



Live according to the Way of obedience, chastity and the renunciation of ownership.

An entire book can be written about each of these dispositions of the vowed life: obedience, chastity and the renunciation of ownership. Each of these books could then be followed by a complete series on how we may adopt such attitudes and adapt them to every day life outside of a religious Order. Here, I will attempt to write briefly, and perhaps write these books later or leave them for someone wiser and more eloquent than myself, setting the stage and foundation for you to see how they may be applied and incorporated into your own life. My hope is that you may begin to see that these are not vows and dispositions that have been reserved to members of religious orders alone, but their very presence in the orders comes from a most basic observation that they are essential to the Christian way of life and should, in fact, be central to the life of anyone who longs and strives to live a life in allegiance to Christ. These are the counsels that urge us along the path of perfection and toward the sainthood that was initiated at our baptism.

OBEDIENCE

First, we will explore the disposition of obedience, which is the foundation and source of all other things--this is why Albert included it first among his charges to the brothers, that they profess obedience to a prior, and even earlier, he stressed the importance that from among all the ways that lead to Christ, it was to him that the hermits had turned and to this way that they should remain obedient. Again, as I have written many times already, this requirement is not an imposition of oppression and control, but a fundamental piece of wisdom: if we are not obedient, if we do not begin by carrying a disposition of listening and deferring to the very thing that we hope will lead and guide our life into a better place, if we are not committed to following what is recommended but rather judge our own wisdom and experience to be superior, then what is the point? How can we claim to follow a Rule, or any way of life, if we are not actually following it? Would we think of the Disciples as *followers* if they had not first been obedient? To be obedient is the first step in following any thing or person, and here it is through obedience that we then may follow through on the prescriptions for prayer, on our daily attention to silence, on

acts of charity and kindness, and on the other dispositions of chastity and the renunciation of property.

The first question of obedience would be: What do we mean by obedience? In its simplest form, to be obedient is to do what someone else has told you to do, and in essence, this is the holy disposition of obedience that we are seeking. Yet this is not a blind or dumb obedience of which so many people are afraid: that in pledging obedience we are opening ourselves to potential abuse; that we are surrendering our God-given intelligence and initiative; or that we are giving up our essential liberty and freedom of choice in order to be bound in chains to some other. These are legitimate fears and are often stumbling blocks that prevent many from actually giving themselves over to obedience; that somehow, by holding onto a sliver of self-determination and preservation, by reserving some rights to object according to a so-called 'holy' disobedience, that we can protect ourselves against injustices and abuses by one who has us under their authority and claim of obedience.

Disobedience, if that is how the thoughts are projected in our mind, is never holy; disobedience is not a disposition or grace of love; it is not a virtue that leads one to a better way of living, nor does it build bonds of unity between people. Disobedience is harm, it is division, it is separation and the stepping over of another person. Disobedience is violence and to be disobedient is to oppress someone under our personal will and desires. These words may be hard ideas for us to hear and even harder for us to truly consider thoughtfully surrounded by a culture and time that praises acts of civil disobedience and encourages self-assertion of one's own ideas, thoughts and identity. Disobedience, is much like anger and pride. We may be tempted, and even encouraged to believe that there are times and situations that call for these things: that we should be angry over injustice, proud of great accomplishments and disobedient in the face of evil. Rather, we are to be passionate for the protection of life, grateful for the gifts that God has given to us and act in obedience to our Lord and to the love and the good of all.

One of my Carmelite brothers was teaching us about the vows and in particular about this vow and disposition of obedience. He was seen by many as a revolutionary in the Order and regularly disobedient, periodically standing up to his provincial against orders that he saw as violating the spirit of the Order and the Carmelite Way of Life. He urged us to always be obedient to our Prior and Novice Master in the simple things and even in the face of orders that seemed to be stupid or that clearly did not consider our own well being. We asked him then about how to recognize the times when we are called to disobedience; when we are to look at the broader picture and how we should go about disobeying what is clearly a bad command: one that asks us to violate either our vows or what Christ has commanded us to do. "You should never be

disobedient,” he told us, going on to tell us a story about a recent conversation he’d had with his provincial. He said to him, “I am sorry Father Provincial, but I cannot do that. . .” which sounds very much like being disobedient. When we pushed him, characterizing that his act of disobedience to the provincial to whom he had vowed obedience was in his desire to be obedient to Christ first, he again told us “No.” He was, in fact, being obedient to his provincial, that it was for the good of the provincial and the Order that the brother could not take such an action. The brother sought no harm, felt no anger nor desired any rebellion against an unlawful order, but continued to seek what was good not only for himself, but for the provincial. The difficulty is that he was trying to explain to us that in order to be obedient, not to the particular words of the provincial, but to what was good for him, the brother had to refuse to do what he was being asked. He was not, in fact being disobedient in the face of an unlawful or unjust order, but was committed and determined to remain obedient to something higher. This brother was teaching us to always be obedient to Christ, that is, to be obedient to the love of the brothers and sisters and to their own good. There are times, which are very few, when we do not understand what it is that we are actually asking of someone else, or we may not see that we are actually causing ourselves harm and distancing ourselves further from Christ. Our brother’s job was not to be disobedient, but to help his provincial to see the harm that what he was asking would cause, and to not allow such harm to come to the Provincial and the Order. It was not disobedience that our brother was teaching, but the recognition that true obedience to love does, at times, require one to refuse to take certain actions. If we feel the urges and heat of disobedience; if we feel the nervousness of rebellion or the fires of anger of being asked to do something that is unjust; if we feel the guilt or embarrassment of possibly being caught, we are likely falling into the sin of disobedience which severs our ties and separates us from the one, or many, to whom we are being disobedient. Yet if we remain always obedient to Christ, acting out of this desire and a desire for the good, the conversion and a real concern for all of our brother and sisters, then we remain in union and in love. The question is a question of disposition: Do we feel the pull and flames of disobedience, or are we being driven by a passion and desire for being obedient?

