

# THE WILL OF GOD AND CHRISTIAN OBEDIENCE<sup>1</sup>

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## I. THE NATURE OF OBEDIENCE

### (A) THE OBEDIENCE OF THE BELIEVER

**T**O BELIEVE IN GOD means to believe in One who holds everything in his hands: that is, not simply in an all-powerful being who has created heaven and earth and 'all things visible and invisible' as it were once for all, and then has left them to their own will and devices; but in One without whom none of the events which have taken place across the centuries, or are taking place now or will take place in the future, could ever happen.

This Being is all-powerful in the sense that he is all-wise; for he leads all things created by him to an end foreseen from all eternity, and one in all respects worthy of him. This wise all-powerful Being is Charity, the fulness and perfection of Love in the Unity of Nature and the Trinity of Persons; Father, Son and holy Spirit. So it is that he is in all his works, the work of creation, of redemption and sanctification.

This basic theological perspective has been very clearly exposed by St Irenaeus. We can do no better than let him speak for himself.

#### *i) God's view of the believer's obedience*

God made Adam in the beginning not because he had any need of him, but simply to have someone on whom he could pour out his blessings. For the Word glorified his Father by dwelling in him not only before Adam existed but before the whole creation; the Word in his turn was glorified by the Father, as he said himself: 'Father, glorify me with the glory that I possessed in your presence before the world was made'.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Translated from "Théologie de la volonté de Dieu et obéissance chrétienne", which appeared in *Revue d'Ascétique et de Mystique*, tome XLII (Avril-Juin, Juillet-Septembre 1966), pp 121-55 and pp 257-86, with kind permission of the Editor.

<sup>2</sup> Jn 17, 5.

It is not because he had need of our service that he directs us to follow his Son, but for our own sakes, that he might bring us to salvation. To follow the Saviour is to have a share in salvation; to follow the Light is to receive the Light. Those who are in the light do not themselves light up the Light; on the contrary they are illuminated and made translucent by the Light itself. They can give nothing of themselves to the Light; but they simply receive the blessing of being enlightened by the Light. Therefore, the fact that they are in God's service confers nothing on him, because God has no need of the honour that man pays to him. It is he who gives life and immortality and eternal salvation to those who follow him and serve him. This is his gift to his servants in consideration of their service, to his disciples, in consideration of their attachment to him; it is not for any good received by him from them. For he is infinitely rich and needs nothing. The reason why God directs men to serve him is because, in his goodness and mercy, he wishes to enrich those who persevere in his service.

If God has need of nothing, man certainly has need of communion with God. For the glory of man is to continue and persevere in God's service. This is why the Lord said to his disciples: 'You have not chosen me, it is I who have chosen you'.<sup>1</sup> He meant that it was not they who glorified him in their following of him, but on the contrary that they were glorified by the Son of God because they followed him. Again he says: 'I desire that they may be with me where I am, that they may see my glory'.<sup>2</sup> He says this not out of any sense of aggrandisement, but because he wishes to give to his disciples a share in his own glory. As Isaiah says:

I will bring your offspring from the East,  
And from the West I will gather you;  
I will say to the North, Give up,  
And to the South, Do not withhold;  
Bring my sons from afar  
And my daughters from the ends of the earth,  
Everyone who is called by my name,  
Whom I created for my glory,

<sup>1</sup> Jn 15, 16.

<sup>2</sup> Jn 17, 24.

Whom I formed and made.<sup>1</sup>

Where the body is, there the vultures will assemble;<sup>2</sup> receiving their share of the glory of the Lord. He has formed us and prepared us for this very end, that in our union with him we may share in his glory.<sup>3</sup>

To put it briefly: the purpose of creation, by the God who is Love, is to make others happy; that is, intelligent beings who do him the honour of freely subscribing to his great plan, for the praise and glory of his grace.<sup>4</sup> The Creator is glorified in the happiness of his creatures: 'Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth to the men whom he loves'.<sup>5</sup>

ii) *The believer's obedience from man's point of view*

The difference between God and man is this: God makes and man is made. He who makes is always the same; but he who is made must have a beginning, an environment, an increase in growth. What God makes is good and man receives the benefit of it. God is perfect, absolute, always the same and equal to himself; for he is all light, all understanding, all substance and the source of all good. Man on the other hand receives progress and growth towards God. Just as God is always the same, so man shows, in God, a constant progress towards God. God never ceases to do good to man and to enrich him; man never ceases to receive these benefits and to be enriched. In fact, the man who is pleasing to his Creator is a receptacle of God's goodness and an instrument of his glorification; whereas the man who displeases God, who despises his Creator and is disobedient to his Word, is the receptacle of just judgment.<sup>6</sup>

First you must accept your condition as man, and then fulfil your role for the glory of God. It is not you who make God, it is God who makes you. So if you are a work of God, then be still under the hand of your Maker who fashions all things at the right time. Offer him a heart that is supple and flexible, keep the shape which your Maker has given you. If you are not to lose the mark of his fingers by hardening yourself, you need to keep that quality of malleability.

<sup>1</sup> Isai 43, 5-6.

<sup>2</sup> Mt 24, 28.

<sup>3</sup> St Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*, IV, 14, 1. (Cf ed. *Sources chrétiennes*, 100, 1965, pp 538 ff).

<sup>4</sup> Eph 1, 12.

<sup>5</sup> Lk 2, 14.

<sup>6</sup> Irenaeus, *op. cit.* IV, 11, 2.

If on the contrary you harden your heart and refuse to be fashioned by him, if you show yourself ungrateful towards him, man as you are you will lose altogether the delineaments of his fashioning, and life itself. To make belongs to the goodness of God, to be made belongs to the nature of man. If then you hand over to him what is yours, that is, to know faith in him and submission to him, you will become the object of his fashioning, you will be a perfect work of God. But if, on the contrary, you do not believe in him, if you slip away from his hands, you will be marred; and the cause of this will be in you who have not obeyed, not in him who has called you. He has sent his messengers to invite men to the wedding feast; but those who have refused the invitation will be refused entry into the royal feast.<sup>1</sup>

For every man who comes into the world, the ideal of perfection and of happiness is the complete fulfilment of God's plan for him by an unconditional acceptance of all that God does, and by active co-operation in all that it pleases the Creator to ask of man. Faith and submission: belief in the goodness of the only Good, belief in the identity that exists between the world of God our Lord and the love of God our Father. Logically, this means the wholehearted acceptance in general and in particular of the fatherly plan of God: the *Amen*, the perpetual 'yes' to God the Father.

#### (B) OBEDIENCE ACCORDING TO JESUS CHRIST

##### *The New Man: Jesus Christ*

This ideal fulfilment has actually been lived by the Son of God, Jesus Christ. All those to whom the Son of God made man has given the power to become children of God<sup>2</sup> must conform themselves to him.

'You must possess in yourselves the ideas and the sentiments (*phronein* means both) which enlivened Christ Jesus'.<sup>3</sup> But the interior life of Jesus Christ had and could have no other direction than towards his Father, in a movement which was completely, simply, and wonderfully filial: a movement which was at the same time and in the same way fraternal towards men, those men whom he had made his brothers. This ever-watchful filial love extended itself to the smallest detail of his programme as Redeemer by a

<sup>1</sup> Irenaeus, *op. cit.* IV, 39, 2.

<sup>2</sup> Jn 1, 12.

<sup>3</sup> Phil 2, 5.

perpetual and indefectible willing submission. The new head of humanity was given over completely to service.

This chieftain, chosen by the hand of God our Lord to whom all princes and all christian men owe reverence and obedience,<sup>1</sup> this chieftain who is recognised as master and Lord,<sup>2</sup> who solemnly affirms his royal lineage in the face of the roman administrator,<sup>3</sup> this King of kings and Lord of lords,<sup>4</sup> this unique Son before whom every knee in heaven, on earth and under the earth must bend, this Son of God become Son of Man does nothing except obey in every way and always God his Father, in the joy of his soul, even in the hour of darkness and of mortal sadness.

Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said,

Sacrifices and offerings thou hast not desired,  
but a body hast thou prepared for me;  
in burnt offerings and sin offerings thou hast taken no pleasure.  
Then I said, 'Lo I have come to do thy will, O God',  
as it is written of me in the roll of the book.<sup>5</sup>

Here is the whole meaning of the Incarnation, Christ's entire programme for the glorification of the Father, for his own glory and for the salvation of the world, 'which was brought to utter ruin by the loss of so salutary a virtue'.<sup>6</sup>

During the whole of his earthly existence, this will be his unique care, his great love; the secret and the source of his whole interior life is to 'do the will of him who has sent me and to accomplish (that is, to execute down to the last detail) his work'.<sup>7</sup> And more than this, in the moment before he committed his soul into the hands of his Father, as he passed in review, as though in one final examination of conscience, the fidelity of his obedience to the work which had been given him, and seeing that there had remained one detail for fulfilment, 'Jesus said, in order that the whole of scripture might be fulfilled, I thirst'.<sup>8</sup> This for him is the fulfilment of his affirmation, 'not one iota, not one dot of the law will pass away until all is accomplished'.<sup>9</sup> For him more than for anyone else his own humble and bold reply to the tempter is authentic: 'Man lives by every word which comes from the mouth of God'.<sup>10</sup> To do the will of the Father is his nourishment: that is, it not only keeps

<sup>1</sup> Ignatius Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, 92.

<sup>3</sup> Jn 18, 36.

<sup>4</sup> Apoc 19, 16.

<sup>6</sup> Ignatius Loyola, *Letter on Obedience*, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Jn 19, 28.

<sup>9</sup> Mt 5, 18.

<sup>2</sup> Jn 13, 14.

<sup>5</sup> Heb 10, 5-10.

<sup>7</sup> Jn 4, 34.

<sup>10</sup> Mt 4, 4.

him alive, but it is the source of his living growth according to that fulness of grace and of truth by which we are to live in our turn according to the measure of our own obedience.

'The world must be brought to know that I love the Father and that I am doing exactly what the Father told me'.<sup>1</sup> This phrase affirms the identity between the love for the Father and the submission of the Son, and also between the loving submission of the Son and the fraternal love of the Redeemer. Here we have the four dimensions of charity: the height and the depth, the length and the breadth. Outside these dimensions is only the exterior darkness of false love, where all sense of accomplishment is illusory. To pretend to love God in fulfilling a will different from his, or to work for the salvation of the world according to a design other than that of God the Saviour, will, perhaps, result in spending oneself, but in a way that is irrelevant; it may even produce moments of intense joy, but it will not be the joy that belongs to truth;<sup>2</sup> it may mean that we grow old in activity but it will not be a true living. Jesus Christ alone is the Way, the Truth and the Life: Jesus the unique well-beloved Son, the perfect image of the invisible God. 'He is the first-born of all creation, for in him were created all things in heaven and on earth, all things, visible and invisible'.<sup>3</sup> He reveals himself in the most intimate sense of his being when he says: 'I tell you most solemnly that the Son cannot do anything of himself; he can only do what he sees the Father doing; and whatever the Father does, it is this that the Son does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him everything that he does'.<sup>4</sup>

This is what it means essentially to be the Son, to be truly filial; it means to be able to do nothing of himself;  
to do for himself all that the Father does;  
to do nothing except that; and to do all that.

It does not mean to do some things by myself,  
and to do other things through the Father.  
It does not mean to act on my own initiative here  
and on the Father's there.

All my spontaneous action is always to wish and to do  
all that the Father does and wishes,  
even to that impossible point of never wishing or doing anything  
except what the Father does and wishes.

<sup>1</sup> Jn 14, 30.

<sup>2</sup> Cf 1 Cor 13, 6.

<sup>3</sup> Col 1, 15 ff.

<sup>4</sup> Jn 5, 19-20.

And this point of impossibility is omnipotence  
this slavery of adoration is liberty, holiness.

All this because the Father loves the Son.

For everything is the Father's, and all that comes from the  
Father is love  
including the love by which the Son loves the Father.

For if the Son can do nothing  
that he does not see the Father doing,  
he can no longer love anything  
except what he knows is loved by the Father.

This is Jesus, the Bread which has come down from heaven,  
which must become part of us until we have his very life in us,  
the interior life of the Son of Man, Son of God,  
and the freedom which belongs to him as Son.

*The will of God according to Jesus Christ*

The problem then is not to obey or not to obey, but simply where  
is the will to which I am to submit, conform, adapt, adjust my own?  
In short, where is the will of God?

In the universe, 'the macrocosm', and in the microcosm which  
is man, all that is not conscious is subject to the control of God the  
Lord of all, and runs towards the accomplishment of his design.  
This includes all non-free conscious life, all living things, man  
included. If the all-powerful One creates in his image intelligent  
and free beings, their supreme law, the condition of their perfection  
and their happiness, will be the full acceptance of this same design  
by the free consent in general and in detail to the will of God.

In fact, whatever is done or happens according to the divine  
design contributes to the accomplishment of this divine will which  
holy scripture constantly declares to be truly irresistible, as do those  
philosophers who are truly metaphysical:

Direct me, O Zeus, and you too, O Destiny, do the goal  
that you have long ago assigned to me. I will follow you  
unhesitatingly; and even if in my wickedness I should refuse  
to follow, I should be following none the less.<sup>1</sup>

Even for these pagans, all that I win by refusing to submit is to  
become evil and unhappy, because in that case I will be following

<sup>1</sup> From a poem of Cleanthes, 3rd century B.C., cited by Epictetus.

in spite of myself, in slave fashion, a law which would have liberated me if I had grasped and accepted it.

It even happens that these large-hearted intelligent men forget the logic of their stoic system, which forbids them all dialogue with the supreme Being; and the result is true and wonderful prayer:

Since I am at your service, what do you wish me to be? Magistrate or simple citizen, senator or one of the people, soldier or general, lawyer or head of a family? Any place, any position that you could assign for me I would die a thousand times rather than abandon it, as Socrates said. And where would you that I live? At Rome (political capital), at Athens (intellectual capital) at Thebes or Gyaros (a little isle of the Cyclades, for Epictetus a type of obscurity)? I ask of you nothing except one thing: remember me here below.<sup>1</sup>

This is not to renounce happiness; it is the desire to be happy, and to take the only means of becoming and remaining happy: 'There is only one way of finding happiness . . . that is to abandon everything to the divinity'.<sup>2</sup> In the case of a divinity which is confused with destiny, inevitability, inexorable necessity, impersonal fate, such abandonment as this would be to risk stifling all joy, all vitality, all hope, especially among thoughtful and reflective men, at least to the extent that this vitality would never break through the dogmatic crust, effectively preventing a cry like that of Epictetus welling up from the very depths of one's being towards a supreme living and personal God whose very existence one must refuse to admit. The situation of the christian is quite other than this. This universal submission, from which no creature can ever escape, becomes for him an essentially filial attitude, because in his eyes the law is not an eternal action, it is not inevitability, nor necessity, nor fate, but the design of love and the will of the Father. The command that the christian must accept and fulfil is the appeal of a person to a person, a call which is a part of a universal call, an invitation to will with his heavenly Father the goal of all creation: 'the loving design which he had formed in Christ from the beginning to act upon when the times had run their course to the end'.<sup>3</sup> This is the mystery of his will in all things because nothing is foreign to Christ. When the fulness of time was come for him, the Word of God

<sup>1</sup> Epictetus *Diatribes* III, 24, 90.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, IV, 4, 39.

