

# The Service of Authority and Obedience

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When the new Assistants General were elected in the 1998 General Assembly, a Visitor asked me: "What are we going to do with you now?" I answered, "I would like to be a subject of obedience and not an object of your authority." He said to me, "That's a beautiful phrase." I told him, "I have preached these things many times and would like to live what John Paul II said to the doctors, when he whispered in the hospital, after the 1981 assassination attempt, 'Gentlemen, I would like to be the subject of my infirmity and not the object of your medicine.'"

The Congregation of the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life published the instruction "The Service of Authority and Obedience" with the date of May 11, 2008; it is divided into four parts: an instruction (numbers 1-3) and three chapters, which are proposed to help authority in its triple service: to each and all persons called to live his consecration (first part: nos. 4-15); in the building of the fraternal communities (second part: nos. 16-22); in the common mission (third part: nos. 23-31).

## **Introduction (nos. 1-3)**

If man is in pilgrimage in search of a meaning of his life, at times in an inconsistent manner, the Consecrated Life tries to do so in a most conscientious way: "The consecrated person is a witness, a happy and at the same time laborious witness, of the assiduous search for the divine will, and because of that he elects to use all the means available which help to know it and sustain it in achieving the goal" (no. 1). We do it with diverse roles; all are called to obey, some in a particular office by being signs of unity and guide in the service of authority. The consecrated life is a special human vocation, which configures us to Christ in relation with the Father and the Holy Spirit. We follow Jesus, virgin, poor, obedient (and prayerful and missionary). This following is a way of liberation (no. 2) in the midst

of the difficulties of the modern and post-modern world, with the new forms of conceiving and living authority and obedience in the diverse cultural contexts in which we live.

If we ask ourselves what we would like to find in the text so that it could actually be an instruction, it seems that it is necessary to have a description of the crisis of consecrated life, an analysis of the actual problems and their causes and above all a stimulating catalogue of solutions intended by the Congregations and Institutes, especially the new forms of insertion, of organization and formation of the Congregations which renewed themselves since Vatican II, in these two topics of authority and obedience. Moreover, one has to investigate how the missionary spirit contributed to the expansion of some congregations, and how, on the other hand, it helped in the renewal of others, especially in the insertions of small communities in the popular environment (poor villages, young people of shanty towns), or how these places where the consecrated life appeared are called. Another point which would be good to see in an Instruction would be the destiny which has to be given to the works which have to be closed for lack of personnel.

As an example of the way towards the personal (and communitarian) liberation, the journey of Exodus presents itself, in which the cloud guides the people of God. "A group of slaves was liberated and was converted into a holy people, which knows the joy of free service to God. The events in Exodus are the paradigm which accompanies the entire Biblical story and presents itself as a prophetic anticipation of the very life of Jesus, which in its turn also liberates from slavery by obedience to the providential will of the Father" (no. 2). One can see that we could, from this beginning, concentrate our attention on the person of Christ, because we were "called to give witness to the primacy of God through the free obedience to His Holy Will" (no. 3).

In the last decades there were changes in the church and society in the manner of living authority and obedience because of the consciousness of the value of the individual person, the centrality of the spirituality of communion and because "of the less individualistic conception of the mission, shared with all the members of the people of God, from which are derived the forms of concrete collaboration" (ibid). This allusion to the other members of the people of God, with whom we are called to live our mission of consecration, can indicate that there are very great, unsuspected riches in this field, which were not exploited in the Instruction. We know how much the collaboration of lay persons, how much the women (St. Louise, the Ladies of Charity, the Daughters of Charity) were valuable for St. Vincent de Paul and how they helped him in his projects and in

his ways of working with the poor and how all of this radiated in his prayer and in the formation which he imparted to his foundations.

Supposedly, these critical observations, especially when I allude to the “lack” of certain elements in the texts, are not applicable in an automatic manner to the other instructions cited in the Introduction (*Potissimum Institution*, 1990, *Fraternal Life in Community*, 1994, *To walk from Christ*, 2002) and the apostolic Post-synodal Exhortation “*Vita Consecrata*,” 1996.

The indication of these ecclesial texts makes clearer the lack of reference in this Instruction to the concrete life of the Congregations and Institutions: the founders are not cited and the different ways of incarnating the consecrated life through the centuries, particularly in the last centuries are not cited. Sometimes only St. Augustine, St. Basil, St. Francis, St. Claire, St. Ignatius of Loyola are mentioned, in normative contexts, not always the most inspiring. The documents of the Union of Superiors General and Women Superiors General, the minutes of the international congresses on the Consecrated Life, etc. are not referred to.

