

AIDS FOR THE CONSTITUTIONS OF THE CAPUCHIN FRIARS MINOR

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CHAPTER X OF THE CONSTITUTIONS OUR LIFE IN OBEDIENCE

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If there is today one thing that is perhaps least appreciated, it is indubitably ‘obedience’, though in the nature of things, life in obedience is very much in evidence. It is there in pedagogy, in legislation, in familial, societal and hierarchical relations, military life etc. Even so, there is appreciable reason for the non-appreciation of obedience and it is good to take note of it, in the first place. A singular reason for the reluctance either to hear about or to live under obedience is indisputably the enormous stress that was laid in the past on authority and authority-figures.

Earlier, all authority was said to be coming directly from God and authority-figures were understood to hold the place of God communicating the very will of God. Obedience to such an authority was as a ‘sacred duty’ and for no reason may one fail to fulfil it for one’s dear life. The functioning of authority was typically monarchical or hierarchical in nature, all decisions being taken by the monarchs or ‘superiors’ and their word was final. The authority passed definitive verdicts and judgments, promulgated decisive decrees and directives and those under authority called ‘subjects’, had nothing or hardly anything to do except hear and obey the so called ‘legitimate authority’. They had to comply with the orders even if the judgements were wrong and directives unhelpful.

Today, in contrast, authority functions in quite a democratic rather than monarchic fashion, due mainly to the dominant personalistic trends. Humans understand themselves as persons specifically endowed with the exercise of personal freedom, self-government, independence, co-responsibility, etc. They cherish these attributes as God-gifted potentials and, therefore, vital and fundamental to the fact of being-human. As a result, everything that is seen either to control or to curtail the exercise of these personal attributes is categorically frowned upon and instinctively opposed. The newly discovered attributes of personal freedom and autonomy are enormously valued, zealously claimed and conscientiously maintained.

Personal freedom, in fact, is considered as a significant attribute of humans, because it is known to bring about enhanced expressions of creativity, original thought, increased productivity, and an overall personally satisfying quality of life. Of course, the idea of freedom itself is rather complex, and the value of freedom can only be understood and appreciated by those who have an amply developed understanding of human nature and a mature sense of being-human. Still, there is no denying the fact that even people, who have not been raised within a long-standing tradition of freedom, have no trouble in understanding and implementing the democratic ways of our society.

From the personalistic self-understanding of humans, there flows as well the valuation of a perspective or an approach to doing things that respects the ‘participatory model’ of governance, especially when it is a question of the realization of common good. The principle of participation in governance is not merely prized but almost taken for granted in stark contrast to the traditional monarchic style of functioning and unilateral way of issuing norms. The decision to resolve the concerns could well be taken either directly or indirectly through personally elected representatives. Nevertheless, people wish by all means to evolve norms from below rather than receive them from above. They wish to have a say in things that concern their personal life. Stated briefly, participatory model is based on the principle that ‘what concerns all, needs to be decided by all’ or ‘what involves all humans, humans themselves together should resolve’.

Ever since the time of the second Vatican council, therefore, it is this changed scenario that is perceived to be at the root of the constant reflection on authority and obedience. It is seen to reflect in the Church documents and instructions and naturally it is also found in the formulation of our own Constitutions.

The chapter on obedience in our Constitutions, accordingly, after a general introduction stating the theological, spiritual and Franciscan basics, insistently encourages brothers to live their life of obedience in freedom. Unlike the former Constitutions, the new speak of authority unreservedly as a ‘pastoral service’ of the ministers and guardians and obedience as the ‘loving and free response’ of the brothers. We need, therefore, to know this change of perspective and understand what ‘Christian authority’ really is and what brother’s ‘loving obedience’ in practice means.

A. CHRISTIAN AUTHORITY

Without exaggeration, after Vatican II, the concept of authority in the Church has undergone a sea change both in understanding and practice. Gone were the days when ministers and guardians in authority known as ‘superiors’ could exercise an autocratic rule and dominative power over other brothers, then called their ‘subjects’! The terminology, ‘superior’ and ‘subject’, as we know, was very much in keeping with the monarchic style of authority and it is not favourably heard today in our democratic era. Our Constitutions, though continue to use the terminology, have enough clarifications to offer regarding the notions of Christian authority and obedience (Const. 159).

