

# HOW NECESSARY IS THE LOCAL SUPERIOR?

By JAMES WALSH

**A**T A TIME WHEN the Church is insisting anew on the vital importance of genuine religious obedience in apostolic Institutes,<sup>1</sup> many general Chapters have embarked upon experiments in which small communities dispense with a regular superior at the local level. At first sight, there would appear to be some contradiction here, which prompts the question: what is the purpose of these experiments? It can hardly be that the focal point of authority in religious Institutes has suddenly shifted to a 'democratic' plane. For, while recent pronouncements on authority-obedience patterns indicate many changes of emphasis, there is certainly no *radical* alteration in the Church's teaching on the matter.<sup>2</sup>

Here we shall consider the more practical and obvious reason for these experiments: the doubt whether a genuine religious obedience demands a superior for every local community, particularly in modern conditions; and whether such a doubt is justified. We shall approach the problem by considering the various aspects of religious obedience.

## 1. *Unitive obedience*

All members of an Institute by their religious profession bind themselves to strive after the same submission to the Father which Christ manifested in his earthly life, from the moment of his incarnation.<sup>3</sup> Religious vow a deeper and more total *christian* obedience – 'a service . . . a special kind of consecration, one deeply rooted in their baptismal consecration and a more complete expression of it'.<sup>4</sup> This union with Christ, in his obediential relationship with his

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<sup>1</sup> Cf *supra*, n. 32, pp 82–83; n. 2, p 10, pp 13–14.

<sup>2</sup> It is true that much needs to be said from the theological and canonical points of view on the implications of these changes in terms of hierarchy, jurisdiction and charism. We remit this question to a later issue.

<sup>3</sup> Heb 10, 5–10.

<sup>4</sup> *Perfectae Caritatis*, 5. Cf *Supplement* 2, pp 25 ff.

Father, is the core, the essential element of religious obedience which controls all aspects of government and the response to it in a religious Institute.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. *Familial obedience*

By this consecration, which is a free response to God's call, each religious is incorporated into the religious family, and agrees to adopt its style of life, in the belief that he will be helped (and will help) to a more perfect fulfilment of God's salvific will in a particular time, place and circumstances, made manifest through the charismatic inspiration of the Institute imparted to each member for the good of the whole. This is the fraternal aspect of obedience so emphasized by the Church in her recent pronouncements on renewal.<sup>2</sup>

It is perhaps in this area of familial obedience that there is the greatest need of change and of positive renewal. It has frequently been noticed that, in the modern context, particularly in congregations of women religious,<sup>3</sup> the word 'Superior' carries with it a very unhappy ring: it appears to militate against that unitive responsibility which all the members of the Institute share with Christ and with each other; it is also redolent of past situations, in which the theology of religious obedience was either misunderstood or closely linked with particular theories of civil government or a society in which social classes were markedly differentiated; and it still carries with it a confusion between administrative co-ordination and spiritual direction.

In religious life, respect for the Christ-given dignity of the human person, the mutual affection arising from membership of the same family, the human, and therefore 'graced', need for personal fulfilment, freedom for genuine initiative and a developing sense of responsibility, the necessity for eradicating the over-dependence manifested in paternalism (or maternalism) and infantilism; all these are comparatively new emphases. They need to be practically and courageously fostered by controlled and structured experimentation,<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-6, 14. (*Supplement 2*, pp 25-31, 49-52.)

<sup>2</sup> Cf *Ibid.*, 15 (*Supplement 2*, pp 52 ff.); *Renovationis causam, passim* (Cf the entry *Community*, in *Index to key-concepts, supra*, pp 000 ff.)

<sup>3</sup> In clerical Institutes, the majority of the formed members are priests: and the priesthood has always conferred a particular sense of equality, of brotherhood, which is in practice corrective of any tendency on the part of the Superior to dominate over 'inferiors'. A current problem in these Institutes is to achieve a real sense of fraternity between priests and brothers and between formed religious and those still in formation.

<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting here that it is precisely in this area that the clear directives of many

if authentic fraternal community is to be more than a devout wish.

