Obedience

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In recent years, the virtue of obedience has been heavily criticized and deprived of much of its spiritual significance. Some authors have insisted that traditional religious obedience begets a servile attitude, prolongs the immaturity of childhood and is really irrelevant at a time when people have discovered personal independence and the joy of fulfilling themselves without having to rely on anyone else.

The arbitrary ways in which obedience was exacted in the past undoubtedly contributed to bringing it into disrepute. For example, to break their novices' self-will, the ancient Fathers of the desert used to give them "exercises" which they were expected to regard as acts of religion and even as true obedience to the will of God.

In the libraries of religious houses, one can still find old books containing traces of this type of spirituality, in which "the practice of the vows" consisted in futile actions that only with great difficulty could be regarded as obedience to the will of God. Drawing water in a basket or planting cabbages upside down were caricatures of real obedience whose only aim seems to have been to stifle a person's spirit of initiative by ordering him or her to do things that flew in the face of all common sense. It is not strange, then, that such an interpretation of obedience should have provoked an adverse reaction and should have been rejected as an assault on the dignity of the person.

But that is not what real obedience is all about. The kernel of obedience is acknowledging that we have come from God's hands and that, consequently, our center of reference lies outside ourselves, that we are not the center of the universe. Therefore, if we are to mature as persons, we must actively concur with the will of God who created us and wishes us to grow in grace.

Our own insights and decisions are not safe guides in the important task of following God's loving plans for us. Only too frequently, our personal limitations can deceive us by making the will of God coincide with what we want to do ourselves. Accordingly, we must use discernment and consult other people in order to test the validity of what we think is the will of God for us. Although there is no safety in numbers where obedience is concerned, yet following the same path as our brothers is always a trustworthy indication that we are on the way that leads to God.

Obedience is fundamental in the Franciscan way of life, not simply because it is a vow, but because it is the best way to discern God's will, which is made known to us through those who have been appointed as God's intermediaries for us. Obedience also enables us to do the will of God by living as pilgrims, following in the footsteps of Christ and, as a community, helping others to do likewise. This is the foundation of the Franciscan life. Obedience, seen as the sincere, trusting endeavor to do the will of God, is the identifying mark of the Fraternity and the reason for its very existence.

I. Historical Context

If a culture or a society is to endure for any length of time, the values which shape it must change to adapt to the needs of the times. That is why obedience, as a social and personal value, has continued to alter in order to fulfill its function in each period of history.

If we wish to understand what Franciscan obedience is, we must place it within the cultural framework in which it was first understood and exercised. Otherwise, we run the risk of misinterpreting it, drawing false conclusions about its aims and purposes and blaming it for our present-day problems and its inability to solve them.

1. A Society of Subjects

Franciscan obedience arose against a feudal background in which the hierarchical stratification of social classes made submission to one's "betters" a positive value, even to the extent of regarding it a religious duty. According to the well-known "hierarchies" of Pseudo-Dionysius, heaven itself was divided into the classes or levels which feudal society had developed in order to survive.

Towards the end of the fifth century, two books appeared which had a profound influence on medieval theology. They were *The Celestial Hierarchy* and *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* and were written by a Greek author who had appropriated the name and authority of Dionysius the Areopagite whom St. Paul had converted in Athens (Acts 17:34). The first volume described the hierarchy of the angels, which was divided into three orders of descending

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importance, each of which was subdivided into three choirs, making a total of nine choirs of angels. The third of these orders, made up of principalities, archangels and angels, was entrusted with bringing divine enlightenment to earth; and the lowest rank of the heavenly hierarchy, the angels, were linked to the bishops, who were highest in rank in the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Thus, the hierarchy of the Church, was composed of two sections, the Teaching Church, made up of the bishops, priests and deacons, and the Learning Church, with the monks, the general faithful, and the catechumens and penitents. The clear implication was that earthly society should be modeled on the structure of the heavenly choirs.

So it was that this basic idea of hierarchy, of rank, was applied to the organization of human society in all its aspects, with the result that the inequalities in medieval society came to be regarded as being ordained by

God. Thus St. Isidore of Seville could declare that:

Although the grace of baptism frees all the faithful from the burden of original sin, yet God, the Just One, has allotted a different station in life to different people, making some servants and others masters, in order that the freedom to do evil may be curtailed by those who are powerful. For how else could evil be forbidden if evil-doers had nothing to fear?

Since the theological superstructure of the medieval "three orders of society," the clerics, the warriors and the workers, seemed to have God's approval, it became the very backbone of society in the Middle Ages. While this arrangement did hold society together and helped it to prosper, it was in fact based on submission and obedience, since the warriors were subject to the clergy, and the workers were subject to both clergy and warriors. This chain of command existed only because of obedience, which alone made social order, harmony and stability possible. And stability was what the leaders of medieval society desired above all else!

This culture of submission was expressed symbolically in the different gestures of vassalage which strengthened and fed an attitude of subjection. The lower ranks of society—and this included the vast majority of people—owed obedience and reverence to their immediate superiors to such a degree that servants were deemed to be "their master's men." No wonder, then, that the submission of one class to another was thought to be quite natural, ordained by God and to be maintained at all costs because the proper functioning of society in general depended upon this ranking being accepted by all concerned.

When the new communes appeared on the social and political scene, the officials of the Roman Curia declared that they were contrary to the divine will. God had decreed that people should take the places assigned to them in

the hierarchy of classes, so that to establish institutions in which every member had the same rights was to strike at the very roots of stable society.

At the beginning of the eleventh century, a heresy appeared in France which questioned the credentials of the Church and threatened social stability by rejecting totally the concept of "the three orders" of society, asserting instead the essential equality of everyone. Naturally, the authorities fought these heretics, even resorting to force, in an effort to convince them of the need for a social order based on inequality, submission and obedience.

2. Obedience in the Church

This whole ideological apparatus which shaped medieval society was created and maintained by the Church. It was logical, then, that great emphasis should be placed on the hierarchical nature of the Church itself, especially since the will of God could be invoked to justify such a structure. Furthermore, the ecclesiastical hierarchy was what it was, not only because it had been willed by God in heaven, but also because that was the way Christ had established it on earth.

