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Obedience: Listening to God in a “Just Do It” Culture

In a “just do it” culture, the whole notion of religious obedience can seem absurd and anachronistic. Because of the emphasis placed on personal freedom, autonomy, self-will, and personal determination, obedience does little to entice the popular imagination or suggest the good life. From a marketing perspective, obedience is a hard sell, especially because the very notion of obedience seems to imply the suffocation of life rather than the promotion of it. As religious life undergoes changes, such practices as vowed obedience can strike outside observers as vestiges of a repressive religious past. As Edward Kinerk says, “everything in our culture resists obedience, because we are made to fear that any loss of control over self-fulfillment is a loss of self.”¹ Yet obedience is a core element of the gospel, arguably a primary dimension not only of Jesus’ life and relationship with his Father, but also of what it means to be a Christian.

Although obedience has always been a core Christian virtue, it has undergone much redefinition since the

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Second Vatican Council. In a time when much attention is given to the abuse of power, especially among religious and the clergy, how are we to understand the gift and virtue of obedience today? What understanding of it is necessary for it to be liberating and humanizing rather than oppressive, manipulative, and destructive? In this article I explore the ways in which obedience leads one to become more authentic, more loving, and more human.

Three Dimensions of Obedience

Before getting into some specifics, I would like to frame a healthy notion of obedience within three dimensions that can keep obedient living from getting distorted: (1) a Christological dimension, (2) a cardiological one, and (3) a missiological one.

The obedience I speak of is fundamentally Christological. The focal point of obedience is the life of Christ. The value of obedience begins and ends with how Christ lived his own relationship with his Father, and so the Christian meaning of it is in the following of Christ. Without Christ at the center, obedience readily becomes mind control and manipulation and a certain childishness. One accepts a call to obedience and chooses it as a normative value because one desires to become like Christ, to become a disciple of Christ, to conform one's life to Christ's life, and ultimately to become another Christ and, in the process, become a whole human being.

The "cardiological" dimension of obedience implies paying attention to one's own heart, not simply the physical organ, but the physical organ with its mystical quality.² Though the heart is often associated simply with feeling and emotion and thus a shallow sentimentality, the heart I refer to here is the deep center of a person, the place of true knowledge and understanding, where reason and emotion are integrated. To know something is to know it in one's heart. Cardiological understanding is the

deepest level of self-understanding, and faithfulness means being true to this personal core where self and God meet.

I believe that obedience also has a missiological dimension. Obedience is an enduring relational commitment that sends one beyond oneself on a mission that is larger than oneself. Obedience is not a mere finger exercise of acquiescence to a religious superior's whims, a

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childish docility, or a premature disposition or settling of one's identity, but a solid conviction that one is called to focus one's energies, to give oneself in service and in sacrifice to the kingdom of God, to the building up of the church

and the transformation of human society. Such obedience gets its shape from following Christ, being attentive to one's heart, and giving this heart away on mission for the good of others.

Further Meanings of Obedience

It is interesting to note the great disparity between contemporary connotations of obedience and its more precise denotation. Many see religious obedience as a matter of following rules and conforming to obligations and directions from a religious superior. In point of fact, however, *obedience* literally means something different. It comes from a Latin word, *oboedire*, which means "to listen to" (from *ob*, to or toward, and *audire*, to hear). Obedience is less about "knuckling under" than about effective listening. It means cutting through the myriad noise of contemporary society so as to get in touch with the voice and life of the Spirit, with authentic freedom and integration. Obedience means attentive and faithful

listening to various levels of our lives. In the pages that follow, I will highlight five levels: fidelity to one's own heart, to the cries of the poor, to the call of the church, to the needs of community, and ultimately to the challenge of the gospel.

One's Heart's Desires

Listening to the desires of one's own heart, a fundamental dimension of religious obedience, is no easy task. It requires sifting and sorting through the many emotional impulses and even conflicting feelings that arise in the course of personal reflection and discernment. But, for obedience to foster a loving life with God, such listening is essential. As noted in *Gaudium et spes* (§41), "the church truly knows that only God, whom she serves, meets the deepest longings of the human heart, which is never fully satisfied by what this world has to offer."

Obedience involves spiritually digging deeper and deeper into the truths of one's life until one finds there the basic desires that govern how to live in the world. These truths are by no means self-evident, but when they are brought to light they serve as a "nonnegotiable" homing instinct that orients one's life. Without these orienting truths, other people, various social institutions, or shallow cultural expectations readily seem to provide authoritative direction for one's life. Such transferences may have the veneer of obedience, but they are betrayals of one's true self to a fictive and false self that is unreal and therefore has no rightful place in God's plan. Freedom entails being faithful, and thus obedient, to the deepest desires of one's heart, to these orienting truths, to these intensely personal gifts from God.

