

# PRAYER, MISSION AND OBEDIENCE

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THE CHRISTIAN incarnational perspective involved in apostolic consecration is more easily extolled than lived, when one weighs the full rigour of its demands. Well-written constitutions will achieve a balance between the extremes of going one's own way in too independent a spirit, and the legalistic rigidity of letter over spirit. The human penchant for a settled security here and now can always derive a certain satisfaction from doing exactly what the letter of the law stipulates. At the same time, the human spirit is sometimes inclined to make its own decisions rather than obey the Spirit as expressed in the constitutions. Finding the means between these two attractive extremes is never easy. It is, however, crucial to recognize as an illusion to try to live without any written articulation of a group's vision. Expression of the fundamental inspiration of the congregation, and its development up to the present moment, will provide a surer and more enduring direction for the group than will the charismatic leadership of any of its great leaders. Carefully composed constitutions which strive to specify and articulate the spirit and vision of a particular congregation will always challenge and inspire the hearts of all true members. Vatican II began a phase of experimentation for many communities, which have usually been set out in temporary directives and recommendations. The time may now have arrived to express rather less tentatively what has been learnt in the past decade of special experiment.

After a preliminary distinction between monastic and apostolically active religious congregations, I wish to comment on three substantial elements of apostolic religious life today: areas in which there has been much experimentation but on which congregations now must somehow take a stand in their revised constitutions. These are: religious obedience in apostolic ministry, the practice of formal prayer by active religious, and the experience of community among apostolic religious. In each case, therefore, we are dealing not simply with the human or even the profoundly Christian, but with

issues and realities specific to religious life in the Church. It must be added that these reflections are not those of a canonist, nor of one experienced in assisting any congregation to re-write its constitutions. Rather they arise from pastoral experience in a spirit of friendship with many religious congregations, over many years, chiefly in the United States.

*Apostolically active and monastic congregations*<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the most helpful insight that has come from a return to the original inspiration behind a given community<sup>2</sup> is greater clarity concerning the differences between monastic and apostolically active congregations in the Church. Though these two ways of loving and serving God must always be complementary, they manifest quite distinct emphases which should not be blurred. I would distinguish the apostolically active from the monastic group by asserting that the former is characterized by an external<sup>3</sup> flexibility and mobility for a greater active service of God in his people in this world; and that this charism does not permit that patterned external solitude with God and the daily routine of formal prayer in the liturgy of the Hours which is characteristic of the monastic approach. It is important not to exaggerate the differences, for we are still trying to understand the implications for life in these two ways to God.

Constitutions today must take into account the fundamental orientations that characterize apostolically active or monastic life. It would seem that some groups, when they investigate historical roots and development over the years since their foundation, do not find an easy clarity and continuity with regard to this basic issue. Since this is a question of the group's self-understanding, the more clarity and spiritual continuity the better, as long as this is not forced beyond the evidence, and the time of its foundation is taken into account. Further, a confused or poor self-image can corrode activity, not just of individuals but also of groups. Conversely, the patient, prayerful self-investigation of many groups has resulted in an extraordinary

<sup>1</sup> The use of the awkward phrase, 'apostolically active religious', avoids the offensive implication that monastic life itself is not apostolic; it also seems preferable to phrases like 'Institutes dedicated to the works of the apostolate'.

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

<sup>3</sup> I could emphasize that *internal* flexibility and mobility is characteristic of christian holiness for both monastic and apostolically active religious. The monastic life, however, expresses these internal qualities in a special external life-style.

purification, leading to the intimacy of greater reliance on a loving God in all things.

This is not a matter of valuing one approach over the other in religious life, but rather of discerning which approach identifies the group at this particular time. This fundamental orientation and nature of the group will determine all the means whereby it implements its spirit. I do not wish to embark upon a prolonged description of the differences between the monastic and apostolic vocation. However, all my following remarks can be misunderstood, unless this fundamental distinction is kept in mind.

### *Religious obedience*

In most congregations, there has been a necessary and radical change in the manner of arranging the apostolic assignments for individuals.<sup>4</sup> There had been too many cultural alterations in the Church in the world, to allow us to follow the traditional ways of 'missionary'. A greater delicacy in listening for God's call in the individual's gifts and talents led to a more careful concern for the individual. The discovery or re-discovery of individual and corporate discernment was bound to influence our approach to apostolic choices. Since religious government and obedience are always in relationship, the one-sided authoritarian practice of religious government tended to evoke something less than true and full religious obedience. For many religious, obedience was an individual experience of one-to-one between superior and subject: usually in the worst sense of an 'eye-ball to eye-ball' confrontation, where the superior's authority always wins.

