

POWER AND AUTHORITY

By THOMAS CORBISHLEY

THERE is a well-known saying of Lord Acton's – 'All power tends to corrupt' – the application of which in the world of politics we readily recognise as valid. It is true that Acton was speaking of political power; but his words have an equally valid interpretation when applied to all forms of power, not least that wielded by those in authority in the Church. In its more blatant form, we see its truth in the history of the mediaeval Church, when popes and bishops, abbots and others became so imbued with a sense of personal aggrandizement that they failed, all too often, to bear adequate witness to the christian ideals which, in theory, they embodied. Today, fortunately, with the passing of the temporal power of the papacy and the general impoverishment of the Church brought about by the Reformation and modern liberalism, there is not the same temptation to any worldly abuse of spiritual authority. Yet, in more subtle ways, the temptation abides. It is well, therefore, that all those in whom any kind of authority is vested should be absolutely clear in their minds about the nature and purpose of that authority.

'Power is none but comes to you from the Lord',¹ even though it is directly conferred by higher superiors, and we all need to be reminded why we have been given a position of authority in the Church or in a religious order, in whatever capacity. We need to remind ourselves, constantly, that just as God's creation exists for the fulfilment of human beings for their physical well-being and their psychological development – the basis for their supernatural perfection – so, any human creation – a religious order, the Church herself – in its concrete, organisational nature, exists for the same purpose: the fulfilment of the individual members of the Church and the order. It is all too easy for religious superiors to see the success of the work of the order as the ultimate aim, to forget that, sooner or later, the schools they build, the missions they run, the churches they raise, the charitable activities in which they engage, will all

¹ Wis 6, 4.

come to an end; only human beings are immortal. To them and to their realisation all the rest is subordinate.

If, then, we are superiors, our first duty is to our subjects. We must make sure that, as far as in us lies, they find their fulfilment in their vocation: their fulfilment as human beings, as our brothers and sisters in Christ. This, we believe, will come about through their fidelity to the rule, through their devotion to the ideals of the order which they have entered; but these things are to be seen as means; the end of all our endeavours must be their happiness and general well-being as the basis of their sanctification. The work of the order must be seen in perspective, not as an end in itself to which everything and everybody is to be sacrificed, but simply as the field within which these human beings are to find Christ our Lord and, finding him, to bring him to the world for which they are working.

There is much talk today, in many religious orders of a 'crisis of obedience', not in the sense that subjects are finding it increasingly difficult to obey, but in the sense that they are questioning some of the old-established ways of looking at the theory of obedience. Obedience has always been, notoriously, the most difficult of the religious virtues and it is not likely that there is more disobedience, in practice, than there has always been. But it may well be that, since the standard treatises on obedience were produced in an age when autocratic government was taken for granted, their formulation may not be entirely satisfactory in a democratic age. No good religious will question the fundamental importance of obedience; but it may be desirable to present it, as an ideal, in a way which will be more consonant with his general outlook. The old-fashioned parent brought up his children 'to be seen and not heard', and there may well be some superiors in office, who, having themselves been brought up in that tradition, fail to see that their subjects belong to a different world, with different ways of looking at the abiding truths.

The late Holy Father captured the imagination of the world because, for all his eighty years, he saw the necessity for an *aggiornamento*, a bringing up to date, a modernising of the Church's image in theology, in her relations with those outside the Church, in her approach to the manifold problems facing mankind. It would be a confession of failure on the part of superiors if they were not equally prepared for a similar *aggiornamento* in their presentation of the religious ideal. How are we to do it?

It would hardly be a travesty of the truth to suggest that what we may call the psychology of the religious has, until fairly recently,

been conceived in the following way. Just as there is a religious pattern of outward behaviour, an accepted norm of deportment, gesture, speech and the like, to be achieved by noviceship training and the imitation of a traditional, universal nun or monk, so, interiorly, it has been felt, there is a standard religious, with all his (or her) reactions trained to the same level, emotions subordinated to reason and will, reason and will, in turn, being thought of in rigid, absolute categories, to depart from which is to be 'imperfect'. True, each order had its own spirit, so that religious differed from religious, not perhaps as star differs from star in glory, but rather as galaxy differs from galaxy. Training in religious perfection meant ironing out as far as possible the varieties of temperament, character, interests, personal initiative, to produce a set of chessmen to be pushed about by superiors.

