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LIVING THE VOW OF OBEDIENCE TODAY

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INTRODUCTION

Deepening our Spiritan identity demands, among other things, a deepening of our religious life. A few years ago, the General Council published a document on the Vow of Chastity and, more recently, another on the Vow of Poverty. Now it is a question of reflecting on the vow of obedience. A preliminary consultation allowed us to gather together some very valuable contributions from many confreres and thus to propose this document.

We no longer live in an era where it is sufficient merely to give an order for it to be carried out. Our founders, Claude Poullart des Places and Francis Libermann, along with others of their own time, shared a more rigid understanding of obedience. It was not the thing to discuss but one had to “submit”. Such language would not be acceptable today even though the hierarchical structures at the heart of some enterprises are not always conducive to dialogue! However, a religious congregation is not a business enterprise. It is also time to reflect on how religious obedience is facing up to the winds of individualism and freedom which are blowing in every direction.¹ Does obedience still have any meaning in such an environment?

¹ Cf. *The Service of Authority and Obedience*, a document published on the 11/05/2008 by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. This issue of *Anima Una* owes a lot to this document. The document *Consecrated Life* is also very useful here; it was the Post-Synodal Exhortation published in Rome in 1996, especially from no.84 to no.95. See also *Beginning with Christ* published on the 19/05/2002 by the same Congregation.

LIVING THE VOW OF OBEDIENCE TODAY

I. OBEDIENCE – LEARNING TO LISTEN

1.1 DIALOGUE OF THE DEAF AND CONSTRUCTIVE DIALOGUE

Who hasn't experienced endless meetings from which no concrete decision emerges? Each participant arrives with his own ideas and makes no effort to listen to the arguments of the others. Or else, when problems arise, each one has his own opinion on the question and refuses to listen to the explanations of others. Besides, it can happen that many insist on speaking at the same time and this prevents any dialogue taking place. This is as true in the case of a married couple who are not getting on as it is in politics featuring completely opposite tendencies. Do we not see this in a dialogue between a confrere and his Superior? It is every bit as true in a religious community where the atmosphere is marked by tension. Either we argue with one another or else we no longer speak to each other!

Fortunately, other possibilities exist – such as sitting down together and striving to understand what others are saying. It is probable that the other speakers are going to be in opposition to my own particular way of thinking and perhaps will induce me to change my opinion. But at least it is possible to envisage new paths. Is it not the role of chapters or of councils

at every level to facilitate a climate of listening and dialogue which will give constructive answers to the questions which are presenting themselves or to new challenges? The hours of mutual sharing and listening to each others' views will result in decisions which will be owned by the decision-makers.

1.2 LOOKING AT THE OBEDIENT CHRIST

*T*he evangelists all describe the scene: Jesus withdraws to a lonely place, sometimes without his disciples even knowing, and there he prays. Saint Luke mentions this prayer before all the major acts in his ministry (Lk 6 12-13). We do not know the exact content of this encounter with the Father but we can guess it from the attitude and determination of Christ. He sets himself to listen to his Father in order to do his will. For his part, the Father listens to his Son and confirms him in his mission (Jn 11, 41-42). "May your will be done"; this request of the "Our Father" repeated so many times by Christians reflects first of all the prayer of Jesus himself. He has discerned and deepened the meaning of his mission and has accepted all its consequences in the context of sustained prayer. The Gospels make frequent mention of this availability.

It is in this way that Jesus shows the path of obedience – a free acceptance of God's plan, making his own life an act of service of the Father and of the Father's plan for the world. For Jesus, as for all of us, this path is marked with setbacks. Did he not "learn obedience through what he suffered" (Heb. 5, 8) by saying and doing only what the Father gave him to say and do? He encountered a lack of understanding from the members of his own family who concluded that he was "out of his mind" (Mk 3, 21). He had to face conflict from the religious practitioners of his own land and had to endure being

treated as a blasphemer. The scene in the Garden of Gethsamane highlights the dilemma – “Not what I wish but what you wish” (Mt. 26, 39). To persevere in listening to the Father at that particular moment becomes a real interior struggle, an “agony”. By becoming “obedient to death, the death of the cross” (Ph 2, 8), Jesus does not engage in blind obedience but rather his obedience is the liberating act of a free person.

1.3 LEARNING TO LISTEN

Obedience, as the etymology of the word reminds us, is a long period of learning to listen. It calls us to listen deeply to each other as equals in an authentic dialogue in which individualism has no place.

Developing the Sense of Listening

Developing a sense of listening will not be the least of the challenges that face us. Very often there are obstacles which prevent real dialogue from taking place. These include personal preoccupations, prejudice, and a lack of understanding rooted in what has happened in the past. There are so many ways in which what the other person is trying to say can be short-circuited.

To live religious obedience means listening in faith. It is a call to become “listeners of the word.”

This call becomes authentic in listening to the word of God. In this essential exchange, each of us feels called and invited to give a response. Benedict XVI insists on *Lectio Divina* as a means to make each of us better capable of “listening and responding.”² Just as it was for Christ so for us it is a matter of

² Cf. Benedict XVI *Verbum Domini* no.22, Post-Synodal Exhortation, Rome 2010.

seeking the will of God. After reading, meditation, prayer and contemplation, *Lectio Divina* achieves its essential dynamic in action.³ Thus it was for those who listened to Peter's discourse after Pentecost when they asked "What must we do?" (Acts 2, 37).