The basic reason for the exercise of authority in any society or human institution is the necessity of maintaining order and furthering the ‘common good’. As such, authority can only be understood as an inevitable service. Christian understanding of authority too is basically not something different. We gather this from the Gospel of Jesus Christ himself, in the context of the episode of two of the apostles aspiring high places at his right and left hand in the Kingdom (cf. Mt 20:25-28; Mk 10:42-45). Jesus, however, after explaining to them what authority in the real sense means and how it should be exercised, shows them by means of a concrete example ‘washing their feet and recommending that they too do the same’ (Const. 159.1).

As for ‘common good’, Christianity apprehends it in a more holistic or comprehensive sense. To Christianity, common good that is served by authority is not understandable without taking into account the goal towards which it is oriented. The goal is to help lead everyone towards a life of salvation. For, the ultimate goal of Christian authority, inclusive of Christ, as stated succinctly by St. Paul in the first letter to the Corinthians, is to make everything and everybody subject to God, so that at the end ‘God might be all in all’ (1 Cor. 15; 24ff).

It is God’s rule that ultimately completes the process of salvation as well as the purpose of creation. It is what was envisaged by God right from the beginning. It would be the eschaton, the end event of creation and it is for the realization of this eschaton that Christian authority truly functions. With the beginning of God’s Kingdom established through the ministry of Jesus Christ (Lk 11:20), the eschaton has now already begun and all that it awaits is the final day of dénouement.

1. Ecclesial and Religious Authority

Right away, however, the Kingdom of God preached and established by Jesus exists as a covenantal community, i.e. those who accept the rule of God join together and agree to live as the followers of Christ in a community. We call it the Church. While individual’s response to the Kingdom of God is of primary, indeed of sole importance, authority in this community functions basically to aid individuals to give the right response to the demands the Kingdom of God so as to achieve the final goal envisaged in the acceptance of the gift of the Kingdom.

In the covenantal community established by Christ or the Church, love is the supreme law and Christian community basically lives by the law of love, as Christ himself has made it amply clear (Jn. 15:12). Still, as a human community it stands in need of authority, like any other community on earth. For this reason, those who come to be specifically entrusted with

authority, are to render it as the necessary service on behalf of Jesus Christ. The role of authority does particularly emerge, when tensions arise between the ideals of the Kingdom that are to be lived and the actual response of the members that might fall short of them. Authority then comes in to ensure the living of the ideals and goal of God's Kingdom. It does it with the help of both words and example. In fact, authority-figures, for this reason, have to be veritable models of 'ministering spirit and life by the example of their own life'. (Const. 159.4)

Authority, though, is a necessity, its exercise in the Church and Religious life, we must know, is something totally different. It is neither absolute i.e. monarchic nor relative, i.e. democratic in the sense of a majority rule. The distinction here is not between the former as hierarchical and the latter as participative, since they both can be hierarchical and participative. Authority is hierarchical if one or a majority of persons who rule is understood as being directly invested with God's authority; it is participative, if authority comes to be exercised by one or a few of the members, while recognizing the intrinsic autonomy and equality of all persons.

While monarchic style of authority is clearly known to be unsuitable to the Church, participative authority too cannot be thought of as an ideal either. For, even if autonomy and equality of persons are taken into account and participative authority is availed of, ecclesial and religious authority still needs to take into account the uncompromising message of the Word of God, on the one hand, and the message of the Word-made-flesh, who has "the words of eternal life", on the other. In the Church, Jesus Christ is the sole and highest authority. Ecclesial and religious authority ultimately cannot be other than the authority of Jesus Christ, in whom is made known to us the mystery of God's will for our salvation (Cost. 158.2).

Moreover, regarding ecclesial and religious authority, there is something more to be known. Authority, though, is not invested in and shared by all the members of the community, responsibility for the Kingdom of God and for living its demands certainly is (Const.162.1). All members with or without authority share alike responsibility for the Church and religious life. For, all have the inescapable duty of hearing the Word of God and the Word-made-flesh and shape their life accordingly. All must listen to the Holy Spirit speaking to them in the concrete circumstances of their situation in order to be finally answerable to the consequences of their decisions (Const. 9.3; 158.6).

