

# Obedience

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## Introduction

Obedience is not a particularly popular idea in our world. There are many reasons. We value our independence and don't want people telling us what to do. The word "obedience" conjures up children who are supposed to do what they are told, even if they don't know why. The duty of obedience has been used by those in authority for self-serving ends. Many of us in the West have a deep distrust of authorities and lawmakers, especially distant ones. For these reasons and others, there are no popular self-help books about the "virtue of obedience" or "power obedience," or the seven steps to successful obedience.

A friend of mine said she learned the benefits of obedience when she was training her dog. For the dog to develop and use his many skills and capacities, he had to be taught to obey ("obedience training"). Unless he learned to obey her, the dog could not grow up to be a mature, happy, skillful creature. She reasoned that if the dog needed to obey her, she needed to obey God. Another friend was a very rebellious teenager. It was only when she had a child that she began to see obedience as a necessary part of human life.

St. Benedict didn't share our hesitations about the idea of "obedience." To him it was obvious that we should obey God and that human community, monastic or otherwise, requires obedience to authority. If he needed further confirmation of the fact, he needed only to look at the political anarchy which ravaged the Italian peninsula during his lifetime.

The word "obedience" comes from a compound of the Latin verb "audire" which means to hear. St. Benedict begins his rule with the command: "Listen!" A wise person is one who listens well. Merely listening is not obedience, but it is a prerequisite for obedience. To obey means to hear and implement the command or suggestion one hears. An obedient person listens to others to learn the truth and to discover what should be done. Obedience, then, is very closely akin to "responsibility." To obey is to answer to a duty or laid upon us by God or by other human beings.

## Obedience in Human Society

In our lucid moments we all know that for society to exist people must obey the law and those in authority. Law and authority are there to make sure that people can function together in society for the common good. If everyone ignored the laws about littering we would be knee deep in unsanitary garbage; if everyone disobeyed the traffic laws many of us would be dead. If students don't obey the school rules or their teachers, education is impossible.

However, authority which commands obedience must be defined; that is, there must be norms or rules about who commands and what they command and why. Countries have constitutions; the constitutions define the parameters of law and the duties and limits of those who make, enforce and adjudicate the law. Ideally those to whom authority is ascribed are competent and qualified. Thus, the constitution is the basis for educational practice in the country. The federal and state

governments enact laws about education, laws which ought to be congruent with the innate laws, rights and duties of citizens who are human persons before they are citizens. The state department of education and the local school boards promote education. They must obey the laws, and they are answerable to those who elect them. The principals and teachers, who must be credentialed, are answerable to the law and to the school board and to parents and voters.

Ordinarily, those entrusted with authority are better informed than others, and their decisions have a certain authority for that reason alone. Most decisions asking for obedience are pragmatic, educated guesses. In most cases, the good of the community is fostered far more by doing what the leaders ask than by stubborn resistance, though if what they command is immoral one must resist. For their part, to maintain credibility good leaders give their reasons and listen to feedback.

### Obedience in the Christian Church

The role of obedience in human society is a good place to start in understanding religious obedience, one dimension of which is responsibility in, for and to the religious community, its laws and its authorities. After Jesus' death and resurrection, the Christian gospel spread quickly through the work of apostles and teachers, some of whom led permanent communities, while others traveled from place to place. As the first generation of apostles and teachers began to die out, Christians were faced with the need to maintain their identity as Jesus' followers. This involved keeping alive the memory of Jesus and his teaching and the teaching of the apostles, as well as formalizing the requirements for belonging to the community (a process that Jesus had begun and Paul and others continued). Mechanisms for selecting leaders were established and normative texts were identified. Christians were those who obeyed their bishops or elders and the authoritative Scriptures left by the apostles and their associates. Leaders of various churches communicated and collaborated so that the unity of different communities would be maintained.

In all of this, Christianity functions like any other human organization. What makes it different is the Christian belief that the Holy Spirit is functioning in the church to help it remain true to the teaching and person of Jesus. Thus, the apostles and their successors deserved obedience not only because authority and obedience are necessary in any human society, but also because this community was guided by the Holy Spirit. This is not to say that the leaders of the church couldn't make mistakes or become corrupt (always a danger when one has power), but that the Holy Spirit was active in guiding the church and would never abandon it.

The Spirit kept and keeps the church faithful and creative in witnessing to a person and a message which came from above, from God. Christ was and is the Word of God revealed in human form. The Word of God spoken in and by Christ is revelation and command: the fullest disclosure of God and God's plan for human beings. Paradoxically, though, the divine command and the duty to respond if faith and obedience are rooted in something greater than duty: they are an expression of divine love, and are means to guide human beings in responding with love to that love. Ultimately, authority and command and law and duty and obedience are at the service of something more ultimate: God Who Is Love. All are works of the Spirit of Love.

