

# RELIGIOUS OBEDIENCE

By MICHAEL KYNE

## *Obedience: experienced vocation*

**N**ORMALLY, those called to religious life do not begin with a clear understanding of what lies at the root of their vocation; they come to it only gradually. At first, their motivation is usually mixed and confused. It is only when they feel drawn to the life and repelled by it, at one and the same time, that understanding dawns that their basic free desire is to hand over to God all they are, do and possess. Then, only slowly, as difficulties ensue, they come to see that their spontaneous desire rests on the deeper reality of God's imperious attraction. Here, at length, they realize that at the heart of their vocation lies a loving, personal obedience to God, who calls and draws them to give their lives totally, directly and definitively to him who became man for the glory of the Father and the salvation of mankind. It is on the perception and living out of this obedience that their vocation is founded.

## *The founder's vocation*

The founder of a religious order presents the experience of such a vocation at its clearest. Every founder, conditioned by his temperament and his environment in the Church and in the world, through a special gift of God, perceived the Word made flesh in a particular way. He grasped certain aspects of Christ's life and teaching with special clarity; and, suddenly or gradually, he came to see that these demanded, as response, the giving of his whole life in certain definite ways. He saw what he wanted to do; and he also saw that this was one with what he was 'commanded' to do.

Where such a perception is deep and complete, it is received in and through the Church. Though the Church's frailty may seem at times to obscure the saving life and message of Christ, by her Saviour's promise and Spirit she will never fail to mediate the gift of himself which God wills to make to mankind by means of her.

To the extent that a founder's response was total and clear-sighted, it involved understanding of and insertion into the life of

read more at [www.theway.org.uk](http://www.theway.org.uk)

the Church. The founder realized that in the Church Christ is infallibly encountered by faith; encountered in the word, the sacraments and the brethren. It is here that, through Christ, the holiness of union with God is received as gift. Finally, the founder understood that any mission to those who have not knowingly or fully accepted their gift-relation in Christ to God and all men can be received only in the Church – as something guaranteed to be christian.

### *The vision of the founder*

Any founder's gift, vision and response are a participation in the Church's own gift, vision and response, as she slowly comes to perceive the fulness of the life, message and mission given to her. His is a particular vision, a way into the fuller reality of the Church's life; and by its very 'specialization' it may deepen and advance the insight of the Church concerning what she herself is and what her life should be. His vision excludes nothing fundamental in the Church's life; it focuses on certain central points of this life and orders the realities which make it up in a special, simple way.

Indeed, simplicity is the hallmark of any great founder: a simplicity which shares in that of Christ's own existence. This simplicity means that his vision and response are not so narrowly individualized and time-bound as to prevent a wide range of people in different ages entering into them.

For, whether because the founder came to see that others needed to share his vision if it was to be fulfilled for the sake of Christ and the Church, or because others were drawn to him for help or through a desire to share his life, a group of companions formed around him. All those who stayed, though they may have found certain elements in his life and words repellent, experienced an increasingly deep harmony between the founder's and their own incipient vision and response to God. Their vocation came to be established not on themselves nor on him but on God's particular call; which, however had a resonance similar to his. The founder's gift from God served to identify the main contours of their own charism and desire as realities having the same shape as his.

### *Recognition by the hierarchical Church*

Once the founder's way of living out christianity started to win recruits and the group undertook work in the Church, the hierarchy – often at the urging of the founder – had to take cognizance of it.

It is true that the law of the Church, of christians, is the holy Spirit; but in all her weak members the Church finds that this law easily becomes diverted by prejudices and selfishness and confused with merely human impulse or reluctance. Of all her members, only the hierarchy, as a whole or in their head, the pope, is safeguarded against lastingly or definitively passing a false judgment on the public inspirations of the Spirit. Their duty to judge becomes the more urgent, the more the Spirit and the particular vision he arouses lay claim to shape the whole life of any group of christians, and so to express something of the essential reality of the Church herself. Thus the life of a religious order calls imperatively for judgment by the Church. In fact, it begins its life as an order only in obedience to that judgment of the hierarchical Church, one of whose main tasks is that of deciding whether publicly expressed views of Christ and public activity for him in any age are in fact consonant with the Church's lived experience of the life, word and mission of Christ entrusted to her.