### **First Part: Consecration and the Search for the Will of God (nos. 4-15)**

This section is proposed as a help to individual consecrated persons.

Christ asked the first disciples, “What are you looking for?” (Jn. 1:38). As believers we are searching for “a living and true God, the Alpha and Omega of all things; the God whom we have not made out of our own image and likeness, but the one who created us in his image and likeness”; a “God who shows his will and shows us the ways to follow... God wishes above all the free answer of love to his love in order to convert us into instruments of his divine love” (no. 4).

Obedience as listening is a filial attitude, because we have certainty that a father alone has good things to say and give to his son, especially God the Father. “Obedience is the unique form which the human person has, to be intelligent and free, to fully realize oneself... Obedience to God is the way to growth and consequently the liberty of the person.” It includes “a project or a distinct will different from his own, which not only does not mortify or diminish, but which gives foundation to human dignity.” Only a son and a daughter can give themselves freely into the hands of the Father, the same as His Son Jesus, who abandoned himself to the Father. And, in his passion, he even delivered himself to Judas, to the high

priests, to the floggers, to the hostile crowd, to the executioners; he did these only because he was absolutely sure that all found meaning in the total fidelity to the place of salvation wished by the Father, to whom — as Saint Bernard recalls — “what was pleasing was not death but the will of him who died freely” (no. 5).<sup>1</sup>

Christ lived the listening asked of Israel (Dt. 6:4). We will also live it so that the Lord may place his laws in our minds, engrave them in our hearts so that he could be our God as we are His people (Jn. 31-33) (no. 6).

“The loving and daily contact with the Word leads us to discover the life and the modalities through which God wishes to free his sons [and] transmits the meaning of his will and the joy for it; it gives peace and joy to remain faithful to him, at the same time that it makes sensible and prompt those things implied by obedience, either the Gospel (Rom. 10:16; II Thes. 1:8), the faith (Rom. 1:4; 16-26) or the truth” (no. 7). The will of God “can be dramatically different from ours. Hence to obey God means to enter into an order of values which is ‘other,’ capture a new and different meaning of reality, to experience an unthought-of freedom to touch the threshold of mystery” (ibid.).

Jesus, who freed us through his obedience “until death, and a death on the cross” (Phil. 2:8) knew and lived it. When the Father presented him “the difficult chalice to drink,” the Son, because he felt loved by the Father and he corresponded with his whole being, “could reach to this type of radical obedience” (no. 8). Our consecrated obedience will not be humiliation, “but the truth on which the fullness of man is built and realized,” because “in imitation of Christ and learning from him, with a gesture of supreme freedom and confidence without conditions, the consecrated person has placed his will into the hands of the Father, in order to offer him a perfect and agreeable sacrifice” (cf. Rom. 12:1). “Christ is He to whom all Christian obedience is directed” (ibid.), passing through the mediations of the fraternal community and the service of authority. “In reality, it is the same Lord resurrected, newly present among brothers and sisters reunited in His name, who indicates the way to go,” as beautifully said by Benedict XVI.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> ST. BERNARD, *Errors of Peter Abelard*, 8, 21 in “Obras Completas de San Bernardo,” BAC, 452, Madrid, 1984, II, 563.

<sup>2</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Letter to the Prefect of the Congregation of Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life on the Occasion of the Plenary Session (September 27, 2005)*, published in *L'Osservatore Romano*, seminal edition in the Spanish language, October 14, 2005, p. 4.

The multiple external mediations “make visible the mystery of grace which God realizes in the intimate recesses of the heart.... The mediations which externally communicate the will of God are known in the events of life and in the exigencies proper to the specific vocation; but they are also expressed in the laws which regulate the social life and in the dispositions of those who are called to guide it.... The Rules and other ordinances of life are converted also into the mediation of the Lord: human mediation, yes, but authorized; imperfect and at the same time binding; the starting point from which each day begins and also a point for moving forward with generous and creative impulse toward the sanctity which God ‘wills’ for those consecrated.... It is evident that all this will be lived in a coherent and fruitful way only if the desire to know and do the will of God are maintained alive as well as the consciousness of one’s own dignity, fragility and the acceptance of the validity of specific mediations, including when one cannot grasp all the reasons which are presented” (no. 9).