A number of years ago a fine article appeared under the title "Eliciting Great Desires: Their Place in the Society of Jesus," by Edward Kinerk SJ. Its thesis is that God leads us with gifts we can well call holy desires.

Kinerk's point was that, if people are going to have any lasting efficacy in the apostolate, they must get in touch with what motivates them, for these desires are the source of much of their apostolic energy. Although the desires must be channeled through discipline, prayer, and mortification, one of the early tasks of the spiritual life is to find and cultivate them.

In order to distinguish holy desires from mere feelings, whimsical emotions, or even evil inclinations, Kinerk presents four overlapping presuppositions about desires, based on his own study of Ignatius Loyola. He says that all desires are real experiences, but not all desires are equally authentic. For example, the desire to forgive comes from a deeper and truer self than the desire for revenge, however "real" this "desire" may feel. Second, authentic desires are vocational; that is, they lead us to discover how we are gifted uniquely and called by God uniquely. The more we come in touch with genuine desires, the more we will find out who we are and who we want to become. Third, our most reliable desires are those that lead us to glorify God. Such desires lead us toward self-gift more than toward personal fulfillment, which is more a by-product of a faithful life than a goal in itself. Last, all authentic desires are somehow public. There is a paradox here, for such desires are profoundly personal; still, holy desires will ultimately lead us out of ourselves into a greater connectedness with the human community.

Holy desires tend towards building human community. It is a subject of its own to say what these holy desires are, but Kinerk mentions a few, including "a desire to help souls" and "a desire for the cross." I would add that some of these holy desires revolve around love, meaning, self-gift, freedom, and knowledge. Obedience, then, simply put, means identifying and clarifying these principles and values as we meet them in our own unique

experiences, relationships, and longings. Paying attention to our heart's desires helps authenticity to emerge out of our faith commitment to obedience. We have something substantial to think and say and ask about obedience in religious life only if we pay attention to our desires and how we act on them as we go through the day. Otherwise obedience degenerates into mere legalism or formalism. It is an anthropological truth that we are made by God, that we are made for God, that we long for God, and that only God can satisfy our heart's deepest desires. Obedience, then, is about being faithful to our heart, but also making sure that this "heart" is not an idol that has little or no intention of giving itself away to God and others.

The Cries of the Poor

To keep our heart's desires from becoming simply narcissistic, obedience requires serious listening to the cries of the poor. Those cries are a great corrective to selfishness. If our heart's desires are gifts from God, then listening to the cries of the poor reveals the demand these gifts make on us. Obedience relates to the challenging side of faith, not only reminding us that we are loved but also calling us to love as God loves. Listening and responding to the poor is a profound kind of obedience.

Those of us who live in the United States and other prosperous countries need to listen to the cries of the poor within our own borders and throughout the world. The United Nations' World Development Report reveals some staggering socioeconomic statistics.³ If we think of the world's population as one hundred people, fifty-nine percent of the world's goods would be in the hands of six people, all of them in the United States. Fifty would suffer from malnutrition, eighty would live in inhuman conditions, and seventy would not be able to read. Only one would have a college education, and only one would

have a computer. I mention these statistics not to induce a debilitating guilt, but to awaken us to our responsibility to the human family. The divide between faith and justice is a form of spiritual schizophrenia that only obedience can remedy: As noted in *Gaudium et spes* (§43),

This split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our age. Already in the Old Testament the prophets fought vehemently against this scandal, and even more did Jesus Christ himself in the New Testament threaten it with grave punishments. Therefore, let there be no false opposition between professional and social activities on one side and religious life on the other. Christians who neglect their temporal duties . . . jeopardize their eternal salvation.

Any Christian life which does not listen to the cries of the poor effectively shuts out the voice of God. Obedience requires faith-filled listening to the poor and helping them towards a dignified life, one that includes basic physical necessities, meaningful work, and freedom.

In ministry, obedience often involves listening to something deeper than the cries of the poor. The voices of people that suffer are a revelation of the presence of the crucified Christ. Christ challenges his disciples not only to work for the poor, but to discover in them his very own presence: “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me” (Mt 25). Obedience means listening to the poor and allowing them to enrich and even challenge our understanding of God.

The Needs of the Church

In obedience we also listen to the needs of the church. In the face of the human heart’s tendency towards

narcissism, individualism, and exclusiveness more than towards the needs of others, obedience is a way to become integrated into the human family. Obedience as listening, not only to ourselves but to those we serve, can challenge our own worldviews, prejudices, and limitations. We may be approaching our ministries with defective presuppositions without knowing it.