This call becomes more authentic still in fraternal dialogue where what others have to say opens up horizons and offers opportunities to imagine what the future might be. This is not mere polite listening which provokes no enthusiasm. Each one is called to develop his skills for real and open communication.

Learning to Discern

To move from listening to discernment is a step which we can take only when we let the Holy Spirit become active. The beauty of our vow of obedience is to be found in its underlying principle - the discernment, carried out in the Spirit, of the will of God for us as individuals, communities, and as a Congregation. An attentive listening corresponds with a response to God's plan.

Learning to discern begins very early in our family environment and from the first stages of initial formation. In silence, in prayer and in dialogue with a guide, the candidate becomes aware of the needs of the world, of the Church, of the Congregation at the same time as he comes to an awareness of his own talents. God's will reveals itself progressively, just as conscience is formed as much through the events of daily life as through new challenges and a reading of the signs of the times.

³ Idem. no.87

Discernment is particularly facilitated with the help of a spiritual guide. The candidate enters this process with an open heart and with a willingness to clarify the motivations which are leading him towards the religious and missionary life. Without a climate of prayer, it is impossible.

The guide stands beside the candidate. He helps him to find the path he should follow and to name the obstacles which will eventually present themselves.

Most assuredly we must turn to Father Libermann who guided so many people and who helped so many young people to discover their vocation. He insists continually on seeking the will of God. It is this which “decides everything.”⁴ But he is careful to discard illusions which hamper this search. Without mincing his words, he writes to M. Clair who consulted him concerning his vocation: “You will easily see that it is an interior illusion which has been leading you all the time.”⁵

Accepting Mediation

Listening to and engaging in discernment to know the will of God is something that is learned over a period of time. Experience shows that we need to have recourse to mediation in order to reach that point. In addition to prayer, *Lectio Divina*, reading the signs of the times – all of which punctuate our daily lives – we also have, as religious, institutional mediation:

- The charism of the institute, recognised by the Church in which we have found our own vocation and our form of service;

⁴ Letter to M.le Vavas seur 03/12/11846, Notes et Documents VIII, p.364 (henceforth referred to as ND).

⁵ Letter of 13/12/1847, ND IX, p. 369 (see also p. 373). In the letter to M. Le Vavas seur quoted above p. 364, Fr. Libermann denounces the same dangers of illusions.

- The structure of government of the Congregation which recognises a distinction between the legislative aspect (Rule of Life, Chapters) and the executive aspect (superiors and their councils) and provides regulatory bodies (Enlarged Councils) and opportunities for reconciliation (SRL 166.2);
- Communities which are places of discernment;
- Superiors who are charged with putting into practice Chapter orientations in particular situations as these are lived by the circumscriptions.

It is essential that we be attentive to the way in which we use these forms of mediation. Above all else, they are a way of living the evangelical project which is at the heart of our charism and our spirituality.

The Capacity to Listen: A Criterion of Discernment

Attentive listening results in obedience when the individual allows himself to be challenged. This presupposes a solid human and spiritual formation. Thus the would-be Spiritan will display the openness necessary to living in solidarity without seeking his own interests. It has to be said that living the vow of obedience today is difficult! We have to get rid of the illusion that there is a painless way to be a human being or an authentic Christian. Unfortunately, it has become clear that some confreres who have scarcely arrived in their circumscription of appointment, ask to leave it at the first sign of difficulty.

A candidate for the Spiritan way of life has to be able to consider respectfully and with realism the authority of the Congregation. If he finds himself continually in conflict with authority, how could he positively live the vow of obedience?

To reach that point, he must depend on the witness of older confreres but also the possibility of living in the reality of listening and of constructive dialogue, especially during his period of pastoral placement.

Hearing New Calls: Ongoing Formation

Ongoing formation challenges each member of the Congregation. Discernment cannot end with the taking of Perpetual Vows. The unexpected hazards of life, missionary involvement, the needs of people, cultural shocks and the different situations that we encounter either open up new horizons or lead to serious doubts... It happens too often that confreres, overwhelmed by the urgency of a particular situation, forget to take time for reflection, prayer and reading. They do not participate in meetings to reflect, as a Congregation, on the situation or to reflect with other people engaged in a work similar to their own. Is this due to a fear of wasting time or a fear of being called to account?

The many possibilities offered by ongoing formation have as their ultimate aim the verification that we respond authentically to the call we have heard and that we make ourselves available to hear that call again and again.

1.4 SO WHERE ARE WE AT?

1.4.1 At a Personal Level

- Do I take time for prayer before engaging in discernment?
- How much time do I devote each day to reading the Word of God and to personal and community prayer?
- Do I have a spiritual counsellor to help me reflect and see things in perspective?

1.4.2 At a Community Level

- How frequent are our community meetings?
- Do they consist merely in planning for the week or the month or are they also occasions of sharing, reflection and evaluation?
- Do all the members of the community have the possibility of expressing themselves or does one person monopolise the meeting?

1.4.3 At Circumscription Level

- Do Superiors and their councils give sufficient attention to experienced and gifted confreres to be trained for discernment in helping candidates for the Spiritan life to discern their vocation?
- Within the Council of the Circumscription, do confreres have regard to the views of the members of the Formation team concerning the candidates who are making their requests to them?