Taking all that for granted, obedience became the basic Christian virtue, for it was obedience which made people accept the authority that Christ had given the Church. Consequently, the ordinary faithful were led to obey their superiors by a potent mixture of social and spiritual motives which left no room for dissent or active criticism.

a) Monastic obedience

The socio-religious obedience so characteristic of the medieval faithful increased as the Church's authority became ever more powerful. Since the Church held sway over all Christendom, the hierarchy not only ruled the spiritual life of the faithful, but also controlled—or tried to control—their social relationships.

Although the monastic life began and developed independently of the Church hierarchy, it very quickly came to wield so much influence that, at certain periods, it overshadowed even the hierarchy itself as the teacher and guide of Christendom. The monks, the "pray-ers," became the most influential force in the three classes which formed medieval society—the clergy, the warriors and the workers—and formed a veritable army in which submission and obedience played a fundamental role. But while this was possible when monasticism was at the height of its powers, it did not always continue to be so.

Because of the nature of their life, the solitary hermits had no specific "superior" to obey. Instead, they gave their obedience to the Church and the Christian community as a whole. But these hermits were a limited case apart.

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Unlike them, the anchorites of Lower Egypt did not live in complete solitude since they had occasional dealings with each other and acknowledged some of their fellow-hermits as true spiritual fathers whose guidance they sought. Nevertheless, there was no question yet of a system that imposed its authority as a coherent institution. Opening their hearts to an elder hermit and taking his advice was an important feature of the desert hermits' spirituality, but it was spontaneous and not imposed by anyone and was simply one of several ways of avoiding the danger of following their own will.

In general, we can say that the hermits' obedience was not motivated by any community necessity because they had no community to answer to. Nor did they believe that God made His will known through a superior, for they had no superiors as such. Instead, their obedience to their spiritual guides sprang from their desire to make progress towards closer union with God by putting

aside anything that could hinder their approach to Him.

St. Pachomius brought organization into religious life by establishing a community that was perfectly regulated and adapted to his time and place. For him, the essential thing was love of the community (the *koinonía*), which, however, presupposed a well-tested organization, a uniform mode of life and complete obedience to the superiors of the various monasteries. Although his disciples insisted that "No one may do anything in the house that has not been ordered by the superior," there was no question of all authority being invested in a central hierarchy. The virtue of obedience was given no priority but was on a par with the other virtues.

St. Basil, following St. Paul's analogy, saw the monastic community as a body to which all its members had to be subordinated. The superior was not God's representative and therefore could not rule the body of the community in His stead. Only the commandments and the word of God conferred authority on those who preached and practiced them. Obedience for beginners in the monastic life followed the same pattern it had done among the hermits: the future monk had to find a teacher to lead him along the way of asceticism. Just as Christ lived completely in accordance with His Father's will and obeyed Him even unto death, so also the Christian had to renounce completely his own will and self-interest.

When St. Jerome, Rufino and especially Cassian set about establishing the Eastern form of monasticism in the West, they tended to reduce everything to "rules," and they stressed the authority of the superior. For Cassian, obedience was first among the virtues because it was the ladder that led to the heights of

the spiritual life:

Those who have much experience teach us that monks cannot hold concupiscence in check if they have not first learned to mortify their own will through obedience.

That is why he held that:

Those who have not acquired mastery over their own will can never, in any way, conquer anger or sadness or the spirit of fornication; or have true humility of heart or unbroken union with their brothers or firm and enduring peace with them; nor will they persevere long in the monastery.

St. Augustine insisted on brotherly love and work as virtues essential in a community. He showed little interest in external discipline for its own sake; and in this, he was closer to St. Basil than he was to Cassian. According to his Rule, the superior was the one who was directly responsible for meeting the needs of his community. That is why Augustine commanded the religious to obey their superior "as a father, giving him the honor that is due him, so as not to offend God." Since the superiors were to be concerned primarily with the spiritual welfare of their subjects, Augustine reminds those subjects:

Obey your superiors and be subject to them. Since they have the duty of keeping watch over your souls, you should joyfully and without complaint do what you can to enable them to accomplish this.

St. Augustine saw the brothers' obedience to the superior as a religious duty similar to that which children owe to their parents or Christians to their pastors. From this perspective, obedience was viewed socially, that is, as a demand of religious charity within a family or church group.

St. Benedict regarded obedience as an interior virtue which the monk had to exercise in a spirit of asceticism by keeping the Rule as applied by the abbot:

The first degree of humility is obedience without delay.... (Good monks) are moved with the desire of attaining life everlasting. That desire is their motive for choosing the narrow way, of which the Lord says, 'Narrow is the way that leads to life,' so that, not living according to their own choice nor obeying their own desires and pleasures but walking by another's judgment and command, they dwell in monasteries and desire to have an Abbot over them. Assuredly, such as these are living up to the maxim of the Lord in which He says: 'I have come not to do my own will, but the will of Him who sent me.' (St. Benedict: *Rule for Monasteries*, Chap. 5: trans. by L. J. Doyle, Liturgical Press, St. John's Abbey, Collegeville, Minnesota).

As time passed, commentators on the Rule of St. Benedict put increasing emphasis on the value of obedience, and the further removed they became from their origins, the more the monks came to regard the abbot as God's representative and not just the interpreter of the Rule. That is, the legal

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relationship between superior and subject became more personal, more individualized.

In the twelfth century, monastic obedience once more came to mean obedience to the Rule and was regarded as the highest virtue for the monk. For St. Bernard, the superior was not above the Rule; therefore, obedience could not be directed to the person of the abbot but to the Rule itself. The abbot's function was to ensure that the monk was faithful to what he had promised, namely, the Rule; but the abbot could not command anything that went beyond the Rule. However, such obedience was not yet perfect, confined as it was to the prescriptions of the Rule. Rather, the monk who wished to exercise perfect obedience went freely and lovingly beyond what he had promised and did whatever the abbot commanded.

b) Obedience in the lay movements

When the archbishop of Lyon forbade Peter Valdes to preach because he was not a cleric, Peter replied: "We must obey God rather than man." Almost all the medieval radical poverty movements took this position and maintained that they owed obedience to the word of God rather than to the teaching and ruling authority of the Church.

