

*AUTHORITY AND OBEDIENCE IN
RELIGIOUS LIFE.
ON THE INSTRUCTION "FACIEM TUAM."*

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Before broaching our topic, we might ask if the Instruction "The Service Of Authority And Obedience. *Faciem tuam, Domine, requiram*" (May 11, 2008) offers anything new within the totality of documents on consecrated life published over the course of the last ten years or so. This is a particularly apt question given that the topic has traditionally been considered somewhat "delicate" whether within the Church in general or within religious life in particular.¹

Personally, I would summarize in three points the aspects which struck me in the document: 1) the constant reminder that we owe obedience to God alone, with everything else amounting to mediations and the reality within which we seek the divine will; 2) the emphasis on the fraternal-communal aspect and on the fact of human maturity as the context for living out this service; 3) therefore, an awareness of limits, whether of the one obeying or the one ordering, limits which give rise to understandable tensions, difficulties and even "objection in conscience." All of this does

not devalue the obedience proper to women and men religious; on the contrary, it has the effect of making it more complete, more true, because humanly more mature² and evangelically more christological. Neither does it take from the statement that whoever is in charge “has the responsibility for the final decision,” as the other documents had noted (FT 20; cf. 25, PC 14c, VC 43, FLC 50c, SAC 14).

1) Christ, Model Par Excellence In Searching Out And Accepting The Will Of God.

The Father has given us a visible model in seeking and living out his will in the midst of history, the model of Christ (cf. FT 8). Yes, as the Instruction notes: “Obedience to the Father’s will is not an attitude added to the personality of Christ but rather one that expresses it fully: ‘My food is to do the will of him who sent me’ (Jn 4:34)” (FT 23a). He was the *amen* (cf. Rv 3:14), the perfect *yes* (cf. 2 Cor 1:20) in response to the Father (FT 23c). We are called to continue his life “in history, to afford others the possibility of meeting him” (FT 23b). This obedience of Christ is an obedience that brings to fruition the mission entrusted to him by the Father.

Our own obedience as disciples consists in nothing other than an extension in history of the incarnate Son’s obedience to the Father, a “filial obedience” (VC 16c), “*not servile but filial ... a reflection in history of the loving harmony between the three Divine Persons*” (VC 21d; cf. 22, 23). The most profound and true theological foundation of our Christian life lies in this christological-trinitarian aspect. We must therefore be careful not to fall into the trap of viewing the linking of authority and obedience in religious life as simply an organizational tool, a practical and sociological fact of life designed for efficiency even though its ultimate purpose is apostolic. So, paraphrasing Saint Paul, we can say that we are members of his body (cf. 1 Cor 12:12 and following; Eph 4:11-17) and, as a result, our obedience of the Father becomes a true extension of that of Christ. In this way, for the sake of the reign of God and with the help of the Spirit, in his Church we complete in our flesh (in our human history, both personal and collective) what is lacking in Christ’s obedience to the Father (Col 1:24) “so that the world may believe” (Jn 17:21). The obedience of Christ introduced that of the new Israel, of the new humanity, of the Church and, through her, that of various groups or individual Christians down through the centuries.

So let us ask: what is this will of the Father which, for our good, we

must search out and fulfil – as did Christ – in the midst of history, time and the circumstances in which we find ourselves whether individually or as groups (congregation, Church, humanity)? The answer is simple: to make Christ known as the unique Holy One so that God’s historical and eschatological kingdom may come and his will be done on earth as it is in heaven (cf. Mt 6:9-10; Lk 11:1-2). This kingdom becomes reality to the extent that God’s salvific plan is carried out, the plan conceived for humanity from all eternity in Christ out of God’s infinite love. This plan is being realized as it unfolds throughout history but it will not be completely fulfilled except in Christ, in eternity (cf. Eph 1:3-14; Col 1:13-20), when the Son will hand back everything to the Father and God will be all in all (cf. 1 Cor 15:24-28). Salvation – kingdom – cannot but be the happiness and fulfilment of human beings whose humanity reaches perfection when it attains the full maturity of Christ (cf. Eph 4:13-16). The divine will begins to be accomplished first of all when human beings believe in the Son whom the Father sent out of love into the world (cf. Mk 1:15; Jn 3:16 ff; 17:3) so that none may be lost (Jn 6:40). Now God is love (cf. 1 Jn 4:8, 16) and has made us sharers in his divine nature (cf. 2 P 1:4): this love has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Rom 5:5) so that the Trinity might come to us and make its home in us (cf. Jn 14:23) and we might thus enter into communion with it (cf. 1 Jn 1:1-3). All this comes about when we try to love God with all our strength as well as our brothers and sisters (Mt 22:37-40) without distinction (1 Jn 4:20-21), keeping as an invisible reference point the perfect love of God himself (cf. Mt 5:43-48) and as a visible reference point the attitude of Christ and the way the Father has loved us in Christ (cf. Jn 15:9-17).

This having been said, if Christ is our model, what was the nature of Christ’s obedience and how did he obey? The Instruction provides an answer: Christ abandoned himself totally into the hands of the Father: “Even if in his passion he gave himself up to Judas, to the high priests, to his torturers, to the hostile crowd, and to his crucifiers, he did so only because he was absolutely certain that everything found its meaning in complete fidelity to the plan of salvation willed by the Father to whom, as St. Bernard reminds us, ‘it is not the death which was pleasing, but the will of the One who died of his own accord’”³ (FT 5c).