<sup>3</sup> Eph I, 9-10.



entered the world saying, 'Behold I come to do thy will O God'.<sup>1</sup> In each moment of our earthly life the time is come to fulfil a particular detail of the eternal plan. Then it is for me to say, it is in my best interest to say, it ought to be my delight to say, 'Here I am, O God, to do your will'.

To know this surpasses all knowledge, since this knowledge is identified with Charity. This is why St Paul never ceases to pray for his christians and to ask God that 'through perfect wisdom and spiritual understanding they should reach the fullest knowledge of his will';<sup>2</sup> though such knowledge is not to be confused with the attitude of those who content themselves with not having killed or stolen, or having avoided grave sin at all costs. It is an attitude which springs precisely from this that 'God is my witness that I love you tenderly in the heart of Christ Jesus. This is my prayer, that your love may abound more and more with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ'.<sup>3</sup> 'I appeal to you brethren then . . . not to be conformed to this present world, but to be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God: that it is good, that it is acceptable, that it is perfect'.<sup>4</sup>

The important thing to know first of all is the intrinsic quality of the divine will in our regard. If God is Charity in his essence, if he is Father in the intimate core of his being, if he is the only Good, not only in himself but also of necessity in his works, as the whole of scripture and in particular St Paul and St John never cease to affirm, then we shall be christians first of all by the knowledge that we have of this love, and by the faith in which we receive this knowledge. If this is the will of God our Father, if we know it and believe it truly as such, we shall consider it as a signal grace, as the greatest good, that we have been, like St Paul, predestined to know this will,<sup>5</sup> even if in this knowledge there also appears all that we must suffer for the name of the Lord.<sup>6</sup> If we understand that the will of God is for the good of every nature, we shall have in us all the dispositions for recognizing it.<sup>7</sup> All this is a matter of faith; and it will be according to the measure of this faith that we shall have no more intimate desire than to know, in general and in particular, in the round and in detail, the object of this will: what this call, this

<sup>1</sup> Heb 10, 7.

<sup>2</sup> Col 1, 9.

<sup>3</sup> Phil 1, 8-10.

<sup>4</sup> Rom 12, 1-2.

<sup>5</sup> Cf Acts 22, 14.

<sup>6</sup> Cf Acts, 9, 16.

<sup>7</sup> Cf 1 Thess 5, 18.

invitation is. We shall have in us the ideas and the sentiments we know to be his, and shall write at the head of our whole programme of life the great word of salvation: 'Here I am, O God, to do thy will'. Like the Word at every stage of his incarnate life, so we in every moment of our existence will be willing for obedience even unto death, the death which it pleases the Lord to assign to us for our share in the salvation of the world. Our *kenosis* will never consist in descending from a divine state to that of a slave. It will simply demand that we accept the reality of our created existence, and that we do not force ourselves into a lie of self-deification or camouflage our poverty under the tinselled grandeur of 'the establishment'.

Like the 'great cloud of witnesses' made up of all the saints of the Old and New Testaments, we shall experience that which is the victory over the world, our faith.<sup>1</sup> As we fix our eyes on Jesus, who leads us in our faith and brings it to perfection,<sup>2</sup> we shall refuse the bait which the tempter normally uses to persuade us to exchange the food of the children of God for the desire for vain glory or its reverse, the fear of humiliation or loss of prestige.

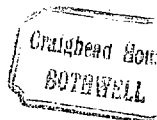
The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, after his long peroration on the faith exemplified in action, indicates to us the way we, in our turn, should live, by his application of these two words, 'despising shame', to the Lord Jesus. We are to run steadily and with perseverance in the race we have begun, looking down upon the conventional criterion of honour and honours. Therefore, for the sake of the good and in all simplicity, with a kind of superior disregard which comes from the superiority of understanding, nobility of character, and above all from every grace of choice, we are to take seriously the maxims of Christ the Redeemer concerning purely human esteem and the glory which comes from God. Attachment to the first destroys the very possibility of faith – 'How could you believe, you who take your glory from one another?'<sup>3</sup> – and therefore of all true submission. The other, the glory which comes from God alone, will be measured according to our obedience; or, to put it more exactly, obedience which is filial, effective and total *is* man's true glory, because it is the condition for accomplishing God's design. It liberates, so to speak, the divine omnipotence just as the light pressure of a human finger can release the most irresistible powers of nature.

'It belongs to God to make, to man to be made. If then you hand

<sup>1</sup> 1 Jn 5, 4.

<sup>2</sup> Heb 12, 1-2.

<sup>3</sup> Jn 5, 44.



over to him what is yours, so that you know faith and submission, you will receive the results of his knowledge in doing, and you will be God's chief work'.<sup>1</sup> This is the law which applies in the first place to Christ, obedient unto death: 'This is why God has exalted him and given him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord in the glory of God the Father'.<sup>2</sup>

For the christian who reaps the victory of faith and of submission, he says 'as for the conqueror, I will make him a pillar in the sanctuary of my God, and there he will remain for ever; and I will write upon his forehead the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, and my own new name as well'.<sup>3</sup>

*Obedience: the honour and happiness of every creature*

If what we have said is true, then indeed those who would wish to escape from the universal law of submission are to be pitied. They would act as though the will of God could contradict his love, as though God could cease from time to time from being what he is, Wisdom and Charity.

Since we are the children of God such an attitude would be literally to surrender one's birthright, to throw off the heritage of Christ who wishes to bring us to the Father by his own way, or better by the way which he is himself made man: that is, made obedient. It would be to leave him to go and to look elsewhere, to seek the words of eternal life from false saviours; to go begging elsewhere from the false rich for the daily bread of the soul which they do not possess. We would delude ourselves with a caricature of happiness, while true peace, the peace of Christ, the peace of God would cease to reign in our hearts.

It is God's will that all men be saved, in the same way as he wishes all to be docile to his will, because these are only two aspects of the same plan of love 'There is a variety of gifts, but always the same Spirit; there are all sorts of service to be rendered, but always to the same Lord, who works in many kinds of different ways in different people; but it is the same God working in all of them. Each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good'.<sup>4</sup>

That each should have his own task in the Church, his personal

<sup>1</sup> Irenaeus, op. cit., IV, 39, 2.

<sup>3</sup> Apoc, 3 12-13; cf 2, 17; 3, 5.

<sup>2</sup> Phil 2, 9-11.

<sup>4</sup> 1 Cor 12, 4-7.

activity, his particular kind of suffering in and for the body of Christ which is the Church, this necessary and visible specialization is far from destroying or weakening the fundamental equality of all before God. 'You are all brothers' says the Lord; we have only one Father, and he is in heaven; only one master, only one teacher, the Christ.<sup>1</sup> It is obvious that among the children of the same Father, disciples of the same Master, there will be different functions; Peter, over and above the tasks common to all, will have something different to do than John or Paul or Thomas. But, like Paul and John and all of them, including that 'brother of the Lord', St Jude, Peter is first, and is so styled, servant, and only then apostle, of Christ Jesus.<sup>2</sup> Servant first of all by nature, and from the essence of things; then apostle, and only by a particular vocation, which does not suppress the quality of servant but specifies it on one single point, leaving it the first place, as something which must inform all the rest. What follows may have a dazzling appearance, and resemble the divine to such an extent that a man will fall on his knees in adoration. 'You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brethren who hold the testimony of Jesus. It is God whom you must worship'.<sup>3</sup> 'You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brethren the prophets, and with those who keep the words of the book. O worship God'.<sup>4</sup> They are servants with the same title as ourselves in the spiritual service of the heavenly hierarchy: 'Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to serve for the sake of those who are destined to receive the inheritance of salvation'?<sup>5</sup> Yes, they are servants according to the same title as ourselves, in the service of the ecclesiastical hierarchy: 'When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshipped him. But Peter lifted him up, saying, Stand up: I too am a man'.<sup>6</sup> We notice the same reaction with the apostles Barnabas and Paul: 'Friends, what do you think you are doing? We are only men, just like you'.<sup>7</sup>

One might say, and indeed it ought to be said in all truth, that the greater the person is, the nearer he is to God; which means that his understanding and willing of his duty of submission is in proportion more effective in him. The Church canonizes certain servants of God, and it is precisely by this title that they are first recognized

<sup>1</sup> Mt 23, 8-10.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the salutations of the Letters of Peter, James, Jude, Paul to the Romans and Philippians, and the Apocalypse.

<sup>3</sup> Apoc 19, 10.

<sup>4</sup> Apoc 22, 9.

<sup>5</sup> Heb 1, 14.

<sup>6</sup> Acts 10, 25-6.

<sup>7</sup> Acts 14, 15.

before being divided into such classes as martyr, confessor or virgin; because this is the title which gives value to all the rest. For a man to be a martyr by his own will is a contradiction in terms. 'The title of martyr is not granted to those christians who have died under torture, if it is proved that they gave themselves up to the tribunals or executioners on their own initiative. The formal course of martyrdom can be no other than charity, that is, in the last analysis, submission to the divine will. The supreme confession in the ultimate sacrifice is prepared for by the daily witness of unconditional dependence'.<sup>1</sup>

We know by the express testimony of our Lord that there is no greater love than that which consists in giving one's life for the object of one's love. And speaking of giving one's life, there are two ways of doing this: first, instantaneously by the total acceptance of the will of God which calls to martyrdom; or from day to day and from hour to hour, in every moment, by the continued acceptance of the same will of God which calls to a sacrifice of self-love. How the hierarchy of the saints is established we know only in principle, and not in fact. There are two exceptions to this principle, the two persons in whom fact and principle coincide: the Lord Jesus and the blessed virgin Mary. 'You alone are holy, Jesus Christ'. This refers not only to the essential and infinite holiness of the second person of the God who is thrice holy, but of the holiness of the servant of Yahweh *par excellence*, which he acquired during his earthly existence. And as far as the queen of martyrs and of all the saints is concerned, it was her 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord', willed, uttered and lived without a single lapse, which constitutes, on her part, the reason for her excellence above all the other servants of God. For all of them, 'it is enough for the disciple that he should grow to be like his Master'.<sup>2</sup> It is enough, but it is essential. For only those who will make the will of the Father their food, following in his footsteps in the measure which is possible for them, will be recognized as his own. But how he will love them! He will love them as he loves a brother or a sister or a mother; more than this, he will love them as he loves his own mother, because the deepest reason why he loves her is not because of the natural tie, nor even because of the fourth commandment, but because she more than

<sup>1</sup> Hausherr, I., 'Vocation chrétienne et vocation monastique selon les Pères' in *Laïcs et vie chrétienne parfaite* (Rome 1963), p 63.

<sup>2</sup> Mt 10, 24.

<sup>3</sup> Jn 16, 27; 5, 20.

anyone else became obedient, even to the death of her Jesus on the cross. It is as though he felt that the love which he gives those who have at heart his thoughts, his sentiments, of filial submission to the Father was not enough, so he assures them that the Father loves them as he loves his only Son.

And so we come once again to that Cause which is absolutely first: our perfect submission to God, which is above all else the gift of God and the great sign of his love for us, even as for Christ. According to the measure in which we wish to be loved by him, we will ask him to give us the good Spirit which he will never refuse us, the Spirit which makes us say *Abba, Father*; this is absolutely true, because he has made us children of God both by his sacraments and by his commandments: by the work of baptism and the sacraments and by the effect of fidelity to the commandments.<sup>1</sup>

Here lies the meaning of the our Father, and of all prayer. The Spirit of God knows how often we are unaware of the actual demand of God's plan for us and for every creature. Though I ask – and it is my right to ask for everything except to offend God – it must be understood once and for all that in all my prayers, in all my words and sighs, in those aspirations of mine which are hardly ever formulated, I understand and I ask that all this may be taken up, assumed, assimilated by the Spirit of God, in such a way that 'he who knows all that is in our hearts' sees only in mine one single desire that counts, 'that the pleas of the saints expressed by the Spirit are according to the mind of God'.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cf the prayer over the offerings in the votive Mass 'for Charity'.

<sup>2</sup> Rom 8, 27.

## II. THE CALL TO OBEDIENCE: THE SIGNS OF THE WILL OF GOD

There are three possible hypotheses here:

God acts in me, and his will appears, after the accomplishment, in its effect: in other words, in the event.

God asks me to act with him, and his will shows itself before the act either by a commandment, a counsel or an inspiration.

God leaves me in uncertainty, as it were to see how I will behave spontaneously.

### (A) THE EVENT

The most universal, and in a sense the clearest, manifestation of God's will is the event.

When anything happens, it can be said, at the least, that God has not prevented it. He has not prevented it: that is, he has permitted it, and clearly this is not merely a negative permission, following from ignorance, negligence or impotence, because nothing of this kind could exist in God. Rather it has happened with the full knowledge of his unfailing wisdom, of his indefectible goodness and of his infinite power. There is no reality, nor was there nor will there be, except in the measure and in the moment of its being willed by the all-powerful One who holds everything in his hands. One can speak of a negative permission in regard to sin, because sin as such is merely an absence, a privation, imputable to the creature, and possible only because the creature was originally nothing. Everything positive into which evil inserts itself, and which the sinner misuses in his pursuit of ends foreign to God's design, all that is ultimately real for the sinner himself or for others, for which the play of natural forces is set in motion, no matter how perverse the intention: all this is necessarily governed by the absolute law, 'Nothing happens without God'. 'All things were made by him, and without him there was not made any one thing of those that were made'.<sup>1</sup> These formulae and others of the same kind have their ceaseless impact on the spirit of one who believes 'in God the Father almighty, Creator of all things in heaven and earth', as scripture and the liturgy state again and again.

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<sup>1</sup> Jn 1, 3.

*The acceptance of the event*

There is here a truth which is as necessary as the very being of God: if God creates, he cannot abdicate for a single instant his sovereignty over the smallest detail of his work. This why the ancient teaching 'You will accept whatever happens as good, because you know that nothing is done without God' is really the simplest logic. What St Theresa of the Child Jesus said some seventeen centuries after this amounts to the same: 'My God, you fill me with joy because of all that you do'. All those who, like Thérèse Martin, love to reflect on their faith in God will always think this way until the end of time.

Those who do not reflect sufficiently will always be troubled by two considerations, or more accurately two sorts of confusion. The interplay of their feelings obscures and sometimes destroys the logic of their faith. There is the problem of physical evil which a good God could never permit, still less will. And there is moral evil, which a holy God could never tolerate, still less actively share. What are we to say when the moral evil of some people (their vices, their perversion, their selfishness, their opportunism, their despotism) results in indescribable sufferings for others? Does this also happen by God's action? Indeed it does! Otherwise it would be all by chance, without rhyme or reason. As Origen said long ago, 'God never does anything without reason, and he never permits anything whatever to happen without a purpose'.<sup>1</sup> Chance is merely a cover for our ignorance, 'the counsels of God hold good for ever'.<sup>2</sup>

The creative Word, which brought the universe into existence, continues to operate with the same effectivity to bring all things to their fulfilment, in the realization of the total plan foreseen and willed by the Creator.

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,  
and return not thither but water the earth,  
making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower  
and bread to the eater,  
so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth;  
it shall not return to me empty,  
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,  
and prosper in the thing for which I sent it.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In libr. I Reg. hom. I, 10 (ed Baehrens, 18, 5).

<sup>2</sup> Ps 33, 11.

<sup>3</sup> Isai 55, 10-11.



It cannot be otherwise; for God cannot cease to be God. Once we understand this, we see that it is eminently reasonable to accept first of all the plan in its entirety and then all the details involved in the plan. Intelligence is the power of seeing further than what is under our noses, of seeing the whole across the various details, and the end as the horizon of the means. The detail has its value precisely in function of the whole and the means has its value by its effectiveness in relation to the end.

