

OBEDIENCE

By BRO. FRANCIS VOLLMER, O. P.



OBEDIENCE is looked upon by many persons, right here in America today, as an invasion of their personal liberty, that cherished prerogative which they seem to interpret as license to do just about as they please; it is looked upon as a quality of those spineless individuals who have not sufficient stamina to oppose the dictates of another; it is considered as a necessary evil that must be borne on account of the present condition of things and out of expediency lest greater evils follow; as something that is expected from those who have vowed obedience, but degrading in a modern man of affairs.

This dislike of obedience is due, in no small measure at least, to an ignorance of the real nature and functions of obedience. An explanation of the true character of obedience,—of obedience as a virtue,—may help many people to consider it as an asset and not as a liability.

We define obedience as: The moral virtue which renders the will of man prompt in fulfilling the will of another.¹ Man seeks happiness, he cannot help it, it is his destiny, his last end. As to the method of obtaining this end, however, man is free to choose or to reject. By obedience a man voluntarily gives up to another this right of choice. For reasons that he considers worthy he spontaneously submits his choice to the dictate of someone else, and follows that other's commands. The reasons for man's surrender of his liberty are manifold, but, in general they are love and faith.

Obedience proceeds from love.² As Cardinal Manning says, "Obedience without love is a mask, and not a living reality."³ The Ten Commandments of God are just what their name implies, commands, and the fulfilling of them is obedience, and yet, when Our Lord summarized all the Law and the prophets in two precepts, those two were the love of God and the love of our neighbor. Nothing could show more clearly than this how obedi-

¹ St. Thomas Summa Theologica, 2a 2ae Q. 104, a. 2 ad 3.

² St. Thomas Summa Theologica, 2a 2ae Q. 104, a. 3 sed contra.

³ "The Eternal Priesthood." p. 213.

ence should spring from love. The first three commandments refer to the love of God, the other seven to the love of our neighbor, and for the Christian of course, obedience should find its source in one or the other of these two loves, but love of some sort will always be found at the root of real obedience. If a man does not obey through love, he is only submitting, through fear or expediency; he is being influenced against his wishes, and this takes away the element that is essential for real obedience, namely that it be voluntary. It is true that such compliance is popularly called obedience, a person is, in a loose way, said to obey when he submits, under pressure of circumstances, and with a bad grace, against his will; but this is not genuine obedience in the true sense of the term, and theologians call it "material obedience."

Love, however, is not the only source of obedience, faith also is equally important as its mainspring and motive. It is impossible to love anything unless we know it, and in the majority of cases the truths and principles upon which we act are not really known to us in themselves, but are taken on faith. If we are on an eastbound train and want to know what time the southbound train left New York the night before, if we will not take the word of the trainmen or the time-table, but insist upon having been there to see the train depart with our own eyes, we are going to have difficulty in making our connection. And so it is with all our daily life, there are some things we must believe. We obey because we believe that obedience is due to the person to whom we give it, we believe that for us he represents God, in this particular instance, or he represents our Government, or the cause or principle to which we adhere. Very frequently it is not demonstrated to us by cold reason that he really does represent these things, it is not necessary; we believe, and believing, freely submit our will to his. Christians obey the secular power because it is just to do so, and the law of Christ perfects rather than destroys justice.⁴ Recall the familiar words of St. Paul,⁵ "Let every soul be subject to higher powers, for there is no power but from God and those that are, are ordained of God. Therefore he that resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God."

⁴ St. Thomas Summa Theologica, Q. 104, a. 6.

⁵ Epistle to the Romans, xiii, 1.

The object of the virtue of obedience is some command, and the execution of this command is an act of obedience. This precept may be either express or tacit, that is, we may be told to do a thing in so many words, or we may know in some other way that the one in authority desires the thing done, although he be silent; it may be positive, commanding the execution of some action, or prohibitive forbidding something. If the action we perform does not come under one of these heads, then it is the act of some other virtue. Now taking the converse we see that every sin, even a slight sin, is a disobedience. If it be a serious sin, it is, perhaps, disobedience in a grave matter, if a venial sin, it may be in a small matter, but it is disobedience nevertheless, for the slightest turning from God is disobeying His command to love and serve Him, and to love our neighbor for the sake of God. This reveals the immense importance of obedience, and the necessary place it holds in the scheme of things. One might go so far as to say that to render obedience is a part of our very nature, for what is that but saying that we are dependent, that we are contingent, and that we are finite; if we did not have to submit our will to that of another, we would be independent, self-sufficient, infinite, gods.