II. OBEDIENCE, SCHOOL OF LIBERTY

2.1 FULFILMENT AND INDIVIDUAL LIBERTY

*W*e only have to open our eyes. The enticing images which are used by certain media outlets and advertising posters exalt individual liberty. Professional success, accompanied by important projects, result in a great freedom of action. Such images contribute to placing the stress on individual liberty, a liberty that is tainted by subjectivism. This

idea can be found making its way insidiously into all societies and penetrates mentalities. In this context, obedience to the law or to authority is often seen as an attack on the development of the person. However, the choice of a state in life, no matter what it may be, leads people to accept unforeseen constraints.

But it is not all negative. The most normal thing for a person is to be able to develop himself according to his talents or his tastes. Education aims precisely at facilitating the passage of an individual from dependence to self-development seen in the context of interdependence.

Thus we see too many people being forced to do what they do not like, if only to survive. The forced renunciation linked to such situations gives rise to deep frustration, because such individuals find that they are not able to express everything of which they are capable. To have the possibility of giving the best of oneself is an essential element of the dignity of every human being and it is for this that individuals and groups have fought and continue to fight.

2.2 A LOOK AT THE RENUNCIATION PRACTICED BY CLAUDE POUILLART DES PLACES

A Man of Ambition Who Loved Freedom

In his time, Claude Poullart des Places had to answer this question: "What do I do to attain complete fulfilment?" His desire for liberty and renown was in keeping with his ambition. In that brutally honest portrait that he made of himself, during his retreats, he recognised that his taste for "independence" was linked with being "the slave of greatness".⁶

⁶ Claude-François Poullart des Places, *Writings*, Spiritan Centre Rome 1988, p. 42.

“At the moment, you are so lacking in fidelity, you cherish liberty so much.”⁷ He knew that appearance at the royal court was essential for recognition. He also knew that his family cherished great ambitions for him. “My father, who is old, will leave considerable assets which very few people, apart from myself, would be capable of administering.”⁸ This same family was depending on him to gild once more that family escutcheon which had been tarnished for many decades. His academic brilliance and his eloquence seemed to mark him out for the Parliament of Brittany. His success seemed assured. A real interior struggle began in him when he experienced the call to serve the Lord in another way. “You know that I am bound to submit to and obey my dear parents who cannot see their way to approving such a plan and I owe it to them to do nothing which would be against their will.”⁹ It is impossible not to hear the reasonable expectations of a family!

I Am Determined To Walk In the Way That You Will Show Me

However, Claude-Francois soon renounced all his desires for greatness and liberty. When he put on the lawyer’s gown which his mother had prepared for him, everything turned upside down. He would never put it on again. It was an irrevocable decision but one that conformed to a desire that had lain deep within him for a long time. It became clear to him that real fulfilment lay not in the honours which a high rank in society would provide but in a complete and free acceptance of the will of God.

⁷ Ibid p. 45.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid p.49

To reach such a decision, our founder placed himself completely at the disposal of God “in a state more conducive to hearing your wise counsel”¹⁰. It was not surprising that in the end, he declared himself ready to respond to the call he had heard. “You have undertaken, O Lord, to lead my steps, since I am resolved to walk in the way that you will show me. I renounce all those advantages which could flatter me... Speak, my God, to my heart; I am ready to obey you.”¹¹

Poullart des Places offers no further resistance. His entire self-giving would lead him to Paris, where, while continuing with his own formation, he would devote himself whole-heartedly, to helping the poor and to establishing the community which would become the Seminary of the Holy Spirit.

2.3 OBEDIENCE AND FREEDOM

Obedience is a school of freedom and freedom is at the heart of obedience. Through the decisions that have been taken, each one prepares himself to undertake a project that will be at the service of the Gospel. Each one’s relation with God will henceforth be the yardstick by which he will measure his relations with other people. The more we acquire this freedom in obedience, the more we will be responding to the will of God. Four conditions at least are necessary in acquiring such freedom

Openness to the Holy Spirit

“Docility”, “abandonment”, “self-denial”, “renunciation of self” – these are the terms in which our Founders expressed openness to the Holy Spirit and they contain an element of

¹⁰ Ibid p. 18.

¹¹ Ibid p. 41.

surprise if not of actual fear! They go against the thinking of many of our contemporaries. However, availability is the basic crucible whence springs Spiritan spirituality. "Under the action of the Holy Spirit, consecrated life itself becomes mission"¹². Thus, availability deepens to become availability to the Lord and to all people (TA 1.1.3). How else could we declare that we follow Jesus in his obedience if we do not allow ourselves to be guided by the Spirit?

Like Poullart des Places, Father Libermann continually insists on this aspect in his letters. From 1835 onwards, concerning candidates who presented themselves, he wrote that they "might have a docile spirit and without attachment to their own way of seeing things and their own will."¹³ Less than a year before his death he wrote to M. Duby: "May your spirit submit itself to the Spirit of Our Lord Jesus Christ."¹⁴ To M. Blanpin's anxieties, he replied, using the familiar image of the sailing ship. "Your soul is the ship, the heart represents the sail, the Holy Spirit is the wind that blows into your will and the soul moves towards the goal which God proposes."¹⁵ And Libermann concludes: "You are not yet formed." He still had to give way to the action of the Spirit within him. This is a grace which must be requested!

Necessary Renunciations

Such availability does not come without renunciations. Once again, this is a strange word for our contemporaries. Nevertheless, the daily reality for many people is made up of renunciations which one experiences or takes on. We only have

¹² Cf. *Beginning with Christ* no.9.

¹³ *Lettres Spirituelles* I, p. 131.

¹⁴ Letter of 06/05/1851, ND XIII, p. 141.