These movements had an hierarchical element in their organization, but we do not know just how they dealt with the problem of obedience. Those documents concerning them which have come down to us were not written by the groups themselves but by their opponents, so that it is difficult to ascertain the real motives for their obedience. However, it is quite clear that their lives and their organization were based on a somewhat fanatical interpretation of the Gospel which was reflected in their beliefs and preaching.

If they did have documents setting down their ways of life, we know nothing about them; we have only some professions of faith made by those groups that later returned to the Church. But we do know that they did not have any "organizational" documents like those which we commonly regard as Rules. Most of the groups were formed by lay people attracted to a radical poverty interpretation of the Gospel which sustained them and gave meaning to their lives. Their fervent, and at times, rather naive devotion to their particular interpretation of the Gospel led them to live as poor itinerant preachers. Naturally, this mode of life determined the form their obedience took; but, due to the way the groups were organized, they could not be viewed as being in any sense monastic, nor did they want to be.

The members of these groups were reacting against the feudal oppression to which they were subjected even by the Church. They rejected an hierarchical or "vertical" form of obedience in favor of a more personal, "horizontal" commitment to the group. They usually gathered around a charismatic figure

whom they obeyed spontaneously even though they were so averse to obeying any hierarchy, whether civil or religious.

This loyalty to a central figure was one of the principal problems that had to be resolved when any of these groups sought the approval of the Church. The Roman Curia demanded control over them, but that was difficult to guarantee in the case of the itinerant movements because of the personal nature of their obedience.

II. Francis's Obedience

Broadly speaking, the Franciscan way of life belonged to the group of radical poverty movements. But while Francis's attitude to poverty was similar to that of the other radical movements, his view of obedience could not have been more different. In the eyes of the hierarchy, the other groups were simply rebels because they gave all their allegiance to the word of God and did not acknowledge that the Church had any authority over them, a view to which Francis was totally opposed.

Francis adopted the Cistercian type of obedience as interpreted by St. Bernard. Perhaps he did this because the Cistercian form of religious life had spread throughout Christendom and was being used as a guide for the reform that the Roman Curia was introducing. In addition, Cardinal Hugolino knew and greatly admired the Cistercians and may well have influenced Francis regarding the kind of organization and, consequently, the type of obedience he would use in establishing his Fraternity.

1. The Trinity, a Mystery of Obedience

Whatever about the contemporary influences which may have helped to shape Francis's view of obedience, there is no doubt that his real model was Christ, the obedient Son of the Father. Spiritual tradition had always appealed to the example of Christ in support of religious obedience. That is why, when Francis was seeking guidance in forming his Fraternity, he looked to Him who was the most obvious exemplar of obedience. Francis obeyed because Christ obeyed.

Even more than that, Francis's seeing Christ as a model of obedience reached beyond our Lord's earthly life. He saw Christ as the eternal Son of the eternal Father. He knew that, in the intimacy of the Trinity, being the Son of the Father consists precisely in the fact that Christ, to use the theological term, "proceeds" from the Father and is ever open and ready to do the Father's loving will. Christ, as the promised Messiah, came on earth to do the will of His Father by dying to redeem us and by leading us through the trials of life to His Father and ours.

2. Jesus, model of obedience

It was Christ's obedience as the Son of the Father that made our creation and especially our salvation possible. In the mysterious interchange between the Three Persons of the Trinity in which the Incarnation was decreed, the Son accepted the saving will of the Father. Consequently, when Christ came down to us in human form, He stated clearly the reason for His coming: "Then I said, 'Lo, I have come to do thy will, O God'" (Heb 10:7).

The Son demonstrated His readiness to do His Father's will by coming to live among us as a man, so committing Himself totally to carrying out the Father's plan. As He Himself told us, that was His whole purpose, the thing that sustained Him: "My food is to do the will of him who sent me" (Jn 4:34).

Christ showed His obedience by following the dark, painful path that led through Calvary back to the Father. Thus it was that, as the *Letter to the Hebrews* expresses it, "he learned obedience through what he suffered and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him" (Heb 5:8f). Accepting the harsh trials of His life on earth, Christ submitted completely to everything that came to Him from the hands of His Father out of love for us (OffPass 1-6). By being obedient even unto death on the cross, Christ wrought our salvation.

Despite his lack of theological training, Francis understood perfectly the role that Christ's obedience played in our salvation. In his Second Letter to the Faithful, he reminded them that, in the darkness of Gethsemane, Christ

prayed to His Father, saying: 'Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me (Lk 22:42).... And His sweat became as drops of blood falling on the ground' (Lk 22:44). Nonetheless, He placed His will at the will of the Father, saying: 'Father, let Your will be done (Mt 26:42); not as I will, but as You will' (Mt 25:39). And the will of the Father was such that His blessed and glorious Son, Whom He gave to us and (Who) was born for us, should, through His own blood, offer Himself as a sacrifice and oblation on the altar of the cross: not for Himself through Whom all things were made (cf. Jn 1:3), but for our sins, leaving us an example that we should follow in His footprints (cf. 1Pet 2:21) (2EpFid 8-13).

For Francis, Christ's obedience was a *healing* obedience. Adam's sin in disobeying God and seeking to be independent of Him by eating the forbidden fruit (Adm 2:1-2), broke off our filial relationship with our Father. In contrast to Adam, Christ renounced His own independence and sacrificed His own will in order to do the will of His Father. In this way, He re-opened our dialogue with the Father and showed us the path to Him.

3. Following the Christ of the Gospels

The whole purpose of Francis's life was to follow as closely as possible in Christ's footsteps, and he did this by living the Gospel in a manner that was

typical of his times. He modeled his life on the Gospels, especially on Christ's teaching and example, His words and deeds while He lived among us as a man.

