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of St John Bosco

OFFICIAL ORGAN OF ANIMATION AND COMMUNICATION FOR THE SALESIAN CONGREGATION

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“I HAVE COME TO DO YOUR WILL”¹
Our obedience: a sign and prophecy.

Let us talk about it again. – 1. The First and radical Beatitude. – 2. Value of religious obedience. – 2.1. *“In the head of the book it is written...”* – 2.2. Following Christ. – 2.3. Together with Mary. – 2.4. Like Don Bosco. – **3. A value in transformation.** – 3.1. Cultural elements. – 3.2. Ecclesial elements. – 3.3. Signposts. – 3.3.1. From the ascetical to the mystical aspect. – 3.3.2. Members responsible for community obedience. – **4. An obedience for the present day.** – 4.1. Our vocation an obedience “in formation” – 4.2. A pedagogy of obedience. – 4.3. Our vocation an obedience of life and mission. – 4.4. Our life a prophetic obedience. – **5. An obedience for the third millennium. – 6. The Annunciation: an appeal and response.**

Rome, 25 March 2001

Solemnity of the Annunciation to Mary

My dear confreres,

It is not easy nowadays to speak about obedience. A change is taking place in the very concept, and it would be naïve to ignore it. It is a price we have to pay for the continuing development of democratic principles and, in many ways, from the individualistic vision of life, such as leaving everything to authority, to more mature ways of collaborating for the common good, and from the belittling of authority to giving it a more humble foundation against a background of faith.

“Obedience is no longer a virtue”, proclaims the title of a well-known book. There are those who, with a touch of non-conformist pride, declare themselves “disobedient”. And there are even those who see in obedience the “sign of an adult who never matured”. There is an element of truth in this if it refers to the delegation of responsibility which some place entirely on the one who commands. *Gaudium et Spes* assures us that a person is defined by his responsibility to history.² Our own re-

¹ Heb 10,7

² cf. GS 55

sponsibility is defined with reference to our neighbour and world history. And so obedience is a virtue when the responsibility for our life and charism is seriously assumed and shared, according to our particular situation. The Provincial Chapters are already taking place and with the approach of the GC25 it is worth our while to remember that we are all called upon to discern the will of God with regard to our future, setting aside any visions which are too individual or which smack of grinding our own axe.

But there are plenty of people who risk minting false coins. There are lone operators about, who fight their own battle and seem incapable of joining any community process. There are mavericks – it must be acknowledged with a certain bitterness – who are unconcerned about the communal objective, do not defend their own house, and are not even able to associate with the other members of the community. These are all signs of an unease which needs a remedy.

We have to admit therefore that in the current culture obedience does not have a good press. It is not one of those virtues which immediately excites fellow feeling, nor perhaps is it one of the gifts which today's young person or adult wants to possess to the extent that it becomes a habitual request in his daily prayer, for example. But the deepest reason is not found in the practice but in the failure to grasp the theological foundation we have expressed in the title. Religious obedience, in fact, is meant to be united with that of Christ for the redemption of the world.

It has been said that "if obedience is removed as a theological virtue from consecrated life, it re-emerges as a sickness". But then we find ourselves at grips with fundamentalism, which would seem to reflect a blind ideology. We find on our path strong leadership, but it does not always seem of great help in the maturing process. We have to acknowledge forms of manipulation, which in one way or another bear witness to much immaturity, and at the same time to unjustified indi-

vidualism at variance with the salesian project of life that we have taken up.

There is nothing new under the sun, but there is always the need to go back to the beginning and reflect also on the obedience of the Salesian in the prevailing ecclesial and social context, to recognize its meaning, its great value, and its new style. This gives us the opportunity to complete our reflection on the signs our community life is called upon to give to young and old through the evangelical counsels,³ not as a sacrifice of our humanity, but as an opening to a transfiguration according to Christ's humanity, as is abundantly explained in *Vita Consecrata*.⁴

1. THE FIRST AND RADICAL BEATITUDE.

Obedience is in fact an adult virtue. It can only be an adult virtue. We propose it to our pupils not to keep them always children, but to help them to mature. We speak of it in the context of consecrated life, not only because it belongs to the *a b c* of community life, but because it represents the way of entry into the Mystery of Christ, and also to his "*sancta sanctorum*", the most fruitful place of his secrets and revelations. Newman wrote: "They will not know what it means to see God, until they have obeyed him", and again "perfect obedience is the yardstick of evangelical holiness".⁵

The religious who sets out to follow Christ takes from him some fundamental attitudes. He lives a love of total donation, which renounces a seeking of anything for himself and is expressed in chastity. Through poverty he proclaims a radical sharing of his goods, which he places unswervingly at the service of communion and solidarity. By the vow of obedience he consigns his very existence to God's plan which he accepts un-

³ cf. AGC 366 and AGC 367

⁴ cf. VC 87-92

⁵ cf. J.H. NEWMAN, PPS VIII,S.5; VIII, S.14

questioningly through the mysterious interweaving of humble human mediations, often all too humble.

The vows represent the three roots of the tree of our life. It is certainly not our intention to lay down roots which are dried up and dead: what we want to do, rather, is to transplant a living tree, to give it further growth by transferring it from our own soil to his. Obedience is the sign of the “new earth” in which our life has already pitched its tent. It is the attitude underlying the cry of *Totus tuus*, which we see proclaimed on the banner of John Paul II: with him we turn to the Father, after the example of Christ, to make of his Kingdom our home.

In the Gospel there is a beatitude which explicitly speaks of the “pure of heart”. There is another which refers to the “poor in spirit”. Others speak of the meek, those who seek after justice, the peacemakers and the persecuted. Obedience does not receive specific mention, but we could well say that it is proclaimed in every line of the Gospel. It leads all the others. It is the totality of the Gospel which from the Annunciation to Christ’s death on the cross, proclaims the beatitude of communion with the Father.

The Son obeys the Mother and the Mother the Son. In the parables good and faithful servants obey while awaiting the return of the Lord. The spirit of obedience is manifest in those brought in from the highways and byways to eat at the banquet, carrying their white robes.

It is the beatitude which links the Son intimately with the Father. Whoever wants to follow in the way of Christ is called to enter into the Mystery of his obedience.

When we read over once again what Don Bosco used to say to his sons about obedience, a topic very close to his heart, the central place given to it by the holy educator is evident, in the life of the Congregation, in the spiritual life of every Salesian, and in the light of the effectiveness of educational activity.

Don Bosco's idea is accurately reflected in the so-called "dream of the diamonds":⁶ "the largest and most brilliant sparkled in the very centre, and on it was written 'Obedience': the foundation of the whole edifice of sanctity". It is the image of a central and powerful source of energy which is transmitted at the turning points of life. And he was certainly not referring only to the kind of obedience which ends in mediation, but to that which reaches and reflects the gentle will of the Father.

Obedience, notes Don Bosco, is the easiest way to become holy; it is an energy able to sanctify every action. It is the soul of the Congregation, the hub of religious life, the compendium of perfection. It is the guardian of all virtues, the multiplier of energy and all that is good. It must be practised in an evangelical manner, not with long faces but with open hearts living in a family spirit and bearing witness to the joy and peace of those who feel themselves close to their Lord.

If you glance through the salesian constitutions and reach the section concerning the vows, you will find that the first place is given to obedience. It was not always like that. Faithful to the original arrangement made by Don Bosco, and distinct from the order followed by the Council and by ancient monastic tradition, the GC22 (1984) which prepared the definitive edition of the renewed Constitutions decided that the vow of obedience should return to the first place among the three.⁷ Don Bosco, in fact, had changed the order of the vows as found in the sources, and placed obedience first, to emphasize its power with respect to the mission, to sanctification and to communion. It is a choice which provides us with a message.

It is meant to suggest to us that "being sent" to the young is the heart of the salesian vocation: we receive it as a mandate to place ourselves on a risky but vital frontier and to stay there to the end, cost what it may. To know and to feel that he is re-

⁶ cf. BM XV,148

⁷ cf. *Project of Life of the Salesians of Don Bosco*, pp. 517-518

sponsible for young people is a characteristic of anyone who has received such a mission. "By carrying out the mission entrusted to us we relive ... Christ's own obedience".⁸ This first and telling reference to the Father who sends us and to Christ in whose obedience we insert our own, must never be debased by reducing obedience to no more than an effort of the will or an exercise of discipline.

