

## CARMELITE GENERAL CONGREGATION: OBEDIENCE

I will start with a topic that might seem strange, even boring, to some of you: Obedience. Obedience for many religious summons up the worst of the old religious life we hope to have left behind. It sounds infantile. It evokes people being commanded to plant cabbages upside down. I heard of a sister who was forbidden to attend her father's funeral in the parish nearby. She had to learn obedience!

Often obedience in the Church has been seen as in mindless submission. Do what you are told. When I was a young friar, my community at Blackfriars began to give the chalice at Mass every day, twenty years before it became normal. Our Archbishop was a terrifying figure. He commanded us to stop. We discussed it at a community meeting and replied that we would like to talk to him about it. It was important pastorally. He wrote back: 'Why can't you Dominicans just do what you are told. Obey!' We had another long community meeting and again wrote to him asking for a conversation. We waited with bated breath. He wrote back and said, 'OK, do whatever you like!'

Mind you, different nationalities have different understandings of obedience. An American priest, a canon lawyer, newly arrived in Rome, was traveling in a bus. The man next to him lit a cigarette. The priest pointed at the sign, Vietato Fumare. It is forbidden to smoke. No reaction. The man went on smoking. So the lawyer said, 'Look. It says vietato fumare.' The man replied, 'That means that you can smoke or I can smoke. It just means that everyone cannot smoke at the same time!'

But a healthy obedience is the scandal of our way of life; it underlies all of our preaching of the gospel. It challenges the illusory freedom that the so-called "free world" promises to our contemporaries. This is the freedom of the autonomous modern subject who asserts his will. This is the phoney freedom of doing my 'own thing', of not letting anyone interfere with my plans. But as we say in England, If you want to make God laugh tell him your plans. Our obedience as religious contradicts this pseudo-freedom and invites us to discover the freedom of the children of God.

If we lose this freedom, religious life simply falls to pieces. Provincials complain of brethren who become immovable. Of course, some of us have ministries from which we cannot be easily moved. But if it becomes impossible to move the brethren because they refuse to budge, religious life dies.

A talented sister in her thirties told me that she had given up an extremely well-paid job, joined a congregation because she wanted to be sent on mission. But ten years after final profession, no one had sent her to do anything. So, what was the point of becoming a religious?

Dorothy Day was a brilliant, difficult rebellious free woman, who enjoyed fighting with bishops, and yet who loved obedience. She wrote: 'Obedience is a matter of love, which

makes it voluntary, not compelled by fear or force... Even seeing through a glass darkly makes one want to obey, to do all the Beloved wishes, to follow Him to Siberia, to Antarctic wastes, to the desert, to prison, to give up one's life for one's brothers since He said, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brothers ye have done it unto me."<sup>1</sup>

Our obedience is above all to God who summons us to happiness. My deepest identity is that I am someone whom God calls to freedom. In the desert, the voice of God is heard calling , Moses, Moses. He replies *Hineni*, Here I am. 'Go and set my people free'. So obedience is first of all accepting God's the summons to freedom. It is our freedom to set out again, to be mobile. I am not so much a being as a becoming. As someone said, I forget who, we are more like flowing water than solid rocks.

Religious Obedience, at least in the Dominican tradition, is not about putting the superior in the place of God. It is helping each other to hear the summons to happiness and freedom. Do you know the superb painting by Caravaggio of the call of St Matthew in the church of *St Louis de France* here in Rome? Jesus is at one side of the painting pointing at Matthew. But Matthew does not hear him. He is bent over his money table. He is wrapped up in himself. The others are looking at Jesus. Maybe they are saying 'Why is he calling that slob? What about me? I am much better.' But in a moment, they will nudge Matthew and say, 'He is calling *you*.'

That is religious obedience. We help each other to hear: He is calling you. A brother might think that he is the new St Thomas Aquinas, but his brethren discern that he would be a rotten academic but a brilliant pastor. Or the other way around. Charles Peguy tells the story of the person who finally makes it to heaven. God looks at him and says, 'But where are the others?' We travel together, picking up the brethren who fall over or who give up. Spotting each other's hidden talents, giving each other courage. So religious obedience expresses something beautiful about freedom. We travel towards it together. Martin Luther King said, 'No one is free until we are all free.'

When I arrived in Rome to begin my time as Master, I had not even unpacked when I was summoned by an angry Vatican Cardinal. Some of our brethren had been behaving rather outrageously. I will not tell you where! The Cardinal said to me, 'you must act immediately. You are the supreme authority in the Order.' I replied, 'Well, actually I am not.' 'Who is then?' The brethren are. We owe obedience to the brethren gathered in chapter. For some matters of course, this is delegated to the Master or the Provincial or the Prior.