There, in the Gospel, Francis saw how obedient Christ was to the will of His Father, and he took this obedience as the model for his own life and that of his Fraternity (RegB 1:1; EpOrd 6-7; 2EpFid 39). As he said himself: "Now that we have left the world, we have nothing else to do except follow the will of the Lord and to please Him" (RegNB 22:9). Because the Gospel showed how God's own Son carried out the will of His Father, the best way for Francis and his followers to please and praise the Lord was to put that Gospel into practice. That was all they needed to organize their life in accordance with their faith.

In the spirit of the times, Francis took the Gospel literally and "without gloss" as the pattern for his way of life so that the Rule which he wrote for himself and his brothers was simply the Gospel applied to their everyday life.

For Francis, obedience to God's will was not obscured or clouded over by the demands of other authorities. He was convinced that obeying God, obeying Christ and His Gospel and obeying the Rule were one and the same thing. We can easily understand, then, his insistence that all the brothers should be ever vigilant in fulfilling what they had promised the Lord as laid down in "the life of the Gospel of Jesus Christ" (RegNB Prol 2). The only logical course of action for believers and for the brothers was to live according to God's plan for them. Therefore, it was vitally important for them to remain alert and always ready to discern and carry out that will.

The Rule was simply a guide to living the Gospel life, reiterating Christ's words and deeds and holding His actions up as a model to the brothers. We would completely falsify Francis's thinking if we tried to make the Rule an object of reverence in itself because that would detract from—and distract us from—the true object of our obedience, the Gospel. The Rule is the essence of the Gospel to which we are obedient in order to do God's will. The Spirit of Jesus leads us and helps us in our commitment to profess the Rule in word and deed and to know that we are thereby contributing to the spread of the Kingdom, which is what God wills.

However, although the Rule is a practical application of the Gospel, we cannot expect it to establish once and for all what God's will is for us. Obedience to the demands of the Kingdom requires that we place no conditions on our co-operation in its work and that we do not seek to take shelter behind the letter of the law. In this sense, the Rule is nothing more than a series of signposts that point out to us the paths we must follow if we are to do the will of God.

4. Always submissive and subject to the Church

In Christ's life on earth, God showed us how to do His will; and the Church faithfully echoes the voice and example of Christ in its preaching and its ministry of the sacraments. That is why we find in the Church the will of God and the means to carry it out.

To reveal His will to us, God uses intermediaries, one of which is the Church. Accordingly, Francis and his brothers turned to the Church as the interpreter of God's will. But human intermediaries are necessarily ambiguous at times, leaving us in uncertainty and forcing us to decide for ourselves.

To overcome this disadvantage, Francis wished to find a human community in which he could follow as closely as possible in the footsteps of Christ, whose very food was to do the will of His Father. Francis's spiritual progress shows us that his decision to follow the guidance of the Church helped him in his search for the will of God as set down in the Gospels. Only in the Church could he have been so faithful to the Gospel. For that reason he insisted that his brothers should be

always submissive and subject at the feet of the same Holy Church and steadfast in the Catholic Faith ..., observ(ing) poverty and humility and the Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, as we have firmly promised (RegB 123:4).

Francis demonstrated his obedience to the Church in many different ways, from his patient, respectful obstinacy in getting his Rule approved by the Pope, the highest ecclesiastical authority, to his determination to live that Rule in complete orthodoxy of faith. And the most obvious way for him to express his obedience to the Church was by obeying the Pope, the Cardinal Protector, the bishops, priests and even all the faithful.

His obedience to the hierarchy was part of his decision to live the Gospel in full communion with the Church. The homage he paid to the Pope at the beginning of each of his two Rules was not mere legal jargon or just a diplomatic gesture. His geographical nearness to Rome and his dealings with officials of the Curia made his respectful attitude towards the hierarchy almost a spontaneous one. Yet this did not mean that he never had any practical difficulties with that hierarchy.

Francis's obedience to the Pope went much deeper than submission to the person of the reigning Pontiff. Rather, it was the expression of his faith in the Church which led him, as the head of the Fraternity, to have total confidence in ecclesiastical authority. Nevertheless, the Fraternity and the Church were not total abstractions but were personified in their representatives, Francis, Innocent and their successors:

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Brother Francis and whoever will be the head of this Order promises obedience and reverence to the Lord Pope Innocent and to his successors (RegNB Prol 3; RegB 1:12).

Because of practical difficulties, it was impossible for Francis to deal directly with the Pope concerning the affairs of the Fraternity. This problem was solved by the appointment of the Cardinal Protector as the representative through whom the Fraternity could offer their obedience to the Pope (RegB 12:3; Test 33). The relationship between Francis and Cardinal Hugolino was an example of how well this arrangement worked. There were no dramatic confrontations between the two nor was there complete capitulation on the part of either. Each expressed his own opinion and both sought to reach a consensus by balancing their respective responsibilities.

Francis's obedience was not limited to the Roman Curia. In the *Testament of Siena*, when "because of (his) weakness and the pain of (his) sickness," Francis was not strong enough to speak, he advised his brothers always to "be faithful and subject to the prelates and all clerics of Holy Mother Church" (Test 5).

The biographers give a profusion of examples to illustrate how Francis and his brothers were always careful to acknowledge the authority of the bishops in their respective dioceses. Whenever they entered a diocese, they first made a courtesy call on the bishop and accepted his authority in the matter of preaching (RegB 9:1), which presupposed that they renounced any papal privileges they might have received (Test 25) and were ready to submit to the will of each bishop.

The Fraternity also obeyed even the ordinary priests, not because of their moral or intellectual qualities, but because of their status as ministers of the Church. When near death, Francis reaffirmed his readiness to put himself at the complete disposal of the priests. In his *Testament*, he declared:

The Lord gave me and still gives me such faith in priests who live according to the manner of the holy Roman Church because of their order, that if they were to persecute me, I would (still) have recourse to them. And if I possessed as much wisdom as Solomon had and I came upon pitiful priests of this world, I would not preach contrary to their will in the parishes in which they live. And I desire to fear, love, and honor them and all others as my masters. And I do not wish to consider sin in them because I discern the Son of God in them and they are my masters. And I act in this way since I see nothing corporally of the Most High Son of God in this world except His Most holy Body and Blood which they receive and which they alone administer to others (Test 6-10).