The modern tendency toward disobedience, and its consequent revolt against authority takes on a serious aspect. It breaks out under different forms now here and now there, appearing today under one guise, and a few months from now under some other, but all traceable to the same radical derangement. The crime wave, of which we hear so much lately, is but wholesale disobedience against lawful authority, Divine and human. The treatment given it in the public press is apt to be superficial, and subjective,—a crime is “shocking,” “wasteful,” “ugly” and the rest of journalistic lingo, according as the writer is emotionally, economically, or aesthetically inclined. As a matter of fact, crime is disobedience. A murder differs from an execution in that a murder is a disobedience to a law. Now if obedience is a virtue, disobedience is a vice. Public opinion is prone to consider only this or that particular instance or kind of disobedience, it neglects the source from whence it springs. It stresses the act or omission and ignores the vice, the habit, which makes a certain class of people chronically disobedient. These individuals have the habit contrary to that of submitting their will to that of another.

Now if, as we have said, the motives for obedience are chiefly love and faith, the motives for disobedience are, principally, indifferentism, hate, and disbelief. Of course, as motives, as the moving or driving forces, the last two, hate and disbelief, are by far the more powerful, for indifferentism is rather a negative quantity as a source of anything, although it is not without its own insidious effects. In seeking, therefore, the remedy for this bad habit of disobedience, we ought to go to the root of the evil, and convert into love the hate that is the main-spring of this "Bolshevistic" movement. What is their hate against? Against everything that is good and just. Against God, His Church, and all things that pertain to God; against our country and its laws,—in a word, against all power and authority. This must be supplanted in their hearts by love of God, and love of country, before we can expect to find obedience. In order to love, however, they must have faith; they must believe in those who lead and command them or they cannot love and obey. No one requires of them a blind faith. No rational being can well be expected to believe anything, or to believe in anyone, without first being given a sound reason for so doing. They will first have to be shown that they are, in very truth, dependent, and that it is reasonable for them to love God and obey the demands of God and country. They have a right to be shown that these claims are just, and wherever there is a right in one person it presupposes a duty on the part of another person. It is the duty of the Catholic citizen to show these individuals that the laws of God and of their country really have a claim on the actions of every one of us. For instance we could show them that it is perfectly in accord with reason and with nature for one man to obey another, for verily it seems that this is at the root of their vice in many cases. St. Thomas suggests a plan of attack on this question; here are his own words: "Just as the action of natural things proceeds from natural power, so do human actions proceed from the human will. In natural things it behooves the higher to move the lower to their actions by the excellence of the natural power bestowed on them by God, and so in human affairs also the higher must move the lower by their will in view of a divinely established authority. Now to move by reason and will is to command, wherefore, just as, in virtue of the divinely established natural order, the lower natural things need to be subject to the movement of the higher,

so it is in human affairs, in virtue of the order of nature and divine law.”⁶

There is another point that demands attention, and it is by no means the least interesting; it is that obedience is the soul of all organization, the bond of unity in action. Glance for a moment at the two principal forms of religion existing in America today: the Catholic Church, and Protestantism. In the one we find a well-defined obedience to a divinely constituted hierarchy, and as the natural consequence, definite laws, smooth and efficient functioning, the whole society working as one man; in the other, as many laws as there are sects, or even as many laws as there are individual interpreters of the law, no efficient discipline, since there is neither central legislator nor sufficient sanction, and,—no obedience. Thus even at a glance one sees that where there is no obedience there is no unity, no concerted action toward any one determined end. The perfect functioning of any organization is unthinkable without obedience in all its parts.

If examples are sought of great personalities in the history of the world who have inculcated and practised obedience, we need seek no further than He who is the model of all virtues. Surely if ever there were anyone who might have been absolved from this universal law of rendering obedience, it was Jesus Christ, the God-man. And yet, not only did He obey the letter of the law, but His generous obedience was evidenced in other things in which even we poor sinners are not bound to obey. The point to be stressed here is that He obeyed the law. Furthermore, He told us to obey the law of God and of man, and He gave us a personal and Divine example by obeying it Himself.

We are Christians, and profess to be followers of this divine Leader, to be subjects and members of the Kingdom which He established here upon earth, and it will not suffice for us simply to proclaim and insist upon His doctrine, it behooves us to be doers of the word and not hearers only. Therefore it is our duty to God and to our country, as Catholics and as citizens, not only to explain what obedience really is by preaching and writing, but also, as Christ Himself did, to spread a real love of this ennobling virtue in the hearts of all within whom we come in contact, by giving them an example,—by practising obedience ourselves.

⁶ St. Thomas Summa Theologica, 2a 2ae, Q. 104, a. 1 corp.