We know that “mediation is by its own nature limited and inferior to that to which it refers, so much so if it deals with human mediation in relation with the divine will,” and that it is precisely in these cases of difficulty where the consecrated person learns to obey God (cf. Ps. 118,71), to listen to Him and to remain devoted to him alone, waiting with patience and full of hope, for His revealing Word (Ps. 118,81), with full and generous availability to comply with His will and not one’s own (Lk. 22:42) (no. 10).

“Therefore, one adheres to the Lord when he examines his presence in the human mediations, especially in the Rules, in the superiors, in the community, in the signs of the times, in the expectations... of the people, above all of the poor; when it has the courage to ‘cast the nets’ because of His Word (cf. Lk. 5:5) and not for human motives only; when he elects to obey not only God but also men, but in any case, for God and not for men.... Therefore it is indispensable to make themselves available to the Spirit, starting with the Superiors who receive their authority from the Spirit and should exercise it under his guidance, ‘docile to the will of God’” (no. 11).

“In the consecrated life, each one should search with sincerity the will of the Father, because otherwise this kind of life would lose its meaning. But it is of great importance that such a search is made in union with the brothers and sisters; this is what justly unites and makes a family united to Christ. Authority is at the service of this search, so that it is done in sincerity and truth.... On the other hand, one has to recognize that the work to guide others is not easy, above

all when the meaning of personal autonomy is excessive or conflicting and competitive in front of others.... Therefore, authority on its part, has to search assiduously and with the help of prayer and reflection, together with the advice of others, what God truly wishes. On the contrary, the Father Superior or Mother Superior instead of representing God risks recklessly placing himself in the place of God” (no. 12).

The following are some indicated “priorities in the service of authority” (no. 13):

- a) In the consecrated life, authority is above all a spiritual authority to be lived in prayer and a humble search for the action of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the brothers and sisters who should be listened to with the same attention which we give to the signs of the times.
- b) Authority is called to guarantee the time and the quality of prayer, the environment and moment of contact with the Word which “has the power to build (Habakuk 20:32) persons and communities, showing them the paths of mission, especially in the Eucharistic celebration.”
- c) Those in authority are called to promote the dignity of the person, “making to each one the gift of his own self-esteem and self positive consideration” (with great affection for all and great secrecy in relation to confidential information or personal communications they received)... before invoking obedience (necessary), the person in authority has to practice charity (indispensable). Authority is not delegated (‘with the implicit invitation to all to do what each wants’), nor is one’s own point of view imposed (‘that everybody does what I want’).
- d) The person in authority is called to animate and infuse hope in difficulties, to help to set aside the difficulties of each moment, remembering that they form part of the sufferings which frequently stake the road towards the Kingdom. Nevertheless, the evangelical authority “recognizes humbly its own limits and the necessity that it needs of the help of others.”
- e) The person in authority is called to maintain alive the charism proper of its own religious family. One of his special duties is to assume the charism in his own personal life and interpret it “as regards the fraternal life in common and its insertion in the ecclesial and social context.”
- f) The person in authority is called to maintain alive the “feeling with the Church,” the sense of faith and the ecclesial communion, because one follows the Lord not as a solitary sailor, but in

“an authentic spirituality of communion, that is, an effective and affective relation with the Pastors, before all with the Pope, the center of the unity of the Church.”<sup>3</sup> Concrete witness of love of the Church and the passion of Unity is owed to every one.<sup>4</sup>

- g) The person in authority is called to accompany on the road of ongoing formation, to offer to the brothers and sisters “help in resolving eventual problems, or in managing possible crises” and “being attentive to the normal growth of each person in every phase and stage of life.” He will try “to maintain a high level of openness to formation, the capacity to learn from life, the liberty especially to let oneself be formed by others and to feel oneself responsible for the road of growth of the other.” The instruments of communitarian growth are “sharing together the Word, a personal and community project, communitarian discerning, review of life, fraternal correction.”<sup>5</sup>

After listing these priorities in the exercise of authority, the **Instruction** presents synthetically “the particular characteristics of the exercise of authority according to the Code of Canon Law..., the evangelical traits of the power which the religious superiors exercise on various levels” (no. 14).