¹⁵ Letter to M. Blanpin, April 1845, ND VII, p. 148. The same image is used in ND XII, p. 351.

to look around us. Circumstances such as the birth of a child, or work timetables, sickness or unemployment often make it necessary for people to adjust their plans, whether they be the plans of an individual, a family or a group. The result is that they are not able to follow an idea or a path which had previously seemed to be so clearly traced out.

Religious life is not a straight line like an unchanging trajectory. Again and again, it asks us to update our response to the call we have heard by taking circumstances into account. This will not happen without renunciation of our own plans, even legitimate ones.

- Sickness has only to make its appearance in our lives for us to look differently at everything, even missionary involvement.
- It can happen that the departure of a confrere requires that another renounce some enterprise where he was finding fulfilment.
- More subtle perhaps are prejudice and cultural arrogance.¹⁶ These rise up like a wall that cannot be crossed which seals off its own world and prevents the appreciation of a word which would challenge a particular way of seeing things. Renouncing one's culture, making "oneself black with the blacks" - is not this the ultimate step we have to take on the road to the liberation of self?

Obedience becomes a school of freedom when each one takes on the contradictions which prevent him from realising what he had foreseen. "Obedience is the renunciation of one's own spirit and one's own will in order to submit to the holy will of God manifested through the rules of the Congregation and by

¹⁶ Cf. Itaiçi General Chapter, 11.

superiors.”¹⁷ But in many cases, individual immaturity, unhealthy attachments and other forms of dependence trap people and result in self-centredness, even narcissism. We will flourish on our path of obedience only when we as individuals become aware of the ways in which we are enslaved and undertake to open ourselves to perspectives which challenge our way of thinking and living.

Taking Personal Talents into Account

Even if obedience leads to renunciation, it cannot be the same thing as the annihilation of the individual person. There is room for the recognition of personal talent. There is no such thing as a uniform Spiritan profile but rather a variety of gifts, placed at the service of the mission received, that helps the Church to grow. This particular awareness brings with it many consequences for Spiritan life.

No one, in the name of obedience, can be brought to do that of which he is not capable. Such a case would bring with it a sense of self-dissatisfaction or a sense of distaste in the accomplishment of a particular task and would give rise to deep frustration.

Spiritans cannot be changed about at will. Not everyone can be a teacher or a parish priest or a bursar or a superior or a formator! This is so not only because individual confreres might not have the required competence, but also because they might not have the taste for a particular task. What is the point of appointing or electing confreres for such positions if they are lacking the personal charism for the task in question?

Each one is called to discern how he can put his personal talents at the service of all, without, however, proclaiming him-

¹⁷ Libermann, Provisional Rule, Chapter IV, article I, ND II, p. 269.

self to be an expert in a particular field or claiming a particular appointment as his due.

There is no doubt that, in order to be available to the Spirit, it is important to constantly search for that difficult balance between the necessary renunciations which are inherent in the vow of obedience and the valuing of personal talents. It is there that we see that inner freedom which is the source of growth and development.

Having a Responsible Attitude

Obedience, because it is the school of freedom, rejects both complacency and group conformity. It does not accept a contrived protective attitude which falsifies interpersonal relations. Because it frees us from all fear, the vow of obedience leads the religious to responsibility. This responsibility has many facets.

- In a world which is becoming increasingly more complex, the Spiritan takes the necessary means to ensure that his approach is right and appropriate. Our contemporaries have to continually adapt themselves to face new challenges which are posed by the development of techniques, ideas and situations. If they do not engage in this, they are responsible and they have to accept the consequences. Religious obedience is to be found at the crossroads where availability to the Spirit, who frees us from all thirst for power, meets the need for a responsible approach to live out our mission in an attitude of service to the poor (SRL 82).
- All actions in our lives engage the responsibility of the individual. This cannot be reduced to a development defined simply by personal success. Our activities, whatever they might be, have no place in a private domain which

would favour individualism. That is the reason why it is always necessary to account for what it is we do or undertake. Individual responsibility is part of the responsibility of the entire Congregation in the prophetic mission which belongs to it (SRL 36).

- It can happen that confreres, through a display of disobedience, can be guilty of criminal acts. They must assume the consequences. If responsibility can be established, it is fitting that the canonical sanctions be accepted (Canon Law, Chapter VI) as well as the sanctions contained in the law of the country where a confrere lives. It is time that we rid ourselves of that impunity which fails to resolve a problem but which on the contrary fatally damages relationships.

2.4 SO WHERE ARE WE AT?

2.4.1 At a Personal Level

- What are the renunciations which have cost me the most? Why?
- What are my personal gifts and how do I place them at the service of all?
- What must I still give up so that I might respond completely to the Word of God?

2.4.2 At Community Level

- In Spiritan community, how do we recognise the gifts of different individuals and how are they integrated into the common vision of mission?

- Do community meetings allow Spiritans to account for their activities and their initiatives?

2.4.3 At Circumscription Level

- How does a circumscription deal with confreres who are guilty of criminal acts? Does it cover up such deeds and allow the matter to pass away? Does the circumscription assist confreres to take responsibility for such acts and take the necessary sanctions? How does the circumscription help the victims of such confreres' acts?

III. OBEDIENCE: THE PATH OF COMMUNION

3.1 OBEDIENCE FACE TO FACE WITH INDIVIDUALISM AND AUTHORITARIANISM

*E*veryone is in agreement on this point - obedience sits very uncomfortably with two contradictory realities - individualism and authoritarianism.

