

5th Lent Year B
March 17-18, 2018

He learned obedience through what he suffered.

Readings: Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 5:7-9; John 12:20-33

“Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered.” If you asked a young novice in religious formation which of the three evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience will be the most difficult to vow, I suspect that chastity would be the most frequent answer, followed by poverty and obedience. If you asked that man or woman twenty years later, the answer might surprise you. The virtue of obedience is a tremendous challenge because the more that we realize that we are not in charge of our life, the more we try to control it.

Obedience is defined as “The moral virtue that inclines the will to comply with the will of another who has the right to command.” In his *Summa Theologica*, Saint Thomas Aquinas declared that God is to be obeyed in all things, while human authorities are to be obeyed in certain things. While our obedience to God is without limit, that obedience owed to human beings is limited by higher laws, and by the competency or authority of the one who issues the orders.¹

Thus, it is not sinful to disobey an unjust command, even when promulgated by a legitimate authority. History is replete with examples of unjust government interventions. One would be guilty of *servility* if he obeyed a civil law that is contrary to God’s moral law. We are not rejoicing in our disobedience, but rather, we are remaining obedient to a higher authority.

A *virtue* is an habitual and firm disposition to do the good. Obedience falls under the cardinal virtue of Justice: Justice is “the moral virtue that consists in the constant and firm will to give their

¹ Cf. Rev. John Hardon, S.T.D. Pocket Catholic Dictionary (New York: Image Books, 1985) St. Thomas Aquinas(1225-1274), *Summa Theologica* II, II, Question 104, Articles 4 and 5.

due to God and neighbor.”² It is only just to God that we uphold the vows taken to Him and make sacrifices for the sake of His love.

For example, Catholics obey God and the Church by heeding the Ten Commandments, the Precepts of the Church, such as attending Mass on Sundays and Holy Days, following the Church’s laws concerning fasting and abstinence during Lent, etc.

Citizens pay taxes to the rightful authority and defend their country from the enemies. St. Peter even mentions being “subject to every human institution for the Lord’s sake...”³ We often do not like how our tax dollars are spent, and yet we pay them in order to avoid a greater evil, namely a society where no one followed the laws.

So why do we struggle with obedience? It is too facile to dismiss disobedience as merely a result of adolescent rebellion, for our experience teaches that it extends well beyond these years. We need to inculcate at an early age the value of this virtue. Obedience is fundamentally a listening to the voice of God in the deepest recesses of our heart. It makes very strong demands on us.

I have seen it described as: “the center thread that comes down” that supports a spider’s beautiful web. Descending from the top by this thread it produces, the spider constructs a web that is perfect and taut at every corner. Once the spider’s work is finished, this center thread used to construct the web is not removed but remains in place. In fact, the center thread is what holds together all of the spider’s weaving; without it everything collapses.⁴

² Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph #1807.

³ 1 Peter 2:13

⁴ Rev. Raniero Cantalembessa, Fourth Lenten Sermon, March 16, 2018

If we made a commitment to healthy exercise, when that alarm goes off first thing in the morning, we must pray for the grace to be obedient. When we committed to an hour of Adoration, or to the Stations of the Cross during Lent, and that time rolls around, what will we do? We pray to be obedient.

Am I the master of my own life or am I the servant of the gift of life I have received from another? Do I determine my path in life or do I listen for the guidance of the One who has a plan for me? Obedience is difficult because it so often entails doing that which deep down we understand we may need to do, but would prefer not to do. It is a moment of truth, and we need God's grace to make the right decision.

This brief primer on obedience is far from being the final word, but I hope it may have shed a little light on this important virtue. Ultimately, it is about listening attentively to the Lord, for He seeks only to lead us closer to Him. By being attuned to the value of obedience, we will get there much faster and stay there much longer.