

# JESUIT OBEDIENCE

By JAMES WALSH

IT WILL be admitted, I think, that no one figure has had more influence in the organisation and direction of those orders and congregations devoted to the external apostolate than Ignatius Loyola; and this for two reasons: firstly because the constitutions of his Society have been used as a first source by the majority of active congregations founded in the post-tridentine era; and secondly because he himself, in framing his constitutions, relied heavily on the traditional principles of monastic and religious living as enunciated in the West from the time of Pacomius and Benedict. For both of these founders of monasticism, and therefore in practice of organized religious living in the Church, the virtues of humility and obedience were twin pillars on which monastic living, the perfect following and imitation of Christ, was to rest; or, to use another metaphor, and one more in keeping with the monastic theology of the East as initiated by Basil of Caesarea, and incidentally with the theology underlying the decree of Vatican Council II, *Perfectae Caritatis*, humble obedience is the way to that charity which is the perfect love of God and the neighbour; it is calculated to bind us ever more closely to the loving service of the Church, and to enable us to reach that maturity which is proportioned to the completed growth of Christ.<sup>1</sup>

This reference to monastic obedience enables us to grapple at once with an alleged defect in the theory of ignatian obedience as it has largely affected post-tridentine religious thinking. Obedience in the strictly monastic situation has an unconditioned value; not only is it an absolute necessity for the peace and good order of the isolated monastic community, a world set apart from the world: it is *the* ascesis, the means *par excellence*, to personal perfection, and the bond between the monk and his *abbas*, his father in God. We see this tendency heavily emphasized in the mystique of the Jesuit brother, St Alphonsus Rodriguez, who literally heard the words of Christ in the voice of his superior;<sup>2</sup> so that, for him, the perfection of obedience lay in the fact that it was always blind. For him, there was only one problem in obedience: superiors were not always willing to enun-

<sup>1</sup> *Perfectae Caritatis*, 14; cf Eph 4, 13.

<sup>2</sup> Cf *Perfectae Caritatis*, 5.

ciate their commands clearly and simply.<sup>1</sup> But whilst it is true that the language and examples employed by Ignatius, in his constitutions and elsewhere, to express his theory of obedience, are very largely drawn from monastic sources (which is understandable enough when one considers that the religious life of the sixteenth century was either monastic or conventual), obedience for him was not primarily a personal ascesis nor even the means to good order and peace in the religious community; he saw it as the essential requirement for a total cooperation in the salvific work of Christ in his Church.

The sense, extension and purpose of the vow of obedience, and it must be admitted at once that this is at the centre of his theology, and also the vital principle of his Society, is summed up for us in the words of Fr Jerome Nadal, one of his first companions:

Because of Christ's marvellous generosity and special grace, we are the companions of Jesus. We follow Christ in his combat, his warfare, in carrying his cross, here and now, in his mystical body which is the Church. We are to follow Christ as closely as possible, as intimately as his grace permits us, wanting nothing else out of life but what he wanted himself.<sup>2</sup>

Ignatius saw his Society as a body of men who follow the Christ who was obedient unto the death of the cross, in an obedience which is essentially defined as the service of Christ in the hierarchical Church. What Ignatius saw in his vision of the Father and the Son, as he entered Rome to put himself and his infant Society at the service of the Holy See, was the Father consigning Ignatius, and, in him, his Society, as servants to the Son, that all might follow Christ, carrying their own cross, for the same purpose and with the same dispositions as he carried his.

Ignatian obedience is therefore christological in its essence. The end of the jesuit vow is obedience to the Pope, in his capacity as Christ's Vicar: 'where Peter speaks, Christ speaks'; so that ignatian obedience is *direct* obedience to Christ:

Through divine grace, the explicit vow and promise that the whole Society, with authentic will and spiritual joy, has made to God, our Creator and Lord, to obey his universal Vicar without any excuse, to the greater glory of God, in

<sup>1</sup> *The Autobiography of St Alphonsus Rodriguez*, ed W. Yeomans (London, 1964).