You have heard a hundred times that obedience comes from the Latin *ob-audiens*, listening deeply. So healthy, holy obedience is rooted in our fraternal conversations. Our conversations in chapter; our conversations with brethren in leadership; our conversations

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<sup>1</sup> *Dorothy Day Selected Writings* Edited and Introduced by Robert Ellsberg Maryknoll 2005 p. 170, 171

over tea or a drink in the evening. If we cease to talk truthfully to each other and to listen attentively, obedience becomes a prison and not our freedom.

Let me briefly address an objection. You might say that obedience as doing what you are told might have been oppressive but there was something radical and startling. But you, Timothy, just want to reduce it to cosy chats over a cup of tea. Where is the glorious obedience of Abraham willing to cut Isaac's throat? Where is the obedience of St Paul, stopped in his tracks by Jesus?

Revelation is not God booming at us from a mountain top telling us what to do. Revelation according to the Second Vatican Council is God's conversation with us through which we become his friends. Revelation is *always* conversational. So the Word became flesh in a man of conversation. He talked with everyone, with sinners and prostitutes, with lawyers and Pharisees, with friends and enemies. He even talked with his judge, Pontius Pilate until Pilate brought it to an end. 'What is truth?' The conversation ended with the silence of the cross. But it began again in the garden on Easter morning. 'Mary! Rabboni!' So the obedience of faith is always entering into conversation: with God and with each other.

Herbert McCabe OP claimed that in St Thomas Aquinas, obedience is therefore a virtue of the mind as well as the will. He wrote that 'obedience only becomes perfect when the one who commands and the one who obeys come to share one mind. The notion of blind obedience makes no more sense in our tradition than blind learning.'<sup>2</sup> The perfect obedience of Jesus to his Father was not a robotic mindlessness, but the perfect mutuality of the Trinity.

Good obedience means that we listen to each other intelligently, seeking to understand each other and what is the will of God. Herbert's baptismal name was John. When he was six years old, his mother ticked him off: 'Now John what you have done is very wrong. It may even be a mortal sin.' To which young Herbert replied: 'Mother, it cannot be a mortal sin. According to the teaching of the Church, I cannot commit a mortal sin until I have attained the age of reason, which I have not done at the age of six.'

So how are we to live this obedience in a way that is joyful and life giving? How are we to bring back home the brethren who have drifted out of it into private lives? How do we help each other to hear the Lord summoning us to freedom?

First of all we must listen and show that we do listen. We cannot speak with authority unless we listen with all our heart, mind and with utter patience. Amos Oz said of his grandfather: 'He possessed a quality that is barely ever found among men, a marvellous quality which for many women is the sexiest in a man. He listened. He did not just politely pretend to listen, while impatiently waiting for her to finish what she was saying and shut up. He did not break into his partner's sentence and finish it for her. He did not cut in to sum up what she was saying so as to move on to another subject. He did not let his interlocutress talk into

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<sup>2</sup> *God Matters* London 1987 p.229

thin air while he prepared in his head the reply that he would make when she finally finished. He did not pretend to be interested or entertained, he really was.<sup>3</sup>

We have to listen imaginatively! Fergus Kerr OP preached at a Chapter of my Province about what he had come to love about the Dominican way of life: 'If you ask me to say what I prize more and more the longer I am in the Order (and it will be 40 years this September) then I have to say that it is a way of thinking – of expecting other people to have views we may disagree with; expecting also to be able to understand why they believe what they do – if only we have the imagination, the courage, the faith in the ultimate power of the truth, the charity to listen to what others say, to listen especially for what they are afraid of when they seem reluctant to accept what we want them to see.'<sup>4</sup>

We need the imagination to discover why it is that someone holds a different position to my own. What have they lived? What do they mean by their words? What do they love and fear? There was a heated debate on preaching at the Dominican General Chapter of 2004, held in Krakow over the nature of preaching, always a hot topic for us Dominicans! The document proposed to the Chapter by a commission understood preaching in dialogical terms: we proclaim our faith by entering into conversation with people of other faiths or none.

Some capitulars strongly disagreed, arguing this verged on relativism. They said 'We must dare to preach the truth boldly'. Slowly it became evident that the brethren were speaking out of very different experiences. The principal author of the commission document had spent his Dominican life in Pakistan, where Christianity necessarily finds itself in constant dialogue with Islam. In Asia there is no preaching without dialogue.

The brethren who reacted strongly against the document were mainly from the former Soviet Union. For them, the idea of dialogue with those who had imprisoned or tortured them made no sense. To get beyond the disagreement, rational argument was not enough. You had to imagine why the other person held his or her view. You had get under their skin. What experience led them to this view? What wounds do they bear? What is their joy? This demanded a *process* of mutual listening which continued for years after the Chapter.

We listen with expectant attention. We *expect* that the other person will say something worth our attention, whoever it is. We had a rule in the General Council. Whatever another member of the Council said, it was never absurd or ridiculous. It might be wrong, based on misinformation or faulty logic. It could never be dismissed as nonsense. To rubbish another person's position is to rubbish them. It is an act of violence.