Here is a case in point. Looking for a place to start building up the lay leadership in a parish, I quickly decided to foster more lay participation and input in the liturgy. I approached a middle-aged woman who had shown many leadership qualities and proposed that she lead the liturgy committee we would begin to assemble. Eager to help her do well, I went on to say: "I will make sure you have all the resources you need. We will meet regularly, and I'll send you to conferences. We can discuss your ideas, and I'll give you a list of books you can read." She began to cry. I said, "What's wrong?" She said, "I hope you don't feel I can no longer be active here, but I have to tell you I can't read." Hearing her tearful words, I knew it was time for me to rethink my presuppositions about how important, or unimportant, literacy is in the training of lay leaders.

Illiteracy was not uncommon here. Besides the rethinking, I needed to listen to what this woman had to offer beyond the limitations of her formal education. Obedience requires not only a willingness to serve but also the humility to listen, to hear God's voice in unexpected ways at unexpected moments. Attentive listening often lets us in for surprises, bringing fresh insights about God and forging new relationships in various directions.

Obedience pays attention to the signs of the times, events that may have the fingerprints of God on them. In the church in the United States, a church that is becoming more multicultural and especially more and more

Hispanic, obedience does not just do “what the church has always done,” but goes to new and unexplored places. In those places obedient listening will stretch our cultural boundaries and rearrange patterns of thinking. This will not always be easy, but we will not be there alone.

Disobedience, a refusal to listen well, seemed tangible one day when I was visiting a suburban parish in the eastern United States. After Mass, during a conversation I was having in Spanish with a couple from Colombia, the associate pastor came up and rudely asserted, “You people should learn English!” This was a failure to listen humbly and alertly to the needs of the church. There is, of course, a need for newly arrived immigrants to learn the language, but they and their culture will greatly enrich the church even while they bring new challenges. Patient mutual listening will bring mutual benefits.

Even though Hispanics are now the largest minority in the U.S. church and in this country as a whole, the church does not seem to have done an effective job of listening to them and their needs: one out of every five has left the church in the last twenty-five years. This loss can be called catastrophic.⁴ Though many factors have contributed to this attrition, surely a principal one is that the church has not adequately heard and addressed the needs of Hispanics. Pastoral outreach programs have not managed to do enough. Here we see the link between obedience and mission, between finding God present in these signs of the times and being energized accordingly.

The Call of Community

Community is the very context in which one lives out a vow of obedience. Obedience is a divine counterweight to an individualism that fails to value the communal dimension of salvation, the only dimension that God has provided. Religious life is corporate by its very nature, and obedience ensures its internal coherence and its

external commitments. Nonetheless, obedience in a communal setting demands complex navigational skills. What happens when my religious community asks of me something that I feel I have no gifts for or that takes me away from a satisfying and fruitful ministry? How does one integrate faithfulness to one's heart with faithfulness to community?

Here obedience means not simply responding to one's own inner authority or to the authoritative voices of the poor and the church, but responding to the community as well, which speaks through one's own superiors. Here is the place to revisit this vow fully aware that our culture cherishes intensely its own autonomy and supposed self-sufficiency. Kinerk says it this way: "However personal and individualized our desires may be—and they certainly are—they ultimately reach their full flower by reference to the corporate body of the people of God. If the discovery of desires is a discovery of self, it is also a discovery of community."⁵ Especially since the Second Vatican Council, human initiative, independence, and freedom of thought have been much encouraged in religious life. But one of the prophetic dimensions of obedience is that religious situate their lives within community rather than simply their own individual enterprises. Otherwise they run the risk of making idols out their personal projects.⁶ What can help resolve the conflict between personal and communal desires is a subject that needs more reflection and analysis.

Obedience as a call to listen also has a daily, demanding dimension. It involves alertness not only to

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the deeper currents of one's own heart but also to those of community members—which can be difficult when their personal desires are not evident. Community teaches us to love, and great love consists in this: not that we love those who love us, but that we love those we have not specifically chosen to live with. During my theological studies a professor remarked that in the synoptic Gospels Jesus speaks of loving one's enemies, but in John's Gospel speaks of loving one another (Mt 5:44; Lk 6:27,35; Jn 13:34-35 and 15:12,17). "I used to think that Matthew, Mark, and Luke held out the greater challenge," my professor said; "now, after being in religious life for over forty years, I am beginning to see that John's take on loving others in community is the greater love." Community, its daily stress and ordinary frictions notwithstanding, implicitly expects us to remain and to bear with one another, rather than "check out" physically, mentally, or emotionally.