It is also the foundation of fraternal life, in which "we all obey even though we have different tasks to perform",⁹ recognizing that it is availability to the will of God that holds the group together spiritually and saves it from the fragmentation which could derive from the subjective ideas of many persons without a principle of unity.

An obedience, practised in imitation of Christ, invokes an authority which takes its inspiration from the paternity of God, in that "family spirit of love",¹⁰ which accompanies an obedience which is prompt, joyful and sincere,¹¹ which equally rejects any feeling of victimization or any deception.

"In the community, in view of the mission entrusted to us, we all obey".¹² Obedience is seen as a condition common to all Salesians, even though they have different tasks to perform. It looks unswervingly to Christ, is nourished by his word, and lives by the daily gift of the Eucharist. It is the guarantee of unity and continuity in the Congregation, the principle which unifies its existence and offers it as a complete gift for the salvation of the young and the life of the community.

⁸ C 64

⁹ C 66

¹⁰ C 65

¹¹ cf. *ibid.*

¹² C 66

2. VALUE OF RELIGIOUS OBEDIENCE.

2.1. "In the head of the book it is written..."

For the apostle Paul, as sin is concentrated in Adam's disobedience, so the force of redemption is expressed in the obedience of Christ.¹³

Psalm 40 – interpreted by the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews – evokes the "Here I am" of the Son in the act of the incarnation: "Thou hast neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings; then he added, 'Lo, I have come to do thy will', as it is written of me in the roll of the book."

Obedience with, in and through Christ is an expression of the intimate and continual acknowledgement that God is our Father, which establishes the depth of his Mystery, the source of his exaltation and the thrust which leads him to always do his Father's will. This translates into speaking not our own words but those of the Father, in not performing our own works but his, in being nourished every day not by our own desire but by the daily food that is his will.¹⁴

Obedience in Christ is the awareness of "knowing himself as generated in order to be sent" – as a missionary of the Father, among broods of vipers and the hard of heart,¹⁵ to work with the Spirit's strength not for his own ends, but solely to serve the cause of the Kingdom in the ways and times and with the results known only to the Father, setting prisoners free, proclaiming the good news to the poor and to sinners the Lord's year of favour.

Christ is the *Amen*.¹⁶ He is the *Yes*¹⁷ and *Here I come*.¹⁸ He is

¹³ cf. Rom 5,18-20

¹⁴ cf. Gv 4,34; 6,38; 8,28-29; ...

¹⁵ cf Mt 12,34; 23,33; Ex 32,9; 33,5

¹⁶ Rev 3,14

¹⁷ 2 Cor. 1,19-20

¹⁸ Heb 10,7

the obedient Servant who learns obedience through his own suffering.¹⁹

Obedience in Jesus is not a simple virtue, but the very definition of his identity and the expression of his Sonship, of his being called by the Father through generation and of his continual response "Behold I come!".

Nor does Jesus limit his obedience to when he is in a heart to heart situation with the Father. He obeys even when he is heart to heart with the world. He accepts mediations with humility and realism: Joseph and Mary, who treated him as a normal boy, growing in obedience; the religious laws and customs which required him to be faithful to prayers in the synagogue and a devout pilgrim to Jerusalem; the severe rule of work and its accompanying circumstances which, especially in the case of the poor, always involve hard obedience.

Obedience sums up the entire pre-history and story of Christ, but especially the events of the passion. For Christ it was obedience to be born and lose himself, so to speak, in human flesh. It was obedience to live the hidden life of Nazareth. Obedience too was the ministry of his public life: "My food is to do the will of the Father".²⁰ And obedience finally, taken to its extreme, was committing himself to the Father's will, even to the passion and cross.

There coincide the Mystery of the salvific will of the Father, the Mystery of the redeeming obedience of the Son, and the obscure and sorrowful Mystery of human disobedience – which prompted the cowardly arm of Pilate and the actions of the executioners – destined to be vanquished once for all by the obedience of the Son of God.

"The whole existential attitude of Christ is concentrated in obedience to God, an obedience which does not arise spontaneously, but is learned through suffering (cf. Heb 5,8) and

¹⁹ Heb 5,8-9

²⁰ Jn 4,34

which leads to the cross (cf. Phil 2,8)”²¹. It is superfluous to repeat that in the actions and attitudes of Jesus we discern the secret of the transformation of the world according to the Father’s will.

2.2. Following Christ.

It is in Christ’s obedience that we find joined together the love of the Father and of the Son and the manifestation of the abode of the Spirit. The Spirit of obedience becomes diffused, because those who are of Christ are called to become like him, welcoming him in faith and hence in an unimaginable rapport with God.

Sacred Scripture presents obedience as being the very heart of faith, because faith is self-consignment and total abandonment to the word in the hands of God, who is wisdom, light, truth and joy, as the Psalms tirelessly repeat. Obedience means receiving from him with trust all that life has in store, the criteria of judgement, the truth of what exists, the truth of the relationship between time and eternity. Faith means readiness in receiving through grace and baptism a new identity which progressively transforms us into sons in the Son: and hence it is not out of place to call all this “obedience”. Such a dimension is seen more clearly in moments of sorrow: when Abraham was to sacrifice Isaac, John the Baptist’s agony in prison, Jesus accepting the bitter chalice in Gethsemane, Mary offering her crucified Son on Calvary, and the martyrs of all ages saying their joint *yes* to God and to death in incredibly painful circumstances.

It is no different for us who are transfigured in Christ through the sacrifice of obedience, which places us totally at God’s disposal.

It is our participation in the total self-emptying of the Son, of his triple kenosis: that of the incarnation which immersed him in our human condition; that of the passion, which stripped him

²¹ ABS, *Parola di Dio e spirito salesiano* (LDC 1996), pag. 122

also of his human dignity; and that of the Eucharist, which consigns him in its daily mystery to the love and pains of man.

2.3. Together with Mary.

We obey with greater joy when we realize that we have received a Grace, after the example of Mary who, though surprised by the gift, responds with a most generous *Yes*.

Obedience prompts us to raise our eyes and contemplate the Mother of God and of the Church who with her acceptance proclaimed herself an obedient servant and became the model – or the icon, as we like to call it nowadays – of all obedience of faith. If we can see in the obedience of Abraham the beginning of the Old Testament, it is in the obedience of Mary that we greet the beginning of the New.

Being a true experience of faith, her obedience is presented in dialogue form. Mary is not just a passive listener; she does not act on her first impulse, she does not remain inert and accepting whatever comes. She questions, she wants to understand, she tries to bridge the gap, so to speak, between the unfathomable Mystery of God and the seriousness of a human experience.

Never was the obedience of a pure creature greater or more fruitful, never was a *fiat* pronounced in heaven echoed more faithfully on earth. Mary's *fiat* – notes Paul Evdokimov – “is a compendium of world history, its theology summed up in a single word”. The Armenian Mass calls the Mystery of the Incarnation – of which it is the fruit – “the ‘economy’ of the Virgin”. Into it we are called to enter, in the company of Mary.

Mary's obedience shows us the way to what Augustine calls the “greater freedom”, because it is directly linked with liberating Grace. This was well understood by the inhabitants of the city of Lucca who, in the seventeenth century, entrusted themselves to Our Lady of the Stars with the prayer: “*Vera libera, serva nos liberos*” (O thou, who art truly free, keep us free also).

Like Mary, we obey because we believe that God is there in the unfolding of our history. We recognize that we must deal with him, through mediators approved by his Church. We believe that he is deeply involved in our project of life which is also part of his.

Obedience, in the religious life, means recalling today and re-viving Christ's obedience, speeding up the process of our transfiguration into him. There is also in obedience an intimate eschatological tension which expresses the desire to embrace the Christ who is coming, which becomes ever more in the intervening time and space a "sacrament of filiation" in him. In this way is sampled and, so to say, anticipated that air of freedom we shall breathe in heaven: because in heaven in God's presence, we shall be not only "free" to make further choice, but "super-free" in the sense that the choice has already been made, in full adherence to him with all the power of our will".²²

2.4. Like Don Bosco.

It was not difficult to detect in recent General Chapters an increased effort on the part of the Congregation to better understand its Founder and his place in God's plan.²³ And this not for reasons of theological academics, but to clarify the *grace and mystery* of our identity.