In the Gospel, the life of Christ is seen as an experience of filial communion in the will of the Father. Christ’s first and last words clearly express such docility: “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” (Lk 2:49) and “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (cf. Ps 30:6; Lk 23:46), an echo in history of the words of the psalmist

(Ps-39:7-9) which the author of the Letter to the Hebrews puts on the lips of Christ from the very beginning: “When Christ came into the world, he said ... ‘See, God, I have come to do your will, O God’” (Heb 10:5-7).

Such is the goal of the third request of the Our Father: “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Mt 6:10), a request repeated in anguish at Gethsemane: “Not what I want, but what you want” (cf. Mt 26:39,42). This is an obedience exercised in the midst of trials: “He learned obedience through what he suffered” (Heb 5:8), an obedience “to the point of death – even death on a cross” (Ph 2:69), ever real like daily “food” (Jn 4:34). As a result, on the cross Christ could say: “It is finished” (Jn 19:30). He was the Father’s “yes” to humanity (God’s fidelity to humanity) as well as humanity’s “yes” to the Father (total obedience) (cf. 2 Cor 1:20; Acts-1:4-5; 3:14). Such obedience is, as we quoted earlier, “*not servile but filial* ... a reflection in history of the loving *harmony* between the three Divine Persons” (VC 21d).

This obedience becomes evident in a stance of listening and continual searching for the Father’s will: “Whoever is from God hears the words of God” (Jn 8:47). Now as true man (cf. GS 22; CCC 470), Christ, too, had to search out, discern and articulate the Father’s will through “multiple external mediations” (FT 9a; cf. 11c); it was not always easy for him to understand or fulfil it because he was “born in human likeness” (Ph 2:7) and had to grow and learn (cf. Lk 2:40,52), and he was “tested as we are, yet without sin” (Heb 4:15). In fact, his public life begins and ends with two tests of his mission, the will of the Father and, therefore, obedience: the temptations (cf. Mt 4:1-11) and the anguish not only in Gethsemane (cf. Mt 26:38-39; Heb 5:7-8) but also on the cross (cf. Mt 27:46; Ps 22; 31). This is where Christ experienced what the mystics would call his “dark night.” He “suffered” and “learned” obedience (Heb 5:8). It is in fact in the Gethsemane scene as described by Matthew (26:36-46) that we gain a true appreciation of the process of obedience. Whereas in verse 39 Christ asks that, if possible, he not undergo his passion but, in any case, that the Father’s will be done, in verse 42 he simply wishes that this will be accomplished and does not ask to be spared. In verse 46 he is from then on resolute: “Get up, let us be going.” He understood and fully accepted the Father’s will. “He was heard” (Heb 5:7), not because he was exempted from suffering, but because he was helped to understand and accept it resolutely. In fact, Christ was not the victim of the cross, limited to enduring it with resignation, but rather he embraced it in a positive way and, since he viewed it as his beloved Father’s will, it was less heavy. As FT notes, however, this does not mean that it was the cross as such which

pleased the Father but rather the love faithful to the very end for humanity, his brothers and sisters, of which Christ gave proof. In brief, Paul's comment about being detached from material goods to the point of undergoing a bloody death is applicable here: it is not this detachment itself which is positive but rather what results from it: "If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing" (1 Cor 13:3)⁴.

This explains Christ's freedom in facing death: "For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord" (Jn 10:17-18). Yes, in obeying the Father, Jesus is revealed as profoundly free and independent: free in regard to money (cf. Mt 6:25-33), other persons (cf. Jn 6:15; 13:5,14), the powerful (cf. Mt 26:62-64; 27:13-14; Lk 13:32; 23:6-12), his family (cf. Lk 2:49; Mk 3:33), political or religious power groups (cf. Mt 22, 34; 23:13-32), the Law (cf. Mt 5:21s; Macc 1, 22; 2:27-28), and death (cf. Jn 10:17-18; Mt 26:36-46).

Christ's was a sometimes costly, difficult and dramatic obedience (cf. FT 8c) because it was human, the kind of obedience which goes so far as to give one's life for those one loves (Jn 15:12; Phil 2:8), but, at the same time, one not simply endured, a life not forced but given in freedom even in joy as in the case of the woman in anguish before giving birth but ultimately in ecstasy at bringing a human being into the world (cf. Jn 16: 21). And we know well how much God loves those who give joyously (cf. 2 Cor 9:79), who joyfully carry out works of mercy (cf. Rom 12:8). Indeed it was the freedom of love which impelled Christ to give himself totally (cf. Gal 2:20; Eph 5:2). His was a difficult obedience but one which was free, vigorous and courageous, even joyful because it was above all loving. In obedience he simply lived out "to the end" (Jn 13:1), to "death on a cross" (Phil 2:8), to the "it is finished" (Jn 19:30), his love for the Father, a love concretised in love for his fellow human beings. That is why the crucifix is not simply and forever the symbol of suffering and death but of fidelity to one's love for the beloved whatever the consequences. It is a positive symbol, a symbol of the victory of love over sin, suffering and death.

2) The Church, A Communion Of The Obedient Ever Attentive And Discerning In The Search For The Will Of God.