To be preoccupied by a detail as though it were a whole, is to set up a centre outside the Centre: to be ex-centric. To take for a goal what is essentially a means is to condemn ourselves to be deceived twice over, because the means cannot satisfy us of itself, and because the end which would satisfy us will thus escape us. This is an everyday story: a path which detains us by its own diversions does not lead us to our destination in the time allowed; studies which engross our attention immoderately prove a stumbling block in the preparation for the examination; meals where we indulge out of sheer greed ruin our health instead of building us up. And on the other hand, reason and instinct themselves indicate to us that we must not shirk using some means which may be painful in themselves when we know or believe that the end is worth it. All history bears witness to the same truth, the hope of achievement is the source from which every effort springs, and the cause of all search for progress.

The event then shows us a will of God; but what is the will that is shown? First of all the fact, considered in itself, assures me that God has willed it not as an end but as a means to the end. It is as such that I ought to will it in my turn, at least by resigning myself, like Jesus in his agony: 'May your will not mine be done', if it is psychologically impossible for me to do it joyfully, as Jesus did on the return of his seventy two disciples: 'I bless you, Lord of heaven and earth . . . yes, Father, for such is your good pleasure'.<sup>1</sup> But even this impossibility I will accept as willed by him. For in both cases, as in all cases, I will always say: 'Father'. This is the expression of my faith and of my submission.

And here we ought to let our imaginations wander through all the dimensions of space and time, in order that we may come to appreciate the immensity of the field of action in which the will of God's good pleasure is expressed, and compare it with the narrow

<sup>1</sup> Lk 10, 21.

confines of the field of action left to my own will. Everything that happens to me, that happens without the actual collaboration of my freedom, is willed by God *for me*.

The wills of others, even those which are sinful in themselves, only have their impact upon me by the play of co-operating physical forces, and not formally by the sin which they commit. Sin rebounds on the sinner; that is why it is always the sinner who is most to be pitied, even if, and especially then, he succeeds in his enterprises. The second consideration is of special concern to our charity for our neighbour. But for the moment let us consider further the acceptance of the will of God's good pleasure. Holy scripture contains whole books whose purpose is to teach this truth: the just man lives by faith, that is, like Abraham, the father of all who believe, he gives credit to God and counts on the fulfilment of God's promises, not only when such faith is contrary to all appearances, but also by sacrificing, at God's single word, the very thing which constitutes God's unique and necessary pledge. The principle is stated in the wisdom of Jesus Ben Sirach: 'My son, if you aspire to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for an ordeal'.<sup>1</sup> The Jerusalem Bible has a note here: 'A favourite Old Testament theme, particularly in the psalms'. The same theme is the subject of the entire Book of Job, on which St Gregory commented at such length. And the story of Tobias is condensed in this maxim: 'Because you were pleasing to God, you had to be tested'.<sup>2</sup>

Here too is summed up the entire history of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, and of his disciples: 'This Jesus of Nazareth, a man recommended to you by God . . . this man was put into your power by the deliberate intention and foreknowledge of God, and you took him and put him to death by nailing him to the cross through the hands of impious men'.<sup>3</sup> 'God himself has accomplished what he foretold through the words of the prophets'.<sup>4</sup> So speaks St Peter. And St Paul: 'What the people of Jerusalem and their leaders have done is to accomplish without knowing it the words of the prophets read out each sabbath'.<sup>5</sup> Whether it was ignorance or a crime on the part of Judas, Caiphas, Pilate and the rest, is of little importance; what was brought about in the person of Christ was the plan of the Father.

This profound philosophy or theology finds its best expression in

<sup>1</sup> Sir 2, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Tob 12, 13.

<sup>3</sup> Acts 2, 23.

<sup>4</sup> Acts 3, 18.

<sup>5</sup> Acts 13, 27.

a variant of the First Letter of St Peter. The vulgate says: 'Christ was delivered up to him who judged him unjustly'.<sup>1</sup> On this text Bossuet preached a very eloquent and realistic sermon. But the Greek reads: 'He was delivered up to him who judges justly'. That is, of course, to God his Father. Bossuet's sermon still has its point, but it concentrates too much on the external. At a deeper level than all appearance and all visible realities, the Son of God made man lived in that hour, which was *his hour*, the most intense act of his filial life, a life human and divine, the act of his supreme obedience to the Father. It was by this act that he saved the world. If he had done the impossible and refused his obedience, or – this amounts to the same thing – if he had merely surrendered to violence without the formal interior submission to love, what would have happened?

It is not surprising that those who were formed in the school of such a master, the first christians, although they were not learned men according to the wisdom of their times, show a metaphysical penetration equal or superior to that of the greatest philosophers. When Peter and John, after being arrested and then released by order of the Sanhedrin, had reported on all that the high priests and elders had said to them, the faithful,

when they heard it, lifted their voices together to God and said, 'Sovereign Lord, it is you who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them, you it is who spoke by the mouth of our father David your servant and said by the holy Spirit, 'Why did the gentiles rage and the people imagine a vain thing? The kings of the earth set themselves in array, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed'.<sup>2</sup>

This is what has come true: in this city Herod and Pilate made an alliance with the pagan nations and with the people of Israel against your holy servant Jesus whom you anointed, but only to bring about that which you in your strength and your wisdom had predetermined should take place.<sup>3</sup>

Leagues, plots, intrigues, alliances, hypocrisy, opportunism, malice: whatever the evil practices of enemies or false friends; when I become an object of hatred for the whole world, as Jesus predicted for those who were his own; when the cause of all my sufferings is due to the sins of others, as it was for Jesus himself, who was still

<sup>1</sup> 1 Pet 2, 24.

<sup>2</sup> Ps 2, 1-2.

<sup>3</sup> Acts 4, 25-8.

the only and well-beloved Son at Gethsemane and on Calvary no less than on Tabor; then I ought, in that moment more than at any other time, to take up the arms of faith, believing, in my wretchedness, in the good news which was preached to the poor: 'Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for your reward will be great in heaven'.<sup>1</sup> The reward will be as great as the glory which Christ acquired by his passion,<sup>2</sup> not so much because of the cruelty involved, but because the passion, through the sin of the world and the cowardliness of the administrators, furnished him with the most marvellous occasion for behaving as a loving Son, and glorifying his Father by his obedience.

'Think of him who endured such hostility from sinners, and you will not grow weary and fainthearted. You have not yet resisted in your struggle against sin to the point of shedding your blood. Have you forgotten those encouraging words in which you are addressed as sons?

'My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor lose courage when you are punished by him.

For the Lord disciplines him whom he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives'.<sup>3</sup>

Suffering is part of your formation. God is treating you as sons. Has there ever been a son whose father did not train him? If you were left without this training, in which you all have a share, you would not be sons, but bastards. Besides, we have all had earthly fathers to train us, and we respected them. Ought we not to be even more willing to be subject to our spiritual Father, and so be given life? Our human fathers were thinking of a short life when they disciplined us, and could do only what they thought best: but he does it all for our own good, that we may share his holiness.<sup>4</sup>

#### *Interpretation of the event*

St Basil states in two short words the principle of this filial submission in this regard to events: *ouden apronoëton*: from God's side, nothing is unforeseen, nothing left to chance.<sup>5</sup>

It is precisely in so far as it is willed by God as a means that an event has a limited existence in time and space; but more than this, it has the value of a sign, which it is for me to interpret. We are

<sup>1</sup> Lk 6, 23.

<sup>2</sup> Lk 4, 26.

<sup>3</sup> Prov 3, 11-12.

<sup>4</sup> Heb 12, 3-10.

<sup>5</sup> In *Hexaem* VII 15 (PG 29, 161).

not speaking of a prophetic or a messianic sign for a whole generation,<sup>1</sup> but a sign for me who experiences the event, the sign of a direction for the future which may be more or less close at hand. It is not at all a question of testing the Lord by some superstitious practice, an omen or a reading of a dream for example, but a warning about doing something or not doing something for the love of God and of one's neighbour.

First with regard to the neighbour: there are many events of varying importance, which show one or other of my contemporaries in a new light. I see my neighbour more in need, more worthy of sympathy, more open or more hostile to my ideas, more or less capable of understanding and collaborating. The interest that I have for my neighbour ought to make me really attentive to opportunities and occasions for knowing him better. There is no attitude more unjust, more lazy and egotistical, than to have one's judgments fixed, coagulated as it were by facts and figures.

To begin with the most obvious: it would be a sheer insult to employ towards the pains and problems of others a superficial resignation, abstract and platitudinous. Such an attitude is as common in our day as it was in the time of St James. 'If a brother or a sister is poorly clad or has not enough food to subsist on, and one of you says to them, Go in peace, keep yourself warm, eat well, without giving them these bare necessities of life, what good is that'?<sup>2</sup>

To love our neighbour as ourselves is the most formidable and exigent of commands; it ought to inspire and excite in me the same vitality of thought and activity for others which would move me for myself. There is only one limiting factor: physical or moral impossibility. 'Whoever has the opportunity to come to the aid of his neighbour and does not do it will be counted as a stranger to charity'.<sup>3</sup> So speaks St Irenaeus, and the sentence is no more than a summary of the doctrine of the Lord.<sup>4</sup> Our various encounters with our neighbour have very many different dimensions. They all provoke in me reactions which spring from the qualities of my soul. Modern means of social communication have meant an immense widening of our perceptions. In the past, distant peoples seemed rather like myths; the imagination was free to range at will about them; one did not actually *know* them or very much about them; still less could one *do* anything to help them. Today we can travel more easily to India or to Japan than our great grandparents from

<sup>1</sup> Cf Mt 16, 1-4.

<sup>3</sup> Irenaeus, Fragments (ed. Harvey, II p 477).

<sup>2</sup> Jas 2, 15-16.

<sup>4</sup> Mt 25, 45.

London to Edinburgh or New York to Boston. And when we do not travel there, the Antipodes can come to us by press, radio and television, without it costing us any greater effort than to open our eyes or not to close our ears.

These contacts do not in themselves change the feelings, the intentions or habits. Good or bad thoughts always come from within.<sup>1</sup> This widening of our perspectives, a quantitative phenomenon, will not of itself change our egoism into self-sacrifice, our search for entertainment into forgetfulness of ourselves to the benefit of others. If those in my immediate environment are simply occasions for self-gratification or self-pity, or even of hostility, by what miracle would the sight of an unknown distant people on television inspire me with the courage, or even the idea, of depriving myself or inconveniencing myself for their sakes. Knowledge of underdeveloped or mal-nourished people in itself does nothing more than create fresh fields to exploit, conquer and enslave; and even if the present state of world opinion, penetrated despite everything by some gleam of the gospel, forces men to hide their wolfish nature by going about as lambs, even if they do something for others, it will be a gesture more or less artfully trumpeted forth to the world, a fanfare to get them the glory of men.<sup>2</sup>

For men like these, the event, whatever its importance, is only a sign of the possibility of profit. For Christ, the most hideous of cosmic realities, sin, was simply an occasion for dedicating himself to death on a cross, with the consciousness of interpreting the will of his Father exactly, offering himself freely to this total sacrifice of himself for his brothers.

And here precisely is the meaning of all events for those who make it their profession to follow Jesus Christ. The man whom I meet today, though he is a samaritan and I am a jew, or the reverse, if I see him happy I will rejoice in his joy; if I find that he is unhappy, I will feel his pain as though it were my own, and I will relieve him according to the means at my disposal.

I will not begin by preaching to others as though I myself were without reproach. Above all, if I have an official function in one of the great charitable organizations which have sprung up in the old christian countries, and only there, I will guard myself from all pharisaism, all self-interest. I will make any appeals I have to make, not for the sake of sordid gain, but spontaneously and more

<sup>1</sup> Cf Mt 7, 14-23.

<sup>2</sup> Cf Mt 6, 2.

by my example than by my words. Our worldly generosity and eloquence ought to carry with them the humble and habitual proof of authenticity in all the little daily happenings which are themselves the first call of our Lord to obey his commandments. And yet with what willingness and dexterity we turn a deaf ear or a blind eye to them. On the pretext of taking part in great works which bring us distinction, we have no time for the small attentions and tiny sacrifices which are only seen in the secret places of our hearts by our heavenly Father.

I am young and strong, and yet I persist in looking out of the window of the train or the bus when I ought to offer my seat to an old man or woman. This is none other than to refuse to obey the sign of the superior's will, the only Superior.

I have a ready tongue, and people listen to me and even admire me. So I stare at this poor foreigner, who can hardly get a word out, continuing to do so, playing the game over and over again, because I am insatiable in my personal vanity and incapable in this matter of loving my neighbour as myself even for a few moments. And God above all things? Presently I will be praying to the Lord, perhaps before the tabernacle, saying that I love no one but him. But in this moment it is the presence of my fellow man which ought to recall to my mind another expression which sums up a whole page of the gospel, 'You have seen your brother, you have seen God'. How careful I am not to interpret this sign and recognize this representation of Christ; for it would mean having to attempt the impossible, to bridle my tongue.<sup>1</sup>

And so it goes on, incessantly. For the man who is preoccupied with living as a son of God, every encounter furnishes an opportunity for exercising and finding the joy of a son and a brother. To begin with the intelligence: instead of making myself impregnable in the fastness of my own ideas, on the lookout always to repel an enemy or pick out a suspect, I will instead have a sympathy that goes before, always open to any human being crossing my field of vision; he has only to appear to release in me a feeling of kindness, ready at the least sign to transform itself into the kindly action. To every passer-by I will say interiorly: 'May the blessing of God be upon you'!<sup>2</sup> and as long as I live I will with St Polycarp 'remember in my prayers all those I have ever met, small or great, famous or unknown, and of the whole catholic church and of the world'.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cf Jas 3, 8.

<sup>2</sup> Cf Ps 128, 8.

<sup>3</sup> *Mart. Polycarp*, VIII, 1.

It would seem that we have wandered far from our subject of obedience? No, it is not so: docility to the holy Spirit, the sign of all christian perfection, demands 'that we seek to excel in obedience not only in the things which are commanded us but even in others, even where there is simply a sign of the will of the superior without any express command'.<sup>1</sup> Or is such promptness only due to those who transmit God's commands, and not first of all to the God who gives them?

Some events affect myself alone – my sicknesses for example. These as well, when I have accepted them because they are the effects of the divine good pleasure, are a sign for action: I must do whatever depends on me to cure them. Sickness as well provides me with the means for living my filial submission to God in its entirety. I accept what he does without me, and I do with him and in dependence on him what he seems to desire that I should do. Active and passive conformity to the divine will comprise an alternating movement: there is the perpetual consent on my part to the aspiration which, coming from God, draws me to him; the desire of the Spirit which, as it is fulfilled, itself fulfils the Father's plan.

It is not only sickness which gives me this sort of information. All that contradicts my legitimate desires or puts my plans out of joint, all my failures, call to me to assent to the fact that they are a sign of God's good pleasure. They also contain a hint for the future, less easy to interpret perhaps than in the case of bad health, because they simply concern themselves with various temporal works, and not with the possibility or impossibility of working. Yet our whole human existence is shot through with failures, catastrophic or of little importance. If, instead of facing them simply with temperamental reactions which expose us either to a superficial lightheartedness or to melancholy, we saw them for what they truly are, the details of providential working, we would find in them both the certainty of God's will which is in the course of being accomplished, and the possibility of accomplishing ourselves the will of God. These events, then, in the realm of faith, can be said to be doubly important and doubly blessed.