In the case of individualism, the person builds up a private domain around himself where no one has the right to look in. In this case, obedience is in conflict with personal interests. It is beyond doubt that Spiritans share in a general tendency, often decried in so many chapters but still very tenacious within us - the tendency towards individualism which undermines common projects and promotes both misunderstanding and suspicion. Despite the beautifully-worded messages from capitular documents on community life, the facts are self-evident and individualism continues its way undisturbed.

It is also well known that authoritarianism is no help to the practice of the vow of obedience. Our environment is no help to us here. The world of economics and politics continually gives us examples everyday where those who take decisions impose their wills without any kind of discussion or dialogue. It is very clear that their subordinates are not one with them in their plans. One finds in them nothing but forced submission and bitterness. The same problem can often be encountered in religious life. Certain individuals believe that everything is permitted to them by virtue of the single fact that they have been invested with power over others. However, their way of intervening and of making decisions destroy both confidence and peace of mind.

With both individualism and authoritarianism, it appears very difficult to envisage any kind of constructive dialogue. However, obedience lived in a positive manner opens up a path of communion.

3.2 FATHER LIBERMANN, A CATALYST OF COMMUNION

*F*rom the very moment when he became involved in the Work for the Blacks, Father Libermann was acutely conscious of his role of gathering people together. Nothing was more difficult than when he had in front of him personalities who were so diverse.

He wrote to M. Le Vavasseur in acute distress: "Don't tell me 'I am ready to do whatever you order me to'. It is the feeling of your heart that I ask for. Blind obedience is not enough. What is required is a union between us that is perfect, full and complete, so that God can use the two of us as a single man to create his work. There must be no more premature judg-

ments, no more fixed positions. What is needed is one heart and one soul. Otherwise, I would say that God's moment has not yet arrived."¹⁸

However, with regard to the intrepid M. Arragon, who disputed the appointment of M. Graviere as Superior, we note a change in tone. If on the one hand he gave him a rule of obedience so that he would give his observations on all matters, on the other hand he reproached him for his language which was "too brusque, too harsh, too high-blown, too crude." He invited him to take into consideration "union, charity and religious cordiality". And Father Libermann concluded with precision: "I direct you therefore in the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ, to receive M. Graviere with friendliness, with charity, with all the sentiments that one ought to have towards one's Superior."¹⁹

These two examples might give the impression that Father Libermann was contradicting himself. In fact, he was seeking above all else a deep-seated fidelity of the heart to the one project where all are concerned with one single aim, the success of the missionary enterprise. This explains why, when he was criticised on his choice of missionaries, he wrote at length to his detractors explaining his position and recalling that union which was essential for all. When the confreres in Goree and Dakar demanded that he explain himself on the acceptance of the Australian mission, he replied to them not so that they might adopt a spirit of perfect obedience but to lead them to a unity of hearts. In discussing the question, he used six times the term "disunity" and "division" and six more times, he mentioned the word "union". By taking on a new

¹⁸ Letter of 27/04/1847, ND IX, p. 132.

¹⁹ Letter of 08/05/1846, ND VIII, p. 142-144.

mission he had no wish whatever to “destroy” the mission to Guinea, but, as far as he was concerned, “without unity, the entire work that has been entrusted to you will disintegrate.”²⁰

3.3 THE VOW OF OBEDIENCE FAVOURS THE GROWTH OF UNITY AND COMMUNION

The Spiritan motto “*Cor Unum et Anima Una*” could become no more than an empty slogan if Spiritans do not become more open to each other in mutual listening and discernment.

Discernment in Community

Discernment in community should be a customary form of the practice of the vow of obedience. SRL 77.2 reminds us of this, inviting all to availability. In this demanding situation, it is not a question of speaking louder than all the others to impose one’s point of view; rather is it readiness on the part of everyone to listen to each other in all truth. God speaks through all, including the least and the most humble. In this area we all certainly have much to learn about communicating with respect for the other person. The discernment process leads to a recognition of Gospel values, the needs of the world, of the Church and of the confreres. But the term “process” implies much more than mere courteous respect for a decision. It involves each person in taking effective responsibility so that one moves away from one’s own opinion and that one remains in dialogue to bring to fulfilment the decisions that have been taken for the good of the community and of the mission.

²⁰ Letter of 09/05/1846, ND VIII, p. 150-152.

To Live In Covenant with One Another

Each community adopts the means necessary for living harmoniously. It seems superfluous to recall that the model of community life is not that of a democracy but of a covenant - a covenant between God and the community and between the members that make up that community. In this context, which has served as the background of the history of the people of God, his people are led to obedience, an obedience that begins by the observance of the commandments. When he calls his disciples "friends", Jesus invites them "to do what he commands them" (Jn 15, 14-15) because entering the New Covenant has done away with the master-servant relationship.

If the community is built on a covenant relationship, it will enjoy the consequences of this. By working out the community project, it will define the relationship between the members that make up that community.

Relations between the members will be those of respect and of love, all the more necessary when the confreres are living in an international community. It is appropriate too that we learn to appreciate each other.

These relationships permit each confrere to feel that he is part of the tasks that have to be accomplished. It is not a leader who commands and underlings who carry out his orders, but rather confreres who experience solidarity among themselves.

These relationships will include reconciliation when inevitable difficulties arise. It is not always possible for community life to be experienced in a warm and harmonious atmosphere. Certain decisions have to be taken in the pain of childbirth. That is why the vow of obedience invites us continually to reconciliation (Mt 18:25-35).