Cardinal Ratzinger once was concerned with the views of a brother on homosexuality, I was summoned to see him, as so often. As always, it was easy to talk with him. I said to Cardinal

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<sup>3</sup> *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, Vintage, London, 2005, p.110

<sup>4</sup> Acts of the Chapter of the English Province of the Order of Preachers, 1996

Ratzinger, 'Please leave this to us. He is our brother. He is our responsibility' I then invited the brother to discuss his views with a small group, so that he could better formulate what he wanted to say. Usually when this happens, it turns out that there is no problem. He said to me, 'No, Timothy. I will never write about the subject again.' For me that was a failure. Good obedience is never silencing someone. It walking together towards the light.

Often there is a tension between generations in religious life. Often the oldies from my generation look at the young and dismiss them as 'conservative', and the young look at us and think we are tired old liberals of the sixties!

We need to imagine the adventure that each generation lives. For my generation, growing up in the sixties, in a strongly Catholic world, the adventure was discovering the world. We were excited about plunging into the secular world to proclaim our faith, We took off our habits and in a demonstration of individual freedom, we *all* put on blue jeans and black polo necks!

The spiritual adventure of many young today often moves in the opposite direction. Many grew up in the secular world. Many are converts from atheism or agnosticism. For them, the adventure is discovering the gospel, the tradition and the Church. These two adventures may be opposite but they do not cancel each other out. When you weave a blanket, you need threads that move in different directions, otherwise it will tear. So we must open ourselves to the adventures of other generations. What makes their hearts beat with excitement? It may not be what excites me, but it is the fire that ignites their vocation.

This is important in a Church which is becoming split by bitter polarisation, especially in the United States. For Catholics a fundamental opposition between tradition and progress makes no sense. We are all traditionalists, looking back to the gospel, and we are all progressives, longing for the Kingdom, There are differences of generation and of temperament, but there should never be a schism.

We may even learn to enjoy disagreement. Disagreement is the fire that lights up the world. Do not be afraid of it. Think of the glorious arguments between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well in John chapter 4. They tease each other. It is even flirtatious! Don't be misled by over serious Biblical scholars. It is fun! It sparkles!

When I joined the noviciate, there was an older novice, who rather irritated me. He was always going on about his experience in Africa and making me feel very young and ignorant. Then one day we had to clean and sort the potatoes which had grown in the farm. It involved a terrible machine that threatened to chop off our fingers. We started to laugh and it was the beginning of our friendship which lasted more than fifty years until he died of Covid a couple of years ago.

Difference is fertile. The differences between the gospel accounts of the life of Jesus have kept theology alive for two millennia. Gareth Moore was a Dominican of about my age. He was brilliant, much cleverer than I am. And we delighted to argue. Once I went to ask him if he was free to say mass for the Notre Dame sisters the next day. We got into an argument,

and the next thing we noticed was that it was dawn! We had debated for 8 hours, and enjoyed it enormously. And we had not even had anything to drink! Alas, he died of cancer when he was in his fifties. I miss our debates. At best human beings are playful, ludic. Hugo Rahner, the Jesuit younger brother of Karl, wrote a wonderful book *Homo Ludens*, on how play is central to our humanity. We can be playful and serious at the same time. Indeed in the English culture, one is never so serious as when one jokes!

I am writing a book at the moment with a Polish Dominican. He is thirty three years younger me, of a different nationality, and he is a real Biblical scholar whereas I am really an amateur. I love our differences!

Finally, Some brethren wander away and create private lives. Some become in effect diocesan priests, living on the edge of the community. Why do we want them back? How will they perceive the invitation to come home? Is it because it makes more economic sense? Or because we feel that they are a bad example? Or that there is a danger that living alone they might get up to scandalous behaviour? Or there may be brethren whom we would rather did go away and stop creating tensions in the community!

So why will they think we want them to come home? If our obedience is truly a response to the Lord who sets us free, then it must be because we want them to take part in our mission. Because we really believe that they have something to give! Think back to that painting of Caravaggio, the call of St Matthew. The other disciples look at the Lord who is calling Matthew. In a second they will surely turn to him and say: Listen Matthew, he is calling you? He is summoning you to freedom and to be a preacher! If our marginal brethren hear that, then coming home will not be felt as a defeat but a new setting out. Even a joy.

So obedience is indeed a sort of poverty, the poverty of not owning your life. As the Franciscan Richard Rohr likes to say, 'your life is not your own.' We do not own our lives as private possessions. We are given our lives to give them away. At the Last Supper Jesus said to his friends, 'This is my body, given for you.' So our obedience is Eucharistic. We say to each other, 'This my life, given for you.'

So obedience will be at the heart of this gathering of Carmelites. It is the tough and joyful discipline of opening your hearts and minds to each other. If you find a brother's position incomprehensible, ask yourselves what he is trying to say. Can I help him to say it better? If he is struggling for words, can I offer him some? We need the freedom to express ourselves badly if we are to discover the truth together. I pray to God that you may even enjoy your differences, and have fun!

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