None of this, of course, has ever been explicit; but it has certainly been implicit in much of the teaching on religious life. Even in practice, despite centuries of experience of the infinite variety of human beings, even within a given community, let alone within the order itself, superiors (and others) have behaved as though this were a reasonable attitude of mind. It is time we came to recognise that the absolute importance of every single human being is due to his possession of a unique quality as *this* individual, uniquely precious in the eyes of God.

No good religious, indeed no sensible person, is going to question the need for a strong spirit of obedience and for a definite hierarchy of power and authority. For the general good, for the smooth running of the affairs of the community, the province, the order, sheer common sense demands that we normally accept unquestioningly the instructions and commands issued by those set over us. After all, at the purely natural level, the relationship of obedience enables men to pool their resources, to work together, to benefit from the experience of others. To obey, we recall, means to listen, to pay attention to someone. Now, just as by listening to others we learn, we add to our store of knowledge, so, by obeying, we actually enrich ourselves, we add to our own strength, because we are thereby enabled to associate ourselves with others in a common effort. Ideally, obedience is given naturally and almost spontaneously to the wise and good man, to the man whose authority is based on his power to see further, plan more effectively, conceive a nobler ideal than his subordinates. In principle, it is only in virtue of his possession of such qualities that obedience to him is justified. In other

words, obedience is a wholly rational and reasonable attitude of mind provided that the man who is in authority bases his orders on reason, on what is for the general good, which should not be thought of as other than the good of the individuals constituting the general body.

When, therefore, the man in authority is not seeking the good of his subjects, his authority ceases to be justified, however much it may be enforced by naked power. In Plato's *Republic* Socrates refused to admit the notion that merely because a man is in a stronger position, he can determine what is right. The same principle applies throughout the whole field of obedience. A man can legitimately claim authority, can justify his claim to be obeyed, only where his orders are based on right reason; anything else is a usurpation of authority. His power no longer comes from God, supreme wisdom, absolute goodness.

What is true of obedience in the natural order is not less true in the supernatural order. We shall not be able to make sense of religious obedience unless we bear in mind this fundamental structure of the nature of things. It is surely this fundamental structure which St. Ignatius had in mind in a famous passage in his *Letter of Obedience*, where he points to the hierarchy of nature itself, which ensures that which is lower in the scale is subordinated to and guided by what is higher, whilst this in turn is ruled and guided by the highest principle of all. Valuable and true as this illustration is, it may be helpful at this stage to point out that it must not be applied directly and *tout court* to human obedience, whether inside or outside religion. There is this essential difference. In human affairs, the subject, the 'inferior', is not necessarily inferior in intelligence, as he is certainly not inferior in ultimate importance, even to the highest of his superiors.

Is it impertinent to suggest that, not infrequently, the hierarchy of obedience has been interpreted to mean a descending scale of intelligence and (dare we add?) quasi-infallibility from the all-but-omniscient major superior to the simple-minded rank-and-file, to whom the poet must have been referring when he said:

Theirs not to reason why;

Theirs but to do – and die . . .

May it not be that the ideal of religious obedience, of 'blind' obedience, is so often presented in terms which seem to suggest that it means shutting our eyes to the obvious facts, destroying what is of value in the subject's own personality, that even good religious are

tempted to revolt? May it not even be true that some religious have been turned into embittered critics by the unintelligent and ruthless conduct of superiors, who are liable to suppose that an unwillingness to manifest common humanity towards their subjects is to be identified with strong government. 'Strong government' may be little more than the mulish obstinacy of a superior conscious of inner weakness, or the self-assertiveness of a fundamentally vain person.

Religious obedience, obedience from supernatural motives must seek to preserve, even whilst it transforms, all that is of value in obedience at the natural level. When our Lord said: 'Not by bread alone does man live . . .'¹ he was not denying that men do support their natural life by taking food; he was pointing out that supporting life is not the whole story. So is it in the sphere of obedience. Of course, obedience must be intelligent; of course, it is directed normally to the achievement of some purely practical purpose, the efficient running of a house, a school, a hospital. But efficiency is not the whole purpose of man, still less of the religious.