Disciples of Jesus should have his attitude. He is the prototype, the supreme model. He himself makes this point: "Whoever does the will of

God is my brother and sister and mother” (Mk. 3:35). As he did, the disciples also listened, welcomed and carried out the wishes of the Father and so became part of his new family, the new Israel. The new family is in fact made up of “those who hear the word of God and do it” (Lk 8:21): listening and doing are the two essential characteristics of “the family” of Christ (cf. FT 8).

This is the way to understand obedience within the Church, an understanding intended for all Christians, and this is the obedience required of all down through the centuries. Such obedience precedes and is the foundation and explanation not only for the obedience of a religious to a superior but also for that of each believer to the internal demands of the ecclesial community, including obedience to the hierarchy who exercise the ministry of guiding the faithful.

This explains why the Church does not distinguish between those who command and those who obey since all actually obey and the whole Church follows the example of her spouse, Jesus Christ, in listening to and doing the will of the Father with the help of the Spirit. Each Christian then lives out this obedience within the particularities of his or her vocation, and religious obey within the parameters of their own way of life (in multiple ways, in fact). So the way one chooses to follow Christ is not an unimportant matter. Each person must, however, seek out his or her vocation, that is, the will of the Father for him or her, and accept it with joy, love and fidelity. This is not an oppressive obedience but rather a liberating one (cf. FT 5-6; VC 91) because God is love (cf. 1Jn 4:8.16) and therefore cannot help but desire the greatest good for each and everyone of us when gifting us with a specific vocation (cf. Jn 3:17; 12:47; Rom 8:28; 1Tm 2:4, 2 Pet 3:9). When all is said and done, the vocation of a particular Christian cannot be considered better or superior to all others because it is God’s will for him or her.

Now the obedience of each person is carried out within the ecclesial community and so involves not only the fundamental personal connection between God and one’s conscience but also the relationship with other brothers and sisters in the Church who are journeying together toward God. In other words, our obedience to an invisible God is carried out within God’s visible community of the Church in the same way that love for the God whom we do not see is proven by love for the neighbour whom we do see (cf. 1 Jn:4:20-21). Furthermore, if charity lies at the heart of Christian life (cf. Jn 15:12-17), given the fact that God is love (cf. 1 Jn 4:8, 16), the exercise/service of obedience in the Church cannot but be how charity and fraternal love are lived out “so that the world may believe” (cf.

Jn 15:12-17; 17:11, 21-26). On the other hand, the service of authority as well as obedience will be considered Christian to the extent that it is the expression of charity. Charity is the proof of gospel authenticity because “love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law” (Rom 13:10; cf. 1 Cor 13) and “above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony” (Col 3:14).

“Above all” means, then, above even the desire to maintain a purely external order, a certain ‘ecclesiastical politics,’ or to safeguard a certain image of the Church. For God who is “the” truth (cf. Jn 3:16; 14:16) defines himself as love (cf. 1 Jn 4:8, 16). Love is therefore “the” truth because it is a sharing in the life of God (cf. 1 Jn 4:7-8, 12-16). As a result, to defend the truth of Christianity at the expense of love, as individuals or groups have done more than once, would simple be a contradiction – such a truth would be self-destructive. Love without truth is impossible and there can be no truth without love. Yes, while we cannot be saved by love without knowing revealed truth, we cannot be saved by revealed truth if there is no love (cf. Mt 25:31-46; Lk 12:47-48; 1 Cor 13; Jas 2:14-26; see also: LF 14-16, CCC 839-848).

The exercise of authority and obedience in the Church originates then in love (communion); they are demonstrations of it and, when lived in a Christian manner, they certainly increase love (cf. 1 Jn 1:1-3; cf. also ChL 32, FLC 58, VC 46a). As a result, authority will be all the more authentic, that is Christian, to the extent that, in seeking and doing the will of God, its exercise is prompted by love, motivated by love, for the sake of love and enabling of a love lived ever more deeply. In other words, the more authority actualises ecclesial sharing in the Father’s *agape* with the help of Christ’s paschal mystery and the working of the Spirit (Jn 17:11-21; 1 Jn 4:18, 16; Rom 5:5; 2 Pet 1:4), the more it will become a visible reflection “of the *infinite love* which links the three Divine Persons” (VC 21d).

That is why communion (cf. 1 Jn 1:1-3) is the foundational element, even the goal, and it is in communion that the disciples listen, discern and do the will of the Father. In the Church, there are then a variety of gifts distributed by the Spirit (Rom 12:3-8; 1 Cor 12-14; Eph 4-5) and among them is the authority of the hierarchy which must be exercised precisely because it is given by the Spirit for the common good. The body is made up of many different parts, each with its own function, and none is useless; authority is one of these gifts and it is essential even though it is not unique. Obedience, however, is also a gift, a service offered to the communion and to authority. One serves by seeking, listening, discerning,