2. Service of Ministers and Guardians

In the religious life, the role of being in authority is an instrumental device to interpret the will of God for the community. The persons holding authority, however, do not possess any charism that guarantees rightness and infallibility. A sincere and earnest search for the will of God in the community with the participation of all the brothers, therefore, is an indispensable imperative. It is through intense prayer and prudent discernment that they together have to persistently seek and know the will of God (160.2; 162.1).

Knowing well that authority is not an end in itself but just a means to serve and further the Kingdom of God, ministers and guardians have to be receptive and encourage the free contribution of new good ideas by individual brothers, before they come to make a final decision. It is the only way to lead all to a responsible co-operation of living the religious life seeking the welfare of the entire brotherhood. In virtue of their office, those in authority of

course make the ultimate decision and they are absolutely answerable to God in this regard as no one can escape rendering a faithful account of the stewardship entrusted to them (Const. 160.3).

It follows that ministers and guardians themselves are to be docile to God's will in the exercise of their office. They are to use authority, as we said, solely in the spirit of service to assist brothers and manifest the charity with which God loves them'. (*Perfectae Caritatis*, 14). Their governance of the brothers is to be said as one that befits God's children. They have to respect their human personality and make it easier for them to obey freely and gladly (Const. 162.2). They have to give the kind of leadership that will encourage brothers to give an active and responsible obedience to the offices they shoulder and the activities they undertake (Ibid).

The ministers and guardians, likewise, have the grave duty, in fact their foremost responsibility, to assure the fidelity of the brothers to the charism of our Founder, St. Francis. It is actually the very summation of the essence of the role of the ministers and guardians. There is nothing more pressing or no matter of greater supervision or administration that can outweigh the priority of animating and inspiring the brothers to fidelity to the charism and pursuing the mission proper to the Order. That is why, promotion of the knowledge of Capuchin Franciscan charism (161.3) and faithful observance of our *Rule* and *Constitutions*. (161.3) are to be known as their highest priorities.

In the process of exercising their office with diligence having concern for brothers and care for all things (160.1), the guardians talk of shortcomings and omissions of fraternity in local chapters (163.4), protect, promote and foster fraternal life through sincere dialogue, kindly and charitably admonish, encourage and correct the failings of brothers through fraternal discussion (163.3) and ensure that the fraternities are moulded by the teachings of the Gospel of mercy (163.1). The ministers on their part, are not to impose commands in virtue of obedience, unless charity demands it (163.2).

We can thus conclusively say, what the main characteristic of the authority of ministers and guardians are: it is to share authority with the brothers, leaving them room for personal initiative, invention and experimentation, and responsibility for their exercise and participation of the work of the community rather than centralizing it all on oneself (cf. *Ecclesiae sanctae*, 18-19). For, authority is not to be exercised in isolation, rather it must be subject to the principle of subsidiarity, consultation, and mutual accountability. In the fraternity, every member not only may, but must play an active role in every one of the aspects of its life and ministry in order to make it become vibrant and fruitful. It goes without saying that to achieve all this while being in authority, religious persons in authority stand greatly in need of arduous training in management, administration and personal relationships.

B. CHRISTIAN OBEDIENCE

The concept of Christian obedience naturally derives from the understanding of Christian authority. Obedience that Christians owe is never to any human authority but to God alone and it is owed in and through Jesus Christ. For, by baptism Christians are inserted into the Body of Christ and rendered God's adopted children. Christ is the head and all are the members. As Christians, therefore, it is the life of Christ that all Christians live. Their

obedience, accordingly, is the same as that of Christ on account of the intimate union with Christ. For, in one body, all members need to live as one. Their mind and heart has to be identical with that of Christ; in other words, all Christians obey just like Christ. Else, it would not be true Christian obedience.

Now, if we well ask: what was the obedience of Christ, the answer is given to us by the author of the Letter to the Philippians: *'make your own the mind of Jesus: who being in the form of God, did not count equality with God something to be grasped. But he emptied himself taking the form of a slave becoming as human beings are; and being in every way like a human being, he was humbler yet even to accepting death, death on a cross.* (Ph. 2. 5-8)

So, Christ though was divine, did not cling to his equality with God; rather he humbled and submitted himself to his Father. He did this through various intermediaries of this world, that is to say, various persons, events and institutions, religious, social and liturgical. He understood these limited created realities, as manifesting God's will and submission to them is submission to God.