- a) Obedience of the superior. He should be first obedient to the law of God from whom this authority proceeds and to whom he will give an account of his work, to Church law, to the Pope, to the laws proper to his institute.
- b) Spirit of service. This should be according to the example of Jesus Christ, who “came not to be served but to serve” (Mk. 10:45). This is due to the charismatic origin and to the ecclesial mediation of the religious authority. In a special way, the superior, “brother among brothers... is called to make felt the love with which God loves his sons,” avoiding, because of this, “all attitude of dominion and... all form of paternalism” (ibid.). It is important to elicit, through dialogue, a voluntary obedience, in respect of the human person and an adhesion “in the spirit of faith and love, in order to follow Christ the obedient one” (ibid.).
- c) Pastoral solicitude: because it is trying to “build a fraternal community in Christ,” which seeks and loves God, “the person in authority is essentially pastoral, inasmuch as it is completely

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<sup>3</sup> *Caminar desde Cristo* (no. 32).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Vita consecrata* (no. 46).

<sup>5</sup> *La vida fraternal en comunidad* (no. 32).

ordered to the building of a fraternal life in the community, according to the ecclesial identity proper of the consecrated life” (ibid.). The means, founded in faith, they are listening to the word, to the sentiment, to the resolutions, to the necessities of each brother in the community. One should not see the members of the community only as needful; it is a faulting of the superiors if they are asked only “to help them conveniently in their personal needs, care with solicitude, visit the sick, correct the rebellious, console the pusillanimous and have patience with all” (ibid., citing the canon 619). By the grace of God, there are also in the communities sane members, happy members, who have true leadership, a spirit of collaboration, capacity for work, tireless dedication to the Lord, to the poor and to the brothers. With the poor ones, one has to have patience. What should be expected of the superior, when the brothers are empowered, have leadership, imagination, initiative, creative spirit and confidence in themselves? It is not always easy to deal with adults who have perhaps the qualities which we ourselves do not. One cannot think of neutralizing them so that they will not be in the shadow (no. 14).

As a conclusion for this first part, a proposal as a help to consecrated individual persons, it must be remembered that, sometimes, the mission directs itself “to persons preoccupied by their own autonomy, envious of their freedom, fearful of losing their independence” (no. 15). And it is said technically (with beauty and truth) “The consecrated person, with his very existence, shows the possibility of a different way of realizing one’s own life; a way in which God is the goal, His Word the light and His will the guide; a way in which one advances with serenity, knowing that one is sure of being supported by the hands of a welcoming and providential Father; where one is accompanied by brothers and sisters and pushed by the Spirit, who wishes and can satisfy the desires shown by the Father in the hearts of everyone” (ibid.).

The first mission of a consecrated person is therefore “to give witness to the freedom of the sons of God, a freedom modeled on Christ, the free man free to serve God and his brothers.” We should say with our being “that God who has planned the human person from mud” (Gen. 2:7.22) and has woven him in the womb of his mother (Ps. 138,13), can also shape his life modeling it on Christ, a new and perfectly free man (ibid.).



## Second Part: Authority and Obedience in the Fraternal Life (nos. 16-22)

With the commandment of love of God and love of neighbor as Jesus loved us (“in this they will know that you are my disciples” John 13:34-35), “the building of fraternal communities constitutes one of the fundamental commitments of the consecrated life; the members of the community are called to dedicate themselves to this, moved by the same love which the Lord poured into their hearts. Because in effect, fraternal life in community is a constitutive element of religious life and an eloquent sign of the humanizing effects of the presence of the reign of God.” Authority and obedience are “a valid help to live in daily life the commandment of love, especially when there is a question of confronting the problems relative to the relation among the person and community” (no. 16).

God the Father guides us with his Spirit and configures us to His Son in fraternal community. It is among the jobs of superiors to build a fraternal community in Christ in which God is sought and loved above all things in order to fulfill God’s redemptive plan (no. 17). “Exercising authority in the midst of one’s brothers or sisters means serving them, following the example of him who gave his life as a ransom for the many (Mk. 10:45) in order that they might give their lives.” (ibid.)

Only if the superiors themselves “live in obedience to Christ and sincerely observe the Rule can the members of the community understand that their obedience to the superior is not only not contrary to freedom of the children of God but causes it to mature in conformity with Christ, obedient to the Father.”<sup>6</sup>

We live in community, because called by God the Lord himself, we are united equally by the same will to search for God, “notwithstanding differences of race and origin, language and culture.... Contrary to the spirit of discord and division, authority and obedience shine like a sign of the unique Fatherhood which comes from God, of the brotherhood born of the Spirit, of the interior freedom of those who put their trust in God despite the human limitations of those who represent him” (no. 18). The Spirit makes us all available for the Kingdom in the various obligations marked by obedience. This stops the division of the community that can arise from a variety of persons with all their diversity.