Despite having a medieval, very hierarchical view of the Church, Francis was keenly aware that the ordinary faithful were, indeed, part of it, too. He showed his care for and devotion to them in a simple, uncomplicated way. He said that he was the servant of the members of the Fraternity, most of whom

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were not clerics (EpOrd 2-3), and also of all the faithful in the world. He regarded himself as "their servant and subject," who was bound to serve them and minister to them the words of the Lord (2EpFid 1, 2).

5. Obedience in the Fraternity

As the community of the faithful, the Church enables us to see the will of God more clearly. But we can discern that will more clearly still in the Fraternity, in the company of other brothers who have heard the same voice and are ready to answer its call generously. In this way, the Fraternity and the form of life set down in the Rule encourage and guide us to obey the demands of the Gospel more fervently and more faithfully.

Francis knew that most human endeavors, including religious obedience, are reinforced or perhaps even made possible by a supporting structure or institution. For that reason, he saw the Fraternity as a community in which the brothers, by living together in fraternal harmony and obeying the Rule, would be better able to discern and carry out God's will. The Fraternity, then, was a network of personal relationships which fostered and guided the brothers' loving obedience. So it was that religious profession, by which one became a member of the Fraternity, came to be known as being "received into obedience" (RegNB 22:9; RegB 2:11). After profession, the brothers were not to "wander outside obedience..., for no one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God" (RegNB 2:10; RegB 2:12-13).

Apart from their legal implications, these texts show the logic of the Franciscan vocation. Because the brothers have been called together in the Fraternity to follow Christ and to "live according to the form of the Holy Gospel" (Test 14), they must trust the Fraternity to interpret God's will

faithfully for them. The Fraternity, then, is where the brothers, by being obedient to each other, are obeying the Gospel and the Rule. Consequently, Francis warns them that, if they leave the Lord's commandments and wander outside obedience, they will know that they are in a contradictory situation, that is, that they are in a state of sin. But while they persevere in doing what the Lord commands, which they have promised in the Gospel and their form of life, they are persevering in true obedience (RegNB 5:16-17).

The language which Francis used when speaking about obedience may sound rather harsh and uncompromising to our modern ears. But we must remember that he was writing at the beginning of the thirteenth century, when the power of the Church was at a height it had never reached before and has not reached since. The belief that "Outside the Church, there is no salvation" was transferred to the community with the implication, strangely enough, that "Outside the Fraternity, there is no salvation."

But that was not really what Francis meant. What he intended to point out was that when, after mature consideration, we have freely chosen to join the Fraternity as the best place for us to follow Christ in living the Gospel life, it would be illogical for us to live on the margin of the Fraternity by following our own wills. In this sense, it seems evident that being a member of the Fraternity carries with it the commitment to obey the will of God as interpreted by the Fraternity.

6. Loving Obedience

Loving obedience within the Fraternity is not an unattainable ideal. When we chose to enter the Fraternity as the best way of doing God's will, we undertook to obey each other gladly. This is the first meaning of obedience in the Fraternity. The Lord has called us to live the Gospel life in the company of our brothers so that we can help one another to find the best way to serve Him. "And this," as Francis tells us, "is the true and holy obedience of Our Lord Jesus Christ" (RegNB 5:15).

The Chapters which are held at various levels of the Fraternity are special occasions when the brothers discuss and decide on the best means of doing God's will and of living the Rule in the world of today. Although Francis wrote little concerning the Chapters of the Order, we know enough of his mind to be able to outline his thoughts on the subject.

First, at a Chapter, the brothers meet to legislate on the Rule and to set down norms for putting the decisions of the Chapter into practice. The main purpose of the Chapters is to ensure that the brothers are carrying out their commitment to live the Gospel life. That is why Francis ordered the Rule to be read at every Chapter (Test 37).

Until 1221, all the brothers went to the General Chapter. Later, however, only the provincial superiors attended this Chapter; but they convened provincial Chapters with all the brothers in their respective territories (RegNB 18:1; RegB 8:5).

Second, all the brothers could take an active part in the General Chapter and could make suggestions on how better to serve the Gospel through the Rule. We know this from Francis's Letter to a Minister on the eve of the Chapter at Pentecost. In this letter, Francis dealt with the problems which the minister had brought to his attention: and he informed the minister of a change which he, Francis, wished to make in the Rule:

At the Pentecost Chapter..., with the help of God and the advice of the brothers, out of all the chapters of the Rule that treat of mortal sin, we shall make one chapter such as this: If any one of the brothers at the instigation of the enemy should sin mortally, he is bound by obedience to have recourse to his guardian.... Keep this writing with you until (the Chapter of) Pentecost that it may be better

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observed, when you will be there with your brothers. And you will take care to add, with the help of God, these things and all else which is lacking in the Rule (EpMin 13-14, 21-22).

Third, the Chapter is the appropriate time to examine the life of the brothers in the light of the Rule. When difficulties or failures have occurred in the observance of the Rule, they should be discussed by the friars in order to find an acceptable solution (RegNB 5:4-6).

The biographers provide more details about this matter. The Three Companions describe the first Chapters held by the Fraternity. The brothers met in St. Mary of the Angels at Pentecost and on the Feast of St. Michael in September to hold a Chapter:

At the Pentecost meeting, the brothers discussed how to observe the Rule more perfectly.... St. Francis admonished the brothers faithfully to observe the holy Gospel and the Rule to which they had bound themselves (L3S 57).

Francis later expanded this exhortation to keep the Rule into many specific Admonitions which, when taken together, give us a vivid picture of what he regarded as the true Gospel life.

To sum up, we can say that, in the Chapters, the brothers take stock of their vocation to follow the Gospel. They make laws, examine and revise the measures they have already taken so that the Fraternity shall always remain open to God's will. The Fraternity encourages the brothers to obey each other in charity so that they can follow the path of obedience to the Father through Christ.

7. Authority as a Form of Service

The Gospel shows that authority does not need power to be effective. The authority which Christ proposed can be exercised only in a community of faith, a community in which nothing is imposed by force but in which everything starts from the principle that one should believe and obey only out of freedom and a voluntary acceptance of the values proposed.