dialoguing, ordering and obeying. Faith comes before authority, and authority is at the service of the communion which has its source in faith (cf. 1 Jn 1:1-3). Faith precedes, envelops, conditions and explains the meaning of authority as well as obedience and the way they are to be exercised within the Christian community. After all, what everyone must aspire to do is the will of God, not that of another member of the community. In seeking it out and doing it, each person is called to collaborate according to the different sacraments received and the particularities of one's own Christian vocation and various responsibilities. Some members of the community are then chosen by the Spirit to offer their spiritual and human gifts to ensure the stability and solidity of the communion and the unity of the faith, and it is through them that the Spirit affirms the whole ecclesial community (cf. Mt 16:18-19; 18:18; Lk 22:32; Jn 21:17; 1 Jn 1:1-3). Nonetheless, this authority remains an historical reality, a transitory one, and in our final communion with God it will in fact no longer exist. That is why, within the Church, God alone is absolute, not authority, and so the necessity of listening to everyone within and without the community in the conviction that even together we will never arrive at the complete truth, let alone exhaust it. On the other hand, the great gift will be that the truth will little by little take possession of us. We are all the Church, we share in responsibility for it, and so the collaboration of all is necessary as is respect for the role each one plays since no one person owns the Church. As brothers and sisters, we are all fundamentally equal (cf. LG 32; CCL 298; CCC 871-873; VC 31b, 84-85), having one Father alone and one Master alone (cf. Mt 23:8-12). We find this profound evangelical and human truth in the homily of Benedict XVI at the Mass inaugurating his Petrine mission on April 24th, 2005: "I am not alone. I do not have to carry alone what in truth I could never carry alone My real programme of governance is not to do my own will, not to pursue my own ideas, but to listen, together with the whole Church, to the word and the will of the Lord, to be guided by Him, so that He himself will lead the Church at this hour of our history Let us pray for one another, that the Lord will carry us and that we will learn to carry one another."⁵

This was not a case of rhetoric but the simple truth. That is why we always acknowledge that authority has human limits (cf. FT 13d, 18a, 21ac, VC 92) and persons in authority would be mistaken if they were not aware of it (cf. FT 20g, 25a).

At this point, let us ask how we seek God's will within the Christian community and what is the actual role of authority.

The problem is twofold. It is true that we are called to freedom (cf.

Gal 5:13), we are all led by the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 5:32; Rom 5:5) and therefore are no longer subject to the Law (cf. Gal 5:17-18) because where the Spirit is there is freedom. It is also true, however, that, as long as we are in this mortal body, our freedom is imperfect, we do not fully possess the Spirit, we carry this treasure in earthen vessels (cf. 2 Cor 4:7), we see in a mirror dimly (cf. 1 Cor 13:12) and we are God's children now but what we will be has not yet been revealed (1 Jn 3:2) As a result, we must still seek God's will in our own way, that is, as far as is humanly, personally and communally possible. Because of the limitations of our human and spiritual maturity, we have research, discussions, laws and norms, inevitable tensions ... obedience (cf. FT 9b). In his letters, Saint Paul himself gives many norms and sometimes very concrete ones.

Keeping in mind this goal and in this context, those in authority in the Church's magisterium also have a duty which is both discretionary (helping individuals to seek and carry out the will of God) and communal (guiding the whole community toward the historical realization of God's design). The mission which the Spirit entrusts to the magisterium is, therefore, to be of service in the formation of conscience and the life of the whole community; it is not to assume anyone's responsibility. The magisterium accomplishes this mission through teaching, sanctifying and governing (cf. LF 24-27; MR 13; CCC 888-896).

Now, as we have noted, such searching for the will of God and such obedience is meant for everyone in the Church, it is communal. The authority of the magisterium does not stand alone because it is not always easy to know God's will (cf. GS 33b, 43b) since all have the gift of the Spirit (Acts 5:32; Rom 5:5) and, as blessed John XXIII used to say, the fact of the "*depositum fidei*" is one thing and its historical and cultural articulation another.⁶ It is also true that the magisterium will be authentic to the extent that it is docile to Christ and the Spirit. Even within the Church, it is clear that one must obey God rather than human beings (cf. Acts 4:19; 5:29; see also: FT 27a). As a result, no one can remain passive in the Church because this would amount to infidelity to the Spirit living within, and this is so even when someone can create tensions, as was the case between Peter and the Jerusalem community (Acts 11:1-18), between Peter and Paul (cf. Gal 2:14), between James and Peter and Barnabas and Paul (Acts 15). Mutual respect, a practice of listening and dialogue are a necessity, a right, an obligation of all toward all, not a passing fancy, a luxury or a kindly concession by someone, even if that someone is in the service of the magisterium with its authority (cf. ES passim).

That is why when an individual or group in the Church offers a critique out of a sincere desire to know the will of God, as long as charity is maintained such a critique is not evidence of disobedience but is, rather, a responsible act of love for the Church and fidelity to the Lord. One has only to recall Saint Catherine of Siena's criticisms of the Popes resident in Avignon, urging them to return to Rome, the misunderstanding between Saint Teresa of Avila and the Papal Nuncio of Madrid, the tension between Francis of Assisi and his bishop ... (VC 43, 46, 84, 85, 91, 92). Criticizing certain things in the Church or a few of its members in love and out of a sense of responsibility indicates more love rather than less – just as the love parents have for their children does not prevent them from criticizing certain things that do not seem right or acknowledging certain faults. Anything else is childishness, a lack of human maturity and serene objectivity: anyone who loves criticizes while still loving the person criticized and, not only that, but criticism is done out of love and lovingly. Remaining silent is not always a sign of mature obedience but, on the contrary, it can be a sign of indifference or failure to take responsibility for the common good as much in the Church as in society. Listening and being listened to is a duty and a right of every Christian if we truly wish to understand God's will (cf. NMI 45a): "The unity of the Church is not uniformity, but an organic blending of legitimate diversities Therefore the Church of the Third Millennium will need to encourage all the baptized and confirmed to be aware of their active responsibility in the Church's life" (NMI 46a).