Therefore, in the bottom of our relational nature, as human beings, attentive to the value of openness to someone other than

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. *Perfectae caritatis* (n. 14).

oneself, to the fruitfulness of relation with the diversity and enrichment that comes to each from it, we are taken to live a spirituality of community, defined as the “spiritual climate of the Church at the beginning of the third millennium and, therefore... the active and exemplary task of religious life at all levels.”

“Holiness and mission pass through the community because the risen Lord makes himself present in it and through it, making it holy and sanctifying the relationships. Has not Jesus promised to be present where two or three are gathered in his name? (Mt. 18:20) Thus brothers and sisters become sacraments of Jesus and of encounter with God, a concrete possibility of being able to live the commandments of mutual love. In this way the path of holiness becomes a way that all members of community follow together; not just a path for an individual but ever more a community experience in reciprocal welcoming; in the common search for the will of Lord, rich in grace and mercy; in the willingness of each to bear one another’s burdens” (ibid.).

Community holiness is a convincing witness because it accomplishes the gift of unity which the Lord left us. “This becomes particularly evident in international and intercultural communities that demand high levels of welcoming and dialogue.”

The role of authority in the growth of fraternity has to be established in the best possible way in the community rules, indicating what is the role of the superior, of the various councils, of the directors of sectors and of the local community. This should be made concrete especially in the community projects.

Those in authority are asked a very weighty series of services: listening and dialogue, helping in sharing and co-responsibility, stimulating participation in all, equilibrium in attention to persons and to community, discernment and fraternal obedience.

a) Service of listening: For this, to gather the community to say the word, particularly to the young ones, to the most isolated, to those needing attention. To welcome persons unconditionally, with listening full of affection and understanding. Maybe the job which is most difficult, in this case is not the understanding of the superior, but to make these sentiments and this respect be the attitude of each member of the community.

Listening to another as the voice of God “allows one to better coordinate the energy and gifts that the Spirit gives to the community and also, when making decisions, to keep in mind the limits and the difficulties of some members.” Listening is not lost time but “can often prevent crises and difficult times both on the individual and community levels.”

b) Creation of an atmosphere favorable to dialogue, sharing and co-responsibility, creating an environment of trust and recognition of the capacities and sensibilities of individuals. In order that one can share, he has to have sufficient information, sincere and free dialogue and recognition of being accepted and valued in his own identity. There will be difficulties, but childishness, discouragement, rancor, will be overcome with forgiveness, mutual acceptance, openness to others and their concerns.

c) Soliciting the contribution of all for the concerns of all. One has to repeat once again that “he who presides is responsible for the final decision” (*Vita Consecrata*, no. 43; *Fraternal Life in Community*, no. 50c; *Walking from Christ*, no. 14), but we would like to see in this task what Fr. Robert O. Maloney simply said: the last word, more than a distinct decision of what he thinks, feels and likes has to be a word of synthesis, of welcome of the points of view of all: “Therefore is this it? Have I understood what you wish, you my brothers in the community?”

This is normal when the superior animates and values “as much as possible the free contribution of all the brothers and sisters.” One has to motivate everybody so that they can be proud of “their own contribution of charity, competence and creativity.” When we feel welcome, we give a sincere effort of loyal participation. One has to promote “sharing of spiritual goods, sharing of the Word of God, faith” more than the individual forces and the work of each person. “The bond of fraternity is the stronger the most central and vital the thing that is placed in common.”<sup>7</sup>

If the persons do not share easily, one has “to wisely balance the invitation to a dynamic and enterprising communion with the art of patience,” without haste recognizing that only the Lord “can touch and change the heart of persons” (*ibid.*).

d) The service to the individual and to the community. While respecting the freedom and the different gifts of each member, it belongs to the superior to distribute the various jobs to the members of the community. The necessary balance, more than to please and to be agreeable to everybody and to actualize the common mission, can be found in this: that it is not for the superior alone to answer for the mission, as if the fidelity to what God asks of us depends on him, but, rather that he stimulates the community to answer collectively to the

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<sup>7</sup> *La vida fraternal en comunidad* (n. 32).