<sup>2</sup> Nadal, *Monumenta* V.

order to work harder and better in the Lord's vineyard for the greater spiritual profit of souls with the divine favour and help, has always been understood in this sense: that his Holiness might send us wherever he thinks or judges convenient or necessary. In the vow of obedience we vowed and promised our Lord God to obey and to go wherever Christ's Vicar sent us. This promise is our principle and first foundation.<sup>1</sup>

'This promise is our principle and first foundation': the words are deliberately redolent of the thought of Ignatius as expressed at the beginning of the *Spiritual Exercises*, with their strong christological bias. Obedience is to be the perfect execution of what Ignatius sets down as the end of human existence: the praise, reverence and service of God our Lord. It is the nature of man created and redeemed in Christ to give himself ever more fully to Christ in his redemptive activity; this is the progression of the Exercises, in the colloquy of the meditation on the triple sin, in the various self-offerings in the meditations on the kingdom, the two standards, the three modes of humility: and through the contemplations of the passion and resurrection to the contemplation for obtaining love.

The same ideal has been re-formulated by the recent General Congregation of the Society in the following terms:

All the members of the Society, firmly grounded in faith, in company with all other christians, lift their eyes to Christ, in whom they find that absolute perfection of self-giving and undivided love which alone completely reconciles man to God and to himself. For unless men adhere to Christ and follow the way which he shows, they desire and seek in vain for that full realization of themselves which they long for in their undertakings.

From the love for Christ, the Society offers itself completely to the Church in these needs, so that the Supreme Pontiff, as the Vicar of Christ, may 'send' all its members into the vineyard of the Lord.<sup>2</sup>

But, since a person can vow obedience only to God, how is it legitimately extended to the Pope, and under him to religious superiors within the order as a whole? There can be no question that the ignatian theology of obedience depends from the assertion of iden-

<sup>1</sup> *Monumenta Ignatiana* III, 1, 162.

<sup>2</sup> *Documents of the Thirty-First General Congregation of the Society of Jesus*, p 7.

tity between God (Christ) and the Vicar of Christ on earth. The only mediation acceptable in jesuit obedience is that adumbrated in the section on obedience in Vatican II's decree on the religious life – participation in Christ's obedience to the Father:

By their profession of obedience religious offer to God as a sacrifice the complete dedication of their own will. This offering fastens them more permanently and securely to God's saving will. In this religious follow the example of Jesus Christ, who came to do the will of his Father (cf Jn 4, 34; 5, 30; Heb 10, 7; Ps 39, 9), and 'taking the form of a slave' (Phil 2, 7), learned obedience in the school of suffering (cf Heb 5, 8).<sup>1</sup>

The Pope, the Hierarchy, the Society's various superiors are *not* media between the individual and Christ. According to the theology of Ignatius, it is clear that all obedience in the Society (and not merely of those who have taken the special vow of obedience to the Pope) is the ultimate effect of this vow to the Pope; and that this obedience, because of the Pope's position as the Vicar of Christ, constitutes the jesuit's service and praise of God, our Lord and Creator. This is why the name 'Society of Jesus' was chosen by the first fathers in 1537; because all were convinced that they had no other head than Christ. Further, since this obedience is conceived as fighting for God under the banner of the cross, the Society sees the Pope as the Vicar of the crucified Lord of the Church.

The ignatian concept of the dignity and authority of Christ's Vicar is rooted in the mystical theology of Paul: that Christ is even now bringing his passion to perfection in the Church, and that his sacrifice is continually offered in those who find the determination to answer his call to offer their lives and personal liberty under the standard of the cross.

Jesuit obedience, then, is true and integral only when it reaches across every intermediary to the immediate and direct service of Christ, the head of the Church and of the Society. Ignatius insists that his Society's well-being and the reality of its purpose depends from this immediate submission to Christ himself:

The Society makes progress in the holy Spirit and fights under the standard of the cross by serving the Lord alone, and his spouse the Church, under the Roman Pontiff, Christ's Vicar on earth.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Perfectae Caritatis*, 14.

<sup>2</sup> Nadal, *Monumenta* IV, 618.

The first companions of Ignatius were convinced that they could know the will and love of Christ in the voice of his Vicar on earth. So Bl Peter Favre would write: 'the clearest call is heard in the voice of Christ's vicar'.

For the early Society, at least, there was no contradiction between the *ductus Spiritus sancti* – the immediate direction of the holy Spirit – and the renunciation of one's own judgment in favour of another's. In fact, the purpose of the vow of obedience, in their eyes, was to ascertain more surely the direction of the holy Spirit. It was a guarantee that their service was authentic: that is, directly willed by God. Ignatius formulates it thus:

They (the first fathers) made the vow or promise in order to avoid wandering from the way of the Lord. They were convinced that Christ would condescend to indicate to them the path of greater service through his Vicar.<sup>1</sup>

It must be stressed, however, that this bond between the Pope and the Society can be understood only in terms of the apostolic purpose of the Society. 'We are papists', says Nadal, 'in so far as we ought to be: that is, for the glory of God and the greater good of all'. And there is an implied criticism of the papal policy of the time in the directive of Ignatius to the German Jesuits of the counter-reformation: not to be imprudent in their defence of the Holy See's authority; to fight against heresy, but to love and show compassion to the heretics. His absolute obedience did not blind his critical judgments. Reform of the Church and the world, he said, depended on the reform of the Pope and his curia.