Listening to the call of community is about channeling the heart's energies and allowing them to be directed towards a vision of greater things than one could dream of or do on one's own. Obedience is the gift of my life to something greater than my own plans. In God's economy the greatest disappointment is not that our plans do not work out as anticipated, but that they do! Obedience is willingness to be taken, with Isaiah and Paul, to where "eye has not seen, ear has not heard, what God has ready for those who love him" (1 Co 2:9). God's will for us is beyond our own conception of how our life should work out. The God of surprises gives us something greater than ourselves if we give ourselves to it.⁷ Obedience means magnanimity. It means a heart large enough to avoid making idols even of the good work and good people that one is involved with in the apostolate.

The obedience of listening to the community includes listening to the charism of the community. Ordinarily

people with a particular ardent desire (or charism) are drawn to a community that has a similar ardent desire (or charism). The community cherishes that personal gift and helps it grow. This clearly implies, of course, that obedience is not about docilely adopting some exterior “religious *persona*.” Obedience means establishing a harmony between one’s own heart and the community’s heart.

The Challenge of the Gospel

Obedience is intimately related to the following of Christ. Paul’s letter to the Philippians (2:5-11) says this vividly:

Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and, found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.

Christ takes obedience to a new level, revealing that, contrary to contemporary culture, the way of discipleship has more to do with self-emptying than self-fulfillment. Such obedience is a distinct virtue when one adheres to this discipleship even when one’s emotional fervor weakens, when one finds the call of the poor burdensome, when community becomes a chore, and when bearing with the church becomes difficult. At such times obedience becomes *kenosis*, letting one’s mind and heart be renewed, not according to the economy of the world, but according to God’s. Obedience, *tout court*, means living with incompleteness, with hunger and with unfulfilled desires. Gregory the Great referred to this obedience when speaking of Mary Magdalene after Jesus’ resurrection:

At first she sought but did not find, but when she persevered it happened that she found what she was

looking for. When our desires are not satisfied, they grow stronger, and becoming stronger they take hold of their object. Holy desires likewise grow with anticipation, and if they do not grow they are not really desires. Anyone who succeeds in attaining the truth has burned with such a great love.⁸

Ultimately, then, obedience means letting our lives get in touch with our lives' core, where God meets us. Obedience is a radical listening that calls us to see in our own desires the desire for Christ.

We can find and foster this desire for Christ by reflecting on how others have found Christ over the centuries, by careful retrieval of the sources, particularly patristic and Scriptural sources. When one can recognize the wisdom of the past as a guide to the present, when one can see in the words of former generations a mirror of one's own heart, then one has learned the liberating and sustaining dimensions of obedience. As St. Augustine noted:

The heart has its own desires. . . . We say that one who finds pleasure in truth, in happiness, in justice, in everlasting life, is drawn to Christ, for Christ is in all these things. . . . Show me one who loves; he knows what I mean. Show me one who is full of longing, one who is hungry, one who is a pilgrim and suffering from thirst in the desert of this world, eager for the fountain of the homeland of eternity; show me someone like that, and he knows what I mean. . . . Christ says: "I give each what he loves, I give each the object of his hope; he will see what he believed in, though without seeing it."⁹

Obedience is about a radical listening to one's heart, the poor, the church, the community, and the gospel. We discover only by a long path of soul searching that our desires invite us to obedience, the continuing effort to keep our hearts in rhythm with the heart of Christ. Obedience becomes a way of listening to our love of the Lord and allowing that love to direct our lives, to bring us

to all that our hearts desire.

Notes

¹ E. Edward Kinerk, "Eliciting Great Desires: Their Place in the Spirituality of the Society of Jesus," *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 16, no. 5 (1984): 19.

² Though much attention has been given to barbaric practices of the Aztecs, especially human sacrifice, less attention has been given to the Aztecs' understanding of the human heart as the receptacle for divine energy and human creativity and as the place where one comes to true understanding. See Miguel León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought and Culture: A Study of the Ancient Nahuatl Mind*, trans. Jack Emory Davis (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963), and David Carrasco, *Religions of Mesoamerica: Cosmology and Ceremonial Centers* (Long Grove, Illinois: Waveland Press, 1998).

³ For the latest statistics on world development, see the Human Development Reports at the United Nations at www.undp.org.

⁴ Andrew M. Greeley, "Defection among Hispanics" (updated), *America* (27 September 1997): 12-13.

⁵ Kinerk, "Eliciting Great Desires," pp. 18-19.

⁶ See the discussion on obedience in Sandra M. Schneiders, *New Wineskins: Re-Imagining Religious Life Today* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986) and *Finding the Treasure: Locating Catholic Religious Life in a New Ecclesial and Cultural Context* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000).

⁷ Virgil Elizondo, *A God of Incredible Surprises* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowan and Littlefield, 2003).

⁸ Gregory the Great, *Homily on the Gospels* 25, 1-2.4-5 (PL 76, 1189-1193).

⁹ Augustine, *Tract* 26, 4-6 (CCL 36, 261-263).