Meditating once again in the light of the Spirit on the whole story of Don Bosco, we find it to be a salvation event in which we too are involved, and that "for this reason his story is our story also".²⁴ "The relationship of sons and disciples that Salesians live with regard to Don Bosco"²⁵ is a true and enduring grace.

We recognize in Don Bosco the guide moulded by the Risen Christ to point out to us – educators and young people to-

²² VIGANÒ E. *Un progetto evangelico di vita attiva* (LDC 1982), pag. 139-140.

²³ cf. ABS, *Parola di Dio e spirito salesiano* (LDC 1996), pag.321-331.

²⁴ GC24, 69

²⁵ cf. ABS, *Parola di Dio e spirito salesiano* (LDC 1996), pag.323

gether – a gospel way of missionary and youthful sanctification.

For this reason it is a good thing that we should continue to love and sing, in the salesian world, that old hymn of the beatification “Don Bosco ritorna”, which well expresses our continuing commitment to “bring Don Bosco to life again in ourselves” (Bl. M. Rua).

There is a powerful analogy between the great biblical Fathers and the founders of religious families, between the descendants of the former and the followers of the latter. The descendants of the Fathers returned continually to the story of their origins to define their particular identity and better understand it: from this effort at re-reading derive many pages of the text of Sacred Scripture, in confirmation of its great holiness and presence of the Holy Spirit! In the same way, the sons of the great Founders are called upon to explore the “originating grace” of their vocation – which is made concrete in the story of the Founder – as a check on their own fidelity and to better discern the will of God.

There is therefore a mystery of obedience to God, which – because it is of a filial nature – represents the pinnacle of our human condition. It sends the Salesian back to Don Bosco and binds him with the bond of obedience as to a sign of the most authoritative testimony to his spirit – the Constitutions – in which (as Bl. Philip Rinaldi noted) “we have the whole of Don Bosco”.²⁶

This, perhaps, is the root of some of the problems in which we feel ourselves involved. We have not yet studied at sufficient depth, from a vital and spiritual standpoint, our relationship with Don Bosco, God’s prophet for us. And perhaps sometimes we have slackened too much the bond of obedience we professed “according to the way of the Gospel set out in the salesian Constitutions”,²⁷ which are centred mainly on the mission to be fulfilled with shared responsibility.

²⁶ cf. Circular Letter, 24 January 1924, ACS 23

²⁷ C 24

Undermined by subjectivism, worn down by individualism, left more upset than active on life's fringe, obligations associated with the mission sometimes become disregarded if not actually opposed, because they are linked more with the fragile and changeable sphere of law than with the solid and rocklike domain of the "gift of God" – which is the charism of Don Bosco – on which it is possible to build our own life. The GC25 with its substantial recall to the community character of our way of living, being seen and working, refocuses our attention on seeking together the will of God, which does not eliminate mediations, but gives them their full prophetic force.

3. A VALUE IN PROCESS OF TRANSFORMATION.

3.1. Cultural elements.

If the foundation of evangelical obedience is what it has always been, we must admit nonetheless that the protagonist has changed, the cultural context is different, and there has been a profound change in the relationship governing the rapport between those called to the service of authority and those who have embraced willing obedience.

The *protagonist* has changed through the ever more widely stated principle of the possibility of the individual contributing to the making of decisions and the interiorization of new attitudes linked with them. The individual enjoys greater freedom for personal expression, he feels encouraged to express his own personal initiative as a form of authentic docility and obedience, and is called upon to express his personal responsibility in ever more decisive ways, both at the stage of discernment which leads to the more important and vital decisions, and in that of accepting the consequences of what has been decided.

The safeguarding of his own happiness, the withdrawing from others the right to make decisions about his own life, the

desire to see his own point of view given proper consideration, the need to know the reason for what is happening to him beyond the pure principle of authority, his intuition about the inalienable dignity which still belongs to a person who becomes an obedient religious: all this makes us realize that the protagonist of obedience today is not as he was in the past.

It is clear of course that it is all lived and experienced with different degrees of intensity and enlightened in different ways. And it is here that applies what we said earlier. When left to human assessment, religious obedience loses its value and consistency.

The passage from a static to a dynamic society, from a structured epoch to one that is critical, from the local to the global village, has brought about a big change in the backdrop against which obedience must be viewed.

Norms, both written and unwritten, which formerly derived their strength from their very antiquity and duration are contested, or at least submitted to frequent verification.

The participative style which has come into civil life is already gaining ground in religious houses, especially as regards decisions which affect group-life, the community's future and the apostolic project with which it is entrusted.

The perception of the complex nature of reality (including pastoral reality) brings about a greater sensitivity to the frailty, unilateral nature, and problems in the making of decisions in themselves quite lawful – and sometimes even necessary – stripping authority of any facile infallibility, but at the same time leaving it a role.

The secularization of authority has led to some extent to a secularization of obedience, which must be continually enlightened by its deep Christian and charismatic sense.

The practice of placing numerous confreres in civil roles and contexts, often through legally enforceable contracts, tends to lead in such contexts to modifications, and even reserve, in the indi-

vidual's approach to obedience. It must then be strongly recalled that we professed the vow of obedience with a theological root. Everything else must be understood and accepted in this light.

The increase in formative processes, also within religious Institutes, the acquiring of an overall professional approach by many confreres, the rise of many new fields of specialization (and the consequent difficulty in being in command of them) can sometimes create a real imbalance in areas of competence between superior and religious which deeply affects the rapport of authority and obedience.

If on the one hand this makes loyal and methodical dialogue ever more indispensable, on the other it can give rise to superiors who are too timid, or who withdraw, or are held back by an acute sense of their own incompetence, and can be tempted to let things go their own way, without making the laborious effort to guide them.

3.2. Ecclesial elements.

It is precisely in this context that the obedience of the consecrated person can take on an increased theological and humanistic significance which is a mark of serene maturity. In the more properly ecclesial setting there has been a development in those areas which tend to reshape the manner and meaning of the exercise of authority and obedience.

Obedience in the Church forms part of the post-paschal attitude, through which Christ makes himself present through his Spirit. He intervenes through charismata recognized by the Church, and these include also the rapport between authority and obedience, in its particular manifestations, which are lived in the different forms of consecrated life. The religious community is a part of the Church, from which derives the authority proper to the consecrated life. And the religious delivers himself over to Christ through his body, which is the Church-Community.

The Church – like the attentive Virgin – remains in an attitude of obedience. She is called to build the Kingdom according to God’s design. She is sent with the mission of evangelization and salvation she has received, and is accompanied by the tireless and fertile breath of the Spirit.

If it is true that the Church shares in the passion of Christ until the end of time – as Pascal observed – it is no less true that she is equally called, again to the end of time, to be the expression of his obedience to the Father’s plan: it is Christ who obeys in us; and for this we are called to obey in Christ. But for our joy and consolation, what we follow is the gratifying will of the Father.

This is true for every Christian, and with particular force for every religious who makes of obedience a privileged channel for his fidelity and sanctification. Thomas Aquinas was convinced that man could make no greater offering to God (“*nihil maius potest homo Deo dare*”),²⁸ because in this way he hands over all that he is. This explains why the vow of obedience is considered – and not only in the Dominican tradition – the most important of the three.

The emphasis placed on the charismatic Church-as-community, rather than on the hierarchical Church-as-institution has implied the parallel passage from accent on the duty of obedience imposed on the faithful, to accent on the discernment of the gifts of the Spirit required of the superior and those responsible for the life of the community.

The strength of the community derives from the gifts in each of its members, and the best superior is not the one who is best able to impose his will, but he who can best discover and give due value to the contribution of each member. Don Bosco’s contemporaries bear uniform witness to his wisdom not only in his discernment in placing a person in the position

²⁸ cf. S.T. II,II, Q 186, art.5 e 8

best suited to him, but also in being able to exploit the true values of those who may have been set aside too hastily as being difficult, or even on the wrong track.

In speaking of discernment we must emphasize the double component of the process which, on the one hand takes place quite openly, but on the other is made through the fragile process of human mediation. It is done in the context of seeking God's will, which is normally done on vertical and communal lines. It is linked less with elements of efficiency and more with attitudes of trust. And so the elements which mark the various stages are dialogue, listening, patience, the joyful discovery of the real member, and they lead to the maturing of an obedience which – in its most successful outcome – seem more an advancement of the person concerned than an imposition of authority.