At the same time, there is nothing of the pious fiction about the vicarious representation of Christ in the Pope, and, through him, in superiors; it is a rational inference from theological fact. The salvific will of Christ in his Church must be constantly visible; therefore, the continuation and fulfilment of Christ's passion consists in a real participation in that obedience which achieved the salvation of souls on the cross. This is why Ignatius always insists that superiors command *loco Christi* – in place of Christ, and therefore command a *loving* obedience; but that this love is not for the person of the superior, but for Christ, and for the Father in Christ.

Obedience is thus the loving oblation of the self to Christ crucified. Without this relationship of love with Christ obedient unto death,

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<sup>1</sup> *Fontes Narrativi*, I, 264.

every demand of obedience within the Society has no justification; and conversely, every individual problem concerning obedience has no ultimate solution except in the dark illumination – the *lux in tenebris* – of the cross. It is only in the crucified Lord that a man can give his life away: which is what the vow of obedience implies.

According to this concept of obedience – of the understanding – as the imitation of Christ crucified, the will of the eternal Father is achieved in exactly the same way as it was achieved on the cross of the Lord. The ignatian theology of obedience is the essential theology of the *Spiritual Exercises*. Obedience to any precept which is in no way sinful, but may well be stupid, can lead to assimilation with Christ, the suffering servant, who is despised and rejected; the assimilation which is asked for in the Exercises. There, from first to last, we are concerned with this donation of our liberty to Christ crucified. As Karl Rahner puts it:

Where the life of the imitation of Christ is truly lived, when Christ's cross is considered not as an inevitable burden but as the incarnation of grace – as something which needs must be if the scriptures are to be fulfilled for the entry into glory, inside the scope of such a life even an irrational order makes sense; it can even be desired, in spite of the fact that the superior has no right to issue such an order; all the obstacles and vicissitudes of life, which should not really be, can be intimately desired; because faith in God's grace finds its full perfection only when it becomes actual in circumstances such as these.<sup>1</sup>

The theology of obedience is thus the theology of the cross; not the cross without the resurrection, but one which leads to resurrection. Ignatius teaches that all true joy and consolation come through participation in that perfect obedience of the cross which is the reason for Christ's glory: 'Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name'.<sup>2</sup> Obedience, he says, is a self-decapitation, a martyrdom, which inevitably brings interior joy and peace, as sweet as our wretched condition here below permits. Obedience is the compenetration in our living of passion and resurrection; it is the self-despoilment which is the expression of the authentic desire for the interior liberty of the sons of God and the peace Christ promised.

<sup>1</sup> *Stimmen der Zeit*, 158 (1956), p 265.

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

Ignatius saw that the work of redemption is achieved only because God became a servant: in the moment when the Word made flesh hands himself over to the sole service of the eternal Father: 'When Christ came into the world, he said . . . Lo, I have come to do thy will, O God'.<sup>1</sup> It is on these historical, salvific facts that Ignatius sees that the very existence and fruitful continuance of his Society rest. It depends, as the Church to which it belongs depends, on this love of Christ which expresses itself always in service: the service, for the Father, of the brethren.

Ideally, then, in the relationship which is obedience, love will always emerge as a dominant, effecting that direct contact which transcends all intermediaries: 'You yourself are the love with which the soul loves you'. And participation in the loving obedience of Christ will mean that the obedient man operates as Christ operates, divinely and humanly at once: he is 'informed' by the voice of his Creator and Lord, and at the same time collaborates with a personal responsibility that is fully human. For grace perfects human nature and does not destroy or damage it. A great deal has been written, and by Ignatius himself, about 'blind' obedience; but it is not always understood that such blindness is self-inflicted: the closing of our eyes to the persons, and personalities, of all intermediaries, so that we may see Christ, and him only. We could equally well speak of 'deaf' obedience, since it is his voice alone to which we listen across all intermediaries, be it Pope or local superior.

