mother of the Messiah, it is said that the reason why she rode a donkey to Bethlehem was because she had already given her Fiat to the Lord. "Yes" must be the obedient reply of each believer to God's particular call. Mary's vocation was unique in all of humanity, however each of us as a disciple of Jesus is also called to bring him to birth in our everyday lives.

For each of us to hear God's unique call for us requires that we listen to him as he speaks to us through his word, his Church, and his inspiration in prayer. But it is not enough for us to hear the Lord. We are called to put his will for us into practice. In his letter, James reminds us: "A man who listens to God's word but does not put it into practice is like a man who looks into a mirror at the face he was born with: he looks at himself, then goes off and promptly forgets what he looked like. There is, on the other hand, the man who peers into freedom's ideal law and abided by it. He is no forgetful listener, but one who carries out the law in practice. Blest will this man be in all he does." (James 1:23-25)

However, not everything in God's unique call to each of us is fully contained in the Scriptures, the general teachings of the Church, and our inspiration in prayer. We also need to place ourselves under the authority of those who, according to our Rule, are chosen by "the greater and maturer part of you." (Paragraph Four) They are instruments for God's will to be made clearer for us. So we surrender to the authority of the Pope, other Church authorities, the President of the United States, and other civil authorities. Without such submission, we are going to have trouble.

Besides being subject to human authorities, a final entity to which we are called to be obedient is our own conscience. If we do not do what we believe to be right in order to win favor with our bishop, the pastor of the parish we serve, or the parishioners themselves, we are failing in obedience. God gave us a conscience to guide us and we must do what it tells us to be right. As William Shakespeare said so well: "Unto thine

own self be true, and it must follow, as the night the day, thou canst not be false to any man.”

However, assuming that legitimate authorities are fulfilling their leadership roles in a reasonable and dedicated way, their subjects are obligated to obey them as ones who is representing the will of God. Only with such obedience will the peace and order of a society be maintained. Hear the words of Blessed Francisco Palau addressed to a congregation of sisters that he founded:

Obedience...shall keep you at peace with each other and in mutual union. There can be no house without someone to rule it, and those who live in it must obey her...Order must be maintained first and foremost among yourselves, and this hinges completely on one single point, that is obedience. Your whole perfection consists in willing what God wills and in fulfilling His Ordinances; the will of God is manifested to you through those who guide and govern you; God shall share with them His lights and shall give you strength to fight against...your whims, your own opinions, your own wishes, your egoism, your own will...your own fickleness, these are the enemies of peace and order; prayer, devotions and all your weapons should be ordered to subdue them (Letters, pp. 635, 829)

Why is it such a struggle to be obedient? Obedience is difficult because of our tendency to put our will first and sometimes our unwillingness to accept another's authority as God-sent. We usually regard one who has authority over us as restricting our freedom rather than enabling us to more fully follow the will of God. What is required of us is a more radical understanding of freedom. Listen to St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross as she contrasts the usual notion of freedom and a God-centered one:

Children of the world say they are free when they are not subject to another's will, when no one stops them from satisfying their wishes and inclinations. For this dream of freedom, they engage in bloody battles and sacrifice life and limb. The children of God see freedom as something else. They want to be unhindered in following the Spirit of God; and they know that the greatest hindrances do not come from without, but lie within us ourselves. Human reason and will, which would like so much to be their own masters, are unaware of their susceptibility to be swayed by natural inclinations and so to be enslaved by them. There is no better way of being freed of this slavery and receptive to the guidance of the Holy Spirit than that of holy obedience. (*The Hidden Life*, p. 100)

Teresa advises that we make every possible effort to be totally obedient to our superiors. She states:

Genuine obedience is not content merely to avoid manifestly overstepping the prescriptions of the Rule and Constitutions or the precepts of the superiors. It actually determines to deny one's own will. Therefore, the obedient person

studies the Rule and Constitutions, not to ferret out how many so-called “freedoms” are still permitted, but to recognize more and more how many small sacrifices are available daily and hourly as opportunities to advance in self-denial. Such a one takes them on as an easy yoke and a light burden, because doing so deepens the conviction of being closely bound to the Lord who was obedient to death on the cross. (*Ibid.*, p. 100)