#### (B) COMMANDMENT

Each event, then, carries with it a commandment, if only we knew how to interpret it. Creation itself, to start with: 'Ever since

<sup>1</sup> Ignatius Loyola, *Constitutiones S.J.*, VI, 1, 1.



God created the world, his invisible nature, that is, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. That is why such people are without excuse; for they knew God and they refused to honour him as God and to give him thanks'.<sup>1</sup> The universe itself is a call to adoration.

Lack of understanding of this first sign has idolatry as its logical sequel: either formal idolatry, or its equivalent in the pursuit of a substitute for the true final end, and all the deviations that flow from this fundamental error: 'And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a base mind and to improper conduct. So they were filled with all manner of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice . . . though they know what God's decree is that those who do such things deserve death, yet they not only do them but, what is worse, they approve of those who do the same'.<sup>2</sup> If the call which the universe contains to adoration of the Creator has not been understood by the whole human race, it is not surprising that the invitation to obey which is contained in every event should so often pass us by. It is an incomprehensible language to those who do not possess the key or the principle of interpretation, living faith in the living and true God.

### *The benefit of the law*

These considerations help us to understand the great benefit which the law, the decalogue, the gift of God, conferred upon his people. 'By an act of free choice, by a loving plan conceived from creation's beginning and pursued despite all men's waywardness, Yahweh formed a nation and made that nation his . . . But in return he demands loyalty from his people: if Israel withholds this fidelity, if she sins, the bond may be broken that God's love has made'.<sup>3</sup> What we need to understand here is the quality, the goodness, the excellence of this gift which merits ceaseless thanks, because it shows that God's love is everlasting: 'Give thanks to God for he is good, his love endures for ever'.<sup>4</sup>

It follows therefore that he is happy 'who never follows the advice of the wicked . . . but finds his pleasure in the law of God, and repeats his law day and night'.<sup>5</sup> The longest of the psalms is nothing more than an eulogy on the divine law: 'Ah, how happy are those of blameless life who walk in the law of the Lord'.<sup>6</sup> To respect

<sup>1</sup> Rom 1, 20-21.

<sup>2</sup> Rom 1, 28 ff.

<sup>3</sup> Jerusalem Bible (London, 1967), Introduction to the Pentateuch, p. 13.

<sup>4</sup> Ps 106, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Ps 1.

<sup>6</sup> Ps 118.

his decrees, to seek him with one's whole heart, to walk in his ways, to treasure his promises, to meditate on his precepts; the psalmist multiplies expressions which show the same attitude of submission, the same feeling of love for God's will and the same recompense – a happiness unknown to the arrogant. But the pious israelite also knows that his very fidelity to the law is a grace of God. So he asks: 'Teach me, O God, the way of your will, and I will always respect it. Explain to me how to respect your law and how to observe it wholeheartedly. Guide me in the path of your commandments, since my delight is there'.

The psalmist does not appear able to imagine that there can be an aversion for the commandments amongst those who know their true meaning. The love of the law is the same for him as the love of God. Moses had spoken in the same sense:

Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be written on your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. And you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. And you shall write them upon the doorposts of your houses and on your gates.<sup>1</sup>

So it is that love for God and intelligent love for oneself are equally fulfilled in the faithful observance of the commandments; and love of one's neighbour as well, not only because seven out of ten of the precepts of the decalogue concern human relations, but chiefly because submission to God predisposes the spirit and the heart to justice and to kindness towards the children of God, who are his servants as we are.

#### *Uncertainties*

We are left now with a task as important as it is difficult: to grasp at each moment, or at least on every new occasion, the true sense of the commandment. What does it mean, for instance, to honour one's parents, both in general and for me in my own circumstances here and now? There are many different possible

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<sup>1</sup> Deut 6, 4 ff.

interpretations, according to the varying meaning of the word 'to honour' in each period of time; and it depends also on the preoccupation of the interpreter, whether he is a beneficiary or a subject of the commandment. The pharisees themselves, the élite, as specialists and observers of the law, drew from our Lord this reproach: 'Why do you transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God has said, do your duty to your father and your mother; you have made God's word null and void by means of your tradition'.<sup>1</sup> And how many more fallacies did they not perpetrate in their pretence to infallibility! They believed that they alone had the key to theological and moral knowledge,<sup>2</sup> and had nothing but contempt for the common people: 'This rabble knows nothing about the law'.<sup>3</sup> Their blindness is worse because they supposed themselves to have clearer sight: 'If you were blind you would be without sin; but you say: We can see. So your guilt remains'.<sup>4</sup>

It is only a step from the pedantry of learning to the affectation of moral perfection. In fact the two make common cause together, love of one's own excellence. Theoretically, their study should have inclined the pharisees to humble thoughts about themselves and true regard for others. But these are abstract possibilities which are hardly ever verified in fact. In any case pharisaism remains a sufficiently real danger for any man conscious of superiority, in our time as well as in any other; and this no matter how often it is pointed out that one needs to take every possible means to be on one's guard against it; the most efficacious means consists of not relying on oneself either for knowledge or for virtue.

'He addressed the following parable to certain people who prided themselves on being virtuous and despised everyone else': the parable of the pharisee and the publican. Everyone is acquainted with it and God knows what influence it has exerted for two thousand years in the introduction of a little honesty, truth and loyalty into the eternal lie which has been woven from human complacency. 'Every man is a liar' the psalm says, and St Paul repeats the words.<sup>5</sup> The most recent latin translation of the breviary replaced *mendax* with *fallax*, mistaken and this is an enrichment rather than a weakening of the sense. A man does not lie only when he speaks, his whole exterior deportment is calculated to deceive. And more than this, he succeeds only too often in deceiving his own self, so intent is he on being unlike the rest, so that he may be noticed,

<sup>1</sup> Mt 15, 3 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Cf Lk 11, 52.

<sup>3</sup> Jn 7, 49.

<sup>4</sup> Jn 9, 41.

<sup>5</sup> Ps 51, 6; Rom 3, 4.

praised, admired. Even when he is aware of his conscience's warning, he often prefers to honesty and good sense what the latin poet has justly called 'the most egregious error of the mind'.<sup>1</sup>

*The origin of the monastic life*

The previous considerations can be summed up in a few simple propositions:

1. The only good of the creature is the fulfilment of God's plan.
2. Because man has been unable to recognise this plan in the whole of creation, and in the details of happenings, the divine goodness has made his desires known in the law, in the decalogue promulgated by Moses.
3. This law the Son of God made man came to bring to perfection by his doctrine and to illustrate by his life. The difficulty still remains, however, of knowing what the will of God is in the multiple affairs of actual living.
4. This is why certain christians, anxious never to stray from the royal road of the service of God, imagined that the law could be made known to them by others whenever they were in doubt about their own understanding and their own righteousness.

So it was that the monastic life was born in the Church: not by an act of authority, but by a desire for submission. At least it was so in its origins, and it ought still to be so in principle. Put in other terms, the important thing is not that an order should be given by a man, nor even that an order should be received and executed by another man, but that the servant of God should bear witness to his complete submission to God by his desire to know God's will as perfectly as possible. This distinction merits the most careful examination. Without it one runs the risk of a false understanding of christian obedience, whether monastic or otherwise. This submission is seen as given to God himself, and to him alone. The intervention of an intermediary does not change anything, either in the essence of it or in the merit of it; mediation merely increases or facilitates certainty: that is, when the commandment transmitted – and it is never, in fact, anything but a transmission – by the human instrument is not openly contrary to the divine law, the subject who obeys has a complete certainty not only of his own intention of submitting to God, but in relation to the object of his submission.

<sup>1</sup> Horace, *Epistles*, II, 2, 140.

If there remains an objective doubt, it is the transmitter who bears the responsibility of it.

Nothing is easier than to document this assertion. Monasticism began with the eremitical life, even if St Paul the first hermit never existed. But the life of Antony does not leave any doubt. Antony left all he had to follow the gospel, having heard in church one day what our Lord had said to the rich young man ('If you wish to be perfect, go and sell what you have and give your money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me'), and recalling that the apostles had left all things and followed Christ, 'he considered this thought as sent to him from God'. The father of monks began his ascetical life with this very conscious act of obedience towards God, without the intervention of any superior. Later, and always with the desire of serving God, he began to frequent the company of other servants of God, not to submit himself to them, but to be instructed 'about the things in which each of them excelled in the exercises of the solitary life'.<sup>1</sup>

In the long discourse which St Athanasius attributes to him in order to expound his ideas on perfection, there is indeed a question of obedience, but always directly to God: 'we are servants of God and obliged to render him complete obedience'.<sup>2</sup> To ensure this, the most necessary virtue is the discernment of spirits. Cassian reports Antony as saying that,<sup>3</sup> just as St Athanasius does. The apophthegms of the Fathers reveal or presuppose the same situation everywhere: it is not for superiors to command either on their own initiative or even in virtue of a command received from on high; they are the seekers in quest of replies to their queries, theoretical or practical. The only important thing is to know the path of salvation, the will of God for all our activities, interior and exterior, individual and social.

The life of St Pachomius teaches us the same truth even more clearly if that is possible:

Pachomius was depressed and his heart full of anguish in his yearning to know the will of God. It was still night; and suddenly there stood before him a being full of light who said to him: 'Why are you sad and why is there sorrow in your heart'? He replied: 'It is because I am seeking the will of God'.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Vita Antonii*, chs 2 and 4.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, ch 18.

<sup>3</sup> Cassian, *Collationes*, II, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Cf Draguet, R., *Les Pères du désert* (Paris, 1949), p 88.

Pachomius was the founder of the cenobitical life. It is true that this institution did not change the notion of obedience, as could easily have happened; for it goes without saying that any community needs government. But there are different forms of government and different ways of governing: there is a form which Jesus Christ reproves, and another which he proposes by his doctrine and his example.

Pachomius, whilst a prisoner of war, had made this compact before God: 'O God, if I escape this peril, in which I am, by your help I will put myself at the service of men in honour of your name'. This personal resolution had not given him certainty. He who appeared to him gave him this reply to his anguished questioning: 'The will of God is that a man put himself at the service of men to reconcile them to God. To which Pachomius replied almost irritably, 'I am seeking the will of God, and you tell me to serve men'!. Yet the apparition repeated the message three times: 'The will of God is that a man put himself at the service of men to invite them to go to God'. The fact that this revelation and the resolution that he had himself taken coincided, finally convinced Pachomius. He now had what he desired more than anything else: knowledge of the will of God.

This will of God put him at the service of other men, to lead them, like himself, to peace with God, by attachment to the divine will alone. This service, this will to serve, makes Pachomius in the eyes of his brethren 'the man in whom they trust and their father before God'.

It was precisely this will to serve others in order to lead them to God which brought about the transformation to the cenobitical life. At first 'each one was sufficient for himself and was engaged in working on his own; but then they made a common purse to relieve the material needs of all'. This change was not without its difficulties; there still lacked the essential prerequisite: the love of the will of God and the desire to know it. 'Their heart was not sincerely turned toward the Lord'.<sup>1</sup> It was more convenient, they found, to make use of the services of Pachomius in a very down to earth sense, using him as masters use servants: 'Pachomius, our servant', they said, 'look after the baggage and carry the monastery on your back'.<sup>2</sup> Pachomius patiently endured this for four or five years; and then he understood that his first experiment was a failure. After praying for a long time, he sent away the oddities,

<sup>1</sup> Draguet. *op. cit.*, p 92.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p 93.

and decided not to admit in the future any who were not 'resolved in their own heart to do penance before God'. In one year he sent away as many as a hundred at a time when 'the brethren of the entire monastery of the congregation were scarcely three hundred and sixty'.<sup>1</sup> St Benedict, two centuries later, spoke of these monks as 'the worst possible kind of monastics', who 'lie to God through their tonsure'. It was not for nothing that they carried the coptic name of *Sarabaites*: they mistook their own desire for the will of God. 'Whatever preference came into their head, they called that holy, and whatever they had repugnance for they judged it to be wrong'.<sup>2</sup> Even worse than the *Sarabaites* were the *Gyrovages*: 'servants to their own will, of whom it is better to say nothing'.<sup>3</sup> Thus Pachomius replaced anarchy with organization. But he did not change the fundamental principle of his government: it remained a service, and never degenerated into authoritarianism. Let us make this more precise: authority, the function of the superior or the exercise of this function, never became an end in itself. It remained, on the contrary, a means for the sole end of the christian life, whether monastic or not, which is to find peace of soul in the fulfilment of the divine will, whatever it is.

When he was face to face with death and the judgment, Pachomius made his plea before his brethren:

You all know well enough what my aim has been. I have never reprimanded any of you simply because I had authority, but for the good of your souls. I have never transferred any one of you from one residence to another, from one occupation to another, unless it was for your benefit. I have never in my life returned evil for evil; I have never insulted anyone who has insulted me, never giving way to impatience or anger, but rather instructing the other with patience so that he should not sin against the Lord, and saying to him: 'You may sin against *me*, for I am a man like you; well and good! Only keep yourself from sinning against the God who made you'. Never until now have I protected myself from a rebuke which was justified, even when it was addressed to me by a younger one.<sup>4</sup> And when I prepared to set out for any place or any monastery I have never said, just because I had authority: 'Give me an ass to ride on'.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Draguet, *op cit.*, p 109.

<sup>2</sup> *Regula Benedicti*, I, 6-9.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 10-12.

<sup>4</sup> One who is not a superior.

<sup>5</sup> Draguet, *op. cit.*, pp 116-17.

The desire for religious life arose out of a hunger and thirst after justice, that is, out of love of submission to God for the good of the people of God, and not at all to give certain individuals the satisfaction of being in authority or the occasion of gaining privileges for themselves or the means of conferring honours on themselves.

Pachomius was sick for a very long time:

For forty days he kept to his bed in the common infirmary of the brothers, and was treated in exactly the same way as all the rest, without receiving any preferential service, according to the recommendation which he had made to them beforehand.<sup>1</sup> His body was worn out with the length of his illness... Then he said to Theodore: 'Have the goodness to bring an old covering for me, for this one is too heavy and I cannot bear its weight; now it is forty days that I have been sick and I thank the Lord for it'. Straightway Theodore went to get a good light covering from the keeper of the store; he brought it and covered Pachomius with it. But when our father noticed the difference in the covering, he was angry with Theodore and said to him: 'Theodore, you have committed a great evil. Do you want me to be an object of scandal for the brethren? They will say after I am gone: when Pachomius was alive he took his ease more than the rest of the brethren; and thus I will incur the judgment of the Lord'. Then Theodore took it away from him, and brought him an older and worse covering than all the brethren had when they were in the infirmary, and comforted him with it.<sup>2</sup>

Any self-seeking, any complacency in the thought of oneself as different from others, any satisfaction taken independently of the will of God, is an irrelevance, if not an infidelity, for the christian who is resolved to live by his faith. Three days before his death, Pachomius called together all the great ones of the monastery (that is, those of the brethren who were in authority) and said to them: 'Now I am going to the Lord who made us and who has united us with each other to do his will'. He showed the same preoccupation with the future: 'the successor of Pachomius would have to be the one who will build up your souls in the Lord'. He said that there was no need to weep at his going, 'since it is the order of the Lord given to his subject that I should go to join the fathers'.

<sup>1</sup> Draguet, *op. cit.*, p 107.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p 118-19.