Union with Christ is union with one another in Christ. So Ignatius will write of his Society:

The chief bond of the members amongst themselves and with their head is the love of God and of our Lord, Jesus Christ, whose great goodness will unite them; that love which, descending from God, envelops the neighbour and the whole body of the Society in a special way.<sup>2</sup>

Obedience always presupposes this unitive love; blind obedience, as popularly conceived – the meek subject unconditionally consenting to perform the impossible command of a superior who is unjust or irrational or both – could only be a divine-human action where an infused, contemplative love supplied for human reason and understanding. Obedience, to be human, must be rational; it presupposes a right mode of government, in which the power of commanding is in every case proportioned equally to the capacity for

<sup>1</sup> Heb 10, 5-7.

<sup>2</sup> *Constitutiones S. J.*, VIII, 1, 8.

obeying. To command and to rule others demands a complete mastery of the art of obeying: the art of loving God and of realizing truly what it means to be loved by God.

In the thought of Ignatius, without self-discipline in commanding and true discernment in obeying, religious are in exactly the same position as were the british cavalry on the crimean peninsula:

Theirs not to reason why,  
Theirs but to do or die . . .

which has little or nothing to do with the love of God. Examples could be multiplied of his own self-discipline, which for him meant love of others, in commanding. He went to endless pains to inform himself about the proclivities of his subjects, and nothing pleased him more than when he found that his own ideas and those of the brethren ran the same way. His love shewed itself in not laying impossible burdens on others. In difficult matters, or in delicate situations, he asked himself three questions: Could the person do it if commanded; would he naturally take to the command; what would he do if it were left to him entirely to do it or not to do it. He believed that a superior who commands properly and worthily is almost always obeyed. He advised that superiors should command circumspectly and with due order, with all good will, modesty and charity. The brethren, he said, must be convinced that the superior has the power, the knowledge and the will to govern well. He would have subscribed whole-heartedly to the statement:

As for superiors, who will be called upon to give an account of the souls committed to their charge (cf Heb 13, 17), they will show themselves docile to the will of God in fulfilling their duty, and will exercise their authority in the spirit of service for the brethren, in a way that will express the love God has for them. In governing they will treat those who are subject to them with due respect for the human person and as children of God, anxious to lead them to a submission that is freely made . . . They will so treat the brethren that they cooperate with positive and responsible obedience in undertaking tasks and acting on their own initiative. Therefore, superiors will listen willingly to the brethren and will seek their cooperation for the good of the institute and the Church, though without detriment to their right in authority to decide and to command what is to be done.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Perfectae Caritatis*, 13.



For all this demands true *ascesis* in the superior, who must be continually aware that it is his task, in governing, to educate to responsibility. We can list the faults that he noted in various superiors – they make a useful examination of conscience: despotism, perfectionism, withdrawal, frigidity, indifference, over-protection, over-indulgence, fear, anxiety, government by guess.

For Ignatius, discernment in obeying means the recognition of a shared responsibility; it means that the principle of subsidiarity must work both ways. If the subject will not take his full share of responsibility, or is over-critical, or shows emotional instability, or strives for an independence that is unbalanced, the complementary faults are liable to appear in the superior. Ignatius did, however, insist that discretion in obeying, which applies equally to superior and subject (cf the famous hierarchy in the *Letter on Obedience*), in the last analysis demands submission of the understanding as well as of will. 'Obedience of the will without the understanding is like a one-legged man'.

Reflection on the high ideals of asceticism that this concept of obedience demands serves also to uncover the enormous difficulties which it has always involved. What was said in the life-time of Ignatius remains true today, that 'Obedience is our mother, from whom we sucked our milk; but now that we have cut our teeth our first tendency is to bite'. Obedience demands true perfection of holiness – that is, of all Christ's virtues. Ignatius (who had his detractors amongst his own: Fr Bobadilla remarked publicly, not long after his founder's death, that Ignatius was a tyrant and always did whatever he wanted) was desperately anxious that the numbers in his Society should be strictly limited; and, as he saw them growing beyond what he considered feasible for the true unity of charity, he would quote the text: 'You have multiplied the people, but not their happiness'.<sup>1</sup> Like so many founders, whose charismatic gifts in the first years made the obedience of others a sweet yoke because most of them could recognize Christ so easily in him, he found in his later years that, as his personal influence waned because of the problems of distance and of numbers, there occurred a widening gap between law and spirit, initiative and passive acceptance, responsibility and acceptance of will. The basic problem of renewal and reform in the Society of Jesus is that of any and every religious institute: 'Physicians, heal yourselves'.

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<sup>1</sup> Isai 9, 3 (Vulgate).