Teresa Benedicta gives us the clear understanding here that obedience is not intended by God to be an intense struggle for us but rather a joy. Hear the word of the Lord as it comes to us in Psalm 119:1-4,24a:

Happy those whose way is blameless,  
Who walk by the teaching of the Lord.  
Happy those who observe God’s decrees,  
Who seek the Lord with all their heart.  
They do no wrong;  
They walk in God’s ways....  
(God’s) decrees are my delight.

Now I will substitute the word “superior” for “God” or “Lord” in this passage:

Happy those whose way is blameless,  
Who walk by the teaching of their superior.  
Happy those who observe their superior’s decrees,  
Who seek the will of their superior with all their heart.  
They do no wrong;  
They walk in their superior’s ways....  
My superior’s decrees are my delight.

Was my second reading as sweet to your ears as the first one? If not, why not? Does not a legitimate superior mediate the will of God to you? Here are some more questions which were addressed by Blessed Francisco Palau to some of his disciples as part of an examination of conscience: “Do you obey all those whom God has placed above you to rule? If you obey, how? Voluntarily, willingly and with joy, whether the order is hard, light, easy or grievous?” (*Flowers*, p. 48)

I am aware that sometimes a superior will command something in error. Normally it will not cause us any damage to obey such a command, but occasionally a superior may assert authority in such an unwise manner that, after the community has attempted to obey, they realize that the whole community is endangered if the order continues to be carried out. Hear again the advice of Blessed Francisco Palau: “In all things, when as a result of obedience there follow difficulties and unforeseen events, you shall try to follow the spirit of obedience rather than obedience itself, interpreting the rational will rather than what has been ordered literally.” (*Letters*, p. 676)

The above situation may occur because of insufficient dialogue between the superior and the community. A wise leader will always listen to his or her community as well as expect them to listen to him or her. When those in authority listen well to Christ and his Church, then Jesus' disciples are able to live in peace and share his goodness with the world. Good leaders will model to those under their care the Christ-life that they expect them to emulate in their everyday relationships. Then superiors and the communities they lead will be able to live in the freedom of the children of God.

Finally, it may happen that a superior will command something that proves, after comparison with the will of God as shown in the Gospels, to be unjust. If it deprives a person or group of persons of that which is their due or which God is requiring them to receive, an action commanded by a superior must not be followed. As the apostles of Jesus told the high priest and the Sanhedrin, when they were commanded not to teach in the name of Jesus, "We must obey God rather than men." (Acts 5:29) They could not submit themselves to the dictate of their religious authorities because it was not in accord with the will of Christ. We are meant to follow their example and that which Saints Paul and Timothy gave the Corinthians: "We demolish ... every proud pretension that raises itself against the knowledge of God; we likewise bring every thought into captivity to make it obedient to Christ." (2 Cor. 10:4-5)

St. Therese of Lisieux was of like mind. She writes in her *Story of a Soul*: "Our Lord has made it clear to me that all he wanted of me was plain obedience.... I never acted like Pilate who refused to listen to the truth. I've always said to God: O my God, I really want to listen to you; I beg you to answer me when I humbly say: What is truth? Make me see things as they really are. Let nothing cause me to be deceived."

St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross also spent her life searching for the truth. Under her Jewish birth-name, Edith Stein, she was an assistant of Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology. Being friends of many philosophers, she was staying at the home of another philosopher and his wife. When they went out for the night, she had their library to herself. She sat down with the *Life* of St. Teresa of Avila and read it straight through. When she finished, she said to herself: "This is the truth." The next day she went to Mass, after which she asked to the priest for baptism. Of course, she had to have a period of instruction first, but, like St. Teresa of Jesus, she had determined determination. Her mother vigorously opposed her conversion, but her mind was made up. She even wanted to join the Discalced Carmelites quickly, but, after spiritual direction, she was persuaded to remain in the world for another ten years while instructing mostly women.