Consequently, Gospel authority does not need to dominate or to impose its own criteria in order to be effective. It consists, instead, in being ready to serve and to put oneself at the disposal of one's brothers in the Gospel life which the Fraternity has chosen as the best way to follow Christ.

When Francis was planning a way of life for himself and his brothers, he had in mind this principle of authority as service, and he warned that:

All the brothers...shall not hold power or dominion, least of all among themselves. For, as the Lord says in the Gospel: 'The rulers of the peoples have power over them, and their leaders rule over them (Mt 20:25); it shall not be like this among the brothers (cf. Mt20:26a).' And whoever among them wishes to become the greater shall be their minister (cf. Mt 20:26b) and servant. And whoever is the greater among them should become like the lesser (cf. Lk 22:26) (RegNB 5:9-12).

The reason for introducing these standards was very simple. All the values contained in the Rule had to be coherent; they had to fit together logically. It would be absurd to have the Fraternity governed by any type of power-based authority, for that would disrupt the basic equality of the members. If some of the friars were imposed on the others, even in the name of authority, the Fraternity could not continue to exist as a community of true brothers, and the friars could no longer pursue the egalitarian Franciscan way of life as a form of following the Gospel.

The same is true of minority. A proud, overbearing authority that would take no account of Franciscan minority would be completely foreign and inimical to the whole spirit of the Fraternity. While authority is necessary even in a community of brothers, it must preserve the Gospel traits that will enable it to harmonize with the other values contained in the Rule.

The requirement that authority within the Fraternity should be exercised in a spirit of minority and service has an historical background which explains Francis's attitude. In the evolution of the Fraternity towards more rigid forms of organization, such as those required by the Roman Curia, a decision had to be made about the type of authority to be adopted in the Fraternity. Francis, with his Gospel ideals, thought it normal that authority among the friars should be applied without any wielding of power. But the "intellectuals" in the Order, as well as the Curia officials, thought that, if the Fraternity was not organized according to canon law, it would be headed for disaster. Actually, the whole problem was a mere matter of perspective. Francis knew from his own experience with the brothers that his milder method was both possible and very effective, while the others felt that the type of authority which he proposed was too flimsy and needed to be supported by the sanctions of canon law.

As one would expect, the controversy was long-drawn-out; and since the legalists were more powerful than Francis, they won the day. The provincial ministers and "custodians" were given the same type of authority in the Fraternity as the "priors" had in the older Orders. Like these priors, the Franciscan superiors now had the legal power to demand obedience and to punish those who refused to obey. The results were unfortunate. With shame, we must acknowledge that some friaries eventually came to have prison cells in which recalcitrant friars were confined, at times badly treated and, in a few extreme cases, even died from ill-usage. But we must not allow the luminous reality of the Rule to be obscured by this authoritarian, legalistic and sometimes even barbarous interpretation of the Gospel commitment. Instead,

history should teach us to acknowledge how easily we can fail to make the liberating force of the Gospel effective in our lives; and past failures should inspire us to seek forms of authority which will help us to see and follow God's loving will.

8. Superiors and Subjects

The Fraternity shows us the will of God and helps us to do that will by following the Rule. The Gospel as it is lived in the Fraternity is the guideline for all the friars because that is what they professed when they entered the religious life, and it is that alone which gives meaning to their lives. In order to safeguard the Franciscan way of life against the vagaries of self-will, it is necessary to elect one of the brothers who will encourage and co-ordinate communal obedience among the friars and will foster each friar's obedience to God.

a) Ministers and servants

The minister is placed at the center of the Fraternity, not so much as a leader who shapes and influences the brothers according to his own ideas, but as a servant who reminds them of what they have promised the Lord, helps them to achieve it and strengthens them when they are weak. The only authority the ministers and guardians have is that of enabling the other friars to obey the Gospel.

However, when the ministers became part of the legal system of the Church, they were given a degree of power and authority which Francis had not wanted (RegNB 5:9) but which, nonetheless, he himself made use of.

Francis's reference to the superiors in the Fraternity as "ministers and servants" showed clearly that whatever power they possessed was derived from the Gospel, that is, it was the power to serve:

Let the ministers and servants remember that..., because the care of the souls of the brothers has been entrusted to them, if anyone of them should be lost because of their fault or bad example, (these ministers and servants) will have to render an account before the Lord Jesus Christ on the day of judgment (cf. Mt 12:36) (RegNB 4:6).

Although this passage presents no great difficulties to us today, it did cause much anxiety to some superiors in the past because they thought it meant that they had to act as the "conscience" of all the friars. But in this they were mistaken because personal responsibility cannot be delegated. No superior can be asked to assume complete accountability for his subjects' actions. Still, he is definitely responsible for his own acts and will be held to account if he has not done his duty to the best of his ability.

Although the minister is accountable for the smooth functioning of the Fraternity, his responsibility must remain within its proper limits since excessive zeal can be as damaging as negligent inactivity. That is to say, the superior's accountability in spiritual things is not absolute but is limited to his particular duty, which is reminding the brothers of their commitment to live the Gospel and helping them to be faithful to that commitment, not just as a heavy obligation imposed from outside but as a decision which they made because they saw in it the possibility of fulfilling themselves as persons who believe in Christ. Hence, the minister's duty is not to command but to show, especially by his own example, the freedom of the sons of God which following Christ in the Franciscan way confers. If, however, the minister does not serve his brothers with love and understanding but instead obscures their vision of God's mercy and patience by his harshness and lack of insight, then he is directly responsible for his own bad administration and indirectly for his brothers' slowness or reluctance in discerning and carrying out the Lord's will.

Francis's Letter to a Minister is a detailed description of how he wished that official to act:

I speak to you, as I can, concerning the state of your soul. You should accept as a grace all those things which deter you from loving the Lord God and whoever has become an impediment to you, whether (they are) brothers or others, even if they lay hands on you. And you should desire that things be this way and not otherwise. And let this be (an expression) of true obedience to the Lord God and to me, for I know full well that this is true obedience. And love those who do these things to you. And do not expect anything different from them, unless it is something which the Lord shall have given to you. And love them in this and do not wish that they be better Christians. And let this be more (valuable) to you than a hermitage.