3.3. Signposts.

Cultural and ecclesial elements cause an evolution in the concept and practice of obedience.

From a prevalent insistence on the ascetical aspect of the virtue, emphasis has now passed to a deep and convinced appreciation of the mystical and Christological aspect; from an individual emphasis on a duty to be performed we have passed to a much more careful contextual assessment of its community value.

3.3.1. *From the ascetical to the mystical aspect.*

Special attention must be given to redefining our freedom, to the charismatic operation of religious obedience.

Obedience remains a kind of “dead space”, marked by the cross, because even our freedom must have its Passover if it is to be truly free and lose itself – to use the gospel expression – if it is to really find itself.²⁹

²⁹ cf. Mt 16,25; Mk 8,35; Lk 9,24

From an insistence on the renunciation of freedom, we have to pass – at the suggestion of Vatican II – to the appreciation of a freedom which is “fortifying”,³⁰ “more mature”,³¹ “more extensive”³²: it is the result of the arrival of the Spirit of freedom, who takes possession of the heart of the believer and expands there into a “space of life and resurrection”.

The flexibility of the concrete “form” of our existence is the proper mode of our obedience, by which we are always ready to “conform” ourselves to the Lord’s call (which can sometimes take us by surprise) through a disarming and bold availability which derives from abandoning ourselves into the Father’s arms.

Psalms 118 praises God’s law with a series of verses that correspond to each letter of the alphabet, as though to show that it is obedience that gives rise to the sounds, syllables and words with which we write the story of our life as believers.

For this reason, obedience is a sign and manifestation of faith. “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called by God”.³³ Paul speaks of the “obedience of faith” in the opening and closing of the letter to the Romans (Rom 1,5; 16,26),³⁴ where he sets out a mature summary of his experience as a prophet and as a believer.

In obedience, the fundamental polarization lies not in the confrontation between superior and subject or between personal projects and the order received, but in the dialectic between the design of God and the plans of man, between the Word of God (the builder of history), and obedient listening to it by men who live in that history. “The becoming ever more ourselves will be nothing else than a continually saying of ‘yes’ to the word by which God calls us to an ever greater fullness of existence. True freedom consists in living in this attitude

³⁰ cf. LG 43

³¹ cf. PO 15

³² cf. PC 14

³³ Heb 11,8

³⁴ cf. Rom 1,5; 16,26

of listening, with our ear turned to the one who speaks so as to build his reality".³⁵

The road of obedience to God coincides with a faith that is not merely theoretical but lived in depth: it represents the sphere of our sharing in the sonship of Christ, given to us in Baptism. In this sense our obedience becomes a prophecy of faith, which consists not only in truths to believe but especially in the will to accomplish: "Not those who say Lord, Lord... but those who do..."³⁶ For this reason the vow of obedience has been defined as "the most biblical of them all", precisely because it enables us to enter into Christ's own sentiments.

Obedience is a pervasive spirit before being a particular and decisive gesture. More than a habit of prompt response, it is a permanent state of mind which engrafts us into the soul of Christ. It is a "*fiat voluntas tua*", which resounds as a fundamental chord in life's symphony and makes of each one of us "the Father's son" after the example of the Lord Jesus.

The heart of our consecrated life is an "obedient charity" which welcomes God's plan for us by living it each day in our personal vicissitudes and in the community perspectives.

3.3.2. Members responsible for community obedience.

The second point I want to emphasize, after this indispensable theological reflection, highlights the communal energy which obedience expresses.

The ecclesiology of communion – which has been revived and emphasized so much in the light of Vatican II – has made us sensitive to the community as the first recipient of the ecclesial mission, as the Body of Christ, which dwells in, animates, and is the saving force in history. When we have embraced this in faith, it makes us pass from the frustrated search for individual self-realization to the joyful gift which is the engrafting of self-transcendence, from the simple act of obedience to that

³⁵ A. PIGNA, *Consigli evangelici* (Roma 1993), pag. 425-426.

³⁶ cf. Mt 7,21

of a shared project, from the style of the “lone operator” to the humble commitment of one who is well aware that his first mission is communion. From all this emerges a change of mentality with respect to our relationship with the community and with obedience.

Nowadays, to obey means to be well aware of the interdependence and mutual relationship which characterizes our presence in community. It means also the full recovery of a sense of belonging, which cannot be only sociological but must also become affective and spiritual.³⁷ In times when filiation is weak or in decline, when membership is fragmented and fidelity uncertain – circumstances from which religious communities are not immune – an obedience properly understood and lived with joy becomes the foundation for renewed hope. And it must be said also that when we are acting in communion with renewed effort, our actions have greater salvific force.

If in some periods the aspect was prevalently that of *I obey*, today we are called upon to live the more ecclesial aspect of *We obey*. For this reason the present reflection is addressed to all Salesians without exception, confreres and superiors alike: before any distinction is considered on the basis of roles of authority, in fact, there must be unity as regards obedience of faith which we all profess. If there is a crisis, it first affects not authority but the community, which needs to rethink in consequence its whole style of obedience. The latter must be lived, in fact, also as the ability to assume a serious, mature and responsible role in the community in which we have been placed by the Lord’s call.

If in times past the direct rapport with the superior was central to obedience, today greater relevance is attaching to the presence of obedience in the fabric of the community. Many acts of obedience have to be realized within the community, after the

³⁷ cf. MERKLE J. *Gathering the fragments, New times for obedience*, in Review for religious, June 1996

example of Jesus who obeyed the Father, but also accepted the mediation of Mary and Joseph. What happens is that lack of attention to “small mediations” leads, almost unconsciously, to neglect of those which are greater and authoritative. And yet, even in the small mediations is repeated the invitation of Ex 20,19: “You speak to us, and we will listen”. In this light we must not undervalue, for example, the friendly talk with the superior,³⁸ which – albeit with the necessary adaptations³⁹ maintains a central place in the life of the salesian community.

If in the past the executive aspect could sometimes prevail, it is the participative aspect that is better emphasized and lived. It spurs the awareness of our own share in the responsibility for formulating guidelines, options and decisions concerning ourselves and the life of the community and the Congregation. Community discernment then becomes – in the case of more serious problems – a preliminary stage before the intervention of authority, and a moment of grace for both superior and confrere. In this way each one is obedient to the will of God, through an effort at discovery and realization in line with the lights each one has received, and against the common background of all of us within the charism of the Founder. Frequently the “convergence of views”⁴⁰ – which the superior should never discount without serious reasons – will help in the making of broadly agreed decisions. Sometimes, on the other hand, the confrere will need to accept the authority of the superior as the decisive element in the discernment process, “an aid and a sign which God uses to manifest his will”.⁴¹

The community, therefore, is called to be the place not only of obedience but also of discernment and creativity, and not only for young confreres but for mature ones too, a place of authoritative leadership but also of shared responsibility and dialogue.

³⁸ cf. C. 70

³⁹ cf. the excellent work of Fr P BROCARDO *Maturare in dialogo fraterno* (Rome LAS 1999)

⁴⁰ cf. C 66

⁴¹ C 67

4. AN OBEDIENCE FOR THE PRESENT DAY

4.1. Our vocation an obedience “in formation”

It has been said that “every vocation is a new day”, and so we are called to open every day – and hence our whole life – saying to our Lord: “*Here I am, to do your will*”.⁴²

It is a matter of a vocation which, at the stage of full maturity, can be recognized more as a call from the Lord than the realization on our part of a desire, perhaps lawful in itself, but which by itself is incapable of providing long-term support for our pilgrimage in life.

The Lord’s call is very often manifested through a joyful interior attraction towards the charism of one of the great Founders, who live on in the Church through their sons and daughters. It is a movement of the Spirit, who opens up a horizon and gently encourages our scared ego to say ‘yes’ with calm and confidence. Something of this kind took place in our own lives in the days when we were making our vocational option,⁴³ but it continues to take place every day through the grace of perseverance.

Our task in life therefore consists in growing in the quality of our vocational obedience, aiming at an obedience which is mature, free and joyful. This is not something we can take for granted: we see, in fact, examples of vocational obedience which have flourished even to sanctity, and others unfortunately which have faded away to insignificance.