Hers was not selective obedience, where one chooses from among the truths of one's faith according to one's preference. Neither was the obedience of St. Therese of Lisieux. She wrote: "I made the resolution never to consider whether the things commanded me appeared useful or not.... It is love alone that counts. Forget about whether something is needed or useful; see it (the demand, rule, obligation, etc.) as a whim of Jesus." Are we determined to follow every whim of Jesus? The teaching and example of St. Therese and St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross call us not only to hear and listen to the word of God, but also like Mary, to ponder his words and actions as we see the mystery of God gradually unfold for us.

Some of that unfolding is not only through the guidance of those in authority over us, but also through others in the various communities of which we are part. In the *Last Conversations*, St. Therese shared: "I formed the habit of obeying each one (referring to requests made by her companions in Carmel) as though it was God who was manifesting his will to me." The needs of others in community can be a call to obedience. Our call is not only to obey the letter of the law, but also and primarily its spirit, which is love. St. Teresa of Jesus teaches that growth in love of neighbor goes hand in hand with growth in love of God. She writes: "Be sure that, in proportion as you advance in fraternal charity, you are increasing your love of God, for His Majesty bears so tender an affection for us that I cannot doubt He will repay our love for others by augmenting, and in a thousand different ways, that which we bear for Him." Being attentive to the smallest needs of others and striving to help those who might be considered the least important is a sign of humility, because it does not advance our influence in the ranks of power. St. Teresa of Jesus equated humility with truth. Our humble awareness of our personal fragility and the absolute power of God causes us to realize our total dependence on God and to surrender ourselves to his care.

Yet humility also means recognizing our own wealth of knowledge, talents and skills so that we can use them in the service of God and neighbor. This is also part of the truth. If we denied it, we would be disobedient to God's plan for us in giving us these benefits. St. Paul, St. Teresa of Jesus and St. Therese have all taught us that everything we are and have is a gift from God to be used for the glory of God and the service of others. If we don't do this as an act of false humility, we are not living in the truth. St. Therese calls this "false currency" used in exchange for the approval of those in authority. But true leaders can readily spot this counterfeit coin.

Of course, the greatest humility was that of Jesus Christ, whom St. Paul described in this manner:

Though he was in the form of God,  
he did not deem equality with God  
something to be grasped at.  
Rather he emptied himself  
and took the form of a slave,  
being born in the likeness of men.  
He was known to be of human estate,  
and it was thus that he humbled himself,  
obediently accepting even death,  
death on a cross. (Phil. 2:6-8)

Jesus did this not only to save us or to be an example of humility, but to show us that all service of the heavenly Father demands that we carry our own cross. Jesus said, "If a man wishes to come after me, he must deny his very self, take up his cross, and follow in my footsteps." (Mk. 8:34)

Denying ourselves means being obedient to God's will rather than striving to fulfill our own desires. Not doing this is what got the first human beings into trouble. The story

of Adam and Eve tells us that they had only one command from God – not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Everything else was available to them in the Garden of Eden. But they gave into the temptation to disobey that one commandment after being deceived by the serpent to think that eating of the tree's fruit would make them as wise as God.

As Benedict M. Ashley, O.P. writes in his excellent book *Theologies of the Body: Humanist and Christian*:

The sin of Adam and Eve was not that they wanted to be divine, since they were created in God's image, but in seeking "to know good and evil," that is, to determine for themselves apart from the wise order of God's creation what is for good and for evil. This claim amounts to a rejection of their own humanity which is a participation in God's divinity, but only a sharing, not an independent possession. In this they fooled themselves, for in fact their choice of autonomy was an enslavement to the "wisdom of the earth".... In denying their humanity they entrapped themselves in a self-destructive contradiction, enmity to each other and to themselves, bodily and spiritual death. (page 417)

Rather than relying totally on the perfect plan and provision of God, they chose to have control of their own destiny. God, respecting their free will, allowed them to have that control. He does the same with us when we choose our way over his way. Ever since the original sin, all of us have made the same choice. The only human not to make that choice, besides Jesus, is the Blessed Virgin Mary. Jesus is the New Adam and Mary is the New Eve. They always do what our "first parents" failed to do – cooperating fully with the plan of the heavenly Father.