Authority at the Service of Communion: Obedience to Superiors

How do we reconcile authority and obedience? There have been so many misunderstandings and wrong approaches! On the one hand, some denounce the abuse of authority, acts of discrimination, manipulation, blackmail. But superiors sometimes find themselves confronted by walls of incomprehension. Libermann was well aware of the difficulties. In the case of M. Blanpin, he wrote as follows to his superior, M. Le Vavas seur: "Obedience exacts an enormous cost from him if one does not deal with him with great gentleness or if one seems to be putting him under constraint... I have never had any difficulty in this regard... I have always spoken to him in ways with which you are familiar, without harshness, without any tone of definite and commanding authority... He has always done what I told him to do, without any retort, even when what was asked of him was against his taste."²¹ How happy superiors would be if it was always like that!

In order that authority might facilitate communion, it is necessary that the various roles be clearly defined.

- The superior is not a mediator between God and the individual religious but between the charism of the Institute and the religious. Neither is he responsible for the smooth operation of the enterprise but rather he suggests the various stages by which the charism might be put into effect and suggests both its insights and its demands. To reach this point, he must have a profound grasp and a deep respect for the Spiritan Rule of Life and for Chapter orientations.

²¹ Letter of 15/06/1847, ND IX, p. 191-192.

- The superior does not take arbitrary decisions but rather shows deep respect for individuals in their own particular path by listening to them with great attention.
- When faced with authority, whatever form it might take, confreres listen to the pressures, the difficulties or the demands with which superiors are faced. The request of a confrere for a particular task obliges superiors to display great humility and, for his part, the confrere concerned is called on to show great openness and availability.
- Simply taking decisions is not enough. These decisions must be accompanied and followed up. When a superior appoints a confrere to a particularly difficult task, he must give the confrere in question the means of accomplishing the task and to help him effectively, beginning with frequent visits.

Authority at the Service of Communion: The Obedience of Superiors

Communion will be facilitated if superiors themselves do not place themselves outside the demands of the vow of obedience. Indeed, how could they do this when they themselves must submit to the word of God and to SRL? Father Libermann was acutely aware of this: "God has bound me and fettered me to this crucifying work, yet dear to my heart. I am deeply aware of the need to sacrifice my own rest, my consolation and my happiness in order to respond to this powerful will which holds me. With all the fullness of my soul, I submit to the divine will which grasps me and ties me up with such rigour. I believe that I can truthfully say that my soul has not made the slightest movement to loosen the chains which the divine will imposes on me. Better to be the last in the kingdom of the heavenly Father and to go there with submission

to the holy will and for the salvation of so many abandoned souls, than to be among the first by abandoning the way traced out by this adorable will.”²² If superiors submit themselves to the will of God, they will be even more ready to listen to the confreres.²³

As a consequence of this, superiors will avoid any kind of arrogance which only serves to crush others. They will not seek to make themselves “lords”, to dominate, to have others serve them, to give themselves titles (Mt. 23, 8-12, Lk 22. 24-27). Rather will they adopt the attitude of service, like Christ washing the feet of his disciples (Jn 13, 14-15). Libermann willingly develops this image of the servant. “Superiors should consider themselves as servants whom Our Lord has placed over their brothers so that they might take constant care of them and to ensure that the latter lack nothing that they might need for both body and soul.”²⁴ These words which were written before the establishment of the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary find an echo in the advice which Libermann sent in writing to the Mother Superior of Castres: “As far as being superior is concerned, a general rule which includes everything is that you have not come to be served but to serve. You are the first servant of your community... Our Master has said: ‘I have not come to be served but to serve and lay down my life. These words embrace all the duties of being a superior because it is to superiors that he is speaking.’”²⁵ It is clear that he himself put this advice into practice because he knew from experience that “gentleness

²² Letter of 28/01/1846 to M. Le Vavasasseur, ND VIII, p. 30-31.

²³ “No Superior can neglect his mission of animation, fraternal support, encouragement, listening and dialogue”. Cf. *Beginning with Christ* no. 14.

²⁴ Provisional Rule, Part III, chapter II, article VIII, ND II, p.317.

²⁵ Letter of 08/08/1843, ND IV, p. 293.

and persuasion win souls over while firmness and rigidity bring about nothing more than an external change".²⁶ A superior's strength does not lie in an attitude of domination, because this kind of attitude leads only to violence and frustration, but rather in an attitude of service of his confreres (SRL 46). Accordingly, they will be careful in their use of titles in their relations with their confreres.

Dealing with Conflicts

It is vitally necessary though, to intervene to re-establish communion and unity when conflicts arise. Too often issues that have been left unresolved as well as other misunderstandings make situations impossible to live with and bring with them undesirable consequences. Not only does community life become a counter-witness but the very work of the mission is affected adversely. On the other hand, difficulties which have been overcome can become a factor in helping the community to grow (SRL 39.2). In seeking a solution to a conflict, confreres will have recourse to various possibilities:

- A body set up for listening to the individuals involved – it will be possible to identify the difficulties because of this unprejudiced listening;
- The assurance that the individuals involved strive to move beyond the conflict and to forgive each other. Even in the case of a serious conflict between confreres, they will not have recourse to civil courts in an attempt to resolve their differences;
- A meeting between the confreres involved. They will listen to each other without interruption under the direction of a third person;

²⁶ Ibid p. 295.

