

RELIGIOUS OBEDIENCE

I

NON semper aliquis obedit legi ex bonitate perfectae virtutis;

sed quandoque ex timore poenae; quandoque autem ex solo dictamine rationis quod est quoddam principium virtutis (1^a 2^{ae}. 92. 1. 2^m).

It is not always through perfect goodness of virtue that one obeys the law;

but sometimes it is through fear of punishment; and sometimes from a mere dictate of reason which is a beginning of virtue.

II

Obediaentia dupliciter dicitur :

Quandoque enim importat inclinationem voluntatis ad implendum divina mandata; et sic non est specialis virtus, sed generaliter includitur in omni virtute, quia omnes actus virtutum cadunt sub divino precepto.

Alio modo potest accipi obediaentia secundum quod importat inclinationem quantum ad implendum mandata, secundum quod habent rationem debiti. Et sic obediaentia est specialis virtus et est pars iustitiae; reddit enim superiori debitum, obediendo sibi. (2^a 2^{ae}. 4. 7. 3^m).

Obediaentia is two-fold : for sometimes it denotes the inclination of the will to fulfil God's commandments. In this way it is not a special virtue, but is a general condition of every virtue, since all acts of virtue come under the precepts of the divine law.

In another way obediaentia denotes an inclination to fulfil the commands considered as a duty. In this way it is a special virtue, and a part of justice, for a man does his duty by his superior when he obeys him.

III

Obedientia sicut et quaelibet virtus debet habere promptam voluntatem in suum proprium objectum, non autem in id quod repugnans est ei. Proprium autem objectum obedientiae est praeceptum; quod quidem ex alterius voluntate procedit. Unde obedientia reddit promptam hominis voluntatem ad implendam voluntatem alterius; scilicet, praecipientis.

Si autem id quod ei praecipitur sit propter se volitum, etiam absque ratione praecepti, sicut accidit in prosperis, jam ex propria voluntate tendit in illud, et non videtur illud implere propter praeceptum sed propter voluntatem propriam (2. 2^{ae} Qu. 104., Art. 2., ad 3).

Obedience, like every other virtue, requires the will to be prompt towards its proper object, but not towards that which is repugnant to it. Now the proper object of obedience is a precept, and this proceeds from another's will. Wherefore obedience makes a man's will prompt in fulfilling the will of another, the maker, namely, of the precept.

If that which is prescribed to him is willed by him for its own sake apart from its being prescribed, as happens in agreeable matters, he tends towards it at once by his own will, and seems to comply, not on account of the precept but on account of his own will.

IV

In his quae pertinent ad interiorem motum voluntatis homo non tenetur homini obedire sed solum Deo.

Tenetur autem homo homini obedire in his quae exterius per corpus sunt agenda . . . secundum rationem superioritatis (2^a. 2^{ae}. Qu. 104. Art. 5).

In matters touching the internal movement of the will man is not bound to obey his fellow-man but God alone.

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Nevertheless, man is bound to obey his fellow-man in things that have to be done externally by means of the body within the sphere of his authority.

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Obedience is a moral virtue. It is part of the cardinal virtue of Justice.

The (material) object of justice is some thing or act (service) due to another. The formal aspect of this (material) object is that 'it is due to another.' Only then do we do an act of justice when the act is done because it is due to another.

If the just act is done for another motive, good or bad, it is not an act of justice but is an act of some other virtue or vice. Thus to pay back a loan because we owe it, is an act of justice. But to pay back a loan for fear of imprisonment is an act of prudence and not of justice. Again, to pay back a loan in order to prepare the way for adultery is a sin against temperance and not an act of justice.

Yet there is no sin of injustice in paying a loan for prudence (a good motive) or for adultery (a bad motive).

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Obedience, as a part of justice, gives to the superior what is due to the superior, because it is due. Only then does the subject make an act of obedience when the subject gives what is due to the superior because it is due. If the subject gives what is due to the superior not because it is due but for some other motive, good or bad, the act is not one of obedience but is some other act, good or bad. Yet though it is not an act of obedience to give what is due to a superior for another motive than that it is due; yet it is not an act of disobedience. Thus if a superior commands a subject to go to his cell, and the subject goes, not be-

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cause he wishes to obey but because he wishes to study, this act is not disobedience nor yet obedience, but an act of the virtue of studiousness. If the subject on being commanded, goes to his cell in order to get drunk, this act is neither one of disobedience nor of obedience, but of intemperance.

In extract I St. Thomas has very finely noted the chief obstacles to an act of perfect virtue (a) fear of punishment; (b) a dictate of right reason (prudence).

To obey merely in order to avoid punishment is not obedience; yet it is not disobedience. To obey a command merely because we judge that the act commanded is a prudent act is not obedience; yet it is not disobedience. It is prudence.

Hence the two great obstacles to an act of perfect obedience are (a) fear of punishment for disobedience; and (b) a judgment that the act commanded is, in itself, a wise act to command.