Lord. It depends then on every one to receive in faith what is being asked of us, contributing with all our gifts, with loyalty and personal effort and affection to the brothers.

e) Community discernment. This is necessary to know what the Spirit is telling the community (Ap. 2:7), in the more important decisions: “The spirit of discernment ought to characterize every decision-making process that involves the community” preceded by a time of prayer and personal reflection, and accompanied by a series of important actuations:

- The determination to seek nothing other than the divine will which is manifested in the Scriptures and in the history of the Institute, with a logic which is often “upside-down” in relation to human logic.
- Openness to recognize in each brother or sister the ability to discover the truth even if partial, and “to welcome his or her opinions as mediation for discovering together the will of God”;
- “Attention to the signs of the times, to the expectations of the people, to the needs of the poor, to the pressing needs of evangelization, to the priorities of the Universal Church” and the particular churches and to the indications of Chapters and major superiors;
- “Freedom from prejudices, from excessive attachment to one’s own ideas, from perceptual frameworks which are rigid and distorted”;
- Courage to ground firmly one’s own ideas while also opening oneself to new perspectives and to changing one’s own point of view;
- Firm proposal to maintain unity in any case, whatever the final decision might be. The authority “cannot ignore that the community is a privileged place to recognize and welcome the will of God” (ibid.).

f) Discernment, authority and obedience. Persons in authority will be patient during discernment, which they will seek to guarantee in its phases and support in its most critical steps and to be firm in requesting the implementation of whatever is decided. He or she should not abdicate his responsibilities to preserve peace for fear of wounding sensibilities, to avoid situations in which it is necessary to make clear and, at times, unpleasant decisions.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Vita consecrate* (n. 43).

“After the time of discernment there is the time for obedience, which is the implementation of the decision. Both are times in which it is necessary to live in the spirit of obedience” (no. 20).

g) Fraternal Obedience. Here the idea is to live a true brotherhood, based on the recognition of the dignity of the brother or sister; it is accomplished with attention to the other and his needs, as well as in the capacity to be happy for his gifts and successes, in putting at his disposal one’s own time to listen and to let oneself be enlightened. But all this requires that all be free internally. “Those persons are certainly not free who are convinced that their ideas and their solutions are always the best; who suppose they can decide by themselves without any mediation in knowing the divine will; who think of themselves as always right and do not have any doubts that it is the others who have to change” (ibid.). “Rather, free are those persons who live constantly attentive and reach out to take advice in every situation in life, and above all from every person who lives next to them, a mediation of the will of the Lord, however mysterious” (ibid.).

To make oneself noted or affirmed, to have oneself served or to enslave are means of putting authority outside the evangelical model. Obedience is made less burdensome when “authority places itself at the humble and diligent service of brotherhood and the mission,” representing the attitudes and values of the Good Shepherd.

“The effort to form fraternal communities is not only a preparation for the mission but forms an integrating part of it, from the time that fraternal communion as such is already an apostolate.<sup>9</sup> To be in mission as communities that daily seek to build community means affirming that by following the Lord Jesus, it is possible to realize human life together in a new and humanizing way” (no. 22).

As the whole second part wishes to be a help to communities, one has to distinguish always the societies of apostolic life, in which the purpose of the congregation is not the sanctification of the members, but the apostolate, the witness, the service to others, distinguishing them from either contemplative or active congregations which look for the sanctification of its members. Our Congregation, for example, defines very well in article I of the Constitutions, that we work hard to clothe ourselves with the spirit of Jesus Christ, to reach the perfection corresponding to our vocation. We will not say, as in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, to search for our own perfection.

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<sup>9</sup> *La vida fraternal en comunidad* (n. 54).

### **Third Part: In Mission (nos. 23-31)**

“The Lord Jesus makes us understand with his own form of life that mission and obedience cannot be separated.” Jesus came as sent by the Father to do his will (cf. Jn. 5:36-38; 6:38-40; 7:16-18). We collaborate in the same mission of Christ, we make “ourselves the place of his presence and, therefore, the continuation of his life in history, to afford others the possibility of meeting him.” To be sent with Christ and as He “supposes reference to the one who sends or to the content of the mission to be developed” (no. 23).

In the mission, there are “difficulties that can be confronted only with the strength that comes from the Lord, in the humble and strong awareness of being sent by him and, because of this, being also able to count on his help” (no. 24). By obedience, we have the certainty of serving the Lord and this certitude is the source of unconditional commitment, tenacious faithfulness, interior serenity, disinterested service and dedication of our best energies (ibid.). We do not pursue our self-affirmation, we leave ourselves to be lead by the desire to do the adorable will of God (ibid.).

Authority has an “important role in relation to the mission, within the fidelity to the congregation’s own charism.” One has to balance the performance of jobs and the care of persons who work in the mission. The authority animates the community and coordinates “the various competencies relative to the mission, always respecting the roles and in agreement with the internal norms of the Institute.... Authority cannot (nor should it) do all, but yes it is ultimately responsible for everything” (no. 25).