Religious obedience was rarely a communal experience. In most cases, it had lost its apostolic orientation: it often became a series of incidents between superior and subject which festered like angry memories between a parent and an unruly child. In retrospect, it is fairly easy to see that a change had to come, and to understand the type of development involved in such a change, in spite of the inevitable over-reactions. Obedience experienced as submission to totalitarian authority predictably led to excessive individual independence. These over-reactive phases, so much part of the human

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<sup>4</sup> By concentrating on the special moments of apostolic assignment, I do not wish to imply that religious obedience is simply a matter of these major decisions every once in a while. These explicit, special experiences must always be grounded in an obedience which is a daily living of a mystery in faith.

condition, can be instructive and growth-producing. To give them undue emphasis would be immature and misleading for the future development of the individual or the religious group.

*Communal experience of being sent*

The most important re-orientation of religious obedience since Vatican II has been the understanding of it as a community experience in the context of corporate apostolic mission. This has involved a major adjustment; and we are still trying to appreciate all its implications for our lives of decision and service together. Through these changes in governmental structures, obedience can now become a source of apostolic energy and a means of deeper unity within the whole congregation. At least, this is the vision; but we have still far to go in its implementation.

This vision of apostolic obedience offers us a glimpse of the unity of the congregation at its deepest level: the authentic experience, on the part of each member, of 'being sent'. Here all are united in sharing the mission assigned by the Father to the Son. Previously, this unity was often seen as uniformity, according to which everyone shared the same work. Such a view was far too superficial and, for most groups, was a violation of their charism. The attitude of heart in 'being sent' creates an apostolic presence which transcends what is actually done. It unifies all the members in faith, and integrates all their apostolic efforts into the corporate mission of the whole congregation. This can only be a sharing of Jesus's mission today, which is to further his Father's Kingdom in human hearts and social structures. It follows, of course, that any 'sending' of oneself would utterly disrupt the profound unity of the group. It would indicate an attitude quite contrary to that of Jesus in relationship to his Father, and of the apostles in relationship to Jesus and his Father, as we see it being lived, for example, in the Acts of the Apostles.

This 'being sent as Jesus was' is subject to various falsifications: It is not simply a matter of doing what one is told to do, of going where one is told to go. The initiation of the process will be the individual's seriously considered opinion concerning the future apostolic assignment. This opinion will always include a comprehensive awareness of one's strengths and weaknesses, successes and failures, likes and dislikes. It must challenge the individual to raise the level of his prayerfulness: to be more aware of the quality of freedom required to sense where God is leading at this point in life.

The humble self-knowledge involved here is far more important than checking over various job-opportunities.

The sharing of all this with the congregation, in the person of the superior,<sup>5</sup> involves a full and personal self-revelation. This act (this risk!) of trust is the response and invitation to even more trust on the part of the superior and the congregation. In short, the inter-personal relationship of honest trust and mutual love is the ground of the ultimate experience of missioning and 'being sent'. For human beings, entering into such a relationship is never automatic. It always involves risk and mature growth. This first stage, seriously and wholeheartedly entered upon by the individual, constitutes a major step towards the apostolic missioning of that individual. It is not, however, the whole process, least of all its decisive element. However, it must be stressed that such a procedure is far removed from that earlier, more primitive form of obedience, which would consist simply in 'doing what has been decided'.

There is another possible misunderstanding of this 'discerning obedience'. For the individual not to have the final say and ultimate decision about what he or she should do, is, it is alleged, an immaturity, and militates against true human responsibility. The allegation can only be answered in terms of a faith-vision. The rugged individualist, with polished self-sufficiency and cool independence, though often a cultural model today, is not the model of true christian humanism. Christian maturity will continually be born only through a death to self:<sup>6</sup> a total submission to a loving Father, who always blesses such dying with the humble confidence of an intimacy in faith and the promise of fidelity. In this way religious obedience becomes an inter-personal encounter with and in God: an incarnate, sacramental experience rather than some computerized, impersonal programme.

### *Intimacy of incarnated abandonment*

Here we come to a critical point in the development of obedience in religious congregations today. Most groups have taken the initial

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<sup>5</sup> I am aware that other terms can be used to designate the individual in whom religious authority resides in some special way. In using the term 'superior', I do not mean to imply that this term alone is suitable. There may be good reasons for using some other term. What is important is that religious authority is resident in this person. The superior may have authority on various levels, over the whole congregation, over a province, or over a local community.