Our own history has sometimes known the danger that some ways of living out obedience can lead to childish forms of dependence, of not accepting personal responsibility, of inability to accept roles of risk or government. Nowadays the

⁴² cf. *Nuove vocazioni per la nuova Europa*, a cura delle Congregazioni per l’educazione cattolica, per le chiese orientali, per gli Istituti di VC e le società di VA, n.26a)

⁴³ cf. VECCHI J. *Spiritualità salesiana*, LDC Turin 2001. pp.42-43

picture is changed to some extent. The hidden dangers to the fullness of evangelical and vocational obedience come especially from other sources.

They can derive from an over-emphasis on the autonomy of conscience, disjoined from one's community, or from the dimension that is at the basis of our human dignity, which is the assiduous search for God's presence and plan in our life.

Damage is sometimes done by an anti-institutional attitude – which has many roots in today's cultures – which sees authority more as a danger than a help, more as competition than collaboration, more as an adversary than an interlocutor, more as an enemy to defend ourselves against than as a grace from which to draw profit.

In such environments a mentality can get abroad which has little esteem for the Rule, for tradition and for religious discipline, which are no longer accepted as ecclesial efforts for putting the Gospel into practice, but considered rather as obsolete and cumbersome relics of a past that no longer exists.

In line with certain social trends there can arise a secular and functionalist reading of authority in the Church and in religious life, which is an obstacle to the recognition in faith of the "mediations" which, even though imperfectly, bring us into contact with the Mystery of God.

The absence too and evasion of the exercise of religious authority – which can be a tacit indication of its lack of significance on the part of those called to give it human and evangelical weight and depth – can well have lessened the joy and effectiveness of the religious obedience to which Don Bosco attributed great importance in giving serenity to salesian life.⁴⁴

The task of all who are responsible for formation (both initial and ongoing) is to build a "pedagogy of obedience" solidly centred on Christ (*"do whatever he tells you"*),⁴⁵ but capable

⁴⁴ cf. *Obedience*, in the introduction to the Constitutions.

⁴⁵ Jn 2,5

also of coming to grips with the new era in which we are called to live, changing what must be changed, but without running the risk of throwing out the baby with the bath-water.

There are some **human aspects** of personality which must be educated to make possible the serene practice of obedience. The emotive and aggressive elements which characterize our present-day culture could encourage “fusional” attitudes (re-entry into the maternal womb) which would be a serious handicap to the maturing of an adult obedience. Help is needed to live in a balanced manner the tension between dependence expressed in the need for approval, filiation and security) and independence (which involves confidence in one’s own resources, acceptance of risk and responsibility, ability to carry the cross and meet with failure etc.).

A sufficient degree of autonomy must be encouraged for the management of fraternal and social relationships, for positive integration into groups for working and communication, breathing the “relational spirituality” of which the GC24 speaks.⁴⁶

Each one should adopt the way of authenticity, able to speak and discuss with arguments and not improvisations based on laziness or compromise; he should not remain silent through fear of contradiction or isolation, but maintain a watchful journey of faith.

The new edition of the *Ratio Formationis*, recently promulgated by the Rector Major with his Council, could among other things provide means and processes leading to the attainment of these objectives.

At the same time some **spiritual attitudes** need to be strengthened.

Fundamental among these is the ability to *read with faith the events of one’s own life*. This helps us to realize that even

⁴⁶ cf. CG24 91-93

“in the valley of darkness” we need fear no evil,⁴⁷ and that through a thousand and one apparently chance events it is really God who is weaving for each one a narrative of salvation.

The discovery of the salesian charism is a personal grace⁴⁸ which the Lord has prepared for us and offers us; it will be a source of joy and tranquility, and will allow us to be active “in the manner of the *confessio fidei*”,⁴⁹ which – once we have recognized the gift we have received – will sustain the enthusiasm which leads to a knowledge of its great value. And from that stems almost contagiously the vocational evangelization which is most effective in our present-day world.

A correct understanding of the “spirituality of the incarnation” will help us to a calm acceptance of the presence of meditations as “day by day interpreters of God’s will”.⁵⁰ Rooted as they are in the Church, the universal sacrament of salvation,⁵¹ they lead us, through a humble sign, to the possibility of a real contact with God. While they urge us to live as though seeing the invisible,⁵² they make us more familiar with God’s Mystery, through which he comes close to every human being, and helps us to insert the whole of created reality into a network of grace which envelops our life in order to save it.

Church and sacraments, Founders and charismata, Rules and communities, Bishops and superiors, the world of nature and that of history, are all channels of grace which tell us something of God in the mystery of his hidden closeness to us. But among all the mediations the most noble and eloquent remains man himself, made in God’s image, and – among men – those who have received the vocation and mandate to be signs of him in a special way as shepherds. The acceptance of mediation

⁴⁷ cf. Ps 23,4

⁴⁸ cf. VECCHI J. *Spiritualità salesiana*, LDC Turin 2001, p.42 ff.

⁴⁹ cf. *Nuove vocazioni per una nuova Europa*, a cura delle Congregazioni per l’educazione cattolica, per le chiese orientali, per gli Istituti di VC e le società di VA, n.34,c)

⁵⁰ C 64

⁵¹ cf. LG 48

⁵² cf. Heb 11,27; C 21

means the understanding and realization of one of the forms of the recapitulation of all things in Christ,⁵³ transfiguring the world by the light of our faith, while we hasten towards him with the joy of sons, crying out “Maranatha”.

On occasion Don Bosco liked to distinguish between personal obedience and religious obedience, emphasizing the superior quality of the latter which is not dictated by mere empathy or the human qualities of the superior concerned, but especially by the recognition and willing acceptance of a mediation recognized in faith. From this stems freedom and peace in the act of entrustment to God and to those he has given us to guide us on our way. John XXIII expressed this in the motto: “*Oboedientia et pax*”.

4.2. A pedagogy of obedience

The “pedagogy of obedience”, to which I have referred, is meant to make less burdensome the practical life and throw light on it by basing it on the suggested attitudes in the humbly endured **concrete character of daily life**. It would be a fundamental error to present obedience as a heavy yoke when we are dealing with the loving will of the Father.

In particular, it seems necessary – in formation environments but also in all houses, especially when important issues are at stake – to launch the understanding and practice of **community discernment**, in the spirit of articles 44 and 66 of the Constitutions, in an atmosphere of prayer and mutual attention with a guide careful to make good use of all resources and let each one express his ideas. It is a matter of collecting all items that can throw light on a problem, of identifying the most decisive criteria, and of drawing the most urgent practical conclusions. This is a context in which obedience must use an outlook of faith that can read the “signs of the times”, can heed the word and heart of others, and each can make his own con-

⁵³ cf. Eph 1,13; cf. GS, 45

tribution, in joy and humility, to the reaching of a decision which concludes the common seeking process. This is something requiring all the resources of reason; discernment requires as much and there are no shortcuts.

Personal help should be given about how to *handle possible conflicts*, linked with obedience. The most serious case is that of a conflict *between obedience and personal conscience*. Sometimes complex and even dramatic situations can arise, which call for a process of calm clarification; they cannot always be decided by the exclusive judgement of the superior, but call rather for his respect and prayer. But even in these cases dialogue with the superior should accompany the confrere in charity and clarification to help him to discern the values in question, the many just criteria of judgement, and possible lines of solution.

But here I want especially to refer to occasional cases in which conscience becomes simply opposed to obedience, which may be asking for the sacrifice of a change of house or of office, a more faithful observance of the Constitutions, or to accept in connection with some fact or problem the considered judgement of the superior, which may be at variance with that of the confrere.

I point out a few simple **criteria of evaluation**.

In the first place, it should not be assumed that conflicts of this type are frequent. In religious life they are rare and exceptional, because "a religious should not easily conclude that there is a contradiction between the judgment of his conscience and that of his superior".⁵⁴

It will frequently be necessary on the other hand to devote time, prayer and dialogue to bring to the superior the indispensable contribution of our experience and our love for the young and the Congregation, and to accept from him serenely the motives and decisions reached at the end of the common process of research.⁵⁵ "In this pursuit, the religious will be able

⁵⁴ ET 28

⁵⁵ cf. Cost. 66

to avoid both an excessive agitation and a preoccupation for making the attraction of current opinion prevail over the profound meaning of the religious life".⁵⁶

Next we must try to be certain that, in the sight of God, we have a "*salesian religious conscience*", which has accepted and made its own the essential elements of our vocation as consecrated persons, according the spirit of Don Bosco and the vows we have made to the Lord.