Looked at naturally, as we have seen, obedience enables the subject to fulfil his rational nature more perfectly through his co-operation with a larger group, achieving results beyond the scope of his individual knowledge or intelligence. In the supernatural order, obedience fulfils him more completely still, by linking his individual efforts to the larger world of God's purposes, by showing him a plan beyond anything that his mind, or any human mind, could possibly envisage – the whole plan and purpose of the Incarnation. At the same time, normally speaking, God's purposes are achieved through man's intelligent co-operation, not by thwarting his natural inclinations but by guiding them along those lines which will bring them to their final goal.

Religious obedience, then, will almost invariably be a fairly simple, straightforward matter of carrying out instructions which are not merely sensible but are seen to be sensible. Here, superiors can help their subjects by taking them, as far as possible, into their confidence, letting them see why this or that is being done, why certain decisions have been taken. Not only will this build up a habit of trust on both sides; it will also be an important part of training subjects in responsibility, enabling them to grow up. Superiors should pay their subjects the compliment of treating them as intelligent, responsible beings, as their equals. 'I do not speak of

¹ Mt 4, 4.

you any more as my servants; a servant is one who does not understand what his master is about, whereas I have made known to you all that my Father has told me; and so I have called you my friends'.¹ If this is done as a normal practice, when the time comes for superiors to command without being able to explain, subjects will readily accept this, knowing that their superiors are human beings, rather than arbitrary and capricious despots.

Of course it means patience, sympathy, generosity of heart, tolerance and a great humility. The measure of a superior's success will be the degree to which he remembers that he is, first and foremost, a father to his community and only secondarily a man of affairs. It may seem a great waste of time and energy: it will seem so only to the man who has forgotten his first responsibility.

All too often, it would seem, superiors have sought to justify a line of conduct which is neither christian nor religious by appealing to the notion of 'blind' obedience. And so we return to St. Ignatius. What are we to understand by the famous similes – the corpse, the old man's staff, by the appeal to the Desert Fathers, the command to water a dry stick, the reference to miraculous stories? What, above all, are we to understand by 'blind' obedience?

Let us remember two things. First, for all his simple faith, St. Ignatius had a great understanding of human nature. Second, he was intent on developing in the members of his Society a spirit of self-reliant initiative which would stand them in good stead when they found themselves isolated from their brethren in some remote mission or on some apostolic journey. Critics of the Society 'regard Jesuit government purely mechanically as the supremacy and power of one man over another; they look upon the Society as opposed to the individual member, like an enemy or a slave-owner; they imagine that its general purpose is achieved at the cost of sacrificing and annihilating the lives of individuals'.² If this were anything remotely like the reality, it is obvious that the Society could never have produced the rich variety of personalities which even its bitterest opponents cannot deny.

Whilst, then, St Ignatius did affirm his desire that the Society should be conspicuous for its spirit and practice of obedience, he was not less insistent on the need for a truly paternal attitude on the part of superiors.

'The superior is that member of the community who must listen

¹ Jn 15, 15.

² Lippert *The Jesuits*, p. 86.

to everybody without losing his patience and his love'.¹ If there exists this relationship of love – filial love towards the superior, paternal love towards the subject – much of the problem of obedience disappears. It is possible to trust blindly a father whom one loves and respects. Blind obedience does not mean shutting my eyes to obvious facts, telling lies to myself, persuading myself that, because a superior has made up his mind, the objective situation has been changed. It means that I may have to shut my eyes to my own self-interest, so that I am not distracted from carrying out an order which I accept as embodying the will of God for me, and therefore as better for me than my own will. In the words of the Spanish proverb: God writes straight with crooked lines. Blind obedience means seeing the divine pattern more clearly because I can ignore the mistakes of human fallibility.

The famous similes mentioned above merely emphasize the obvious truth that obedience is a work of co-operation between subject and superior, whereby they strive together to bring about the will of God. Normally the will of God, who desires the happiness and fulfilment of his creatures, will consist in the simple carrying out of some obviously useful, sensible, practical task. But there will be times when the will of God as expressed in a superior's command will not be so obviously reasonable. It may indeed lead to something which the superior himself, had he foreseen the outcome, would certainly regret. It is idle to pretend that superiors are omniscient. They have to make up their minds on such evidence as they possess. They may, in fact, give an order which is based on inadequate or erroneous information. It is here that the mystery of obedience arises.