The Christian obedience or submission to God, therefore, is not unlike the obedience of Christ. In fact, it is the real key to understand the vow of religious obedience as well. Because we are children of God, we are not subject to any humans or creaturely institutions or even any human authority. For, as children of God, we cannot owe obedience to any human authority. But, if we do obey human persons in authority, it is because they are the instruments, through whom God's authority is exercised over us (Const. 165.5). In the event, if we obey them, it is because we wish to obey God, just as it was done by Jesus Christ. In doing so, we all enter into the very mystery of him who was obedient to God *'even to accepting death, death on a cross'*.

Obviously, in this instance, the vision of faith is absolutely necessary. Indeed, we believe that our obedience is the obedience of Christ and God's will is revealed to us through created realities of God. *Vita consecrata* (VC) explains 'this obedience practiced in imitation of Christ, whose will was to do the will of the Father (Jn. 4:34), as showing the liberating beauty of a dependence, which is not servile but filial, marked as it is by a deep sense of responsibility and trust'. (cf. VC, 21).

In the Christian community, moreover, we are to understand that neither obedience nor authority can be understood in an individualistic sense. For, both authority and obedience are equally ascribed to head (authority) and members (faithful) in as much as both (head and members) form but one body and together are called to discern and discover God's will and obey. It is done, first, by striving to have the *mind of Christ* and knowing his likes and dislikes; then by seeing to it that the decisions and choices made are decisions and choices of Christ himself. In this way, we know for sure that the obedience we render to God is, in point of fact, not ours but of Christ himself.

This understanding of obedience has a few more implications for us religious. Living as we do in a brotherhood, we understand that our religious obedience is actually an attitude and virtue of the entire brotherhood, which forms a unity in the one mystical body of Christ. In our life, the search for the will of God (Const. 160.2) is also never accomplished singly but always together in and as a brotherhood.

To this end, as we said, brothers have to inspire the ministers and guardians giving their ideas, opinions and all requisite information; the ministers and guardians, on their part, well knowing their duty of understanding objectively the full situation of the brotherhood, then come to take decisions for the brotherhood as a whole (Const. 166.1). In this way, the end result is always a decision that is neither of the authority nor of the brothers, but of all in as much as all become intent upon doing only what is pleasing to God (Const. 158.7). In this sense, the fundamental stance of ministers, guardians and brothers happens to be only one: it is one of pure and simple obedience. In effect, therefore, obedience is not so much an individual as a community-virtue.

1. Value of obedience

With regard to the vow of obedience, we may further speak of its real value. In religious life, the value of obedience, does not lie primarily in greater organizational and apostolic efficiency, though organizational and apostolic efficiency does owe its success to the reality of obedience. The value of obedience cannot be said also to rest in sheer human prudence of submitting one's decision to a wise ruler or counsellor, in spite of the fact that one is certainly recommended to receive counsel and help whenever necessary. Obedience is also not to be advocated just because there would always be some who are seekers of security and others who are too timorous to decide for themselves. Obedience is basically meant for those who love and respect their ministers (Const. 166.1) and are active and responsible (Const. 12.2).

True value of obedience either individual or communitarian, squarely lies in the fact that we are to carry out the plan, God has for us, humans. God's plan or will in our regard is both temporal and eternal. While the former relates here and now to a life that truly accords with our being-human and to our living the religious way of life, the latter has to do with our life to come, a salvific life in God. The two together comprehend our vital share of work and co-operation so that '*God may be all in all*'.

2. Challenge of freedom in obedience

In a discussion of the topic of obedience, it is impossible that we see it as separable from that of freedom. This is because all talk of obedience invariably gives rise to the simultaneous and profound theological conviction of the inalienability of human freedom and responsibility. While promotion of freedom is a genuine value because it is closely connected with the dignity of the human person, we need to be clear whether or not, freedom itself is compatible with the reality of obedience. (VC 91).