Sometimes, when handling choices or problems which are uniquely "Christian, religious and salesian", you have the impression of being in dialogue with consciences that have lost their rich internal vocational qualities and are letting themselves be guided by purely worldly criteria or by principles which are rigidly subjective. For such consciences the salesian Constitutions risk losing all their force, the religious community loses its meaning, the superior's authority becomes unlawful and the salesian mission an exclusively personal choice. In these cases the conflict experience can be the occasion of an authentic vocational revival and sometimes, sadly, of a final decision.

Generally, however, it is not vocational consistency that is at stake, but there is a conflict about the implicit or explicit application of criteria, which need to be better specified.

Sometimes a tension can arise *between obedience and efficiency*: it may seem that the act of obedience required is not sufficiently consistent with the confrere's professional expertise, nor the kind of work he knows how to handle successfully, nor his natural processes and various working and apostolic capabilities.

There is an undeniable efficacy about obedience, but it is attainable only with the eyes of faith, as a great witness of our time who was very close to the Salesian Family teaches: John Baptist Montini. In a critical and troubled phase of his life he got to thinking seriously about the meaning of his obedience.

⁵⁶ ET 25

In a letter to his father in 1942, the future Pope Paul VI wrote: "I have become difficult with friends and see little of them; I hardly ever go out...and even books seem to turn their backs on me from silent shelves; I no longer write anything and I have little time for thought and prayer (at least I would like to do something good and useful!). I must be patient! God will provide"). And God did indeed provide.⁵⁷

Friction can arise *between obedience and self-fulfilment*: each of us has his own plans in mind: objectives, ways to achieve them, time to do so. To put all this aside so as to accept God's plan – through human mediation – is not something to be taken for granted. "I seem to be here (at the Secretariat of State) through a rather strange combination of circumstances", wrote Montini on another occasion⁵⁸ – "while waiting to go back to something simpler and more to my taste. I think about the studies I have left behind, my reduced contact with the ministry, the less time I have for prayer...". "To lose oneself in order to find oneself again" is an evangelical paradox, difficult to digest by anyone who judges by the shortsighted view of his own little world.

Sometimes there is a contradiction, at least apparent, between obedience and *apostolic fruitfulness* which may strike us at first glance. Which of us, when he feels he is doing a good job in some particular post, would not find it difficult to move to another in which he sees no prospect of successful results but feels he has been sent to gather up handfuls of dead leaves. And yet, as Fr Viganò told us sorrowfully in his last Strenna, there are some times in life when fruitfulness is linked with *activity*, and there are others when it comes from *suffering*. But here worldly and secular measurements have no place: the only yardstick is the Cross.

⁵⁷ FAPPANI-MOLINARI, *G.B. Montini giovane: 1897-1944. Documenti inediti e testimonianze* (Marietti 1979), pag.364

⁵⁸ *ibid.* p.365

“I do not want to analyze my feelings”, notes Montini again, “though it might enable me to overcome my sadness at having accomplished nothing of great significance; the strange thought often comes to my mind that I have not yet begun to do something real and serious that I intended when I set out to do it. But I want only to take refuge in God’s grace, through which he has given the blessing, which I have never sufficiently explored, of being bound to the service of the Church and the Gospel”.⁵⁹

By no means rare are cases in which is revealed a break *between obedience and prophecy*. We have the impression that we have done something really well, we have shown how it should be done, we relish the applause, we hit the headlines, we have brought honour to the Church and the Congregation... And then we get an obedience which puts a damper on the whole affair. In such circumstances we need to have a clear awareness that the true moment of real prophecy does not necessarily coincide with the moment of success or of our personal satisfaction.

The point is that, in the midst of every kind of difficulty, we must never lose sight of the suffering and obedient Christ. In times in which has rightly been recognized the dignity of “*conscientious objection*”, there is all the more reason why there should be people who, with an evangelical and Pentecostal spirit, are able to exemplify – more by their deeds than by their words – the dignity of *conscientious obedience*, following the example of Jesus.

“The more you exercise your responsibility, the more you must renew your self-giving in its full significance”.⁶⁰

4.3. Our vocation an obedience of life and mission.

When we read again the story of various vocations, we are

⁵⁹ *ibid.* p.363

⁶⁰ ET 27

struck by the pressing request for obedience which accompanies the Lord's call.

To Abram: "Go from your country ... to the land that I will show you".⁶¹

To Moses: "The cry of the people of Israel has come to me... Come, I will send you to Pharaoh".⁶²

To Jeremiah: "Do not say, 'I am only a youth'; for to all to whom I send you you shall go, and whatever I command you you shall speak".⁶³

To Paul: "Get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do!"⁶⁴

From these examples it is clear that obedience precedes the going and proclamation.

In reality what is necessary is that the one who is sent submits himself in the first place to the word he proclaims, so as to increase its effectiveness.

The hidden life at Nazareth was not time wasted, because the heart of Christ the Evangelizer was being shaped by obedience. St Benedict's three years as a solitary hermit in the grotto of Subiaco was not a parenthesis in his life but a time of obedience and listening, and the source of future fruitfulness. The Don Bosco of the 'Convitto', in the library and studying under the guidance of Fr Cafasso, precedes – and not only chronologically – the Don Bosco who loved to mix with the boys of Valdocco and scour the Porto Palazzo market-place in search of youngsters to save.

Since education is a matter of the heart, of which God alone is the master, "we can achieve nothing unless God teaches us the art and hands us the key".⁶⁵ The first stage of the mission is the obedience of the missionary. He must be a listener before

⁶¹ Gen 12,1

⁶² Ex 3, 9-10

⁶³ Jer 1, 7

⁶⁴ Acts, 9,6

⁶⁵ BM XVI, 376

he can be a preacher. The first missionary terrain is the heart of the missionary, because before all else the mission is an interior reality before it becomes an external commitment. The missionary commitment is one of personal holiness: "We must purify ourselves before we can purify others; we must be instructed before we can instruct others, be light ourselves before we can give it to others, be close to God to bring him close to others, be holy ourselves to bring holiness to others" (St Gregory Nazianzen).⁶⁶ This enables the Salesian "to make of his own life a convincing motive for credibility, and an acceptable apologia for the faith".⁶⁷

The obedience which places us in God's hands is the same obedience that ensures our fruitful insertion in the salesian community and determines our field of apostolate.

Interiorly educated by the Lord, to whom we are entrusted, and accompanied by the community in which we are serenely inserted, we go to the young not in our own name but in his: with a plan for men and women, and educative love, hope and energy which come from him through grace.

The awareness of being "sent" to the young gives to our ministry an inner stability and resilient quality: i.e. the evangelizing patience which enables us to face difficulties, meet failures in a positive manner, wait patiently for the times to mature, without letting crises transform us into a state of stagnation and vocational frustration, or into bitter and fruitless discouragement.