The Rule does not ask the brothers to vow a blind obedience to everyone they meet, nor to a singularly unknown person that may or may not carry their best interest and common purpose in life. There is one to whom they are to vow this obedience: to the prior, who himself has also vowed obedience to the Rule and all that it requires and demands of him in the care, service and direction of all who have vowed to the Order--and all have vowed obedience to a life in allegiance to Christ. It is to Christ that a holy, good and fruitful obedience is vowed and given. It is to Christ, whom scripture has affirmed and we know not only wishes good and healing for us and truly loves us, but who also bears the wisdom of Wisdom itself, who knew us before we were

even born, who has seen us sitting beneath the fig tree, knows his plans for us to prosper and who gives his commands and directions in the love that leads us to salvation. It is to him, the one we call Lord and Master that obedience is properly and joyfully given and in his light that we write and describe the virtue of obedience, in the ways and in as much as he has set the Rule over the Order, a prior above the brothers, a parent over a child, a teacher over students, or a boss or manager over employees.

At the surface, obedience is simply doing what is asked of you, without challenging or debating, but in a joyful and grateful way. But as in all things, we know that there is much more lying beneath the surface and apparent simplicity. To be obedient is to place yourself into the care of another. Not only believing that they will not over burden, take advantage of, or demand too much from you, but that they will take care of your interest, provide for your needs and promote your own good as a coach may train and foster an athlete to both improve one's self and the team's performance.

To be obedient is not merely obeying the rules that have been set or completing assigned chores, but also includes all of the times in between. We do not speak ill, complain, gossip and later criticize the direction we have been given. In this way, obedience also fosters charity and kindness, helping us refrain from speaking ill of others, even when it may be true.

To be obedient is to give another our unfailing loyalty. That our work and activities support their work and whatever cause they are pursuing; that while sharing and conversing we do not argue and oppose what they may be trying to do, but are always supportive and willing to give a helping hand.

To be obedient is to cooperate. Obedience does not force one to hold back from sharing, but quite the opposite, demands that we give of ourself in our actions, our thoughts, through our personality and our interests. In being obedient we should share our opinions, our thoughts, our ideas and converse according to the natural and accepted norms.

To be obedient is to depend on the wisdom of others, which can be particularly challenging in this age of knowledge, when many believe that everything can be discovered and known with clarity. In obedience, we often have to accept that we do not know, that another opinion may be better than our own, and that not knowing is okay because we act not according to our own thoughts and ideas, rather according to those of the one to whom we are obedient.

To be obedient is to be humble; that even if we may know more and better ways, at times we place those thoughts and that knowledge under the decisions of another. It is the opposite of selfishness, leading us to abandon our personal interests and at times, even sacrificing those

interests for the good and benefit of another, drawing us closer to the crucified Christ and a better understanding of the love he shared for us.

To be obedient is to overcome temptation to sin. All of us, no matter what our place or position in life, face the daily temptations to draw us away from a life in Christ. Obedience offers us strength, encouragement and a way to overcome these temptations; that when our own strength may not have been sufficient, each of us at some point has borrowed the strength of a promise, that it has been through our promise alone and for the sake of not breaking this promise that we have kept an appointment, followed through on a job, kept to a diet, fought of an addiction, shown up to exercise or done a number of things that left alone, without having made such a promise, we likely would have failed or created a reasonable excuse not to follow through. But in our desire to be obedient and through our relationship to others we hold in esteem, we are given the additional strength to accomplish much more.

Lastly, we can better understand obedience by turning to the root of its meaning. Obedience comes from the latin: obedio meaning to listen. The literal root comes from ob audire, meaning before/near to hear, as in being in front of the one you hear. To be obedient, then, means to listen to. Not only does this shed some light on holy obedience as a holy listening, but it also helps us to see that we are always in obedience to some thing. We are always listening and following something in any action or decision that we make. Even if it is ourself, to our own desires, fears, or wisdom, that we are listening and being obedient to. This draws us back to that first step Albert mentions, recognizing the prior to whom you are obedient; recognizing and appointing a proper one to whom you listen and follow.

To be obedient is a profound act of love that not only places our trust in another, but seeks their good over our own. To be obedient draws us away from our self and into the fruits and benefits we enjoy from others. To be obedient is an act of faith, of seeing beyond the immediate moment and what may appear to be a wrong decision, or a waste of time, or an insurmountable dilemma and acknowledge and trust that the future will bear out more than today. To be obedient causes us to be attentive, to listen more clearly, to be alert and to see things as they are, not as we may prefer them to be.

What we are speaking about is a disposition of obedience. Not being in the order and professing vows, it would not be appropriate, nor healthy, to profess obedience to someone we consider as a prior, or to our bosses at work, or our teachers at school. But not having professed a public vow does not forego acting according to such dispositions. Live according to a way of humility and obedience. That you remember always the vow that we have made and the promise of our baptism to live according to the life, the way, the teachings and the instructions of our

Lord Jesus Christ. In all things, strive to be loyal to this promise first. But even more, with all of those you meet, afford them the reasonable degree of authority and obedience that they may have been granted. Be obedient to your parents as God has asked us to be. At work, give your boss the deference of obedience. Do the same for teachers, coaches, even public officials and anyone who in various ways has been given authority, using common sense and good judgment. Always bear in mind the nature of your relationship and be obedient to the promises and care of those who are under your authority.