Some important jobs in the service of the superior:

a) Persons in authority encourage the taking up of responsibilities and respect them when taken up. They help to conquer fear for the responsibilities, transmit strength and courage to the co-workers, so that they will conquer fear and the tendency to inhibit themselves. In the coordination, it is important to share information and responsibilities within the just autonomy of the sectors “which allows each one to work and collaborate, to substitute as well as to be substituted for, to take active part and to make one’s own contribution even from behind the scene” (ibid.).

b) Persons in authority invite us to confront diversity in the spirit of communion. in the course of the structural transformation which happens within the activities and the mission, with the tensions created at the womb of the communities, because of distinct types of cultural and spiritual formation, the diverse readings of the signs of

the times (and of the Kingdom) for different projects, not always amenable for the diversity of persons, of their origins, of their age. Then the witness of communion and service, of love among the different ethnicities and cultures imposes itself.

Attention to these theoretical-practical principles:

- diversity of ideas should not become conflict of persons;
- plurality of perspectives fosters a deepening of the question;
- for communication among all members, the free exchange of ideas makes the position clear and causes the positive contribution of each one to emerge;
- “to help free oneself of egocentrism and ethnocentrism, which tend to place the causes of trouble onto others, in order to reach a mutual understanding”;
- “the ideal is not that of having a community without conflicts but instead a community that is willing to confront its own tensions in order to resolve them positively, looking for solutions that do not ignore some of the values that must be taken into account” (ibid.).

c) He maintains the balance among the various dimensions of the consecrated life. Persons in authority must assure that unity of life “be preserved and that the greatest attention is paid to the balance between time dedicated to prayer and time dedicated to work, between individual and community, between commitments and rest, between attention to common life and attention to the world and the Church, between personal formation and community formation.”<sup>10</sup>

The balance “between community and mission, between life *ad intra* and life *ad extra* is delicate and difficult. One has to maintain “at the same time, a spirit of fraternity in the apostolic community and an apostolic sensibility in the fraternal life.” Even acting alone a person “can perform an activity... because someone of the community has given time, or has given him advice, or conveyed a certain spirit; frequently others remain in community possibly to support certain jobs of the house, or they asked for it or they sustain it with their own fidelity” (ibid.).

“The apostle should be proudly grateful” and “remain firmly united to his community in all that he does; he may not appropriate to himself the work of the community and he must be careful at all cost to walk together, waiting for, if it is necessary, those who advance more slowly, valuing the contribution of every one, sharing

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<sup>10</sup> *La vida fraternal en comunidad* (n. 50).

as much as possible the joys and troubles, intuitions and uncertainties, the manner which all feel as their own the apostolate of the community, without envy and jealousy. The apostle can be sure that, the more he gives to the community, will never be equal to what he received or is receiving from the community” (ibid.).

d) Persons in authority have a merciful heart. They develop a pedagogy of forgiveness and mercy, they are ministers of love of God who welcomes, corrects and always gives ample opportunity to the brother who sins. “May persons in authority spare no efforts so that the whole community may learn this merciful style.”

e) Persons in authority have a sense of justice. “Among the members of some fraternal communities, there can be behaviours that seriously harm their neighbor and that imply a responsibility vis-a-vis people outside the community and also within the institution to which they themselves belong... Understanding for the confrere cannot exclude justice, especially in the face of vulnerable persons and victims of abuse” (ibid.).

f) Persons in authority promote collaboration with the laity. If the laity help us to “discover unexpected and rich insights of some aspects of the charism,” bringing in elements of its secularity and of specific service, so that the collaboration become effective and vivid, “it is necessary to have religious communities with a clear charismatic identity, assimilated and lived, capable of transmitting it to others and disposed to share it; religious communities with an intense spirituality and missionary enthusiasm for communicating the same spirit and the same evangelizing thrust; religious communities who know how to animate and encourage lay people to share the charism of their institute according to their different style of life, inviting them to discover new ways of making the same charism and mission operative.”<sup>11</sup>

“Moreover it is necessary that there be a well-defined description of competencies and responsibilities of the laity as much as of the religious, as well as of the intermediate entities (administrative councils and the like)” (no. 25).

But one has to seriously think of this: there is a terrible lessening of the priestly and religious vocations, and this is a sign of the times, and, at the same time, there is an unimaginable participation of lay persons in all fields, as volunteers who wish to help drug addicts, the unemployed, the abandoned aged, the street children, to read to the

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<sup>11</sup> *La vida fraternal en comunidad* (n. 70).



blind, to listen to the women prisoners who need to drown their loneliness and suffering, etc. And this is the sign of the Kingdom which God is sending to His Church, so that she may abandon clericalism, centralism and paternalism, accept the presence, collaboration and leadership of laymen and promote with them the Kingdom of God in the world.