And by this I wish to know if you love the Lord God and me, his servant and yours—if you have acted in this manner: that is, there should not be any brother in the world who has sinned, however much he may have possibly sinned, who, after he has looked into your eyes, would go away without having received your mercy, if he is looking for mercy. And if he were not to seek mercy, you should ask him if he wants mercy. And if he should sin thereafter a thousand times before your very eyes, love him more than me so that you may draw him back to the Lord. Always be merciful to (brothers) such as these. And announce this to the guardians, as you can, that on your part you are resolved to act in this way (EpMin 2-12).

The ministers themselves exercise obedience by serving the friars in helping them to be faithful to God's will, as they have promised. Still, situations do arise in which a friar may find it difficult to be faithful to his commitment. Francis provides for such cases:

Wherever there are brothers who know and realize that they cannot observe the Rule spiritually, it is their duty and right to go to the minister for help. The ministers on their part should receive them with great kindness and love and should be so approachable that these brothers can speak and deal with (the ministers) as masters with their servants; for this is the way it should be: the ministers shall be the servants of all the brothers (RegB 10:4-6).

The whole purpose of the minister's serving the friars is to assist them in obeying the Gospel as it is expressed in the Rule. Therefore, if the minister exceeds his authority and commands

any of the brothers to do something contrary to our life or against his conscience, (the brother) is not bound to obey (the minister), since that is not obedience in which a fault or sin is committed (RegNB 5:2; RegB 10:1).

The possibility that one of the friars may fail to obey the Rule will always be a cause of worry to the minister. But, "if......there should be some brother who wishes to live according to the flesh and not according to the Spirit," and who, even after being admonished, does not change his ways, "the minister and servant should deal with him as he considers best before God." However, if it is the minister himself who is not living up to the Rule, the other friars shall report him to the General Minister and try to help him to amend his ways (RegNB 5:3-6).

The Rule of 1221 clearly lays down this double responsibility so that the whole Fraternity—all the friars—may be faithful to their promise. When Francis spoke about the ministers, he showed that he understood that their office did not exempt or preserve them from human weakness or error. That is why he wished both superiors and subjects to help one another to keep their commitment to the Lord. The minister's authority does not entitle him to confuse, much less identify, his own ideas with the will of God by commanding whatever he wishes. His duty is to keep the basic Franciscan values before the brothers' eyes and to encourage them to act on those values. That is what Francis meant when he warned the ministers that no one can be commanded to act against his conscience or contrary to the Rule.

Yet, enshrining this mutual responsibility of superior and subject in a religious Rule was too daring, especially in a newly constituted Order. According to Francis's critics, such an innovation could not be included in a legal document because it would undermine authority and because long experience demanded increased severity and not leniency after an infringement of the Rule. Moreover, there was an additional problem. Now not all the friars, but only the provincial ministers, attended the General Chapter. How, then, could an ordinary friar who had a complaint against his minister make his voice heard at that Chapter? The upshot was that the mutual responsibility of

superiors and subjects did not appear in Francis's later writings. In his Testament (Test 27-30) and in the Letter to a Minister (EpMin 14-20), he refers only to the superior's duty to warn his subjects about any failure to live up to the Rule. There was still a twofold—but no longer a mutual—responsibility within the Fraternity: the ministers were to be humbly and lovingly solicitous about the brother's welfare, while the brothers themselves were asked to be absolutely obedient to their ministers.

b) The brothers who are subjects

The ministers' concern that the brothers should always be alert to do God's will was to be matched by the friars' own readiness to avail of the ministers' assistance in their response to the Kingdom as proposed in the Rule. Francis was confident that, normally, the ministers' wishes and commands would be obeyed. However, he did remind the friars that they had renounced their own wills for God and that therefore they should obey their ministers in everything that they had promised the Lord to observe and that was not against their soul or the Rule (RegB 10:3; RegNB 4:3).

This is so because the Rule and the friars' own consciences are the areas within which obedience applies and by which God's will is made manifest; and it is the ministers' duty to interpret that will. We can understand, then, Francis's determination to obey the General Minister and the guardian appointed over him. As he said himself: "I wish to be so captive in his hands that I cannot go (anywhere) or do (anything) beyond obedience and his will, for he is my master" (Test 27-28).

Francis wanted his friars also to give their guardians this same type of obedience (Test 30), which, however, we today may think too rigid and authoritarian; yet we must remember the society and culture in which the Fraternity was founded and evolved. Again, we know from many sources how kind and gentle Francis was to everyone, and we have just seen a perfect example of his normal attitude in the picture he gave of the compassionate superior in his *Letter to a Minister*. It comes as something of a surprise, then, to find him demanding in his *Testament* that stern measures be taken against any friar who failed to say the Divine Office according to the Rule (Test 30-33). Apparently, however, such coercive methods were the result of the Fraternity's recent incorporation into the legal structure of the Church.

Writing on true obedience in his *Admonitions* (Adm 3), Francis considers the position of a friar who finds a conflict between obedience and his conscience. The Rule is, of course, the object and the guide for our obedience: but what are we to do when the superior and the subject do not see eye to eye on what the Rule requires?

Francis solves the difficulty by relating obedience to Franciscan poverty, seeing it as "not appropriating anything," not even one's own will, to oneself. Such obedience is not mere blind acquiescence but, with the aid of deeper insight, becomes that loving obedience which should be characteristic of the Fraternity:

The Lord says in the Gospel: 'He who does not renounce everything he possesses cannot be my disciple' (Lk 14:33); and: 'He who wishes to save his life must lose it' (Lk 9:24). That person leaves everything he possesses and loses his body who surrenders his whole self to obedience at the hands of his prelate. And whatever he does and says which he knows is not contrary to his (prelate's) will, provided that what he does is good, is true obedience. And should the subject sometimes see that some things might be better and more useful for his soul than what the prelate may command him, let him willingly offer such things to God as a sacrifice; and instead earnestly try to fulfill the wishes of the prelate. For this is loving obedience because it pleases God and neighbor.