The developing understanding and positive expression of fraternal obedience is also the key to apostolic renewal in these days when religious Institutes must look more to the calibre of their personnel than appears to have been the case in the past. The emphasis now is on a more individual apostolic activity, or on small, flexible and mobile teams, rather than on large, self-contained Institutions in which plentiful numbers of religious manned the whole establishment, often at the expense of the direct apostolate, which scarcely ever moved outside the ambit of the convent or college walls. More and more religious are now working outside the Institution. They need a home to return to, a community in which they can relax with their own brethren, and find an atmosphere conducive to prayer and the mutual solace and sharing without which they will hardly be sustained in the new and exacting forms of their work.

### 3. *Social obedience and community life*

Much of what has passed for religious obedience at local level until comparatively recently was an uneasy alliance between the social aspect of religious community living and the spiritual (which we shall be considering presently). In any and every communitarian situation, 'house-rules' are essential for smooth running and good order. In religious communities they also provide the opportunity for mutual courtesy, charity and selflessness. In the past, such rules were often invested with a false mystique of obedience, so that their literal observance was used by the local superior as a sort of spiritual thermometer to assess religious fervour or the lack of it; and their violation (often irrespective of the cause) seized upon as the occasion for admonition and the imposition of penances. Often enough, they provided the only criterion of regularity and of that 'uniformity' which figured so high on the list of religious virtues.

One good example of this unsuitable marriage between the social and the spiritual, which may still cause a certain amount of difficulty, is 'religious' silence. In the contemplative or monastic situation, and, to a certain extent, during the formative years of apostolic life, a fairly rigid regime of exterior silence is essential. With regard to the former, a life devoted to liturgical and contemplative prayer

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General Chapters have either been misinterpreted or have not been implemented – often through the timidity or narrow-mindedness of local, and sometimes of Provincial, Superiors.

depends heavily on an external atmosphere which will help to create a permanent interior solitude; whilst in the latter situation, as *Renovationis causam* insists, regular periods of withdrawal and solitude are necessary to formation in the apostolic Institute, especially during the novitiate, to enable the young religious to achieve the proper integration of action and contemplation.<sup>1</sup> In communities of formed apostolic religious, however, exterior silence is related as much to communication as to contemplation. Here it will be charity and courtesy, the knowledge and experience of what the actual needs of others are, which will establish the times and places of exterior silence in community; so that it will no longer be one of the regular duties of a superior to see that 'silence is observed'. Rather, it will be an obligation in charity which the whole community accepts and discharges.

#### 4. *Obedience and the unitive life*

Traditionally in the Church, the image to which the religious Superior strives to conform is that of the founder of the Institute: the Superior must be possessed of the general and specific qualities which he manifested, under the impulse of the Spirit, in directing and guiding the first members in their search for the perfection of Christ's charity. In earlier times, such guidance was primarily restricted to the spiritual sphere: the founder was he who led and controlled the others in their search for God's will – the ever more perfect union with Christ. But every religious reform has tended to insist on a return to a humble, personal service and affectionate guidance. In the emergence of the first Institute totally dedicated to the Apostolate, the Society of Jesus, Ignatius Loyola was the acknowledged spiritual leader of his companions, before he was finally chosen by them as Superior General; and most of the important decisions affecting the future structure of the Institute were prepared at community level. But during the rapid expansion of his Order and hence of its work in the Church, he found, as others found before and after him, that he was becoming more an administrator than a: spiritual director (he had hoped to restrict the number of his companions to sixty). But though the constitutions of his Society have suffered the insertion of multifarious administrative details, the primary qualities originally set down as essential in the Superior remain: familiarity with God, the splendour of charity, true humility (so that

<sup>1</sup> Cf the entry *action and contemplation*, in the *Index to key-concepts*, *supra*, p 141.

he might be an example to the community of all the virtues and be loved by them); and, before learning or other qualities of mind, that wisdom and discernment in spiritual and interior matters indispensable for counselling and helping others.<sup>1</sup>

Ignatius followed the tradition established and proved by the great religious Orders: the spiritual well-being of the religious family depends on the willingness to be directed, which in turn demands that the thoughts of one's heart be revealed to the director. Administrative ability, apostolic competence and co-ordinating power: these can be complemented by other members of the community; but the Superior must have the power of discernment and he must inspire that love and confidence in the members of his community which will lead them freely to reveal their inmost thoughts and desires to him. So the practice of 'manifestation of conscience', which implies an outstanding discernment and prudence in the Superior and requires him to be a person who can readily be loved and trusted, became the hinge of the authority-obedience relationship, as well for apostolic Institutes as for monks and *ex professo* contemplatives.