And the ancient biographer ends the paragraph fittingly with the statement that 'the Lord had seen that Pachomius, in order to accomplish God's will, had crucified his flesh in every way'.<sup>1</sup>

*How to maintain this spirit*

This is the essential idea which gave birth to the monastic and the religious life: the desire to walk with sure step in the way of the will of God, to co-operate without error in the accomplishment of the plans of God. Superiors and subjects ought to have no other aim than this; and whatever constitutes a deviation from this way merits condemnation, from whatever side it comes. This will always be so in all the ages and all the places where christianity flourishes.

Hasn't monasticism always maintained in its purity at least the principle of this essential law, if not its practice? Such a historical question is not without great interest, but here is not the place to treat it. What is necessary in each era is to examine actual practice in the light of the eternal doctrine and the primitive practice of it, in so far as the latter appears to have a doctrinal value.

Between its origins and the present time, there could be two causes of corruption of the original meaning of the monastic institution: the arrogance of some and the heedlessness of others: arrogance, in its etymological sense of arrogating to oneself rights which do not belong to one; heedlessness, in the sense of letting things slide, of indifference, of a passive resistance.

Arrogance: there have been royal abbots – a thing of ridicule; but there has been worse; abbots who lived like princes, a disgusting thing. All this is no longer true, thank God, but some of its effects can linger.

Heedlessness: there have been monks without a vocation, that is, those who have entered the monastery with motives which were not simply care concerning the will of God. Compulsive vocations scarcely ever exist in our day. But there can still be lost vocations, that is, monks according to their habit but no longer according to their will. Some take too much interest in their work and come to forget that they are first of all monks and only incidentally superiors. Others no longer take a real interest in their quality as monks and become disaffected from their superiors, with the result that they are disaffected from the will of God.

In life in common, superiors and subjects form such a spiritual

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 120-121.

solidarity that the word of St Paul is literally verified in them: 'If one member is harmed all the other members suffer with it'.<sup>1</sup> The harm will obviously be the greater, the greater the number of subjects affected and the more important their function. It would be difficult for a community to fall away entirely from the ideal under a superior who keeps the ideal intact for himself. It is only too easy for a superior, unfaithful to the spirit of his ministry, to cause the falling away of a community. That is why it is not enough to preach obedience to subjects constantly. Still less is it normal for superiors to do this without taking into account that they run the risk of obtaining the exact opposite of what they desire. Starved for lack of spiritual sustenance, tired of always being treated as suspect rebels, certain in advance that when the superior opens his mouth before the community it will be to claim still more subjection, and that with continual reinforcement from the letter of the law, legislative, capitulary, exhortatory, prohibitive, without ever a brotherly word coming unpremeditated from the heart filled with Christ; such government can only lead to revolt among subjects, or to what is worse, deception, disgust, and a disaffection so profound that any goodwill, even of heroic mould, will not succeed in neutralizing the poison.

The only remedy, or at least the only prophylactic, is to preach charity, first by example and then by word: charity in all its length and breadth, with all its demands, its joys, its renunciations: in other words *the theology of the will of God, trinity, charity*. Unless one reaches this high plane and continues to live on that plane, the christian life and the religious life will be emptied of its substance. The relationship of head and members becomes merely human, or inhuman.

The first representative of Christ as head of the Church, St Peter, gives this warning to pastors. After reminding his listeners that salvation requires great patience, faith in God and the practice of good works, Peter continues:

Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will do right and entrust their souls to a faithful Creator.

So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is to be revealed. Tend the flock of God that is your charge, not by constraint but willingly, not for

<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor 12, 16.

shameful gain but eagerly, not as domineering over those in your charge but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd is manifested you will obtain the unfading crown of glory.

To the young amongst you, be submissive to the elders and let all of you in your relationships with one another gird yourselves in the garment of humility, because God sets himself against the proud and gives his good favour to the humble.<sup>1</sup>

There are several things to be noted in this text. First of all whoever writes these lines has retained the term used by the Master in speaking of the rulers of this world: *katakurieuin*, a word which is found only once elsewhere in the New Testament, and used of the devil.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, this exhortation to superiors is ten times as long as that which is addressed exclusively to subjects. Thirdly, what he considers to be equally necessary for the one as for the other is humility; and the word that he uses here means literally to wrap or fasten tightly around oneself the garment known as the *egkomboma*, that is, the outer garment used by slaves and shepherds. It is hardly possible to hear this without thinking of the time when the chief Shepherd, the prince of pastors, wrapped a towel around his waist to render the most humble of services that he, the Master and Lord, could do for those who were his own.<sup>3</sup> Like him, we must all, superiors and subjects, always be girded with that garment in some way as a sign of our promptness to serve our brethren. Fourthly, such virtue as this can be practised constantly only if it finds its place in the passion of Christ and his glorification. It presupposes that we never lose sight of the only true greatness that God confers at the right moment on those who, having resisted the temptation to vainglory from the devil who is always on the prowl, know how to humble themselves under the mighty hand of God.<sup>4</sup>

This way of presenting living relationships does not only respond to revealed theology; it draws on experience and psychology. One does not attain a true obedience, one that is spontaneous and freely given, unless one begins by scrupulously respecting the truth. The truth is only such if it is total, and its unfolding is only right if it respects this totality. Respect for the totality of truth includes a care for the right order of things; partial expressions of the truth must leave room for the other parts; it must not arrogate to itself that which suits the individual, in pursuit of a personal end.

<sup>1</sup> 1 Pet 5, 1 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Acts 19, 16.

<sup>3</sup> Cf Jn 13, 13 ff.

<sup>4</sup> Cf 1 Pet 5, 6 ff.

The exercise of authority does not have for its end the satisfaction of my personal instincts and temperament, nor the development of my talents for government, nor to dispense me, for a higher motive, for my ordinary submission to God; nor anything, in a word which distinguishes me from the common lot of mortals in this world. The exercise of authority has for its end the simple contribution, in a particular situation, to the most perfect realization of God's universal plan for his creatures, for those creatures especially confided to my fraternal care.

St Peter does not seem to fear that his insistence on the duties of the elders should provoke amongst the younger a reaction of disobedience. It would be very naive psychologically to behave as if the best means of obtaining from one side or the other any sort of virtue was to make the two more and more unsympathetic. That is the method of despots, *katakuriuein*, reduced by poverty of spirit and lack of nobility of soul to take as their motto '*Let them hate me as long as they fear me*'. This is precisely the method which Christ reprehends and forbids to his disciples, because he is the wisdom of God, the Word of God made man, meek and humble of heart; and he knows what is in men's hearts.

Only truth delivers from vice and leads to virtue.

### III. OBEDIENCE IN RELIGIOUS LIFE

#### (A) PRESUPPOSITIONS

The theology of God's will, as we have treated it, is simply truth in the sphere of authority and submission. All we have to do now is to apply these principles to the details of individual and community life.

As individual persons we are all brothers. None of us has any legitimate power over any other. Do not call anyone Master or Father. You have only one Father, who is in heaven, and one Master, Christ. It follows that all the power of one creature over another is legitimate only in so far as it is delegated, and it becomes usurpation if it goes beyond the limits of the received delegation. 'You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above', said our Lord to Pilate;<sup>1</sup> and St Paul, in his turn, said: 'There is no authority except from God'.<sup>2</sup> When the scribes and pharisees sit on the chair of Moses, we must practise and observe whatever they tell us<sup>3</sup> because of their office, but we must not on any account do what they do. But what happens if perhaps they tell us to do what they do? Or if their orders or their recommendations flow from their conduct, whether to justify it or to disguise it? This precisely is the difficulty: the subject of such a superior, far from finding in him his true good which is the certainty of the will of God, has the constant, additional worry of trying to find out if his superior is speaking to him in the name of received authority, or is abusing this authority for his personal ends. The criterion once again will be that of Peter and John, 'Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God'.<sup>4</sup>

The very fact that this possibility of conflict exists shows that obedience has never the right to be entirely and absolutely blind. Somehow or other I need to be certain that, in obeying, I am not being led into error. It is this need which has led to the institution of orders, of congregations, of monasteries in holy Church.

It has always been difficult for an individual to find the ideal spiritual father;<sup>5</sup> and nowadays it is certainly no easier. But Christ our Lord, who is the only teacher, the unique representative by nature of the fatherhood of God, has catered for this need by founding the Church. It is not holy mother Church who founds

<sup>1</sup> Jn 19, 11.

<sup>2</sup> Rom 13, 1.

<sup>3</sup> Mt. 23, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Acts 4, 18.

<sup>5</sup> Cf Hausherr I., *Direction Spirituelle en Orient autrefois* (Rome, 1955), pp 56-123.

religious orders; she knows by experience that this is not necessary. It is enough for her not to stifle the breath of the Spirit. The Fourth Lateran Council had only just forbidden new religious foundations in 1215, when Honorius III approved the Order of Preaching Friars, in 1216 and 1218, and the rule of the Friars Minor in 1223.<sup>1</sup> But since then nothing has been able to stop their proliferation; the fact that they have been obliged to attach themselves to one of the ancient rules has not prevented an endless variety of particular constitutions from springing up.

But the Church is there to 'test the spirits', to see if they are of God,<sup>2</sup> to guarantee to the Lord's flock the quality of the pasture offered to them and the fidelity of the shepherds who will guide them. That is why to enter a religious society approved by the Church with full knowledge and deliberation means to accept its constitutions, including those which deal with the election or nomination of superiors. In other words, it means accepting the fact that submission to these statutes and their consequences is sufficiently reasonable and prudent before God, in spite of those abuses and inconveniences which are always possible in the human situation. This acceptance, this submission, presupposes that we have studied the basic texts, and that this study has led us to give a positive answer to the key question: 'If I follow this path, is there sufficient guarantee that I am not being deceived about the will of God'? If I cannot reach this practical certainty, I have no right to enter this particular society or to make my profession in it. If I have made my profession there in complete freedom, I have declared before God, before the Church, before witnesses, that I consider this society, with its customs and traditions approved by the Church, a satisfactory environment for attaining perfect charity. 'Once we have discovered the way along which providence invites us, nothing should deter us from generously putting into practice what we have freely chosen'. Life will be from now on, for all, a life of obedience, because, on our supposition, all have understood, according to St Benedict's expression, 'that it is by the way of obedience that they will come to God'.<sup>3</sup>

#### (B) THE OBEDIENCE OF THE SUPERIOR

The superior must convince himself once and for all that there is no office in any christian religious society that carries with it a

<sup>1</sup> Cf De Guibert, J., *Documenta ecclesiastica christianae perfectionis* (Rome, 1931), no. 152 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Cf 1 Jn 4, 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Regula Monachorum*, ch 71.

dispensation or even a partial expression of the common duty of submission to God. On the contrary, the higher the function the greater the need to discover and fulfil his holy will; it is precisely because of this that the older religious become an example that the whole flock can follow.<sup>1</sup> The superior, then, will seek to make these attitudes his own and will keep himself on the right track by diligent consideration and constant prayer.<sup>2</sup>

He must have deep in his heart and never forget:

1. that he himself, just as much as his subjects, has entered religious life to obey and not to command; the exercise of authority is nothing more than one form, among others, of obedience.

2. that his position as God's representative does not mean that God has abdicated in his favour; his position gives him no right to infringe the divine will, nor does it dispense him from finding out, by every means in his power, what this divine will is, both for himself and for his subjects.

3. that if he himself, within the limits of his delegation, represents God's authority for his subjects, he should see in his subjects the very person of Christ; so that 'everything that you do – or do not do – to the least of my little ones, you do – or do not do – to me'.<sup>3</sup>

4. that the exercise of the delegated authority is not an end in itself but a means to achieve something higher – the spiritual welfare, the spiritual growth of God's children; and the realization of the particular work allotted to each religious society by its constitutions is subordinate to this.

Secure in these principles, he will show his desire to serve God in three fields:

(a) What is decided by his major superiors; he will behave towards them as he would like his own subjects to behave towards him.

(b) what is decided by the constitutions; he will respect these in the letter and in the spirit. He will avoid anything contrary to them and he will allow his subjects to do anything which is in keeping with the common good of the whole Church and the particular good of his own congregation. On this subject, not only will he not prevent the free recourse of his subjects to major superiors, if only by a sign of displeasure, but he will show that he is happy to see them making use of this freedom.

<sup>1</sup> Cf 1 Pet 5, 3.

<sup>2</sup> Cf *Constitutiones S.J.*, X, 2; IX, 6, 13.

<sup>3</sup> Cf Mt 25, 15.

(c) what is left to his own decision, to his personal discovery of God's will: it is here only that he is 'superior'. In everything that we have said above, he is himself a subject and it is enough for him to live as he used to when he was not a 'superior'. But now that he has become one, is there any change? Materially, yes; formally, no. Materially, from the time he is nominated till the end of his term of office, the 'superior', 'prior', or by whatever name he is called, will take the first place in the assembly; everybody will let him go first; everyone ought to greet him; and each one should 'speak to him with respect and without interrupting him'. However, in all of this, he will remember that he is like the ass carrying holy things. Any mark of esteem he receives is simply because of the burden he carries on his back; nothing at all is changed in him ontologically.

So, in the midst of all this show, if he has a care for his own salvation, for his mental and spiritual health, in a word, for truth, he must find ways to love, to seek after and to fulfil the will of God, exactly as he did (or should have done) before he became superior. Formally nothing has changed in him, because ontologically nothing can change. He will be well advised to mistrust everything and everybody that tends to instil in him, little by little, the illusory feeling (in both the english sense of erroneous and the latin sense of mocking) that he is 'not as the rest of men'. The first to mock him are the flatterers, the parasites who live at the expense of whoever listens to them, once they have gained his favour. He will need all his psychological insight to 'discern the friend from the flatterer', to use the title already given to a famous work by that honest old man Plutarch. Moreover, when a man has been deceived as a superior, it is the community that suffers and the spirit of the community that is poisoned and dies.

In biblical terms, the most important task of God's representative ought to be to make his own the justice, the righteousness, the goodness of the One that he represents. The great enemy to this authentic government is the tendency to make 'distinction of persons'.<sup>1</sup> This expression has almost lost its meaning because the ordinary man does not know that it derives from the greek *prosopolepsis*, and that *persona* in latin, like *prosopon* in greek, means a mask, a sham, a farce or at least a contrast between the external appearance and the internal reality. 'Man looks on the outward appear-

<sup>1</sup> Cf Deut 10, 17; Acts 10, 34; Rom 2, 11; Gal 2, 6; 1 Pet 1, 17.



ance, but the Lord looks on the heart'.<sup>1</sup> 'I the Lord search the mind and try the heart'.<sup>2</sup> The reason for this difference between God's point of view and man's is not only lack of understanding in man, which is forgivable, but chiefly it is self-interest: 'You shall not show partiality; and you shall not take a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of the righteous'.<sup>3</sup> There are all sorts of bribes, and the most blinding are not in the material order but in the order of honours, renown and the glory of a great name on earth. It follows from this that only perfect purity of intention guarantees any earthly function against the abuses which would make of it a lie, a complete overturning of the greatest good there is, the glory of God, to the profit of a vain human satisfaction. St Ignatius says this explicitly in his Constitutions: 'All must strive to maintain a right intention, not only as regards their state of life but also in all particular things'.<sup>4</sup> No word is more suitable to convey universality than the word 'things'; it excludes all precision, all exception, all subtle and specious evasion or subterfuge. Everything is a thing, and if we are speaking of all things, we are including the position of superior as well as that of subject; the one, like the other, must intend only 'to serve the divine goodness and please him'.<sup>5</sup>

Monastic and religious life exist, like the whole of God's Church, 'to give to God our Father children who resemble him'<sup>6</sup> by resembling the Son of God made man, obeying from love, even to death on a cross. The second chapter of St Benedict's rule ought to be included, at least in substance, in all Constitutions of religious orders.