It is linked with the mystery of the cross. We say that, when our Lord was crucified, God's will was done. Does this mean that the Father desired, intended, willed the death of the Son? Clearly not: and for two main reasons. First of all, it is impossible that the author of life and the source of all perfection should directly will suffering and death. Second, since that suffering and death could come about only through the malice and cruelty of men, which infinite goodness cannot intend, he clearly cannot intend the consequences of man's wickedness.

What God did will and desire was the acceptance by the human will of Christ of the human destiny involved in the Incarnation. If

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

God became man, he could become man only in a given human situation. It was that situation which, through the weakness, malice, cruelty, selfishness of men, dictated to the God-Man the course of his life and death. Accepting that destiny, with all that it involved, our Lord, through his obedience to what we may call the law of the Incarnation, undid the harm of man's disobedience, redeemed man, restored him to life. All that God could directly will was that Judas should be loyal, that Caiaphas and the jews should recognize Christ as their messias, that Pilate should be strong and just. What man refused to God in the persons of Judas, Caiaphas and Pilate – obedience to his law – man gave to God in the obedience of the human will of Christ to that same law.

Similarly, we have to say that what God directly wills is that all superiors shall be intelligent, disinterested, emotionally integrated, completely humane. If they were, there would be no problem for subjects, except for the relatively easy problem of doing something they might personally find distasteful or taxing – though even here the perfect superior would be able to temper the wind to the shorn lamb. But no superior in history has ever been absolutely perfect. Therefore there will always be the danger of an element of the irrational or the perverse finding its way into a superior's orders. Since both subject and superior have a duty to see that what theologians call God's antecedent will is done, the subject will always have not merely the right but the obligation to reduce the element of the irrational where it is seen to exist. Any sensible superior will welcome 'representations', because he wants the job done well.

It is precisely here that the chief responsibility of the superior is to be found. His great temptation will always be to think that, because he sees things in a certain way, this is necessarily the best, if not the only possible, way of seeing them. It may call for tremendous patience, self-control, humility to have to listen to the representations of a much younger man, who may be self-opinionated, conceited, even arrogant. For his soul's good, the young man may need a dressing-down. But the superior should not automatically assume that this is the best treatment. We have all been young; we have all thought that we knew all the answers; but most of us have probably been helped much more by the patience and understanding of a genuinely paternal superior than by the brusque refusal to listen of some unimaginative one, who may well have been right in his judgement, but who may have done us much spiritual harm by refusing to listen.

It all comes back in the end to the superior's view of himself and his responsibilities. Does he think of his subjects as so many tools, so many servants to help him to carry through an appointed practical plan? Or does he rather see the office entrusted to him as the opportunity for developing the abilities and promoting the spiritual welfare of those under him? The work must be done, of course; practical decisions have to be taken and implemented. But even at the level of mere efficiency, he will get far more out of his subjects by letting them feel that they are partners in a common enterprise rather than so many 'hands'. Still more important, however, is the recognition that what matters in the end is not what he gets out of them but rather what he has been able to put into them, to give them.

It is a commonplace to say that the superior stands to the subject in the place of God. How often is this phrase limited, in effect, to meaning that the superior represents the authority of God. It must be enlarged to mean that he represents also the love of God, the mercy of God no less than his justice, the life-giving power of God. God has entrusted to all men the responsibility for those who are less gifted, less able to look after themselves. 'As long as you did it to the least of my brethren, you did it to me'.¹ If all Christ's followers are called upon to exercise works of mercy to their brethren, may it not be that superiors, having a special opportunity, have also a special responsibility? 'Each of you must have the humility to think others better men than himself, and study the welfare of others, not his own. Yours is to be the same mind which Christ Jesus showed . . . He did not see in the rank of godhead a prize to be coveted; he dispossessed himself, and took the nature of a slave, fashioned in the likeness of men . . . and then he lowered his own dignity . . .'² 'The Son of Man did not come to have service done to him; he came to serve others'.³ If Cleon, in the *Antigone*, could say that the quality of men is best proved by the way they use power, this is even truer of our quality as Christians. 'The greater thou art, the more in all things abase thyself . . . Sovereignty belongs to God and no other; they honour him most that most keep humility'.⁴

¹ Mt 25, 40.

² Phil 2, 3-8.

³ Mt 20, 28.

⁴ Sir 3, 21.