So it is that, in the often difficult search for the will of God in the Church, Christian tradition has always acknowledged the possibility of "prophecy," the possibility that a Christian might perceive with absolute moral certainty a sign of God beyond the actual norms or methods of ecclesiastical authority. Apart from such an exceptional circumstance, however, can confrontation take the form of a clear protest arising more or less from within the community against the way authority is exercised, a loyal and responsible opposition by an individual or group at a particular historical moment? It is not a matter of contesting authority in itself (which would be a problem to be considered by dogmatic ecclesiology), but rather a concrete operational judgment, a way of asking a question or insisting on serving in a definite way. This displays an attitude of critical loyalty in the search for God's will – a true friend tells the truth to a friend (cf. Pet 27:5-6) – and, as far as I am concerned, it is a responsible act toward the Church-communion. In fact, in the history of the Church there has hardly been an official reform which was not to some extent preceded by or the fruit or

consequence of loyal and responsible opposition by a few of her members. To limit ourselves to recent history, we have only to recall liturgical, biblical and ecumenical reforms promulgated by Vatican Council II, reforms achieved by theologians who had experienced difficulties with the Roman Curia in previous years. A few years ago, Ratzinger, then a theologian, remarked that the Church: “lives always by the call of the Spirit, in the “crisis” of the passage from the old to the new. Is it by chance that the great saints were in conflict, not only with the world but also with the Church and that they suffered while working for the Church and in the Church? True obedience is not that of sycophants (called “false prophets” in face of the authentic prophecy of the Old Testament), of those who avoid any obstacle or hurt, who value their own comfort above all: obedience is truthfulness, an obedience animated by the enthusiastic energy of love, that is the true obedience which has made the Church fruitful over the centuries, freeing her from Babylonian temptation and bringing her back to the side of her crucified Lord.”⁷ This same member of the magisterium would later praise the prophetic, even “provocative,” spirit of a good number of religious throughout the Church’s history (cr. EN 69; VC 84b: see also numbers 46, 74, 84-85).

Loyalty and obedience are demonstrated: 1) in the humble and opportune presentation of one’s personal point of view (as a “no” to fear, inhibition and passivity, to the lack of a sense of ecclesial co-responsibility in the search for God’s will); 2) in the sincere desire to seek the truth (as a “no” to the lack of uprightness or the playing of both sides, to putting one’s own interests first); 3) in continual respect for everyone, including therefore those who exercise the service of authority (as a “no” to offending or denigrating a neighbour); 4) in the untiring effort to reconcile the demands of obedience to legitimate authority with the demands which cannot be abandoned in conscience (as a “yes” to respecting everyone’s clear conscience, even when they make a mistake – let us recall the words of Saint Paul (Rom 14-15; 1 Cor 8-10)); 5) and all this is done in a spirit of faith and so of prayer that must characterize Christian life. People in such a situation who act with this attitude certainly serve the Church, are the Church even when they provoke times of crisis and tension, and they help us know and accomplish the will of God (cf. LG 37a; CCL 212; CCC 907 and 911).

In all of the above, it is finally a question of the necessity and, at the same time, the provisional character of any authority whatever, even that of the Church, and this highlights the fact that, in the Christian community, everyone obeys. According to Saint Paul, the one head and mediator is

Christ (cf. 1 Cor 3:5-7, 9, 11; Col 1:18; Eph 1:22; 1 Tim 2:5), “the” Shepherd (cf. Jn 10:11-15); Peter, Paul, Apollos ... are God’s collaborators in the community (cf. 1 Cor 3:9), they are members of it and at the service of its well-being. That is the profound evangelical truth behind the Pope’s title of “servus servorum Dei.” Only God has authority, only Christ is the absolute authority in the Church. This explains why, as we said at the beginning, there is a fundamental equality among the members of the Church, a principle which takes precedence over that of various ministries and charisms given by the Spirit for the good of all (cf. LF 32; CCL 298; ChL 15a, 17g; CCC 872; VC 31): each having received gifts for the good of all, all members together seek God’s will and are busy accomplishing it.

3) The Religious Community And “Its” Way Of Listening To And Following The Will Of God.

As the Instruction notes: “Consecrated life, called to make the characteristic traits of the virginal, poor and obedient Jesus visible,¹ flourishes in the ambience of this search for the face of the Lord and the ways that lead to him (cf. Jn 14:4-6). A search ... which underlies each day’s struggle The consecrated person, therefore, gives witness to the joyful as well as laborious task of seeking diligently the divine will ...” FT 1b; cf. 8e).

From all that has been said so far, it becomes all of a sudden clear that we women and men religious are not to be identified as “the obedient ones” in the Church, as though others did not have to obey. Given this way of looking at it, our life is but one among so many ways (various ways: cf. FT 3c) of seeking and living out the will of God, a continuation in history of Christ’s obedience to the Father.