#### (C) THE OBEDIENCE OF THE SUBJECT

'Subordinate' or 'subject' is not the equivalent of 'inferior'.<sup>7</sup> The term superior came first, and led to the introduction of the term inferior. Both of them are the comparatives of superiority, of a qualifying adjective: elevated, more elevated; low, lower (superiority with respect to lowness). As a synonym for deputy or provost, abbot or prior, the term superior is no longer an adjective but a noun or an adjectival noun. Hence the corresponding abstract noun is not 'superiority' but 'superiorhood'.

<sup>1</sup> 1 Sam 16, 7.

<sup>4</sup> *Constitutiones S.J.*, III, 1, 26.

<sup>6</sup> Hausherr, I., *op. cit.*, p. 311.

<sup>2</sup> Jer 17, 10.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Cf Lk 2, 51.

<sup>3</sup> Deut 16, 19.

The greatest inconvenience of the term 'superior' is that it entails almost inevitably the term 'inferior', and then we are plainly being unjust. Doubtless, the injunction 'in humility think others better than yourselves'<sup>1</sup> applies to all; but how can we call inferior those whom Paul has said we must regard as our superiors? Of course, the two directives are not on the same level; one is in the administrative and juridical order, the other is in the ontological order, either natural or supernatural. Why impose on oneself and on others the perpetual necessity of making this distinction, when it would be quite easy to find alternative expressions which would avoid all danger of mistake?

Jesus Christ, the Word of God made flesh, Master and Lord, was subject to Joseph and Mary. Who would dare to say that he was inferior to them, that he was their inferior? This is why, fully aware of his superior dignity, he was able later to abase himself even to washing the feet of his disciples, which he would certainly not have been able to do if there had been any risk of arousing their scorn by making himself their servant. 'You call me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am'.<sup>2</sup> And so he was at Nazareth; there also both his mother and St Joseph knew that his subjection to them had for its sole justification the need he had to be 'in my Father's house';<sup>3</sup> and that for the same reason, the day would come when he would grant the request of his mother only at the hour fixed by his heavenly Father.

Jesus Christ shows us the perfection of obedience, and that obedience is perfect precisely because it respects all truth; which is also the fulfilment of all justice and the safeguard of all dignity.

Everything which involves degradation falsifies obedience. Everything which is tarnished with pride demeans authority. The christian doctrine of obedience, as it was lived at Nazareth, safeguards the dignity and honour of everybody; it prevents superiors from falling into infatuated stupidity or the brutality of naked force, it prevents subjects from debasing themselves by feelings of inferiority or convulsions of revolt. It imposes on both the duty of glorifying one Master with free, courageous service; because this Master is so great that to serve him is the greatest thing any creature can do.

For the subject too, submission to God is exercised in three fields:

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<sup>1</sup> Phil 2, 3.

<sup>2</sup> Jn 13, 13.

<sup>3</sup> Lk 2, 49.



(a) *What is decided by his superior*

He will take the utmost pride in obeying him as exactly as possible, 'not only in matters of obligation, but also in other things, where he sees only that the superior wishes and is given no express command'.<sup>1</sup> Whatever one may think about 'blind' obedience, obedience for him means keeping his vision as clear as possible so that he can spot the preferences of his superior without forcing him to resort to that ultimate step – the explicit order. Just as well brought-up children obey their parents, so surely did Jesus, as a child and young man, obeying Joseph and Mary; 'he was subject to them' – not just that, he obeyed them. Thus charity acts towards her neighbour: it anticipates needs, like Mary at Cana. So every child acts spontaneously in his desire to carry out the wishes of his Father and no matter how these are transmitted. And for anyone who freely enters a religious society, the legitimate superior is the means of transmission guaranteed by the Church.

Obviously this promptness of obedience must be supported by a fair amount of common sense. One must not put a superior in an embarrassing position by taking his words or actions too literally. There are plenty of examples of this excessive conformity in the lives of the Fathers, and even in more recent biographies. This can have ridiculous and deplorable consequences. No strike is quite as paralysing as 'working to rule'.

To avoid the irritating consequences of too literal an interpretation of obedience we should remember that obedience, like every other virtue, is worth no more than the love which informs it: love of God, whom alone we obey ultimately, love of the superior, so that he may guide us 'joyfully and not sadly, for that would be of no advantage to you'.<sup>2</sup>

In a complete treatise on obedience we would have to find room for a fuller treatment of this point, which is usually passed over in silence or treated too vaguely. We must love superiors not only in a general way in Christ; more precisely we must help them to fulfil their function. The golden rule in this respect is to 'bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ'.<sup>3</sup> This is true for superiors as well as for subjects. Both sides should ask themselves before they act whether their action will result in making the burden of the other heavier. To burden others so that our own

<sup>1</sup> *Constitutiones S.J.*, VI, I, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Heb 13, 17.

<sup>3</sup> Gal 6, 2.

load will be lighter is to imitate the pharisees.<sup>1</sup> In any case it is exactly the opposite of Christ's attitude, who took upon himself the heaviest of all burdens, the sins of the world.

To encourage ourselves to imitate Christ rather than the pharisees, we should remind ourselves often that it is 'by so toiling that one must help the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus who said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'.<sup>2</sup> Doubtless it is more usual for the superior 'to spend and be spent'<sup>3</sup> for his subjects, because 'children ought not to lay up for their parents but parents for their children':<sup>4</sup> but must it be that, in loving them the more, he is loved by them the less?<sup>5</sup> We can never repeat often enough that all perfection is related to charity, which is loving submission to God, the opposite of rebellion and lack of faith; towards our neighbour, it is goodness of heart and a willing readiness to make our lives austere rather than theirs, which is the opposite of exploitation, and therefore of flattery just as much as of tyranny.

'You are all brothers', even if you are given the name Father. It is always true that we have only one Father, our heavenly Father,<sup>6</sup> and even if you are the weakest, the least fitted, the one who is always *en pasin mikroteros*, that is, so minor that all newcomers will necessarily rank above you,<sup>7</sup> even then, and in a sense especially then, the kindness of the Lord Jesus, and of his worthy representatives, will be poured out on you<sup>8</sup> and you will be great before him who is the Truth.<sup>9</sup>

Delegated authority is noble when it is submission to God and love; obedience is noble when it is love and submission to God. No inferiority complex on the one side, no taking authority for granted on the other; truth and dignity on both sides: Jesus Christ alone will save us all!

(b) *What is decided by the rule*

Perhaps we should have put this first... However neither St Pachomius nor St Benedict, nor St Ignatius, nor any other founder, was first and foremost a legislator, let alone a jurist. If we took the first paragraph of St Ignatius of Loyola's Constitutions as a literary product or as a gentle commonplace introduction, we would be doing St Ignatius a great injustice. Although St Ignatius himself did not realize it, this opening corresponds exactly to what

<sup>1</sup> Lk 11, 46.

<sup>4</sup> 2 Cor 12, 14.

<sup>7</sup> Cf Lk 9, 48.

<sup>2</sup> Acts 20, 25.

<sup>5</sup> Cf 2 Cor 12, 15.

<sup>8</sup> Cf Mt 25, 40.

<sup>3</sup> 2 Cor 12, 15.

<sup>6</sup> Cf Mt 23, 9.

<sup>9</sup> Cf Lk 9, 48.

St Irenaeus said was essential for any creature, 'faith and subjection':

(1) Faith in 'the sovereign wisdom and goodness of God our Lord' because it is that which *activates*, meaning here: 'it must rule, preserve and develop in his holy service this least Society of Jesus, just as it has deigned to begin it'. (2) Subjection to the interior law of charity and love which the holy Spirit writes and imprints in the heart.

All this dominates and gives life to the constitutions, just as the soul gives life to the body. The constitutions exist simply 'to help in making progress, in conformity with our institute, in the way of the service of God'. . . Here is the important word: 'to *help* . . . in the way of service of God'. Constitutions really must be a help, and everyone must see them as such.

Whatever we may think about the actual constitutions and about their adaptation to various times and places, we must hold two things as certain:

(a) It is vital for our moral well-being and for our sincerity that we cease to regard as important prescriptions that are, in fact, out of date. Otherwise we will encourage contempt for law, even among the best of subjects.

(b) For the same reason, it is important not to multiply rules, regulations, statutes, orders and prohibitions on the pretext of guarding against all possible eventualities. This is a sign of weakness on the part of authorities and, almost inevitably, has just the opposite effect to the one intended. The subjects for whom such an ordinance is intended either do not understand it or take it as meant for somebody else, or perhaps, just shrug their shoulders and laugh at it; those who do not need it apply it to themselves. A multiplicity of laws destroys republics – and still more, monarchies, because it implies a sort of abdication of the monarch: *Corruptissima respublica, plurimae leges*, wrote Tacitus, long ago.<sup>1</sup>

Everyone must be careful to observe existing laws, but they must be even more careful not to kill the *spirit* of the law. Now, in this case, the spirit of the law is love of the will of God. There can be no love without spontaneity, and there is no love of the will of God without consciousness of fundamental freedom. The 'spiritual worship' (*logike latreia*),<sup>2</sup> adoration in spirit and truth, forbids all constraint except that which each one freely takes upon himself.

<sup>1</sup> *Annals*, III, 27.

<sup>2</sup> Rom 12, 1.

At the very least there must be that minimum of liberty which servile fear allows; but this fear must not be servile in the sense of slavish. Yet the christian life is not easily adapted to such a make-shift: and the sole *raison d'être* of the religious life is to make more certain and more rapid ascent to that higher level, the only one worthy of the children of God, which consists in 'going forward in a spirit of love and not compelled by fear',<sup>1</sup> in willing 'in all sincerity to serve the divine Goodness and to be pleasing to it for itself alone, because of the love and the incomparable benefits already given to us'.<sup>2</sup>

This attitude, we could almost say this healthy state of soul, can only be encountered, continued and developed with sincerity in that atmosphere of God's kingdom which St Paul describes simply as love.<sup>3</sup> In particular, two aspects of his description merit our close attention: love 'rejoices in the right' (*congaudet veritati*), that is, when truth becomes our dominant concern, far from repressing it we must delight in it, want to know it more and more perfectly and conform all our thoughts, feelings and acts to it, despite the fact that it may not flatter our vanity or our feeling of being superior to others. Secondly, this over-riding love of the truth will not tolerate any self-aggrandisement. We must take it or leave it: either 'rejoice at wrong' or 'rejoice in the right' seen and carried out, whether I have any direct part in it or whether it is to be done, strengthened or safeguarded by me. The best guarantee of mental honesty for each of us is detachment from what is to our own advantage and open co-operation in the good of others. Nothing is more fatal to this than the habit, or rather the fault, of seeing others as hostile to us, as our rivals.

These principles must rule every society, even those which are entirely natural and political, as John XXIII pointed out so well in that memorable encyclical *Pacem in Terris*. But perhaps religious societies are an exception? If we thought that that was so, it would be better not to join them, because we would destroy ourselves.

(c) *What is left to the individual's decision*

There is a question that may arise on this subject. For those who take a vow of obedience, it would seem better never to do anything on their own initiative, but always wait until the initiative comes from their superior. In this way they will be doing everything in

<sup>1</sup> *Constitutiones S.J.*, VI, I, 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, III, I, 26.

<sup>3</sup> Cf 1 Cor 13, 1-13.

virtue of their vow. They will be like the old man's staff or the corpse; and nothing will ever be left to their own decision.

The first man to make use of these comparisons which Ignatius of Loyola later employed would have been very sorry if any of his followers had taken these figures literally. The worst type of resistance, at least in the long run, is passive resistance, and here these so-called models are proposed for the whole of life. So it is certain that the long dead, anonymous inventor of blind obedience, and still more Ignatius of Loyola, who was certainly no fool, did not understand it in that way. As every founder and religious legislator has realized, it is the task of interpreters to explain blind obedience to their brethren. But everyone is faced with the initial question: what is the most perfect way of submitting to God, a direct submission, without any human intermediary, or submission mediated through a duly authorized person? To put it more simply; when a subject is certain of God's will by some other means than the superior, does the superior's intervention increase his merit or not?

An example will make the problem even clearer, and will also show how easy it is for the passage of time to obscure the true meaning of an institution, sometimes to the detriment of sound reason and sound morality.

Certain religious superiors, both men and women, believe that when their subjects are seriously ill, it is their job to give them permission to die. It is a custom, a holy custom, with a very long tradition and it is so fine! Nothing can give superiors a nobler idea of their position, nor subjects a stronger appreciation of their subjection.

The young monk Dositheus was dying of consumption. He was suffering a great deal and made this request of the venerable old man (Saint Barsanuphius): 'Allow me to depart, I can stand no more'. The old man sent the following reply: 'Have patience, my child, for the mercy of God is close at hand'. The blessed Dorotheus, (who was Dositheus' nurse and novice-master) saw that he was suffering terribly and feared that he would come to grief. Once more, after some days, Dositheus asked the old man, 'Master, I have no strength left'. Then the old man answered, 'Go in peace! Take your place with the Blessed Trinity and intercede for us'.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 'Vie de S. Dosithe', 10; in *Dorothee de Gaza, Oeuvres spirituelles* (Sources chrétiennes 92), p 139.

This took place at the monastery of Seridos, just to the south of Gaza in Palestine, in the first half of the sixth century. Its historicity is as certain as that of any piece of hagiography.

If we take it literally, the holy man Barsanuphius gave little Dositheus permission to go to his eternal rest: this has nothing to do with permission to die. The entire literary and historical context shows that Barsanuphius wants to give this former page-boy, who has been a monk barely five years, something quite different and much more valuable, that is, the certainty of his eternal salvation. He means to tell him that his penance has been sufficient, that he has nothing more to fear and that he can depart in peace because the Blessed Trinity will receive him. We need only read a few lines further on: 'On learning the old man's answer, the monks grew indignant and said: Well now, what did he do and what sort of a life did he lead to have that said to him?'<sup>1</sup> The whole of the epilogue justifies Barsanuphius and criticizes the grumblers by displaying the great virtues of the young saint, and at the end a vision shows him in heaven.

It is not permission to die that the old man gives Dositheus; it is nothing less than absolution, or at least the equivalent of absolution. So superiors cannot quote this story as their authority: it deals with the ideas on penance that were in vogue at the time.

As for the theoretical aspect of the question, we must at least admit that it exists and that it deserves objective and close study. That position is at stake which wants to preserve submissiveness to match what everybody calls authority. This position maintains that subjects lose something (merit) when they are forced to decide for themselves. Perhaps in fact everyone would lose something: some would lose the satisfaction of the itch to interfere, so common among those who have governed for a long time, and sometimes lasting far beyond the period of their government. The others would lose that unhealthy passivity, which nourishes infantilism and brings on weariness, especially in the interior life. The question, could, however, be pressed: 'Surely everyone would gain more than they would lose, and to some extent, because of those very losses?' To which the answer must be: 'Everyone would gain in true submission to God, that is, in charity to him and to one's neighbour'.