The difficult obedience mentioned in no. 26 that can be the result of “points of view or means of apostolic or diaconal action, can be perceived and thought of in different ways.” On these occasions one can also wonder “Is it worth continuing?” “Love and communion represent supreme values to which even the exercise of authority and obedience are subordinated” (ibid.).

Yes, it is good to have ideas and to fight for them, always in “open and constructive dialogue,” and one should not forget that the model is always Jesus Christ, who in His Passion asked God the Father that His will done, without pulling back from the death on the cross (Heb. 5:7-9). The strong shouts and tears are “right moments to entrust oneself to the Father in order that His will be done and thus to be able to participate actively, with all one’s being in the mission of Christ for the life of the world” (Jn. 6:51).

In the blessing of the Lord which accompanies this difficult obedience, “the obedient consecrated person knows that he will recover all that he left behind with the sacrifice of detachment; in this blessing is also hidden the full realization of his very humanity” (Jn. 12:25) (ibid.).

Concerning the objection of conscience mentioned in no. 27. “If it is true that conscience is the innermost sound which resonates the voice of God which indicates to us how we should behave, it is no less important to learn to listen to that voice with great attention in order to know it, to recognize it and to distinguish it from other voices. In effect, one should not confuse that voice with others which arise from subjectivism, which ignores or disregards the sources and criteria that cannot be given up and are mandatory in the formation of judgments of conscience.” “The freedom of conscience is never a freedom with respect to the truth, but always and only ‘in’ the truth.”<sup>12</sup>

Consequently, one has to reflect with calmness and to pray in order to recognize where the will of the Lord is manifested, if it is received in a command, or if it is received interiorly from God. We have bound ourselves by vow to capture the will of God through human mediations. It could be that there may be terrible suffering in

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<sup>12</sup> JON PAUL II, Encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* (August 6, 1993), no. 64.

those moments, as in the example of Christ, who “learned through suffering what obedience means” (Heb. 5:8) (no. 27).

Difficult authority is the other face of obedience, when a superior falls into discouragement, disenchantment, feelings of uselessness in what he does and says. He is not a “doer of routine” resigned to mediocrity, inhibited from all intervention, without spirit to assign goals to the brothers and cannot allow his initial love, the desire to witness, to it be lost (n. 28).

But authority is an act of love to the Lord: “Simon, Son of John do you love me?” (Jn. 21:16). The silent interior struggle that accompanies fidelity to one’s own task marked at times with solitude and misunderstanding of those to whom one gives oneself, becomes the way of personal sanctification and a means of salvation for persons for whom one is suffering (ibid.).

## Conclusion

“With an act of obedience, even unconsciously, we have come to life, welcoming that good Will which has preferred us to non-existence. We conclude our journey with another act of obedience, which we would like to be the most conscious and most free possible, but which is above all the expression of abandonment to that good Father who will definitely call us to Himself, in His Kingdom of infinite light, where our search will end and our eyes will see, in a Sunday without end. Then we will be fully obedient and we will be realized totally because we will say always ‘Yes’ to that Love who has made us exist to be happy with Him and in Him” (no. 29).

All this is summarized in the prayer for persons in authority: Teach me, Your servant, therefore, Lord, teach me, I pray You, by Your Holy Spirit, how to devote myself to them and how to spend myself on their behalf. Taught by Your Spirit, may I learn to comfort the sorrowful, to strengthen the weak, to be weak with those who are weak, to be indignant with those who suffer scandal, to become all things to all in order to save all. Place true, just and pleasing words in my mouth, so that they all may be built up in faith and hope and love, in chastity and lowliness, in patience and obedience, in spiritual fervour and submissiveness of mind.

### Prayer to Mary:

“You did not wait passively for the action of Your Son but You anticipated it, making Him aware of the need and with discreet authority taking the initiative to send the servants to Him.

At the foot of the cross, obedience made You the Mother of the Church and of believers while in the Upper Room every disciple recognized in You the gentle authority of love and service.

Help us to understand that every true authority in the Church and in consecrated life has its foundation in being docile to the will of God and help each one of us become in fact, authority for others with our own life lived in obedience to God" (no. 31).

Rio de Janeiro, 28 March 2009

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