The authority-obedience relationship/service specific to religious life is rooted in communion of charism, life and mission: in the “con-vocation” of certain believers by God, that is, in the call to build a more intimate communion with each other. This is a call to live together with other disciples of Christ according to a charism (that of the founder or foundress) which enfleshes and interprets the way to live out the mystery of Christ and emphasizes a particular aspect of it, a charism with which, thanks to the gift of the Spirit, one feels in spiritual harmony. A recent document has put it very well: “From their communitarian way of living flows that form of presence and involvement which should characterize them in the Church’s mission They have freely and consciously chosen to participate

completely in their mission of witness, presence and apostolic activity in obedience to the common purpose and to the superiors of their institute. This participation expresses fraternity and support, especially when the apostolic mandate exposes religious to greater and more demanding responsibilities in the sphere of difficult social contexts” (cf. RHP 25). So it is that obedience links and unites different wills in one fraternal community entrusted with a specific mission in the Church. Obedience is a “yes” to the design of God who has assigned a particular task to a group. Mission is an important aspect of it but so also is the community who exercise it together in the here and now. It calls as well for clarity of vision in faith on the part of superiors who “carry out their duty of servant and guide” (MR 13) and must ensure that apostolic work is in keeping with the mission; therefore it is in communion with superiors that the divine will, alone able to save (FLC 46bcd, cf. 18a), is to be carried out. Note the continual reference to God and to the whole of the community, that is, superiors and those united to them, all of whom keep in sight the will of God for them.

A two-fold service flows from this initial communion-‘convocation’: 1) from an interior point of view, a common search for the will of God and a communal life; 2) from an external point of view, apostolic mission (cf. VLC 58; VC 46a, 72). In this context, authority and obedience are two aspects of the one process of obedience to God through which all seek and carry out together what is pleasing to God (cf. FT 12e); “all obey, each with various tasks” (FT 18b). In this way of life, a diaconia and mutual mediation are necessary between the one who commands and the one who obeys; each is God’s presence to the other: “Thus brothers and sisters become sacraments of Jesus and of the encounter with God” (FT 19c).

What then makes the authority-obedience relationship/service in religious life unique compared to other Christian vocations? Uniqueness does not lie in imitation of Christ’s obedience (the “why”) since this is, as far as humanly possible, common to all Christians. Uniqueness lies in the “how,” in the kind of mediation through which the religious feels called by the Spirit to seek the will of the Father and so extend the obedience of Christ. As we have said, such a mediation is understood within a two-fold context: first, within a Christian’s (founder’s or foundress’) particular “reading” and charismatic experience of the Gospel (of the mystery of Christ) which harmonizes with one’s own in the sense that one is impelled to follow and imitate Christ in like manner and join the group which she or he has founded in the Spirit; and second, within religious life, within a life in community which involves not only obedience but also the

evangelical counsels of celibacy and poverty. A celibate religious feels called, therefore, to scrutinize, discern and carry out the Father's will in fellowship, that is, together with other Christians called by the Holy Spirit. These others with their own human and spiritual baggage (positive and limited aspects as well) become, from that moment, part of the life and mission of a religious, and the convoked become brothers and sisters (cf. FT 9c, 12a).

That is why the obedience of a religious should be viewed within a new and broader horizon encompassing the brothers and sisters given by God and to God rather than understood first as a "renunciation" to one's own will (even though this is part of it, as in every Christian vocation). It is a case of the expansion of self so as to include one's brothers and sisters in such a way that one's human and spiritual mode of thinking and acting is affected decisively and forever more. A religious, then, does not give up thinking, searching, judging and deciding but gives up doing this alone: a renunciation of aloneness for the sake of communion. The relationship among brothers/sisters constantly overcomes the "I-you" opposition in favour of the "we." Each one must feel like a "we." Each one must participate in the community according to his or her human and spiritual gifts (intelligence, experience, abilities, etc.) by freely and willingly offering them to the others and by counting on the gifts of others when thinking, deciding and acting. That is why "there is no contradiction between obedience and freedom" (VC 91b). Both the individual and the community itself become "sacrament" of the path to and discovery of God and God's will (cf. FT 19c). To conclude, mutual obedience in community and obedience to the one who leads are not simply sociological, organizational, ascetical or juridic realities but rather they are profoundly theological-spiritual in nature.

So now, where do the role, mission, ministry and service of the superior come in? In order to protect, stimulate and encourage its cohesion and fidelity to communion and the mission to which God calls it, the group chooses from among its members – keeping in mind its own charismatic and juridic features – someone who will look after all that. Communion and the search for God's will are the work of all members and not the monopoly of one person, but the superior has this specific responsibility. The superior is then servant *par excellence* of communion and search for God or, as the Instruction puts it, "while *all* in the community are called to seek what is pleasing to the Lord and to obey Him, *some* are called ... to exercise the particular task of being the sign of unity and the guide to the common search both personal and communitarian of carrying out the