The greatest mistake in this matter would be to believe, either in theory or in practice, that God has abdicated. The superior is not

<sup>1</sup> Vie de S. Dosithée, *op. cit.*, pp 139-41.



a vice-god in the sense of a viceroy or a vice-president, who exercises the office of a king or a president in the absence of those rulers. *God is never absent.* He can always intervene. And when God speaks, the creature, whoever he is, has only to keep silent or to repeat the word of God, and add *Amen*.

Now there is first of all a sphere which God reserves to himself, to the exclusion of every intermediary. And this sphere is very much wider in extent than the one in which he allows his agents to intervene. This is the sphere of God's will, which we have spoken about already. No creature can command me to do what does not depend on me; and it is ridiculous to 'allow' me to do something that I cannot avoid, like falling ill or dying. When that happens, ruler and ruled can only bow their heads in silence or say, 'Righteous art thou, O Lord, and right are thy judgments'.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, what injustices can be committed by those who demand from others more than can be given! To throw an insolvent debtor into prison until he has paid the last farthing is to condemn him to eternal imprisonment, unless he is given in prison the means to acquire what he has not got.

There is plenty of matter for reflection here for all of us. Do we impose on others burdens which are impossible or difficult to bear?<sup>2</sup> Do we too easily plead impossibility or exaggerate difficulties? Once again we can see opportunities for both sides to conform themselves to the will of God by respecting truth.

There is still the sphere in which the free will of every creature can be exercised, each in its own way. We can narrow down the problem, make it more precise, by asking the following question: When the subject of a certain superior knows the will of God, is there any point in his superior intervening by order, counsel or advice? Does this help either the subject or the community as a whole? Put in this way, the question leaves to one side, as it should, all consideration of the utility the superior sees in it. Consider this quotation from the letter of St Ignatius on the virtue of obedience: 'You are aware that you have subjected yourselves to the yoke of obedience in order to follow with more certainty the will of God in following that of the superior . . .'.<sup>3</sup> But cannot my certainty be complete without any reference to the superior? Must I abandon all thought of obtaining this certainty by my own efforts? And what must the superior do? Should he keep his subjects incapable of

<sup>1</sup> Ps 118, 137.

<sup>2</sup> Lk 11, 46.

<sup>3</sup> *Letter on Obedience*, 16.

forming a prudent judgment by themselves, or should he lead them, bit by bit, to form their consciences by principles which apply to everyone? Can subjects never, for their own guidance, do what the superior is doing all the time for the guidance of the community? Perhaps we must make a distinction here, a distinction that corresponds exactly to the double goal of religious institutions; the sanctification of each member and the common work of the apostolate. There is however a preliminary general answer which we take from St Thomas.

He states explicitly that if a man does good, moved not by his own reason but by the advice of others, he certainly does good, but not yet in a perfect way. A human act can only be perfect when it is directed by one's own prudence . . . The government of others is a participation in the divine government . . . The best government is that which makes others capable of governing in their turn . . . Saint Thomas says . . . docility is necessary for everyone, because of the limits and imperfections of the human reason; but, he adds, it is more perfect to direct oneself by one's own reason than to be moved by the advice of others.<sup>1</sup>

Most spiritual fathers accept this principle; but nowadays most spiritual fathers are not, juridically speaking, superiors. Should we infer from this that superiors should be inspired by different maxims? Should they keep their subjects as far as possible dependent upon them and not allow them to reach any degree of autonomy?

The word autonomy can have several meanings and we must distinguish them. Speaking absolutely, no being is autonomous. God is not autonomous – it is absurd to imagine him dictating *laws* for himself; and no creature is autonomous – it would be a contradiction to imagine a creature freed from all subordination to its Creator. Autonomy then can have only a relative meaning, or rather *several* relative meanings, depending on whether one looks at it from the point of view of the actual fact of ruling oneself, or of the capacity to do so.

The capacity to govern oneself by one's own prudence, in so far as it exists, is a sign of superiority because it is more like God. No one can say that it is a good thing not to aspire to this, or that

<sup>1</sup> 'La direction des autres d'après saint Thomas d'Aquin', in *Eph. Theol. Lovan.* 37 (1961), pp. 503–56.

it is a good thing to prevent others from doing so. Charity commands us to want for our neighbour the goods that we ourselves possess. Every man has certain perfections that others do not have. Charity consists precisely in imparting these perfections.<sup>1</sup>

It is right to foster in every human being the ability to decide for himself, both for the honour of God and for the happiness of his creatures. Without that ability, true submission to God disappears, and what becomes of the *joy* of filial obedience? Ignatius had good reason to write: 'It is no small profit for the free will to want to hand it back completely into the hands of him from whom we have received it'.<sup>2</sup> But how can I hand it back to God when others, even in his name, begin by robbing me of it? Obedience is only true obedience when it is completely voluntary; and not just on one occasion, because in this matter the principle 'once and for all' does not apply, but on each and every occasion. Every physical and spiritual gift wastes away if it is not exercised. If I am robbed of every opportunity of using my practical reason, and above all if I am persuaded that to do so is a bad thing or a lesser good, my reason will ossify and rot. I will become a mental cripple; and then what becomes of my character?

It is absolutely necessary then, to allow subjects the freedom to use their reason and their power of deliberation and to leave them some area in which they can take decisions. To obey is to make one's own, with full knowledge of the facts, the decision contained in an event or in a command. This is not, in any sense, to submit; it is, on the contrary, a human response which transforms outward acceptance into internal agreement. One never *obeys* like a corpse or a log; if obedience could penetrate these dead things it would make the corpse walk and the log blossom.

#### (D) DIALOGUE BETWEEN SUPERIOR AND SUBJECT: ITS LIMITS

In the lives of the Fathers, it is only blind obedience that makes a dry stick, which has been watered for a whole year by abbot John, break into leaf again.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, where will we end if everyone takes time to reflect before carrying out the orders of the superior, as if the superior had done no reflecting himself? So now we have to decide exactly *how* all that we have been saying is to happen, or should happen, without damaging anyone.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p 356.

<sup>2</sup> Letter on Obedience, 7.

<sup>3</sup> Cassian, *Institutions Cénobitiques* (Sources Chrétiennes 109), pp 155-7.

To ensure that our line of argument does not get confused, it is useful to distinguish two areas in which the will of God is shown, and where, as a result, the authority of the superior and the docility of the subject come into play.

These two areas correspond to the two ends of every religious society: the main end is the salvation and perfection of its members, and the second end is the common exterior work of the apostolate in the service of one's neighbour. 'The end of this society is not only to work for the salvation and perfection of our own souls with the help of God's grace but also, with the same grace, to occupy ourselves vigorously with the salvation and perfection of our neighbour'. This formula, which is the second rule of the summary of the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus, can be found almost everywhere in an analogous form. There are some exceptions to this in the old monastic rules, for example in that of St Benedict; but even his rule makes the same distinction using different terminology – the *Opus Dei*, which is the work of the community as such, and the *conversatio morum* promised by each one on the day of his admission.<sup>1</sup> *Servatis servandis*, what we shall say about orders or congregations will also hold good for monks, and we shall not be saying anything more about them except to clarify the present situation by comparison.

The abbacy, as its name suggests, began with the function of the spiritual father. To be called *abbas*, an ascetic had to be endowed with certain gifts, especially the gift of discretion. Those who consulted him asked his advice only about their own spiritual lives. 'Tell me one thing; how am I to save myself'?<sup>2</sup> without any superiority in the juridical order. Given faith, this was certainly enough to obtain certainty about the will of God. Perhaps not even this much was needed; example speaks louder than words, and perhaps with more effect. This was the opinion of St Peter, of St Antony as we have seen, and of St Poemen, the Shepherd *par excellence*.

A brother asked Abbot Poemen: 'Some brothers live with me, do you want me to be in charge of them? The old man answered, 'Certainly not. First of all *you* do what should be done, and if they want to live in the same way, they will know what to do without asking'. The brother insisted, 'Father, they want me to be in charge of them'. The old man said, 'No! Be a model to them, not a lawgiver'.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Regula Monachorum*, ch 58.

<sup>2</sup> *Apophthegmata Patrum*, Poemen 108 (PG 65, 348).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 174 (PG 65, 364).

It has taken us centuries to arrive at this position; such is the difficulty of seeing clearly something that has been frozen by a long and apparently sacrosanct tradition! However, nothing could be plainer than the distinction between the discernment of spirits, which belongs to the spiritual man, and prudence or know-how in collective undertakings, which is often found in rather mediocre people in a developed form. Prudence in ruling, political prudence, economic prudence, military prudence:<sup>1</sup> none of these is necessary for the spiritual life as such; none of them gives any competence in the things of the spirit.

Canon law in no way supports the idea that subjects are obliged to open their consciences to superiors, either inside or outside the confessional. It forbids superiors who are priests to hear the confessions of their subjects regularly. The initiative in the manifestation of conscience should always come freely and spontaneously from the subject. 'It is expedient for them to consult their superiors with filial confidence, even to tell them their doubts and their anxieties of conscience'.<sup>2</sup>

These prescriptions upset those who hold contrary ideas; but all they do is go back to the beginnings. All the ancient documents affirm or presuppose that the prime requisite for legitimately setting up a bond between father and spiritual children is the *faith* of the disciple in the charism of the master. Nobody questioned the fact that this trust could not be imposed. Gradually this was forgotten, or without its being forgotten altogether, a less demanding method was tried. 'In primitive times, the initiative came from the disciple, who went to a spiritual father whom he could trust, but gradually codification and control by authority took over. The superior too easily forgets that he has the duty of drawing out what subjects are bound to do rather than imposing it with all his power'.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, the direction of souls, a completely spiritual business, was treated just as if it were in the same class as social know-how and natural talent. Or, inversely, people acted as if spiritual clear-sightedness brought with it, as a matter of course, efficiency in social activities. This confusion contains the seeds of very serious trouble. The plain fact is that dialogue between spiritual father and the person directed, and between superior and subject is not at all the same thing; unless, of course dialogue is suppressed in both cases, which is nothing less than the most disastrous despotism.

<sup>1</sup> *Summa Theol.* IIa, II ae, 50, 1-4.

<sup>2</sup> Code of Canon Law, c. 530; cf c. 518 § 2.

<sup>3</sup> Hausherr, *loc. cit.*, p 227.

*Dialogue with a view to personal holiness*

With regard to spiritual direction, traditional teaching as well as the findings of psychology demand from the disciple a complete openness of soul. He must lay bare his soul to 'the old man' whom in the past he would have chosen to be his guide in the things of the spirit. The spiritual father is a doctor who can only suggest suitable remedies if he knows all the symptoms; and even if he had miraculous second sight, by which he could delve into the secrets of the heart, he would still have to wait for the spontaneous confidences of the sick person, because the effectiveness of his direction depends first of all on the faith of the disciple.

If we wanted to draw up in descending order the hierarchy of causes which make the relationship of spiritual father to disciple so effective, we would put the faith of the disciple right at the very top. It is first chronologically, because from it the very first steps are taken. It is also first in importance, because everything depends on it: all evil comes from a lack of faith. 'Lord, Lord, deliver us from lack of faith and from futile pursuits, guard us with your divine grace'. We have this from the pen of Symeon Studites. Clearly this faith presupposes the spiritual character of the director. But he would be a very lifeless person if the faith of the disciple did not stir him to action. One of the most essential and most effective things the director can do is to pray for his children in God.<sup>1</sup>

The effectiveness of spiritual direction depends on whether the spiritual father is the instrument of the holy Spirit. We have seen that the disciple ought to be deeply convinced of this fact and it is precisely in this that his faith consists. There is no point in insisting any further on this. But what must be repeated is that this 'pneumatic' character does not work under its own steam. It is not a sort of miracle-working at the whim of the person who possesses it; if there is any miracle-working, it only has effect because of the pressure of the faith of the person asking for it.<sup>2</sup>

We have no intention of going back over the question whether this sort of faith can be imposed from outside, by the one who is seated on the chair of Moses. It is quite certain that faith dies, as if strangled, at the very first sign of deception: that is, from the

<sup>1</sup> Hausherr, *loc. cit.*, pp 246-7.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p 248.

moment that the disciple sees that his confidences are being used for some other purpose than his own spiritual advancement in peace and security.

This fact, even more than the tradition on which it depends (and this again is in keeping with the findings of psychology), imposes on the person who is being directed total obedience to the director *after the dialogue*. This presents little or no difficulty while trust lasts. Since, by hypothesis, he is looking for his own spiritual advancement, and since he is certain to find this if he follows his guide, he will advance with joy and without anxiety; this has been frequently confirmed by those who have experienced this sort of relationship. The disciple will be running no risk of doing anyone any harm: on the contrary, spiritual advancement, consisting as it does in greater charity, will inevitably be an advantage to everyone.

One day I questioned the old man, abbot John, who was a disciple of abbot Barsanuphius: 'Master, Scripture says that we must enter the kingdom of heaven through many tribulations. But I must admit that I do not suffer the least tribulation. What then must I do to avoid losing my soul?' For I had no tribulations, no anxieties at all. If a thought occurred to me, I took my slate and wrote to the old man (it was by letter that I asked him this question, before I was in his service), and I had not finished writing before I felt relief and profit from doing so. Such then was my carefreeness and my tranquillity. Nonetheless, as I did not know the strength of virtue, and since I had heard it said that it is by means of many tribulations that one enters the kingdom of heaven, I was uneasy at not being tested in any way. But when I told the old man of my fear, he said to me: 'Do not upset yourself, this does not apply to you. All of those who hand themselves over to the obedience of the Fathers have this same carefreeness and tranquillity'.<sup>1</sup>

#### *Dialogue with a view to the work of the apostolate*

Does what we have just quoted from St Dorotheus also hold good when we are dealing with the many works of the apostolate? In one sense, yes; but only with great differences both before and after the superior's decision.

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<sup>1</sup> *Dorothee de Gaza; op. cit.*, p 185.

Before the decision, dialogue is not necessary in the same way. The superior, who directs the work of the community, should be competent enough, either because of his natural ability or from his personal experience or from information gathered from elsewhere, to do his job properly. He has no need to question or even listen to anyone apart from those specified in the constitutions or those from whom he thinks it prudent to seek help. So much for the principles of canon law. But we must hold that law, canon law or any other sort of law, does not do away with theology, and it does not make psychology useless. These two, the knowledge of God and the knowledge of the soul, can sometimes impose on the superior a course of action which runs counter to his passing fancies of governing by intrigue or by flattery. The only justification that a lack of fairness can rightly claim is that it is necessary for the correction of someone; if necessary this can be done, even using very strong means. But there will come the temptation to be 'diplomatic' to the strong and harsh to the weak. This is a double cowardice, a treble falsehood. Clear sightedness and loyalty both demand that the superior take a firm stand against all scheming and against his own weaker self, even to the extent of endangering his own position, if it is necessary to do so, in the interests of justice and charity.

Apart from this need to resist shift attempts to encroach on his authority, theology and psychology (in other words, charity and prudence) will incline the superior to treat his subjects in a friendly, rather than a despotic way; even in a fraternal rather than a paternal way.

First of all then, *before the decision is taken*. The age we live in claims to be one of dialogue and no longer one of polemic and controversy. Everyone says he is ready to accept the other, admitting *a priori* his loyalties, whether to a different creed or to an opposing ideology. Will one dialogue alone remain forbidden – that between 'superiors' and 'inferiors'? Surely it is exactly here that dialogue ought to be not only easier but also most pleasant, like a conversation between brothers who share equally a desire to work together to fulfil the plan of God their Father. *No dialogue is possible with a person who is, or thinks he is, or who ought to be, always in the right.*

But notice that it is true to say that 'superiors are always right', just as it is true to say that obedience never makes mistakes; but how many abuses are committed in the name of a maxim taken in the wrong sense!