This at least was the theory; the practice turned out very differently, particularly in apostolic congregations of religious women which were founded or received new impetus during the nineteenth century. These Institutes had no other choice than to adopt the governmental structures of the apostolic orders of men-religious: they were usually harrassed by bishops and clergy who, whilst seeing the need for them, and appreciating the help they gave, particularly in education and in the care of the sick and poverty-stricken, adopted towards them the anti-feminist positions of the time. Little attempt was made to give these religious the necessary training in the basic principles of spirituality, let alone in the theology needed to give sound spiritual guidance. The archives of Propaganda (the Congregation which dealt with the affairs of so many apostolic Institutes of women in the english-speaking world during the nineteenth century) reveal the valiant efforts made by the holy See to guide the hands which were writing the constitutions of so many infant congregations; yet, though certain aspects of charismatic inspiration are often caught and held, this scarcely ever extends to the coherent patterning of authority and obedience, and never at all to government structures, which reveal a monotonous uniformity in terms of 'Superior' and 'subject' in rule after rule. In any case, it is

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<sup>1</sup> *Constitutiones S. J.*, pars IX, cap. II.

hardly possible to ensure the production of wise and discerning directors by passing legislation.

So it tended to happen that, once the charismatic influence of the foundress began to wane with the geographical and numerical expansion of the congregation, less well-endowed Superiors were given the onus of guiding communities. Their inability to form relationships based on unqualified confidence in their discretion and prudence, their lack of theological knowledge and their very limited apostolic experience: all this was reflected in the decree of Leo XIII, *Quemadmodum*, which rescinded any obligation to manifestation imposed by the constitutions of womens' congregations.<sup>1</sup> This directive became part of Church law in the codification of 1917, and was extended to *all* religious Institutes:

All religious superiors are forbidden to induce their subjects in any way whatsoever to make a manifestation of conscience.<sup>2</sup>

And though the same Canon added that free and spontaneous manifestation was not forbidden, and was even to be encouraged, it would be generally true to say that, apart from the novitiate situation, religious women nowadays scarcely ever consider the Superior as in any sense the spiritual guide of the community, either collectively or individually. In fact, spiritual guidance has become linked with sacramental confession,<sup>3</sup> and is thus outside the province of a Superior of women.

It is true that a certain *general* guidance of a community in matters spiritual is possible without the individual relationship described above. But it will remain peripheral and will so often find itself concentrating overmuch on minor points of external detail, which are now much more easily settled without the direct or obtrusive involvement of 'authority'.

What, then, is the function of the local Superior in the current situation? She cannot act as the spiritual guide of the community; nor is she any longer required as the guardian of rule and custom, as this was understood in the past. In some situations, but by no

<sup>1</sup> December 17, 1890. Cf *Acta Sanctae Sedis*, tom. XXIII, p 507.

<sup>2</sup> C. I. C., Canon 530.

<sup>3</sup> One of the more perplexing sentences in the Council's declaration on religious obedience reads: 'The (Superiors) will grant them (the members) the liberty due to them particularly with regard to the Sacrament of Penance and spiritual direction'. *Perfectae Caritatis*, 14.

means in all, she may have the competence to guide or to co-ordinate the apostolic work of the community. The difficulty here is that very often the Superior is not so well trained or talented in respect of the apostolic work of the community as some of its members are; and it is more often the case than not, for example in the educational or medical apostolate, that there is an appointed co-ordinator or director as well as a Superior in the same community.