<sup>6</sup> Cf Lk 9, 23-25.

step of requesting and considering the serious opinion of individual members, enabling them to work through any past oppressive experiences of obedience. However, opportunities of this nature have been let slip in many instances. In other cases, there has been an excessive harping on the 'bad old days'; though this, too, may have been necessary and understandable to begin with. Now, I suggest, we have recovered sufficiently to enter upon the full incarnational encounter which religious obedience was always meant to be, rather than to remain fixated in an over-reaction.

The obedient experience of 'being sent as Jesus was' involves, in the last analysis, a profound meeting with the faithful and loving Father in the Spirit of Jesus, expressed in the mature abandonment of one's whole self and future to the ultimate decision of another human being. This submission of self to the final decision of another human person allows one to participate in the mission and experience of Jesus, which is here and now the furthering of his Father's kingdom. The role of religious authority, because it was often exaggerated in the past, can now be so played down that the whole mystery of religious incarnational obedience is lost. Mediation, eventually grounded in the ecclesial, and normally expressed in the person of the superior, is the quintessence of any incarnational view of the obedience of religious life. With all the good will in the world, to make my own ultimate decision about my apostolic assignment, and not to have to submit to another's decision, really comes to the same thing as 'sending' myself, rather than a matter of religious obedience.

Let me be careful not to over-simplify this point. This submission to another's final decision does not mean that such a decision always disagrees with my own. In fact, in the majority of cases, the serious opinion of one who is living the group's charism will coincide with the superior's final decision and missioning. The submission and abandonment here is not typified by disagreement; it is a special attitude and quality of heart, whereby the individual, in his prayer and reflection, lives in the expectation that the ultimate decision is not arrived at by his own limited powers. At the same time, it remains possible for a religious group to set up a governmental structure and a process of apostolic placement which makes impossible this incarnational abandonment to God. In a situation where the individual has the final say, there would seem to be no apostolic missioning mediated through the religious community: which can hardly be true religious obedience in the Church. Because obedience is a response to religious government, it is important to have a

governmental structure<sup>7</sup> that somehow facilitates this experience of obedience in 'being sent'. Some corporate apostolic vision and set of priorities are also needed to facilitate this experience, since the individual's opinion is to be finally tested within this corporate vision, and thus seen to be a genuine mission or not. This facilitating governmental structure and its whole process will always challenge the individual's lack of freedom in some way or other.

Whether it is easier or more difficult to have the final say in one's own apostolic missioning is beside the point. It is a matter of incarnating one's abandonment to God in relationship with the religious community, chiefly in the person of the superior. This will usually act as a protection against the very human temptation of having too much control in the creation of my own future rather than receiving it as gift. This specific abandonment of self brings our Father close in an intimacy of joy and a quietly confident hope of fidelity: one resembling Jesus's own anguished experience of obedient surrender in that quiet olive-grove of Gethsemane, which brought his Father close in the face of death, and gave quiet courage and sturdy patience for his Passion. John's words in the First Epistle express the mystery: 'Obedience is the test of whether we really live in God or not'.<sup>8</sup> We can never pray enough over these words, both as a commentary on Jesus's experience in Gethsemane and an invitation to our own hearts.

It should be obvious that what is described here is not an unhealthy passivity under the guise of religious obedience. The individual is anything but passive throughout the whole process. At its core is a moment of utter receptivity, which opens us up beyond ourselves in an abandonment to our loving Father and to the superior. This moment of receptivity is often very active and must become the consistent spirit of any apostolic mission. This receptivity is an attitude that made it possible for Jesus to receive the mission of his life from his Father up to the last moment of the cross, where finally he received from his Father a fulness of life, joy and love in resurrection.

I have gone to some length in describing this element in religious life today, in the belief that much thought and care must be given to articulating in revised constitutions a process and structure that will

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<sup>7</sup> There are many possible forms of governmental structures which involve more than a major superior. There can be a board of consultors, a group of assistants to advise in regard to various apostolic areas, a personnel board, and so on. It is the *final* missioning decision which will usually reside in the person of the major superior.

<sup>8</sup> 1 Jn 2, 5. The translation is that of J. B. Phillips.

facilitate and inspire genuine religious obedience in our apostolic religious congregations today.<sup>9</sup>

*The formal prayer of active religious*

Another element that requires serious reflection and careful treatment in revised constitutions is the practice of regular formal prayer by apostolically active religious. I believe that as congregations gradually become more extensively committed to dealing with the social problems of our world, the current dearth of regular formal prayer is becoming more critical. Very generous religious are often too busy to pray with any regularity, and tend to settle for attempts at a vague general prayerfulness. This is nothing like as profound as the doubt about the value and possibility of formal prayer nine or ten years ago. Hence, I am not speaking here so much about a matter of doctrinal unbelief; but neither am I speaking simply of a slovenly horarium in the daily lives of busy people. We must consider what lies beneath this—the actual operating convictions about prayer which either do or do not find its times and ways.