We have already shown that obedience never makes mistakes,



as long as this obedience is consciously given to God. On this condition too the superior will always be right. But this condition lays it down that anyone who has not the order of a legitimate superior as a guarantee, should take all the precautions that prudence dictates to protect himself. He must weigh carefully the importance of each problem and guard against making decisions, either for himself or for another, unless he has a well-formed conscience.

And it is precisely on this level that dialogue should be found: on the level of information. To refuse dialogue at this level is a sin against men and against God, but first of all it is a sin against sound reason. Such a refusal can only come from a badly disposed human will which blithely accepts the risk of not coinciding with the divine will, or from a mental infatuation which is expressed in an excessive haste to assume that it is in the right. *To be certain too easily has never been a mark of intelligence*, any more than complacency is a sign of sensitivity. Besides, these two things go together very easily, either as a result of temperament or of ingrained habit. Once one becomes accustomed to being a superior, one easily falls into the postures and gestures of superiority, with everything that that implies: haughtiness, arrogance, obstinacy, paternalism, crocodile smiles, fine words which have no effect, self-satisfaction and an unconscious contempt for others. From this stems the necessity of limiting the length of the superior's rule, not only for the subjects' sake but also for his own sake.

Even among monks the question of an abbot being elected for life is often discussed. In more recent religious societies, either only the General, or else no superior at all, is elected for life; there are re-elections or re-nominations. And each time this happens, the crisis for those subjects who cannot give their confidence spontaneously to the re-elected or re-nominated superior is renewed. In fact these see themselves condemned to 'lose all ambition' or else become flatterers. On the other hand, too often, those religious, men and women, who have once tasted office find it hard to accept a return to the rank and file; they consider it a degradation, a humiliation, an injustice. So strong is it that when their term of office expires they practically force Major Superiors to find them new posts of authority. Of course, this should be a great opportunity for them to feel 'happy in abjection and relegation to the lowest ranks', to admit 'not only in words, but in the depths of their hearts their lowliness and worthlessness': the many beautiful things that we read about and talk about so often and so willingly when it is a

question of others.<sup>1</sup> And so we find so often at the very root of the power of the superior, corruption of the will – a poor preparation for imparting to others the sovereign love of God's will!

We must seriously examine then whether superiors should be changed more often, out of charity both for them and for their subjects. This was the case in the society of Jesus until recently: from 1551 to 1772, a period of 221 years, the roman province had 73 provincials; the roman college had 73 rectors, an average of a new one every three years. The spiritual father, though, could continue to hold office indefinitely, according to the wishes of those concerned.

What must always be admitted is that superiors are like other men, and they must avoid like the plague all appearance (let alone the reality) of being a closed group, elected, predestined, transcendent. Unhappily, there are not a few pointers that make us fear the existence of such a reality. Why are the superiors addressed as 'very reverend' and the others not? Why are there 'retreats for women superiors', as if the principle of unity, the holy Spirit, was not the same for all religious, superiors or not? There should be special courses and conferences, practical exercises for different functions, including those of superiors, which do not give the impression of two spiritualities, one for the privileged few, the other for the rest. 'No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you'.<sup>2</sup> When this sign is completely absent, when superiors envelop themselves within an aura of secrets as terrifying to the subjects as a network of electrified wires, how can one believe in friendship and respect? And how can one justify superiors who show less confidence in their subjects in proportion as their self-confidence grows? Here, there are attitudes and habits which are real insults. With much faith in God, and sometimes with very real heroism, the subject can swallow slights in silence, but he cannot prevent them from destroying his faith in the fatherly and friendly feelings of the superior. The more so when the superior does not notice and thinks that everything is going well. Most certainly something is lost, and it is precisely that thing for which community life has been conceived and established.

As a matter of fact, no administrative or canonical reform, no

<sup>1</sup> Cf *Regula Monachorum*, ch 7.

<sup>2</sup> Jn. 15, 15.

material innovation, will root out the cause of this sickness. These are remedies and palliatives, and, as such, will be more of a hindrance than a help, especially if their application is prolonged. What is needed is a healthy climate; and this will be brought about by ideas which are really human and christian.

*It is not right to believe that Christ our Lord has abolished the guidance of man by man: and it is not right to behave as if Christ had not radically changed the spirit of this guidance and of this subjection.*

Nobody is forced to enter religion. If he enters, and certainly if he takes vows, he is supposed to have done so with full knowledge, and he will have to accept the consequences of his act. He is supposed to know what his superior may legitimately ask of him and, in all honesty, he cannot expect his superior to be a man without any defect; consequently, he will have to obey the superior in everything where there is no manifest sin or violation of the constitutions. Apart from these cases, the superior's command indicates infallibly the will of God, which is what he came into religion for.

Obedience never errs (when the order of man does not go against the order of God); nor does authority, in its primary sense, as being from God. But the deputy of the one Master and Lord may err, as long as it is not the Pope defining *ex cathedra*. This makes the possibilities of error almost limitless. But this is a fact of secondary importance; it is human and earthly. It is enough for us if error is excluded when it is a question of eternal salvation, so that the obedient man may have complete peace and trust in God.

There is something left for him to do for his neighbour out of charity, and first of all, for his superior. Precisely because the superior carries a responsibility, he can give his subject freedom; however, he has no guarantee apart from the grace of state, which far from dispensing him from effort, obliges him to use all the means which human prudence demands. Realizing this, the subject will consider himself the recipient of a remarkable trust and he will be ready to help the superior as far as the superior allows. That is the meaning of dialogue: the modern equivalent of what used to be called 'admonitions'. As long as these are inspired principally by self-interest, they lack dignity and only pollute the atmosphere. On the contrary, they will foster good relations if they are born of genuine charity. It does not become any self-respecting man, still less a christian who is conscious of his dignity, to lay his burden on the shoulders of another; it is a mark of nobility to bear one's burden and to wish to alleviate the burdens of others. The command-

ment to bear one another's burdens<sup>1</sup> works in two directions: from the superior to the subject and from the subject to the superior. The relation between the subject and superior must be, supremely and solely, a relation of good will and brotherly love, with a note of fatherliness or filial respect, depending on the case.

This is the unchanging teaching of Christ; the practice will, more or less, approximate to this ideal. There will always be difficulties, so that each will have to forgive the other seven times, if not seventy times seven times, a day! That is why it is imperative to eliminate the causes of misunderstanding, of conflict, or resentment, of coldness. All these originate and flourish, like mushrooms, in the dark. Along uncertain borders there are bound to be skirmishes, and each side will accuse the other, each perhaps in good faith and each convinced of its own right or even duty.

*After the decision*

Whatever may have been the dialogue that preceded it, the moment must inevitably come when one person has to make a decision, and that person is the superior. Until that moment, that is, before the decision is taken by legitimate authority, I should show myself docile in two ways; by showing my readiness to accept the decision when it is taken, and by co-operating as much as I can so that the decision may be taken in the fullest knowledge. For that purpose I must constantly beware of any hardening of my attachment to my own will. I must always remember that my own will spoils everything if it does not identify itself completely and filially with the will of God. I must never forget that the best guarantee of this purity of heart and intention is to imitate the grain of wheat, Jesus Christ, consenting to die and disappear in order to bear much fruit for the salvation of the world.<sup>2</sup>

If all this is observed, if all the information has been gathered and a decision taken, neither the subject nor the superior will have any cause for regret. Then *auctoritas locuta est, causa finita est* (authority has spoken, the case is settled), at least until new facts raise the question again. Until then, and this may last an hour or a life-time, the obedient man should apply himself to the work assigned by the superior, that is, he should collaborate, following the mind of the superior, in the common task.

<sup>1</sup> Gal 5, 2.

<sup>2</sup> Jn 12, 24.

What then becomes of his own ideas, if these happen to be different from those of the superior?

The only valid answer is contained in the words of St Ignatius, obedience of judgment. Here again, it is not forbidden, rather it is more than ever necessary, to think hard in order to discover what he is trying to say. Otherwise we shall end up in a cul-de-sac and make that genius of common sense, Ignatius of Loyola, a moron of the petty tyrant type.

Let us distinguish two questions: where does the submission lie, in the faculty of the understanding, or in the acts of that faculty? And where is the proper domain of this submission? Ignatius uses three expressions: obedience of understanding, obedience of judgment, obedience of judgments. Submission concerns itself both with the faculty and with the acts of the faculty; more exactly, with the faculty in the act of exercising itself.

Does this mean the total activity of the understanding, so that, even before the decision of the superior, I have no right to any ideas of my own? This would not be submission, it would be extinction. If this were so, it would have been the intention of Ignatius to found a Society composed of men who had not only mortified their own wills but also their own understandings; just the opposite, in fact, of what he intended and practised. How often he consulted his companions, how he surrounded himself with safeguards, how much he prayed, with what meticulous care he made sure of his own indifference; and how he taught others not to trust their own indifference, so that their purity of intention in all their choices and decisions might be protected. All this we know from his teaching and from his life, and from the teaching that he first lived, the *Spiritual Exercises*.

One need not even go that far. The text of the letter on obedience shows, or rather affirms, that it is not about theoretical problems but about practical things; and more than this, it is not about certainties but about opinions. Ignatius begins by admitting that the understanding, when faced with its object, truth, has no freedom whatsoever; so that there can be no submission with regard to free will. The free will may intervene only in those cases, which are numerous, when the evidence of the known truth does not impose itself.

In common parlance we call this the realm of opinion, rather than judgment; and this realm is immensely greater than that of certainty. Ignatius supposes that his followers, like himself, will resist the temptation to see their instinctive reactions as infallible intui-

tions, and that they will get used to the idea of healthily criticising their own ideas. The value of this healthy self-criticism is confirmed by the rules for the discernment of spirits.<sup>1</sup> Ignatius supposes, in a word, that they will prove their intelligence by refraining from all definitive judgment when there is any serious argument against it.

The precautions to be taken will depend on prudence, the model of all human virtues. The more important the matters are that we are considering, the more necessary it is to spend time in personal reflection and in consultation with those who are wiser than ourselves. St. Ignatius, very aptly, appeals to holy Scripture, 'Do not rely on your own insight',<sup>2</sup> and to common sense. 'The wise consider that it is prudent not to rely on one's own prudence'. That at least is the message of Socrates, the greatest of the sages: 'Dear Cratylus, I am astonished at the wisdom of my own sayings, but I do not trust it. So it seems necessary to re-examine what I say. Nothing is more harmful than to deceive oneself. When the deceiver does not leave us for a moment but stays with us constantly, should we not shudder?'<sup>3</sup>

If it is a mark of lack of intelligence in a superior to be certain too quickly, the subject also must admit that his understanding may err in what concerns himself. It is perfectly logical therefore to co-operate in sincere dialogue, which supposes always, even among equals, that each be eager to find reasons to defend the opinion of the other, and that neither is out simply to dominate the other. Would the *katakuriuein*, condemned by Christ, and reproved by St Peter when he speaks of the dealings of leaders with their subjects, be legitimate in an inverted sense?<sup>4</sup>

Such a way of carrying on would be illogical on the part of the religious in dealing with his superior, because he has entered religion only to be more certain of doing God's will, and the rightly accredited interpreter of this is the superior. Added to this lack of logic is lack of faith in God and in his providence: a fall from the height of christian idealism to down-to-earth pursuits. To cap it all, there is a choice against Christ in the refusal to be like him, unto the cross, for the salvation of the world.

So the superior is always right when he is fulfilling his function as the one who finally decides all practical matters. And once the decision has been taken, the subject must consider any dialogue,

<sup>1</sup> *Spiritual Exercises*, 313-316.

<sup>2</sup> *Proverbs* 3, 5.

<sup>3</sup> Plato, *Cratylus*, 428d.

<sup>4</sup> *Acts* 19, 16.

at least with his immediate superior, as superfluous. The time for debating, even in one's mind, is past; now is the time sincerely to try to justify the superior's command. No problem is so urgent, or so important, that we cannot pause in our deliberations about it and postpone a definitive decision. Most problems have only a rather relative and transitory importance. We must see the decision of the superior as a relief from worries which could weigh us down unreasonably. To conform to the decision, apart from manifest sin, is good for our nerves, good for our morale and good for our minds. For, eventually, in things to be done we must stop reasoning; otherwise we shall never get down to doing anything. There must be an authority to bring all deliberations to a close, thus deciding when theory gives way to action.

In any case, it is a sign of good health to have a period of calm after the superior has announced his decision. At least that will give time for prayer. If, says St Ignatius, while you are in that respectful attitude before God, you think that an objection or representation is proper, you may make it, provided you keep your peace of mind and your spirit of detachment.

Certainly, we are allowed to appeal to a higher superior; but it is a complete mistake to hope for peace of mind from the triumph of self-will, or from ideas that feed this self-will. Even if we are in the right, we must avoid all appearance of being better than others because of this. We must act and speak only out of love of the truth itself, and not out of sympathy for any particular truth which we think is of advantage to us at this moment. If we love the truth for its own sake, we shall make no distinction between a truth that favours us and another truth that does not.

Moreover, if we love the living, personal Truth, the living, true God, then we shall prefer instinctively that which best guarantees our adoration in spirit and truth; and this is self-abnegation.

If we love Jesus Christ, who is the Way, the Truth and the Life, we shall have in the depth of our hearts an unspoken but sincere preference for the more humble and efficacious, because that best guarantees our attachment to the well-beloved Son and makes us resemble him more closely. Briefly, when there is no question of any manifest sin, whoever we are, Superior-General or the least of subjects, we shall value most of all our real title to glory, the title of creature and son of God; and as such we shall give up everything that feeds our pride and self-conceit and look for the bread that came down from heaven, *omne delectamentum in se habentem*,

the flesh and blood of the Son of God made man: the Son of God who became the Servant of Yahweh *par excellence*, obedient unto death on a cross for the glory of the Father and the salvation of the world.

Servant of God is indeed the only title of nobility for every creature. All that is not pure service of God is a degradation, very often hidden under a cloak of false grandeur because of the innate stupidity of man. Seeking our own excellence, the pleasure we find, and dwell on, in our own superiority, drove man and woman out of paradise, and still drives men and women out of the paradise which God still offers them. Once we are rid of all that nonsensical self-conceit, there will be nothing to oppose cordial dialogue. If, on both sides, we did not start breaking away from our filial spirit towards God our Father, all our relations with the children of God would be brotherly. Though now I am a superior by function, I shall not forget that first of all in essence I am a co-servant with my subjects; inferior, and glad to be so, I shall never consider myself dispensed from all collaboration in search for the supreme good which is the will of God.

On this theme, then, of the relation between superior and subject, as on all other themes, the only name, the only doctrine, the only example, the only Person who will save the dignity of the children of God, in all truth, is Jesus Christ our Lord. If we, every single one of us, want to do the will of him who has sent us, we shall realize that this doctrine, his doctrine, is of God.<sup>1</sup>

Our souls will then manifest the Lord, because he will have wrought great things in us;<sup>2</sup> and, as a necessary consequence, our hearts will rejoice in God, who has become, deep in our hearts and minds, our Salvation.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf Jn 7, 17.

<sup>2</sup> Cf Lk 1, 46 ff.