### 5. *Formative obedience*

The ascetical role, the educative value, of religious obedience is precisely expressed in the epistle to the Hebrews: 'Although he was Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered',<sup>1</sup> where the word 'suffered' can carry the wider meaning of general experience. Though it is true that, from this standpoint, the religious will always be in the formative situation, it must be said in general that the primary purpose of obedience ought never to be ascetical for the formed religious, but apostolic. The suffering, the self-emptying which obedience so often must impose is not an end in itself, not even in the formative situation – even though one must say that it will be an essential ingredient of the developing experience of the young religious. Only God can command blind obedience; so that the Superior can impose such an obedience only in so far as he is *reasonably certain*, objectively as well as subjectively, that the will of God and the spiritual well-being of the individual is truly being served by such an imposition. Lack of knowledge, communication and openness amongst Superiors at various levels, as well as between the local Superior and the community, often forces the individual into a situation in which he must obey blindly, if he is to obey at all. Defective guidance can never be absolved by re-assuring oneself, hindsight, that the individual has been purified by the resulting experience. No-one has the right to cause suffering to another, whether this be by neglect, omission, indecision or positive action, on the principle that 'it's all in the shilling', unless he is certain that he is God's chosen instrument in the case. And what are the criteria for such certainty? Certainly not the simple fact that he is the legitimately appointed Superior.

Even in these days of rapid communication and far-reaching experimentation in apostolic approaches and community living, impersonal government structures go grinding on. For example,

<sup>1</sup> Heb 5, 8.

the Superior General, in many instances, feels that he can communicate with the individual religious 'only through the proper channels'; the inspiration of many special general chapters is neutralized by inept handling at provincial and community level, and the simplest directives become the object of ceaseless referral back and forth. Added to this, there is the lingering habit, particularly at local level, of applying legislation intended for the formative situation to communities of formed religious. All these defects are causing untold suffering as well to the older religious who need to have explained to them, patiently and lucidly, the reasons for change, as well as to the younger, who are naturally impatient with an elaborate and out-moded protocol. The Church is asking for new government structures, 'so that the exercise of authority is more effective and streamlined, in accordance with the needs of modern times'.<sup>1</sup>

### *Conclusion*

The first half of this century was a time of expansion for most apostolic Institutes, in which works, institutions and communities multiplied. The same structure was necessarily applied to every new community, large or small: each had to have its Superior – in theory the spiritual guide of the community, in practice the administrator, the guest-mistress, the purveyor of small or routine permissions, the guardian of rule and custom. Originally she was also the apostolic co-ordinator, and the directress of the work of the community; but amid the pressures of modern living, and the growing need for professional competence, this is no longer so. The introduction of a more communal decision-making government, the emphasis on personal responsibility, dialogue and consensus, together with the need for new forms of apostolate and for the revitalization of the old: all this has tended to reveal the weaknesses in governmental structures, particularly at local level. Rapidly changing conditions and circumstances demand more personal guidance and direction in community rather than less. But many local Superiors, who received their formation before the Council, feel insecure because the directives of the special general Chapter are not as clear and precise as the rules and customs they have displaced. Communities – particularly those with a preponderance of younger religious – have the feeling that the local Superior, in spite of immense good will, is often a real obstacle in the implementation of chapter directives.

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<sup>1</sup> *Ecclesiae Sanctae*, 18. Cf. *Supplement* 4, pp 17–18.



The fact of the matter is that the new generation of religious needs a new type of Superior; or rather a return to pristine ideals in modern dress. As long as the principle is grasped that openness of conscience must be free and spontaneous, the local Superior should accept the fact that her primary rôle is spiritual direction; and that unless she is fulfilling this rôle, her presence will often be otiose – given a harmonious community which can share the administration. But the Superior as director must have the unqualified confidence of her community, which in turn means theological competence, a varied pastoral experience, a high degree of discernment and the desire and ability to respect confidences. Until such time as the Institute can produce religious of this calibre for all its communities, we shall have to make do in many situations with local co-ordinators: which puts the onus of direction squarely on the shoulders of a few Superiors. In this situation, decentralization must not be allowed to prevent the free and easy access of each religious to the Provincial, and, in Institutes of smaller numbers, to the General. And in the election and nomination of Superiors, we should seek not so much the outstanding administrators, but those possessing the qualities necessary for eminent spiritual leadership.