The distinction made above between the monastic and the apostolically active ways is of special significance here. It is no use hankering after an external regularity of schedule in which formal prayer would enjoy an almost absolute privilege as regards time and place, thus becoming an apostolic end in itself. But if this near-monastic insistence on regular formal prayer violates the mobility and flexibility of the active life, shifting its focus from the goal of ever greater apostolic service and availability, it would be just as much a violation for active religious, when their years of formal training are over, to think that *any* regular formal prayer prolonged beyond a few moments is a monastic intrusion into active life.

Another critical question for active religious congregations is to realize that, although formal prayer is not an end in itself for them,<sup>10</sup> it is an *essential* means to that specific apostolic presence and

<sup>9</sup> Not every decision needs so profound and elaborate a process as I am describing here: only the major decisions of new apostolic assignments. There will be less significant matters involved in implementing one's apostolic mission which depend on the individual's own honest discernment in line with the original 'missioning' decision. There are also other less significant decisions that must be made by the congregation in the person of its various leaders, when there is little or no time for consultation. Otherwise, most of our apostolic energy would be wasted.

<sup>10</sup> In a certain sense, contemplation is always an end in itself: the being with and in God. To overlook this would be to corrode the true value of christian prayer. My claim is that when prayer is entered into as an experience for its own sake, it does serve as a means to a special integrated apostolic presence.



availability which is the goal of active congregations. Without a sufficiency of regular formal prayer, it is illusory to speak of 'being contemplative even in action', and enjoying the prayerful presence and involvement which should typify active congregations. The precise balance of regular formal prayer and daily activity needed to produce a prayerfully apostolic presence is unique to each individual. No constitution could or should attempt to generalize this unique balance. How much formal prayer, of what kind, how often and for how long, can only be determined by each member. But the practice of regular, fairly prolonged prayer keeps a person's faith personable, with God as the heart's beloved. One who does not so pray distances himself or herself to the extent that God ceases to be a Person. In addition, prayer can gradually bring a clarity and decisiveness to our faith, together with a gentle and tender human presence which is not the product of any human art or science. Without this practice of prayer, our active involvement loses something: we become men and women busy about many things, but without that integration which gives inner peace, humble confidence and zeal expressed in a special quality of apostolic presence and availability. Jesus in his human life grew more and more into this special integrated presence; and it is clear that he realized the importance of formal prayer, apart with his Father, in order to maintain this apostolic presence and zeal. Though the goal is a matter of integration into a prayerful presence in faith, which is the result of the proper balance of formal prayer and activity, the question remains how active religious can be involved enough in the essential ingredient of regular formal prayer to achieve the proper blend. Only in this way can integration even be an issue.

Unhappily, I have no neat or simple answer to this problem. I am raising what I believe to be a serious contemporary issue, and reflecting on it in a way that will, I hope, help those who are writing new constitutions. The need and importance of formal prayer has been expressed in many a constitution. But how do we make it concrete and effective in today's situation? In many renewal chapters after Vatican II, active groups shifted from an expression on prayer where the specifics were all spelled out for everybody, to vague generalities where the determination of the specifics were left to the individual. In many cases we were not ready for so abrupt a change, and inevitably our practice of prayer suffered. It is becoming more and more obvious that without some pattern of formal prayer, an integrated apostolic presence for service is simply impossible, and our true apostolic effectiveness must suffer as a consequence.

We all know how hard it is to remain responsible to ourselves for these specifics about our prayer. Is there a way of helping religious to be faithful to their genuine desire to pray by being responsible to someone other than themselves? The once-a-year 'report' to our retreat director is not enough. Whenever it is possible, regular contact with a good spiritual director can serve this purpose. But given present resources and circumstances, such spiritual direction can scarcely be a universal solution. Can this responsibility about the details of prayer be given to someone in the local community? Can a local superior serve such a role without becoming everyone's spiritual director? Is there a way in which brothers and sisters can call one another and hold one another to a responsibility for formal prayer? I am not sure that we can rely on informal discussion among ourselves for this responsibility. Though I have no specific solution, I am convinced that a simple repetition of the necessity for formal prayer, without setting up some structure to facilitate this responsibility to one another, will *not* be enough. Some programme of continuing education and inspiration in prayer for religious, even for those with final vows, must be provided: whether this be suggested reading, workshops, directed or group retreats — anything which can help busy men and women to pray and not lose patience and courage. Except for general public urgings about its value for us all, too often the faithful practice of formal prayer is left to each person. The actual effectiveness of all our apostolic activity is at stake. The question requires serious reflection on the part of all members of apostolically active congregations.