- The service of an arbitrator, often a superior, who will suggest ways of getting beyond the conflict and who is also a witness of reconciliation.

Very frequently it is the superior who will be the first to help confreres. It would be normal for him to receive appropriate training in tackling such situations.

A Sense of Belonging to the Congregation

So that obedience would truly become a path to communion, each confrere, regardless of his area of responsibility, will be open to the needs of others.

In addition to a desire to live the charism of the Congregation, a new need is making its appearance felt – that of developing the sense of our belonging to the Congregation. This has nothing to do with declarations which are no more than stunts, useless and often harmful! Through our listening to the needs of the world and of the Church and our availability to respond to them, we all become part of the same family. It is from this that we receive our mission. At the very heart of the Congregation, we show our solidarity not just in matters of finance or personnel but first and foremost in a spiritual manner. Obedience lived in this way forges our identity and reinforces our communion.

“Sentire Cum Ecclesia”: Obedience to the Church and in the Church

The path of communion which we adopt within the heart of the Congregation does not distance us from the heart of the Church. On the contrary, this path leads us to it. From the very beginning, our founders sought to place themselves at the service of the universal Church, in fidelity to its missionary orientation. When Libermann presented his plan, he

made it clear that it would lead to good only through submission to and dependence on the Holy See. He was brought to this conclusion by reasons which were both theological and practical.²⁷

The vow of obedience leads Spiritans to develop a sense of belonging to the Church to “sentire cum Ecclesia” (“feel with the Church”) SRL 81.

- Locally, Spiritans develop an attentiveness to the local Church and participate in it (SRL 18-19).
- On a wider scale, they develop an openness to the preoccupations and suggestions of the universal Church as, with the Church, they strive to respond to the signs of the times. In particular, it is desirable that the themes of the various synods would stimulate prayer and reflection in all.
- Spiritan priests will remember particularly that at the moment of their priestly ordination, they take an oath of obedience to the diocesan bishop.

3.4 SO WHERE ARE WE AT?

3.4.1 At a Personal Level

- What are individual modes of behaviour which are an obstacle to fraternal communion?
- What does “belonging to the Spiritan family” mean for me?
- How do I live in deep solidarity with the members of the community, of the circumscription and of the Congregation?
- When a conflict arises between members of the community, do I do my best to resolve it?

²⁷ Memoir to Mgr. Cadolini, ND II, p. 72-74.

3.4.2 At Community Level

- What means has the community adopted to put a covenant relationship in place among the members?
- What process of reconciliation do we put in place to help confreres resolve differences?
- How are the bonds between community superiors and other confreres lived?

3.4.3 At Circumscription Level

- Has the circumscription put in place opportunities for listening to confreres when some individuals are experiencing pain in their relationship with other confreres?
- What is the circumscription doing to promote a sense of belonging to the Congregation and to combat individualism?
- How does the circumscription show its solidarity in a concrete way with confreres who have received particularly difficult appointments?

IV. OBEDIENCE AT THE SERVICE OF MISSION

4.1 THE MISSION THAT HAS BEEN RECEIVED AND PERSONAL PROJECTS

*T*he response to the call that one has heard thrives in the willingness to serve and becomes concrete in the definitive commitment of the Spiritan. It goes without saying that this response needs to be refreshed regularly. The events of life and unexpected happenings mount up to challenge our willingness. And we must make mention too of personal projects. How often has it been observed that confreres show lit-

tle enthusiasm for their missionary involvement because they have carefully elaborated a plan to undertake further studies or again, other confreres who begin a particular work without seeking the advice of their superior and even of their confreres! Before very long, their personal projects come into conflict with the community project and the project of the circumscription.

These personal projects are not necessarily negative. Each one of us has some and we are not to be considered any the less for all that. But that does not mean that we will be able to make them concrete. The question should always be asked: Is this realistic? How does one particular project integrate itself in the global project? Can it be harmonised with the mission one has received or with the Spiritan charism? The problem arises when one individual's project becomes his obsession and a priority that is imposed on everyone, with no discussion possible.

4.2 MARY'S 'YES'

*M*ary, the servant of the Lord, can guide us in our reflection. The Annunciation summarises the essential aspects of her availability to serve. Certainly, the message of the angel throws Mary's own personal plans into disarray but Mary understands that this message has to do with a call and a mission – to welcome Jesus within her so that the world might welcome the Son of God. In the infancy narratives the missionary aim of their authors appears. Mary herself has contributed to them. It was not for nothing that Libermann proposed the heart of Mary as a model for the members of his infant congregation. "We consider the heart of Mary as a per-

fect model of apostolic zeal”²⁸ At the end of the episode Mary makes clear beyond any doubt her willingness to serve: “I am the handmaid of the Lord” (Lk 1, 38).

What follows in the Gospel indicates how she had to adjust her availability continually as events unfolded. She learned to draw from them a deep meaning (Lk 2.51), to find her joy in listening to the word of God without coming between her Son and those who were listening to him (Lk 8,21). Neither did she seek to keep him for herself, because Jesus was the bearer of Good News for all. In Mary, availability and renunciation went hand in hand making it possible for God’s action to take place in people’s hearts.

Nor should it surprise us that we find Mary at the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles (Ac 1, 14). She shows the same availability to accompany the infant Church in prayer just as she had accepted the mission of accompanying Jesus, bringing him to meet his brothers and sisters in their quest for the salvation of God.

4.3 PASSION FOR MISSION

*T*he vow of obedience opens us to being available for the mission which Jesus has entrusted to his Church.