But if the prelate should command something contrary to his conscience, although (the subject) does not obey him, still he should not abandon him. And if in consequence he suffers persecution from others, let him love them even more for (the love of) God. For whoever chooses to endure persecution rather than be separated from his brothers truly remains in perfect obedience for he lays down his life (cf. Jn 15:13) for his brothers. There are indeed many religious who, under the pretext of seeking something better than what the prelate commands, look back (cf. Lk 9:62) and return to the vomit of their own will (cf. Prov 26:11; 2Pet 2:22); these are murderers who cause many souls to perish by reason of their bad example (Adm 3:1-11).

This teaching on loving obedience was part of the monastic tradition, and St. Bernard wrote about it in his *Book of Precepts and Dispensations*. In reply to questions which some monks had asked him about the limits of obedience, he said that superiors should command only what the monks have professed, that is, the Rule. But, he continued, obedience is imperfect if it is limited to the Rule:

Perfect obedience is not confined to the law or restricted in its scope. Not content to stay within the narrow bounds of the vow, it allows itself to be extended to the fullness of charity. And accepting no restrictions, it reaches out in unconstrained freedom and, with prompt, generous courage, it embraces willingly everything that is commanded. St. Peter the Apostle reminds us about purifying our hearts by the obedience of charity, meaning that we should distinguish perfect obedience from that other weak and somewhat servile obedience which never acts readily out of charity but does only what it has to do.

The loving obedience which Francis desired was not the blind, "corpse-like" obedience that the biographers seem to applaud. Celano, reflecting upon what he regarded as perfect obedience, describes Francis's views:

Sitting with his companions, the blessed Francis spoke something like this with a deep sigh: 'There is hardly a religious in the whole world who obeys his superior perfectly.' Greatly moved, his companions said to him: 'Tell us, Father, what is the perfect and highest obedience.' And he replied, describing the truly obedient man under the figure of a dead body: 'Take a lifeless body and place it where you will. You will see that it does not resist being moved, it does not murmur about its position, it does not cry out if it is allowed to lie there. If it is placed on a chair, it will not look up but down; if it is clothed in purple, it looks twice as pale. 'This,' he said, 'is a truly obedient man; he does not ask why he is moved, he cares not where he is placed, he does not insist on being changed elsewhere. Raised to an office, he retains his accustomed humility; the more he is honored, the more unworthy does he consider himself' (2 Cel 152).

Nevertheless, the obedience which Francis proposed was associated more with love than with humility, which was the traditional connection. In fact, in his Salutation of the Virtues, he links Holy Obedience and Holy Charity as inseparable sisters (SalVirt 3). Thus he regarded obedience as an active rather than a passive virtue because it keeps the brothers always open to God's will, "to obedience of the Spirit and to obedience of one's brother" (SalVirt 16).

The obedience which Francis describes in Admonition 3, far from paralyzing a brother in an attitude of passivity, demands of him a generous response which goes beyond the strict requirements of the law. Such obedience includes following the Rule and promoting that fraternal peace which is so necessary if the Fraternity is to retain the atmosphere of obedience in which all the friars, superiors and subjects alike, are eager to do the will of God as manifested in the Gospel.

9. Submissive to all Creatures for God

Francis uses a quotation from St. Peter (1Pet 2:13) to point out another level of obedience, that is, accepting events as an expression of God's will (RegNB 16:6). But it is in the Salutation of the Virtues that he details the effects of obedience, which

destroys every wish of the body and of the flesh and binds its mortified body to obedience of the Spirit and to obedience of one's brother..., and (to obedience) not to man only but even to all beasts and wild animals.....,as indicators of the will of God (SalVirt 14-18).

Francis saw signs of God's will everywhere in creation (RegNB 23:1), and for him the history of the world was the story of salvation, in which God acts to free humanity from the consequences of sin (Test 1). Therefore, just as every other creature in its own way obeys God, so should every human being. But, in particular, those who have committed themselves to seek God's will in the Fraternity should accept the happenings of life as coming from His hand (RegNB 10:3) and should try to use them so that His will may be done.

Praising God by obeying Him along with all His other creatures entails respecting nature as well as people. In this sense, we can say that Franciscan obedience is not only historically but also ecologically sound because it sees in nature the will of God inviting us to live and let other creatures live as the Lord wishes.

Understood in this way, obedience becomes a trusting openness to God, whose plan for humanity and for all His other creatures is unfolded in history. Francis, then, saw God's unconditional love in the events of history; but he also saw how sin could and did obscure that love. So, he reminds us of our need to trust others and to obey them lest we become trapped in an egotistical solitude that would render us incapable of living in and for God's Kingdom.

10. Conclusion

Views on religious obedience, like views on other religious values, have changed from one era to another. When we try to assess Francis's views on obedience, we must recognize the influence which contemporary social and cultural factors had on him. It is not strange, then, that today we do not see obedience the way Francis did because we live in another age and in quite a different cultural and social context. But that does not mean that we can afford to ignore his ideas. Instead, we should try to discover what obedience really meant to him and how it functioned in practice in the early Fraternity so that we, in our times, may live in true Franciscan obedience.

Nowadays, obedience has lost that element of submission to the law which it had in the past and has become a responsible acceptance of the will of God as shown to us by our brothers. However, there will almost inevitably be moments in the Fraternity when conflicts of obedience will test our spiritual maturity.

When we chose to live the Gospel life in the Fraternity, we renounced the luxury of deciding things for ourselves. So we must accustom ourselves to accepting as normal the fact that our superiors are there to help rather than hinder us in our search to find and do God's will. But even then, we must use discernment when we choose between the various claims on our obedience to ensure that it is indeed God who is speaking to us. It is always hard to trust others—especially, perhaps, even God!—because we do not know where they may lead us. Yet it is precisely this self-abandonment to Divine Providence that frees us from being smothered by our own egoism and that allows us to live according to God's loving plan.

Our sole aim in life should be to follow the way of life which Christ laid out for us in the Gospel and which Francis put into practice in his Rule. To attain this goal more fully and more effectively, we must learn to see authority as a service and a safe guide which the Fraternity provides to lead us to God.