"Lord, make me an instrument of your love": this is a prayer attributed to St Francis of Assisi. The vow of obedience expresses the willingness to put ourselves in God's hands, to be used by him so that we become instruments for the building of the Kingdom. "To make oneself an instrument", to quote Montini again, "is the essence of self-sacrifice for anyone who knows

⁶⁶ cf. Congregation for Clergy, Conclusion of *Il presbitero Maestro della Parola, Ministro dei sacramenti, e guida della comunità in vista del terzo millennio cristiano*,

⁶⁷ cf. Congregation for Clergy, *Il presbitero Maestro della Parola, Ministro dei sacramenti, e guida della comunità in vista del terzo millennio cristiano*, C.II,2

the great value of divine action and hierarchic activity".⁶⁸ This flexibility, this total availability, whenever the salvation of the young or the service of the Gospel is at stake, Don Bosco liked to express with a gesture that the first Salesians handed down to us: "If I had twelve boys as manageable as this handkerchief I would spread the name of Jesus Christ not only throughout Europe, but far, far into the remotest lands".⁶⁹ As though in response to such an invitation a tradition grew up in the Congregation encouraging confreres who felt themselves called, to make to the Rector Major a special offer of their availability for the missions *ad gentes*. Overcoming all geographical limitations, it makes them "prepared in spirit to preach the Gospel everywhere",⁷⁰ and gives to salesian obedience a special worldwide dimension of totality. This availability for obedience – which is proper to our traditions – we celebrated with particular solemnity in the missionary expedition of the year 2000, as I already explained in an earlier letter.⁷¹

4.4. Our life a prophetic obedience.

With regard to the future of consecrated life, it has been observed that its hope of life will have a better foundation the more it can be proposed as authentic prophecy.⁷² Evidence of this is Elijah – whom both East and West include among the inspirers of consecrated life – the "courageous prophet and friend of God", who "lived in God's presence and contemplated his passing by in silence; he interceded for the people and boldly announced God's will; he defended God's sovereignty and came to the defence of the poor against the powerful of the world".⁷³

⁶⁸ o.c. p.381

⁶⁹ BM IV, 294

⁷⁰ PDV 18

⁷¹ cf. AGC 362, pp.37-39

⁷² cf. VC 84-95

⁷³ VC 84

The great “prophecy” proclaimed by religious obedience is Christ. One need only glance through the Rules of Basil, Augustine, Benedict, etc. to see that from the beginning of consecrated life, the soul of religious obedience has been the desire to commemorate Christ and his total donation to the Father and to the mission he had been given. “Indeed, the Son’s attitude discloses the mystery of human freedom as the path of obedience to the Father’s will, and the mystery of obedience as the path to the gradual conquest of true freedom”.⁷⁴

The true prophecy – particularly requested of religious nowadays, even by reason of the vow⁷⁵ – is their style of and commitment to *ecclesial obedience*.

In the Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millennio adveniente*, in preparation for the Jubilee, John Paul II drew attention to a “crisis of obedience vis-à-vis the Church’s Magisterium”⁷⁶ on which he asked us to reflect so as to face effectively the risks of our present era.

In the same document the Pope emphasizes the expediency of deepening our faith, especially in the matter of the Church’s unity and the service rendered to it by the apostolic ministry. And this to “bring the members of the People of God to a more mature awareness of their own responsibilities, as well as to a more lively sense of the importance of ecclesial obedience”.⁷⁷ It is a request that the sons of Don Bosco and the Salesian Family feel themselves compelled to accept, even by virtue of a family tradition, now even more relevant than in the past, which sees in loyal fidelity to the Pope and the Bishops one of the essential elements of the salesian charism.⁷⁸

The complex nature of the present time and of the changes

⁷⁴ VC,91

⁷⁵ cf. C 125

⁷⁶ TMA, 36

⁷⁷ TMA, 47

⁷⁸ cf. C 13

now taking place, the commitment to inculturation of the faith and its comparison with other religions and denominations, the ever new and massive contributions of modern human sciences, the powerful thrust of the relativism and subjectivism of our culture, the opening up of new fields of research which pose previously unasked questions, require a maturity and wisdom of choice that can maintain a dynamic and watchful balance between freedom of research and a convinced acceptance of the Magisterium of the lawful Pastors, and the proclamation of the whole truth by which the Spirit leads God's people.

Obedience of this kind appears particularly fruitful, urgent and meaningful in everything that concerns the Mystery of Christ and of the Church, the celebration and catechesis of the sacraments, the moral life of the young of the family and of Christian people in general. It is a matter of the truth with which faith enlightens our life and leads us to its fullness.

Consecrated obedience, moreover, is a powerful manifestation of the demanding nature of our donation to God; it corrects an unmotivated and badly ordered autonomy which is a widespread temptation in today's world, and proposes the dignity of a rapport which is filial and not servile, rich in a sense of responsibility and animated by mutual trust and confidence.⁷⁹

This implies – as St Thomas notes – “*quaedam disciplina*”, i.e. the style of discipleship. It rejects therefore the prejudice of the haughty self-made man, to rediscover in humility the spiritual fruitfulness which recognizes the competence and contribution of our companions in the ways of God. It acknowledges the presence of grace in the web of relationships and highlights the frailty of the situation of anyone who sets out to be “*judex in causa propria*”, at the risk of making sad if not indeed mortal mistakes.

Obedience is a discipline given to our freedom to make it a

⁷⁹ cf. VC 21

suitable instrument of liberation. Blessed is he who learns to live it according to the motto of John XXIII: *oboedientia et pax*. It is not by chance that many men and women religious are among those who have deliberately given their whole life for the Kingdom, for the cause of human rights, for the defence of women and children, for the education of individuals and peoples in general. They are the prophets and martyrs whom John Paul II prompts us to remember in connection with the Jubilee of the year 2000.

Part of salesian obedience is the courage to accept the limitations of our historical condition, which asks of us not only obedience to God but also to man, especially in certain phases and circumstances of our life. Obedience is esteemed in the young person who accepts the educator and adult as interlocutors and guides for growth. But it is also sought after in the adult as the ability to become serenely and successfully inserted in a particular context, in a working team, in a planned process, which cannot always be begun again from square one. In aging people it is expressed in the form of "placing oneself in God's hands", allowing oneself to be carried along by him as he pleases, until he takes us home to himself.

Our obedience has to proclaim the style of authority and obedience inaugurated by Christ as a service and as proclaimed in his Gospel. It is a style seen as an authentic service of God for his brethren – a service far removed from all authoritarian and complacent ways of exercising authority, and one that removes any risk of drifting into forms of power; it is a safeguard against corruptive manipulation in the exercise of authority. "The Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many".⁸⁰

The obedience of the consecrated person is an expression of

⁸⁰ Mt 20,28

solidarity and intercession for all those who are called by life's rigours to obey by force or necessity; for those who have been stripped of their freedom and are unjustly imprisoned; for anyone, even within a family, who is a victim of authoritarianism or abuse and cannot taste the liberating power of love.

The voluntary obedience of the Salesian highlights the relative nature of human options and opinions, which run the risk of haughtily opposing one another, sometimes at the cost of charity.

In the rule of St Benedict there is frequent invitation to the members to try to outdo each other in mutual obedience. It is a contest which has meaning only for those who have found the pearl of freedom in the shell of obedience.

It is also authentically prophetic to place oneself obediently in "marginal" areas of service and apostolate, bearing witness to less popular or initial values, finishing up as "outcasts with the outcasts" and giving flesh to the mysterious logic of the "stone rejected by the builders", which was willingly used by the Lord for the rebuilding of his Church and the increase of its welcoming capacity.

5. AN OBEDIENCE FOR THE THIRD MILLENNIUM.

I have spoken to you about obedience because as we look at the commitments of the Congregation in the opening century to the third millennium, it is one of the elements which guarantees the consistency of its service, the quality of its mission, and the internal power of the communities. To meet these expectations obedience certainly needs to be renewed and lived at greater depth, with the expression of new and rich qualities. And in what concerns the community, calmly seeking the effectiveness of its presence, witness and service this is substantially linked with the GC25.

In the past it was customary to speak of an “obedience of place”, referring especially to moving from one house to another, or to an “obedience of role” which concerned the passing from one office to another. Looking to the future we shall have to speak of a multi-purpose obedience, more complex and with more subdivisions, which will enable us to respond as individuals and communities to the challenges of the present day.

The need is felt in the first place for a *creative obedience*, which is proof against routine, and capable of giving new responses to new demands. This is the obedience proper to the prudent virgins, who were not satisfied merely to keep their lamps alight, but also had oil in reserve for going out to meet the bridegroom. It is the obedience of the servant, who does not keep his talents hidden in the ground but trades with them and makes them profitable. It is the obedience of the shepherd who in the middle of the night goes out to look for the lost sheep.

In today’s society it seems difficult to follow only a conservative policy, repeating on one hand what has already been done on another. New responses have to be found for new needs. The task of a good superior is not to discourage creativity, but to guide and encourage it in the wake of what has been already accomplished. For this reason the opinion has been expressed that Don Bosco was able to transform his first followers into so many other “founders” – (we may think particularly of our missionaries).

If creativity is not to be a mere beating of the air nor end up as a short-lived firework display, it must find a place in a *community project of obedience*. The houses and their educational projects come before the confreres now called to live in them and serve them. Obedience associated with planning means, in the first place, becoming aware of the plan to which the house is working and becoming part of it in a spirit of service, and only then setting about modifying what needs modification, or making innovations where necessary.