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Again; St. Thomas, following his own principle that acts are not meritorious because they are done with difficulty, but because they are done with love, lays down the consoling doctrine that difficulty in obeying is a sign that our act is obedience (Extract III). To obey a superior's command because we judge that command to be wise is assuredly not disobedience; yet it is not, certainly, obedience. It may merely be an act of prudence or of some other moral virtue. And St. Thomas adds that only God, who sees the heart, can know whether an act so done is or is not obedience.

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Now judgment of the wisdom of a command may be either spontaneous or deliberate. Experts in any knowledge have spontaneous judgments which, being

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(*motus primi primi*) are not in the control of deliberate reason. Thus a geometrician has a spontaneous judgment that the internal angles of a triangle are not six right angles. Again, a skilled gardener knows that turnip seed is not grass seed. If a superior ordered his subject to write a book wherein it was stated that the internal angles of a triangle are six right angles, the subject would perhaps be committing an act of disobedience by not writing the statement. But assuredly he would be committing an act of untruthfulness by accepting the statement. Again if a superior ordered his subject to plant as grass seed something which the subject (a skilled gardener) knew to be turnip seed the subject would be committing an act of disobedience by not planting the seed; yet he would be committing an act of untruthfulness if he called it, what he knew it ought not to be called, grass seed.

But if the judgments of the subject on the command of the superior are deliberate and not spontaneous, the subject is in a different moral situation. By his own deliberation and choice he is placing himself in circumstances which may hinder the perfection, if not the existence of his obedience; by his judging that the command is or is not wise.

If the subject's deliberation results in judging that the command is wise, he may act, as St. Thomas says, from a motive of mere reason or prudence and not from obedience.

On the other hand, if deliberation results in judging that the command is not wise the subject has by his own choice created difficulties in the way of his obedience. But it is no part of virtue to create difficulties in the way of the virtue. Thus a deliberate act of judging the wisdom of a command may have the effect of hindering the perfection or indeed the existence of obedience.

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But this untoward effect can itself be hindered; because no other judgment belongs to obedience except the judgment that the command of the superior must be obeyed because it is the command of the superior. It is clear that superiors command subjects to obey; they do not command subjects to judge. If, as in chapters or councils, subjects are commanded to judge, then their judgment, such as it is, must be expressed. If they expressed their judgment otherwise than it is, they would be guilty of untruth.

Another point of interest if not of importance may be noticed. St. Thomas says that 'in those things that pertain to the interior movement of the will man is not bound to obey man, but God alone.'

This principle means that in virtue of the subject's duty of obedience a superior has a right to expect that his command shall be done; but he has not the right to expect that it shall be done from obedience. Refusal to do the external act commanded is alone the formal act of disobedience. The doing of the external act of obedience is sufficient to prevent any sin of disobedience.

In laying down this principle we are not suggesting that subjects should not strive to do the external acts of obedience from the internal virtue of obedience. If, indeed, the religious profession lays an obligation of striving for perfection and if obedience, though not so great as the theological virtues, is yet the greatest of the moral virtues, the obligation to be obedient for the sake of obedience would seem undeniable.

Yet it must always be remembered that to be obedient but not for the sake of obedience is not disobedience.

One last point must be made clear. Religious obedience is obedience by vow. A religious man or woman has made a vow to God of obedience to religious superiors in the sphere of religious life. In

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other words a religious has bound himself by vow to obey his superior when his superior has the right to command. Obviously the religious has not bound himself to obey when his superior has not the right to command.

This vow which the subject takes to obey the command of the superior when the superior has the right to command, adds to the ordinary obligation of obedience the further obligation of vow. In other words a subject who has vowed obedience has a greater obligation to obey than has one who has not vowed obedience.

Yet this greater obligation to obey superiors when superiors have the right to command does not give to superiors an added right to command. Although it is true to say : ' The greater the right of the superior to command, the greater the obligation of the subject to obey,' yet it is not true to conclude : ' Therefore the greater the obligation of the subject to obey, the greater the right of the superior to command.' This added obligation may come, as in the case of a vow it comes, from something external to obedience as such. Thus there may be some external circumstance of justice or charity or religion which increases the obligation of the subject without increasing the rights of the superior. For example : A superior may command a subject to pay a just debt (justice), or to relieve someone suffering from want (charity); or to do an act already promised to God (religion).

As all authority is of divine institution, there is a very real sense in which the authority of religious superiors is no more divine than the right of any ecclesiastical or civil authority. It would be false reasoning to argue that because religious subjects are more bound than other subjects are bound to obey their superiors, therefore their superiors have greater rights to command. It is not always easy for minds to accept

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this consistent moral reasoning, especially when these minds are accompanied by delicate consciences. But what is not easy may at least become easier if such conscientious minds may take the example of a citizen who made a vow to obey the King or the President in all commands which the King or President had a right to issue. Such a vow would assuredly add to the subject a new obligation of obedience, but it would add no new right to the King or President.

VINCENT McNABB, O.P.

THE INN

(At Midnight Mass)

IS this the best that Bethlehem can afford?
But is my heart much kinder to the Lord?
The angels kneel in their impassioned awe:
Mine is the beast's breath and the hard stiff straw.

THEODORE MAYNARD.