Though I feel that there is greater need for more formal prayer today, it is not the sole means to an integrated apostolically prayerful presence. For the active religious, regular reflection and interpretation of inner affective experiences is also a major means to a daily prayerful presence in everything.<sup>11</sup> Through the practice of the formal and informal examen, we deal with the ordinary consolations and desolations of life from the vantage point of faith and our Father's loving care; thus we come to a stability of affective, contemplative presence in all our busy activity. This special presence is what apostolic spirituality is all about.

<sup>11</sup> This is something different from the traditional examination of conscience. Cf my articles 'Consciousness Examen', in *Review for Religious* (January 1972), pp 14-21; and 'A Check on Our Availability: The Examen', in *Récherches Ignatiennes*, vol 5 (1978), pp 8-13.

Without enough formal prayer in our lives, the deep realities and mysteries of faith lose their significance and inspiration. Only someone practising regular formal prayer can appreciate and be attracted by the profound faith-mystery of religious obedience. Without enough prayer I, almost unconsciously, become more attached to what *I* want to do, to what makes sense to *me*, and what is fulfilling to *me*. More prayer makes possible a fuller experience of the profound mystery of religious obedience through an incarnated surrender of myself to a loving Father in Jesus as the beloved of my life.

*Community for apostolically active religious*

The monastic and the active religious have quite different experiences of community. An external stability and regularity expressed in a special physical presence of the members to one another is typical of monastic groups. Though this can seem attractive at times to active groups, it would violate their nature and charism. The danger for the active groups is the other extreme. Everyone is so busy, mobility and flexibility lead to so much coming and going on such different schedules, that we cannot help wondering whether we have any real community. The whole community, or at least a majority, almost never comes together for anything. What is the experience of religious community for such groups? And yet, without the support of religious community, values and commitments utterly fundamental to religious life are not possible: for example, celibacy which, without viable community, may short-circuit into a work syndrome, the 'third way', and so on.

This matter of appropriate community support is another major question facing active religious groups today. I am not ready to attempt a specific solution; but in these few closing reflections, I would like to underline the communal nature of obedience, prayer and poverty, and to emphasize some of their more important aspects. The shared spiritual experience of 'being sent' can have a real effect of unity in loving respect on all the members of a congregation, and can thus avoid the jealous competition for the lucrative and more prestigious missions which can make such inroads in the practice of apostolic obedience in our communities today. Consciously embracing this full experience of religious obedience, all the members find a real spiritual support binding the congregation together. Hence incarnational apostolic obedience will create a sense of community in active groups: brothers or sisters united in heart wherever they are,

because sent by the same loving Father in the same mission and Spirit of Jesus.

Individual members who are praying regularly will find that others have much more to offer on a daily basis, and will be ready to share that experience of prayer in Jesus's Spirit before our Father. In this way, some simple type and pattern of community prayer beyond the concelebrated Eucharist seems necessary for active religious. This provides the opportunity for praying members to *be* together simply and reverently in the Word before our Father. Community prayer for active religious groups has not yet come to fruition in most cases; but it is no less important for that. We must continue to search for means to share the spiritual vision and ideal that makes up religious life.

In the founding of many active congregations, religious poverty had a strong unitive effect among the members. However, the confusion and negligence concerning religious poverty today makes the individual practice of poverty difficult. We seem a long way from a religious poverty lived in a form of common life which binds the members together by taking responsibility for one another in the use of material goods. Is such a common life possible among active religious? If it is, it will surely strengthen the sense of community.

Underneath all this is a more profound (maybe the most profound) issue which I will simply point to in conclusion. Is apostolically active religious life still meant to be different from secular institutes? Secular institutes are usually distinguished by a special secular involvement in the world, no communal style of life, and individual initiative in choice of apostolate without a missioning from the group.<sup>12</sup> In many ways, active congregations have developed much more in the direction of secular institutes. In this article, without suggesting a withdrawal from full-service involvement in our world, I am recommending that we use the occasion of re-writing constitutions to avoid some developments that would blur even more any distinction between secular institutes and apostolically active religious congregations. In this way I am sure we can be of even greater service and influence in our confused, chaotic world, as witnesses of the Spirit of Resurrection, with which a wise and loving Father will always bless the faithful dying of his Son in the lives of all of us.

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<sup>12</sup> Two articles by Jean Beyer S.J., 'Institutes of Apostolic Life', in *Supplement to The Way* (November 1969), pp 182-207 and 'Norms of the Secular Vocation', in *Supplement to The Way* (Spring 1971), pp 24-34, may profitably be consulted here.