At the heart of Christ obedience is the example of Jesus who, the Epistle to the Hebrews says, came into the world to do God's will. Jesus humbled himself becoming obedient unto death. In the Garden of Olives, he brought his own will into alignment with what his Father asked of him.

### St. Benedict's Rule

St. Benedict inculcates high regard for the authority of the abbot, but he also defined that authority very precisely. To begin with, he says the community should elect the abbot, and he lays down criteria for what sort of person the abbot should be. Because the monks have picked their own abbot, they will presumably be more ready to accept his leadership and commands. Secondly, the monk obeys an abbot but also a rule to which the abbot is also subject. The monastic rule, in its turn, is derived from and subject to the Scriptures. Nor is the monastery isolated from the church. Local bishops and abbots and lay people can intervene if an unworthy man is elected abbot. Moreover, in making a decision, the abbot is required to consult senior members of the community, and in making an important decision he is required to consult everyone. This happens in a meeting, so that reasons are discussed publicly. Finally, Benedict frequently reminds the abbot that he is answerable to God for each decision he makes, and especially for the well being of those over whom he holds authority. He is to strive to love rather than to be feared, to avoid favoritism and envy of others with whom he shares authority.

Benedict recognizes that sometimes the abbot may seem to command a monk to do something that the monk thinks is impossible for him. The monk is to patiently and gently tell the abbot why he can't do it. However, if the abbot says he must do it anyway, then the monk is to try to do what is commanded. If he fails, that will not be catastrophic; if he succeeds, he has managed to exceed his self-defined limits.

Obedience for Benedict is owed not just to those with superior authority. He wants the monks to obey each other. Listening to each other and seeking God's will together, patiently and persistently, make possible this mutual obedience. Its ultimate foundation is the same as the foundation of obedience to the abbot: Christ is at work in both, and in listening to them and obeying them we listen to Christ and obey Christ.

While obedience is necessary for community life, it is also a personal discipline, a way of learning how to surrender one's ego. St. Benedict wrote: "The primary path to humility is prompt obedience." The steps of humility involve doing the will of God and the superior, and following the common rule of the community and the example of the elders. Obedience speeds the death of the old self, so that we are made free to be born again. Obedience teaches us that there are things more important than getting our own way, things more important even than doing something in the best or most efficient way. The motive for such obedience is love; the model is Christ.

St. Benedict reminds his monks that God loves a cheerful giver. He says that there should be no murmuring.

## Self-Will

Fr. Terrence Kardong recently wrote a long article in which he confesses that in his excellent translation and commentary on the Rule of Benedict, he confused "one's own will" and "self-will." "Self-will," according to Webster's dictionary, is "stubborn adherence to one's own desires and ideas, especially in opposition to others: obstinacy." One's own will, in contrast, is simply the power and act of choosing.

In this, as in many areas of understanding the Rule of Benedict, it is helpful to compare Benedict's Rule with an earlier Rule from which Benedict took a great deal, the Rule of the Master. Benedict wrote his Rule a little before 550 AD, and the Rule of the Master was apparently written a few years before that. Seeing what Benedict takes, adapts or rejects from the Rule of the Master gives us a pretty good idea of what was important to Benedict.

## The Rule of the Master

At the beginning of the Rule of the Master there is a commentary on the Lord's Prayer, the Our Father. There the Master comments at length on the phrase "thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." The Master has a dramatic view of the human will. Satan tries to lead the will astray; to counter Satan, we need to embrace the will of God. Self-will in fact, is what is consciously done against the will of God. The struggle within ourselves is whether we will choose to live by the spirit or by the flesh, that is, according to sinful impulses. The Rule of the Master then discusses several statements of Jesus: "I have come not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me" (Jn 6.38), and "Your will, not mine, be done!" (Mt 26.39). The Master comes to the startling conclusion: "See therefore that whatever we choose by our will is patently unjust, and whatever is justly imposed on us against our will by the one who has command over us is accounted to our credit." In other words, since our human wills are so inclined to evil, the only hope for the monk is to place himself under the command of an abbot, in effect substituting the abbot's will (and thereby God's) for his own. We recognize that this idea of the Master can't be true. The answer to human sinfulness is not eradication of the human will, or its replacement by God's will, but conversion and transformation that bring human freedom into harmony with divine.

In another place (RM 7.39-65) the Rule of the Master says this: "Furthermore, under the care of the abbot, not only are they not forced to worry and temporal necessities, that is, food, clothing and footwear, but solely by rendering obedience in all things to the master, they are made secure about the account they will have to give of their soul". This is so because, whether for good or for ill, what happens among the sheep is the responsibility of the shepherd " who gave the orders". This seems to imply that the monk trades his will for security. That goes against common sense and Christian morality. No one, monk or not, is absolved from judging his own actions and following his own conscience.