From the religious point of view, we must affirm that human freedom itself is a journey of obedience to God's will and it is in this journey that human freedom attains its true import (Const. 158.1-2). For a proof, we can look at the obedience of Jesus Christ. His total obedience to the point of laying down his life to do the will of his Father confirms that 'there can be no contradiction between obedience and freedom'. Jesus reveals that the mystery of freedom itself is better understandable from the perspective of the path of obedience to the will of God. For, who is unaware of the misuse or distorted use of freedom evidenced in all sorts of injustice,

corruption, cruelty, criminality, violence, wrongdoing etc.? On the other hand, it is obedience to justice, honesty, truth, friendship, peace and harmony etc. that truly takes us on the path that leads to the gradual victory of true freedom. It is to this success of freedom that all religious in the final analysis give a generous witness through their vow of obedience (VC 91).

Understandably, there is no such thing as absolute freedom. All freedom requires compromise between the rights of the individual and the goals and obligations of the ruling authority for the sake of leading a serene life of goodness in brotherhood. This is precisely the reason why, every society or institution has laws, regulations and judicial pronouncements to govern the life of freedom indicating the fact that else freedom may well never be meaningfully understood and humanly lived.

3. Religious Obedience of Brothers

Though obvious, let us remind ourselves once again that the principal objective of obedience in Religious life is to conform ourselves to the loving plan of the saving will of God revealed in Jesus Christ, who throughout his life ‘placed his will in the will of the Father’ (Const. 165.1). The brothers, therefore, seek to know the plan of God and discover the will of God by making continuous progress in the understanding of the *Gospel*, the highest law in all circumstances of life (Const. 1.4-5), study the *Life*, *Rule* and *Testament* of our Founder and Father St. Francis, and familiarize ourselves with our revised Capuchin Franciscan *Constitutions* to know how best to observe the *Rule* (Const. 9.1) and live *according to the pattern of the Gospel* (Const. 1.3).

The brothers, likewise, are never to forget that obedience as such is given to a loving and personal God and not to a cold and impersonal law, much less to any heartless discipline or regulation. Religious obedience rules out an authority that would make brothers almost automatons or passive instruments of authority’s judgement and decision. This occurs if there is a regulation of life with petty details, imposition of unreasonable exercises, demands of express permission for regular and ordinary duties of everyday life, refusal of reasonable and adult field of initiatives, and taking over acts that should be left to any mature and responsible adult person.

Religious obedience of the brothers at times is indeed a sacrifice, a dying to self-will and personal ideas (Const. 166.3). But it is also a genuine rising to a new life of freedom of the children of God (Const. 158.3). True obedience based on the docility to the Holy Spirit has a liberating power. In Christ, obedience even frees us from the trammels of our own selfishness and servility to the law. Rules and regulations, therefore, are necessary; they are also to be respected and obeyed; but the brothers must certainly be on guard against both legalism that stifles the personality and liberalism that demeans the personality. For, they both are extremes!

Living a life of perfect obedience according to the *Rule* and *Constitutions*, which provide a map for the living of religious life in accordance with the specific charism of our Order, may at times be difficult to some of the brothers in certain concrete situations of life. Brothers, who actually find it difficult for some valid reason to observe the *Rule*, are to confidently have recourse to the ministers to resolve their problem. Ministers, on their part, should only be willing to assist them with brotherly love (Const. 167). Besides, in a

brotherhood, life of obedience presupposes good and fraternal relationships. This is especially true in the case of the obedience to ministers in authority. Therefore, it is imperative that mutual love and respect need always mark the relationship between brothers and ministers/guardians.

Last but not the least, there has to be generous space for criticism in the lives of adult religious, who live in a spirit of obedience that leads to freedom and joy of the children of God. However, one should make an important distinction between criticism that merely gives rise to bitter, uncharitable and destructive compliance and another that evokes positive and constructive obedience proper. The latter is the product of a sincere, mature and educated mind and it needs by all means to be cultivated. It would be a reality in religious life provided there is sufficient scope for freedom of expression both written and oral.

C. CONCLUSION

Since theological understanding of the Church and Religious life has largely seen a reinterpretation in our days, the meaning and relevance of the vows too have been reviewed and revised accordingly. Our new Constitutions have reinterpreted the life of the vow of obedience in a way consistent with the tradition as well as the contemporary experience of personalistic trends. If authority and obedience are correctly understood, there would be no doubt whatsoever that the end result will be: ministers and guardians rightly rendering the service of authority to the brothers and the brothers submitting themselves joyfully to doing what pleases God alone (Const. 158.7).

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