How often, when visiting houses, one comes across groups of lay people or collaborators who are frustrated because they are tired of having to adjust perpetually, not to a plan which is continually beginning again from scratch, but to individuals, called to be rector, or parish priest, or in charge of an oratory, who seem to say – more by their deeds than by their words naturally – “I am the plan!”. And if the others do not like it, they do not need to stay.

A Salesian educative and pastoral plan – and it is obedience that brings it to life – necessarily refers to an educative and pastoral community. The plan is marked by a strong *communal obedience*. It is an invitation to discover the community’s available resources – especially personnel; to see how its own role is linked with those of others, which must be recognized and given their proper value; to believe with Don Bosco that “to live and work together”⁸¹ is the source of effective and valid witness, if it be true that our communion is our first mission. Obedience and community are closely linked, not only because any falling off in the first leads to a deterioration of the second, but also because the superior – the normal reference point for obedience – is also the one chiefly responsible for the religious community.

Through the community dimension we must understand that our obedience is also and always a *relational obedience*. Its central nucleus is not the “things to be done”, but the persons to be met”, the “relationships to be built”, the “hearts to be reached”. A salesian educator cannot be a solo navigator, a lone worker like a Prometheus Unbound in a relational desert. “In the community, in view of the mission entrusted to us, we all obey,⁸² and this common obedience gives rise to a relational network that we must keep in mind when constructing our

⁸¹ cf. C 49

⁸² C 66

project and offering our service. It will be of great help in this connection to embrace and cultivate the “relational spirituality”, to which the GC24 invites us.

The field and context of missionary obedience becomes broader nowadays in the *relationship with the groups of the Salesian Family* and in the ability to make effective the Common Missionary Statement which, as I said in its promulgation, is not a fixed rule for work, but a mentality and platform on which to build possible and effective collaboration. In this connection it is a matter of some importance to know and find ways of meeting the afflictions suffered by young people which are not solved but only made worse by globalization: child labourers, boy soldiers made prematurely to bear arms, children lacking even a bare minimum of family support and those submitted to criminal sexual abuse.

The relevant environments are interpersonal, professional and educative, and today we are also bound to add social and political, national and international as well.

Past-pupils, cooperators, collaborators and educators must accompany us in “founding” a right of young people to an assured normal education.

All this can be more successful if we are able to cultivate a *formative obedience*, which makes of learning a constant factor and of the working group entrusted to our care or animation a learning community. From this new style – imperative and inevitable in a society in which knowledge and information are going to play an ever more decisive part – what is still wanted is personal growth, a better quality product (including the educative product), technological updating, and a renewed organization of work and its capacity to meet the demands of the local environment.

All these elements we have mentioned should help us to live a *purposeful obedience*, i.e. one that carries a message and testi-

mony, showing to young people in a crystal-clear manner the meaning of our life. A purpose of this kind appears today to be linked especially to two factors, which are among those most sought after by today's youngsters in the matter of vocational discernment, and of which we have frequently spoken: the spiritual and community dimensions. The spiritual intelligibility of our obedience – which becomes a trusting self-abandonment to God's providence – and its ability to build a family are so many channels which make obedience intelligible to the young people of today.

In a letter of 1617 – written to Mother Favre, who was then superior of the Visitation Sisters of Lyons – St Francis de Sales examines the problem of a Sister who was very fervent and devout but not very obedient, and apparently incapable of renouncing her own opinion, lawful in itself (concerning the frequency of receiving communion, for instance, or the duration of mental prayer) so as to embrace the common practice.

“She is well off the track”, notes Francis, “if she thinks that prayer can lead her to perfection without obedience, the virtue most dear to her Spouse: in it, with it and through it he died. We know from history and experience that many religious have become holy without mental prayer, but not one of them without obedience”.⁸³

There is no doubt that, as we enter the third millennium, we are called as Salesians and communities to commit ourselves to a renewed obedience. Then we shall be ready, docile to the signs of the times to proclaim to young people Christ and the “project for mankind” made incarnate in him, with the fullness of Don Bosco's spirit.

⁸³ S.F. di Sales, *Tutte le lettere*, vol. II, 1294, (Roma EP 1967)

6. THE ANNUNCIATION: AN APPEAL AND RESPONSE.

“Let it be done to me according to your word”.⁸⁴

I cannot conclude without making another reference to the Annunciation to Mary, on which I have already commented in my letter on vocations,⁸⁵ but who is also a sublime model for our obedience in faith.

The story of Mary’s Annunciation is among the most beautiful in Luke’s Gospel.⁸⁶ It applies not only to the past, but is a key to the reading of the present. The Gospel, in fact, is not only history, it is always proclamation as well.

The narration is built on biblical references which recall ancient hopes, express present expectations and anticipate dreams of man’s salvation. Mary, who represents the whole of humanity, feels all this in herself and is called upon to place herself at God’s disposal so that it may be realized.

“Rejoice”: this is a greeting used by the prophets when they address the Daughter of Zion. It ensures a particular attention, the gaze of love, the goodwill of God for an individual and carries a proof of this that can be verified. It proclaims a choice which brings with it incomparable happiness. “Exult! An amazing good fortune has befallen you!”

“The Lord is with you”:⁸⁷ this phrase frequently appears when God is calling someone to a mission; it is repeated in the accounts of the callings to tasks which are important for salvation. It shows that God’s attention and gaze will be translated into presence, assistance, accompaniment and covenant.

“With God nothing is impossible”:⁸⁸ these were the words

⁸⁴ cf. Lk 1,38

⁸⁵ cf. AGC 373, p.44 ff.

⁸⁶ Lk 1, 26-38

⁸⁷ Lk 1, 28

⁸⁸ Lk 1, 37

said to Sara, Abram's wife, desperate about her sterility at the beginning of the generation of the believers. It expresses God's decision to intervene in human history in favour of man, overcoming all limitations of nature and human freedom, and to do so through certain persons of his choice.

We are dealing with the proclamation of an event of particular importance for humanity. This is the "vocation", the "calling" of Mary to collaborate in the plan of salvation and the response of her who was to be the instrument and human mediation of the event..

She was invited, first of all, to believe that the event was possible and to believe also in herself (something much more difficult!); and then to accept to be committed to it, and furthermore to remain faithful in collaboration all through her life. And all this as an unconditional act of trust in God.

God has the mysterious power of rendering fertile what to human eyes is sterile, limited or even lost. It is an invitation to revise our faith in the action and power of the Spirit!

The Annunciation reminds us of our own vocation. It was an annunciation that moved us to follow Christ after the example of Don Bosco. Further annunciations were also the calls to accept responsibilities which call for confidence in God and awaiting the future with trust.

The Annunciation reminds us especially of how our personal response to God must be: docile, trusting and continuous, like that of Mary: *"Let it be with me according to your word"*. Mary allows herself to be moulded by the Word of God, by the Spirit of God to be the Mother of the Word. The grace of the Spirit has worked in the inner sanctuary of her heart to make her a Mother. We begin to understand the expression so dear to the Fathers of the Church that Mary conceived in her soul before conceiving in her womb.

Our own obedience in faith must likewise mature in dialogue with God and in docility to the Spirit. Our active life,

whether consecrated or lay, sometimes involves a certain tension: on the one hand there is the personal rapport with God, i.e. attention, dialogue, affectionate and grateful welcoming of the Lord; and on the other, we are concerned about the results of our activities. This is a challenge and often a temptation. We always want to do more; and little by little we begin to put our trust more in means and activities, which end up by leaving us empty unless we continually refer them to the source from which they take their force and meaning: God's invitation to collaborate with him. This is the real meaning of our obedience.

Let us pray to Mary, whom we recognize as the founder of our Congregation and the Salesian Family, that her journey of faith, manifested at the Annunciation, may also be ours, that we too may hear the call within, allow ourselves to be moulded and made fruitful by the Spirit, and respond with our own "*Here I am*" to produce apostolic results.

I do not forget you in my prayers that the work of every confrere and community may, in obedience to God's will, flourish in doing good for the young people to whom we have been sent.

With the protection of Mary Help of Christians and of Don Bosco,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Juan Sueti". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial "J" that extends downwards and to the left, forming a large loop. The name "Juan Sueti" is written in a fluid, connected script to the right of the initial.