will of God. This is the service of authority” (FT 1c). For this reason, we might say that, “while consecrated persons have vowed total dedication to God, it is authority which enables and supports their consecration. In a certain sense, we might consider it to be ‘servant of the servants of God’”. Its first duty is to build, along with the brothers and sisters, “fraternal communities where God is sought and loved above all” (CCC 619; cf. FT 12d, 13a, 21c). This authority must therefore be vested first of all in a spiritual person, one convinced of the primacy of the spiritual in personal life and in the building of community life and aware that the more love of God grows in hearts the more hearts will be united. Authority will then give priority to the task of spiritual, communitarian and apostolic animation of the community (FLC 50a; cf. FT 12a, 13). In a manner similar to what is required of a bishop – without however confusing or equating the two types of authority – the religious superior must be spiritual leader, prophet, instrument of holiness and government, and brotherly/sisterly companion (MR 13, 14c, 26-27; CCC 619; FLC 50; VC 43, 93). On the one hand, the superior is one of the brothers or sisters; on the other hand, the superior represents and is at the service of what God and the Church expect of the community. Authority “represents” God, not that he or she is humanly infallible in concrete decisions – the superior’s human limitations are explicitly recognized (cf. VC 92b; FT 13d, 18a, 21c, 25a) – but because authority does its best in journeying with us in the search for and accomplishing of God’s will and in using methods sanctioned by the Church (the Word of God, the Rule and Constitutions, Chapter decisions, signs of the times, etc). Authority is an indirect mediator (cf. FT 13c, 17c, 21c, 25 beginning). So whoever obeys welcomes in a spirit of faith – by “humbly submitting” to superiors – this mediation of grace which is offered and which gives a “guarantee” that one is guided by the Spirit and sustained even in the midst of hardship (Acts 20, 22f; VC 92b). In the end, we are placing our trust in God who works through the community to which he has called us, and so we are placing our trust also in our brothers and sisters and in those who go before us on the path to God.

The superior is therefore a member of the community, among the community and is elected by the community. He or she lives in the midst of the brothers or sisters, at the side of each one and is always ready to help them, to “wash their feet” (Jn 13:1-17; cf. Mt 23:11; FT 12b, 17b). “Supported by prayer, reflection and the advice of others,” the superior seeks “what it is that God wants” (FT 12d). Such are the priorities of the service of authority (cf. FT 13), its role in the growth of brotherly and sisterly love (cf. FT 20; and also FLC 50c; VC 43; SAC 14) and in the

carrying out of the mission (cf. FT 25). It is not the superior but Christ, God, alone who is the head of the community and whom all wish to serve together. The superior is to be memory, yeast, stimulant, encouragement; he or she does not take the place of anyone's conscience but rather assures that all members are responsible. The superior listens, serves and enriches rather than being the brake, the constraint or, even less, the one who subjects others.

It is not a case of the superior on the one hand "and" the community on the other, as though these were two different or, worse, opposing realities, just as there is no such thing as a superior without a community or a community "for" a superior. The members of the community are not at his or her service but are rather together at the service of the kingdom of God. In this context, the superior, the authority is an important service but it is not the only one; it seems clear that "far from lessening the dignity of the person, religious obedience brings it to maturity by developing the freedom of the children of God" (PC 14b) and "there in no contradiction between obedience and freedom" (VC 91b).

To summarize, religious obedience must be: 1) human, adult, mature and sustained by faith, not individualistic, egocentric, "childish" (FT 25a; "childishness" 20b), passive or secularised, any more than authority must not be a sign of "paternalism or maternalism" (FT 14b); 2) its reference point is Christ, the will of the Father; 3) it is expressed in congregational fraternity; 4) obedient religious look upon the superior as a brother or sister, are grateful for his or her service, pray for the superior and help him or her in discerning and accomplishing of God's will through dialogue and a sense of co-responsibility and collaboration (cf. FT 19b).

It can happen, however, that even in religious life – as we noted above in regard to the Church – there may be some who believe that they cannot obey on a fundamental point, even though it may not be a question of something sinful in itself (if this were the case, authority would lose its *raison d'être*). In the Church, it is not unusual that, once having entered religious life, a religious comes to understand after a while that the life is not for him or her and believes that God is calling to another form of religious life, whether one that already exists or is to be founded. Have there not been many institutes founded by religious who first belonged to another institute? When the Church gave approval to the new institute, she implicitly recognized that, in that particular case, the religious was right to leave the first institute. We have only to think of Saint Teresa of Avila and, in our own time, blessed Teresa of Calcutta.

On the other hand, a more widespread problem is perhaps that of a religious who does not believe it necessary to leave his or her congregation but at the same time has difficulty accepting an order. On this point, the Instruction generally repeats itself (cf. FT 10, 20e, 26-27). The text distinguishes between “difficult obedience” (FT 26; cf. 10a, 20e, 26-27) and “objection in conscience,” given the fact of “the obscurity and ambivalence of many human realities” (FT 27d). In reference to the first case (cf. 26a), it admits that orders may seem absolutely “absurd.” Following the advice of Saint Bernard and Saint Francis, it recognizes that “it is understandable, on the one hand, to have a certain attachment to personal ideas and convictions, fruit of reflection or of experience and matured over time” and that, in the end, “it is also a good thing to seek to defend them and to carry them forward, always in the perspective of the Reign of God, in a straightforward and constructive dialogue” (FT 26c; cf. 20e). On the other hand, the text reminds us that the model is Christ who did not “pull back from death on the cross (cf. Heb 5:7).” That is why, even if one admits that a religious might experience “a weakness or a temptation to refuse to obey authority,” he or she is reminded that in such a situation one should entrust oneself to the Father so that his will may be done. In the second case (cf. FT 27), it raises the possibility of “situations in which a person’s conscience would not seem to permit following the directives given by persons in authority.” The text recalls that Paul VI had spoken earlier of what is termed “objection in conscience” (cf. ET 28-29). It acknowledges that “it is true that conscience is the place where the voice of the Lord resounds, the voice that indicates to us how to behave” but it is also true that we must be careful not to fall prey to subjectivism and the judgment of conscience must be formed. The consecrated person “will then have to reflect long before concluding that it is not the obedience received but what is sensed within him or herself that represents the will of God” and will have to engage in confrontation and verification with the mediators given by God. Even if “it remains indisputable that what counts is to arrive at knowing and fulfilling the will of God, ... it ought to be likewise indisputable that the consecrated person is committed by vow to accept this holy will through determined mediations.”