#### *Formulation of vision and response*

When a religious order is coming into being, two matching demands emerge. Both the order and the Church realize that human lives are ambiguous expressions of the vision on which the order is founded; they understand that many a guess at the spirit of the order through its external works and actions may be wrong. Most of these externals will be common to all christians or to many orders, and others will be misunderstood through prejudices or hostility or enthusiasm. So, though any human expression must fail to convey the total living richness of God's gift and man's response in love, the Church and the order both seek verbal and organizational formulations of these realities. They do so in order that the meaning of those human lives and activities may be safeguarded, and this particular exchange of gifts between God and men be preserved.

The order wants this so that it may remain loyal to God's particular grace, so that new members may have a clearer sight of what the order really is and may be helped into it, once their call by God has been accurately tested for its harmony with the order's vision. The Church desires this both as an aid to accurate discernment, and so that there may be continuing care for what she will authenticate and recognize as a gift of God to the whole Church. It is at this point that the obedience of the order and its members

to God and the hierarchical Church flow into and become one with the daily obedience found in all religious life.

### *The Rule*

The first thing the Church calls for is a translation into words of the broad, essential vision and responses of an order. As a translation it necessarily fails to express the whole vocation. Yet it is nonetheless as true a rendering of it as the founder could achieve and the Church ratify. To bring it fully to life, to fill out its meaning, the words of the founder and the lives of the first companions as members of the order are incomparable helps. It is the meaning of this document, its deep aim, which the order always seeks to enter into; and the document itself provides a touchstone for all future developments of the order.

Any important or substantial change in this meaning, accepted officially by the order as a whole and not merely present as an abuse which the rule identifies and indicts, means in fact the foundation of a new order. It matters little if this change is the result of a whittling away through lack of generosity, or springs from a desire to face new situations and needs, or aims at allowing the order to contain all types of christian vocation. In all such cases the specific gift of God's original gift to *this* order is lost; it is for the hierarchical Church to discern anew if a fresh and different gift has been given.

### *The Constitutions*

If this phrase is taken to mean a codified amplification of the rule, so that its spirit is expressed in settled structures of government and practice, the current conviction is that such constitutions inevitably result in legalism.

It is true that legalism can exist: that there can be a mania for imposing many practices universally on members; whereas in fact few universal structures or practices may be necessary or desirable in most orders. Detailed regulations are more needed for the lives of those new to the order; and they may also be required for a common life and mission in particular places. But many of these should be settled by the local body in union with the province or order.

The more structures and practices members are asked to enter into, the more three things become vitally necessary, if mere im-

plementation of regulations is not to be seen as the acme of christian perfection in the order.

a. These regulations must be seen as giving a clear aim or strategy to individuals or groups within the order. They do not establish the tactics, or the way to help actual members towards entering into that aim or practice fruitfully. It is here that scope must be given to a local superior to do the tactical work and not merely to reiterate the law, as if this were the sole help that was needed. Sometimes, in order to help members to achieve the goal, over a period of time and to their spiritual profit, it may be necessary for them *not* to do what is enjoined by the law. And the very language of the law should express that it is left to the competent superior to give even such help as this for a time to individuals.

b. It should also be recognized that the more a person enters into the spirit of the order, the more his life should be governed by his own discernment, checked periodically and in important matters with the discernment of the superior. Thus, as the years pass by, the life of most religious, though still wholly under obedience, should in practice be largely covered by general permissions or by the exigencies of the tasks that have been given them.

c. Machinery is required for fairly swift change of structures and practices which have become dead wood. If this is not done, an unreasonable burden is laid on those who rightly hold that they should obey the laws of their vocation where this involves no sin and, at the same time, those who disobey these laws are encouraged to acquire a negative attitude towards all law within the order. In practice, the sort of attitude required of members is one of obedience accompanied by a vigorous expression of the need for a change. Such an attitude is of particular importance for those who have positions of authority and must ask others to obey the law.

This said, it must be asserted that constitutions are necessary for us later members of an order in a way that they were not for the first companions who brought the order into being. These had a long apprenticeship during which they came to recognize what was needed for the order; whereas we enter on the life as it already exists. We cannot judge it *as members* from the very moment of our entry. For us the law is a sure means of leading us into the spirit of the order and sustaining us in that spirit, even when it leads us to seek to change the law. The firm practices of the life provide so many points which test the consonance of the Spirit's leading of ourselves and of the order. Without practical expressions, the spirit of the

order cannot endure or be entered into by later generations. Also it seems fair to say that no individual or group within an order can be trusted to act consistently according to the spirit of Christ and of the order; for the safety of the members, any authority within religious life needs to be circumscribed by words and practices which express the authentic spirit of the order and not the foibles of this authority.