We can do the same, but only with the grace of God. The Lord gave the Blessed Virgin Mary a grace which we did not receive – the Immaculate Conception. Nevertheless she had the free will to choose to go contrary to God's will, thus committing her own original sin. But she did not. Adam and Eve had the same grace but chose to be disobedient. As we well know, many in our time, even believers, choose to sin grievously by following human wisdom rather than God's.

These moral relativists will excuse behavior that is contrary to God's will or the natural law when their badly formed or lax consciences judge it to be for their own or the world's benefit or advancement. For example, God commands in the Book of Genesis that humans have responsible stewardship for the rest of Creation. (Gen. 1: 28-30) But zeal for ecology, according to Benedict M. Ashley, has led many moral relativists "to support contraception, sterilization, and even abortion on the ground that the 'population explosion' is the greatest threat to our human environment, greater even than nuclear war.... The advocates of natural methods as morally and medically superior to contraception, and sufficiently effective, have a right to make their case without being accused of being enemies of the people." (pages 422-423)

Certainly the integrity of human life must be placed before all other moral considerations. But, as a means toward an end, many serious sins have been

committed – murder (sometimes in the form of ethnic cleansing and assassinations), destruction of property, and tyranny (or disrespect for human rights). Adherence to the Ten Commandments goes by the wayside when a person's goals or a society's ideology come before the will of God.

Besides the Ten Commandments and Precepts of the Church, we as disciples of Jesus need to live according to all the principles that he has taught and modeled. This means being attentive to and following the gospel of Christ in its entirety, which the early Church could do only with the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Then the apostles were able to proclaim the Risen Lord to Jews gathered from many countries and speaking many different languages. The three thousand baptized that day took the message of redemption through faith in Jesus Christ to their various locales, possessing the same Spirit.

There were times in which Church-members disagreed with one another. This was even Saints Peter and Paul disagreed on how to handle the Gentiles. However, when the issue of whether Christians of Gentile origin should be required to observe Jewish dietary restrictions and be circumcised was brought before the Council of Jerusalem, it reached this agreement regarding what was to be required of the Gentile Christians: "to abstain from anything contaminated by idols, from illicit sexual union, from the meat of strangled animals, and from eating blood." (Acts 15:20) From this incident it is said that the mode of transportation of the Council of Jerusalem was a Honda. Why? Because the Acts of the Apostles states that they were all in one Accord. When they exited that one car, they must have looked like a bunch of clowns.

Sometimes our efforts at dialogue do not end with everyone being in one accord or coming to a complete consensus. But hopefully, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we can come to a decision that everybody can live with. We could call that setting aside one's own interests out of obedience to the greater good of the community. For us, as ones committed to the Carmelite way of life and the reform of St. Teresa of Jesus, this means sometimes saying "no" to our ego when it goes contrary to her teaching and example as our local community of Secular Discalced Carmelites strives to follow it.

Maybe personally you would like to see your OCDS group involved in a certain charitable project or course of study. However, when you suggest it, very few are in favor of it. At a time like that, it is good to call to mind the words of St John of the Cross: "God desires the least degree of obedience and submissiveness more than all those services you think of rendering him." (*Sayings of Light and Love*, 1, 13). Furthermore, submission to the Spirit-guided will of the community is obedience to God and helps us grow in sanctity. For St. John of the Cross also wrote, "A person who has reached complete conformity and likeness of will has attained total supernatural union and transformation in God." (*The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, II, 5, 4).

In conclusion, for us obedience to God has many elements: discernment of God's will through reading and study of God's revelation through the Scriptures and the tradition of the Church, through prayer, by following one's well-formed conscience, through submission to one's superiors, through dialogue with one's community, and through submission to natural law. The more of these guides that can help our living out of our call as disciples of Christ the better.