When all is said and done, in such a situation a religious is required to give up his or her personal opinion – even when right – in favour of the wishes of the community and its leader. How then justify this renunciation and ensure that such an attitude is valid from a human and Christian point of view? Renunciation is justified if there is a willing attitude and it is not a question of an obedience which is forced or simply easy or passive or,

even less, involving something seriously imprudent or sinful for, in such a case, a subject would definitely not be expected to obey and authority would lose its justification. Or, as number 27 of the Instruction puts it in quoting Paul VI, renunciation is justified, “apart from an order manifestly contrary to the laws of God or the constitutions of the institute, or one involving a serious and certain evil—in which case there is no obligation to obey” (ET 28). This attitude is justified because a religious recognizes in his or her brothers/sisters and in their opinion a certain value which enables him or her to do what they say without a lessening of responsibility or dignity. In effect, a religious acts in such a case according to the will of the other because of a humble recognition that it is humanly possible that others, not oneself, are right (cf. FT 27b; ET 28: “the obscurity and ambivalence of many human realities”), even though sometimes, in the heat of the moment, this does not seem exactly true: this is human reasoning (cf. FT 9d, 10a). A religious also acts this way because he or she acknowledges in a spirit of faith not only the possibility but also the certainty that God is making use of the others since God has called them to a common life in order to discover God’s will and that it is a case here of “an order legitimately given” (FT 10a): this is theological reasoning. A religious is aware that brothers and sisters can make mistakes – just as he or she can – and this is neither surprising nor scandalising. Looking beyond their fragile humanity, however, a religious puts trust in God who has called him or her to communion of life and charism with them, convinced that God does not make mistakes (cf. FT 10c). One obeys “not only God but also others, but in every case, for God and not for others” (FT 11a). This does not mean that one renounces one’s dignity and personal responsibility but rather that one places them within a broader vision which includes the other members of the community and institute, and that one also acknowledges with realism and humility one’s own limits and the possibility of making a mistake. If one discovers later that one’s brothers or sisters were right, and not oneself, it is all to the good; but if, on the contrary, it becomes clear that, humanly speaking, reason was on one’s side, it will remain true that one has lived the Gospel and one’s vocation (the true goal in life) because one will have searched for God through the given mediation of brothers and sisters and so will have done what God had asked, that is, God’s will. It is obvious that faith is not a unique element in religious life but a decisive one. Consequently, there should be no reason to feel frustrated or bitter, even in the second case. That is why the obedience of a religious should always be a reasoned one – we must use the gifts God has given such as intelligence and experience – but it can never be simply a rational one because faith and so abandonment to God

(cf. FT 10c, 11a) have the last word.

In the life of the believer, the “Fides et Ratio” of which John Paul II spoke in the encyclical with this title (FR) always go together. Such is the case with Mary at the annunciation and birth of Jesus when she questions herself (cf. Lk 1:34), reflects and meditates (cf. Lk 2:19, 51). This is a characteristic obedience which is “believing and questioning” (cf. FT 31a; cf. LG 58; Rma 17d). At the same time though, Mary “is quick to obey” (VC 112c) and entrusts herself, abandons herself, to God: “Here I am ...” (Lk 1:38). Mary is “a strong woman,” one who is not “passively submissive or inclined to an alienating religiosity” (MC 37). She is a model of biblical “poverty,” of confidence in and abandonment to the Lord (cf. Rma 17c; cf. 12-19, 39).

¹ Abbreviations for documents from the Magisterium which will be cited. *Faciem Tuam*: FT; *Ecclesiam Suam*: ES; *Lumen Gentium*: LG; *Gaudium et Spes*: GS; *Perfectae Caritatis*: PC; *Evangelica Testificatio*: ET; *Marialis Cultus*: MC; *Evangelii Nuntiandi*: EN; *Mutuae Relationes*: MR; *Religious and Human Promotion*: RHP; *Code of Canon Law*: CCL; *Redemptoris Mater*: Rma; *Christifideles Laici*: ChL; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: CCC; *Fraternal Life in Community*: FLC; *Vita Consecrata*: VC; *Fides et Ratio*: FR; *Novo Millennio Ineunte*: NMI; *Starting Afresh from Christ*: SAC.

² The Instruction speaks in fact of “childish

dependence” (FT 25a), “childishness” (FT 20b), and “paternalism or materialism” (FT 14b) as dangers to be avoided.

³ Saint BERNARD, *De errore Abelardi*, 8, 21: PL 182, 1070A.

⁴ Saint AUGUSTIN would later remark: “Martyres non facit poena, sed causa” (Enarr. In Ps 34:13).

⁵ *Homily*, AAS 97 (2005) 709; quoted in FT 12b.

⁶ Cf. John XXIII, October 11, 1962; Opening speech at the Second Vatican Council (Vatican Council II Documents, Bologna 1966, 995-996).

⁷ J. Ratzinger, *The New People of God*, 1971, 284-286.