### *The Superior*

It is true that all members of the order must take ultimate responsibility for their own self-giving to Christ. Each of them must care for the mission of the whole body and not merely for his own designated part in this, which is their primary charge. Each must see that the essential expressions of a spirit are safeguarded and unity maintained. But in practice it is all too easy for views to become narrowed and, indeed, so foreshortened that the primary object, *viz.* response to Christ, is overlooked. Because of this a superior is needed: one who, after appointment or election, is bound *ex officio* to care for the conditions in which individuals and community may achieve that for which they were called together by Christ through his Church. Wherever the local community is not an autonomous unit, there is need of a superior who is bound *ex officio* to ensure that the local community does not so develop that it becomes a closed group whose members cannot move to any other community. He must stand against any deep movement by individuals or group to narrow their mission to their present job or to view it solely in terms of human efficiency or social help. Finally, though the spirit of an order is a shared one, many aspects of a member's life should not be exposed to the whole group. An individual needs help in discernment with regard to his life as a member which the group itself cannot rightly handle but whose outcome needs the backing of authority.

Just as the superior is checked and helped by individuals, community, and law, so all these are safeguarded and humanized by a superior. His role is not to initiate everything nor to possess competence in every sphere: it is to test the spirit behind group and personal initiatives in the light of the Spirit and the objectivizations of that Spirit in the life of Christ, the Church and the order. He must himself *seek* the will of God and encourage individuals and community to do the same; but he must also have the courage to stand firm against what is clearly contrary to the spirit of the order.

*The community*

It is to the whole order that the Church entrusted the care of continuing receptivity to God's gift of the vocation which brought about its existence and sustains it.

But this charge to care for the response of its members, who change in character and circumstances through the ages, is given to the order only as a delegate of the Church to which, ultimately, this gift of vocation has been made by God. Only one community, the Church as a whole, possesses the grace of definitive (though developing) and self-authenticating discernment. The whole order shares in this in a dependent way, once its law and government are validated by the Church. The local community as such can lay no claim to the obedience of its members to its decisions, unless this authority has been given it specifically by the Church and the order. It has no guarantee for its discernment, however great the agreement of its members, except insofar as this is one with that of the order as such, and ratified by the Church.

It should be noted that the 'shape' of the community is determined by its vision and its obedient response to this in faith. A benedictine community is not like a jesuit one in many ways, nor is it meant to be. Though types of community and communal practice observed in other vocations and milieux may help an order to see how its own communities are deficient in their actual reality, no simple transference of the practices and style of other groups can provide the norms for its community life. Each order must be faithful to the call which creates a particular type of community bond and atmosphere. This is the obedience to community required of its members: not an obedience which exacts compliance with practices, new or old, unless sanctioned by the order for all its members at the present time.

All religious communities are meant primarily to help their members, as individuals and as a group, to grow in their reception of and their answer to the gift of God in their whole lives. It is to encourage this and provide suitable conditions for it that the community exists. Thus the exclusion of practical neglect of any important sector of these lives (prayer, friendship, co-operation in work, and the conditions to facilitate all of these) will be a serious failure in community help. It is for the sake of and as a result of their total faith-response that their deepest human ties should be with those who receive the same call. Today, any help in that faith-

response would seem to demand of all members that they enter at times into forms which do not suit them personally: this is one result of having members coming from a swiftly changing world.

It may happen that a local community does not in practice provide such help. This does not invalidate a vocation, provided that the order has not abandoned the aids which it sees are necessary. Indeed, it is perhaps in the defects of any local community that the deepest sense of obedience to the community is most clearly seen. It consists above all in the costly endeavour to maintain full union with defective human beings and to continue entering into the conditions which facilitate this union and the response of the whole body to the call of God to them in today's world.

Finally, obedience is not the whole of religious life, for Ignatius or any other founder. But Ignatius saw clearly that response to God can be truly centred round obedience in religious life. His insight is still a gift of God, not only to his order but to the whole Church, above all in its religious congregations.