Availability for the Mission We Have Received

In our Spiritan life, the personal commitment of the profession of vows is matched by a passion for mission. “Without reference to obedience, the very term mission becomes very

²⁸ Provisional Rule, Part I, chapter II, article III, ND II, p. 238.

difficult to understand.”²⁹ This mission is received or it is confirmed for us (SRL 77.1). It implies a two-fold attitude.

- On one hand, each one becomes involved in revealing Christ. It frequently happens that some confreres let themselves become intoxicated by the success of their apostolate. Their initiatives win acceptance and people become dependent on them. Without knowing it, the confrere in question moves into the centre and prevents people from personally meeting Christ.
- Spiritans make themselves available to undertake to listen to and to serve the people to whom that have been sent. “I have come to serve and not to be served” (Mk 10, 41-44). In a very few words, Jesus sums up his own mission where he claims nothing for himself. We learn from his own way of living out his mission that obedience results in service. This example is specially recommended to superiors and it invites us to develop an attitude of humility and to reject all desire for power.

To Be Appointed To Mission

The willingness to serve finds its expression in the way our mission appointment is accepted. This is a crucial moment which is the result of a process in which many different partners are involved:

- Superiors, working with those who hold positions of responsibility in the local Church or in particular works, have to seek the good of the mission and of the confreres;
- Communities that seek to be reinforced expect a lot from new arrivals;

²⁹ *The Service of Authority and Obedience*, no. 23.

- The confreres themselves with their own individual story, their good will, their personal talents but also with their own needs and limitations.

Long gone are the days where Spiritans received their “obedience” on the day of their Final Profession or else learned of a change of appointment from their superior without the latter taking the time to dialogue with them. Times have changed and no one is complaining! However, we still hold that an appointment as “obedience” comes from religious obedience.

Nowadays an appointment involves a dialogue and a reflection to ensure that the individual concerned will be able to measure up to what is expected of him. In the final analysis it falls to him to accept the mission entrusted to him as if it came of itself. The exercise becomes more difficult in so far as it is considered as an administrative act. Only when it is seen at the spiritual level does it really become “obedience” when making oneself available interiorises the administrative act which is the formal conclusion of the process. Moreover, this spiritual dimension has value not only for the confrere who is appointed, but also for the superior and council who make the appointment and the community which receives the confrere. The “paratus ad omnia” is no more than a slogan with a false resonance unless it is lived by all as a spiritual adventure.

To Become Part of a Missionary Project

Obedience is played out in the daily life of a community and of an entire circumscription. A new challenge has been launched. The newly-appointed confrere on his arrival meets a group or a community with its own history, its joys and its difficulties. Much is expected of him and he is asked to share the common vision of the group and to adopt its point of

view, without sometimes realising that a certain period of time is required for him to get the measure of things.

It is impossible to receive an appointment without manifesting one's deep solidarity with the group. There is much more involved here than a normal psychological process. When SRL 159 declares "the confrere who is appointed to a circumscription becomes a member of it", it opens a new page of history in which a break with the past, attentive listening to the confreres and an understanding of what has been lived down through the years are all involved. It is a question of an obedience that is both enlightened and enriched by the common experience. It is conditioned by the way in which the confreres each share their own story. It will become transformed into a willingness to serve and an availability both of which give life to the common missionary project.

Thus are the outlines of co-responsibility in the received mission sketched out. Since the mission is much wider than his own particular preference or his own ambitions, the Spiritan takes on with dedication and a sense of responsibility what has been entrusted to him. But we must recognise that our discussions on obedience sometimes seem to be couched in very wooden language. "They talk but they do not act" (Mt 23, 3-4)! Our existing societies do not call only competent individuals but they wish that they might be complementary. However, if an individual does not shoulder his area of responsibility not only does he lose the confidence of the others but he also endangers the work of all.

How many community and chapter decisions are there that have remained dead letters because they do not arouse any sense of making oneself available in confreres or else each confrere has no concern for the common project? We are called therefore to be coherent both as individuals and as

groups in what we have promised to live, even when events or orientations contradict one's personal point of view. The quality of this kind of obedience, marked by co-responsibility, becomes therefore a renewed call to availability and to a willingness to serve.

4.4 SO WHERE ARE WE AT?

4.4.1 At a Personal Level

- Do I make myself available to the requests of Superiors when a response to new or urgent needs is called for?
- Am I available for the missionary priorities of the Congregation?
- Do I submit my own projects to the discernment of others and do I accept this discernment?
- How do I personally account for my own initiatives and projects?

4.4.2 At Community Level

- Is there a feeling of co-responsibility at the heart of the community? How does the community foster this?
- Do confreres have the opportunity to share what they are doing? In what way?
- Does the community update its mission project in line with what is happening on the ground? Does it submit this to the Superior of the circumscription?

4.4.3 At Circumscription Level

- Following the circumscription chapter, what mechanism permits the missionary project that has been decided upon to be put into action?
- How does the council of the circumscription prepare the appointments of confreres? What form does the preliminary dialogue take and what follow-up is there?
- What are the major decisions of the circumscription by which it expresses its desire to place itself at the service of people? Are these decisions followed by action?
- Has the circumscription reflected on the reasons which have led certain confreres to abandon their mission without reference to anyone?



COR UNUM ET ANIMA UNA

God's call to come and work for the Kingdom is not made to us just once for all. Our response has to be updated continually. (SRL 142)

Congregation of the Holy Spirit

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