

Obedience and Authority in the Congregation of the Mission Yesterday and Today

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This work is not a historical or sociological study about how one lived obedience and authority in the time of our founder and how one lives them today. One cannot help mentioning facts and dates of this kind, but they are used only as illustrations. The purpose of this study is simply to analyze the norms referring to obedience and authority that held as their normal objective the practice of both virtues in the time of St. Vincent, and then to analyze the norms that regulate them today.

We begin with a comparative examination of two texts from the Common Rules (RC) and the Constitutions (C) concerning one theme that refers to an aspect of the relationship between obedience and authority: up to what point can one who is under the authority of a superior maintain his opinion or point of view when it differs from those of the superior? These are the formulations of this problem in the Common Rules and in the Constitutions

RC V 2

We will submit our way of thinking and our will with a type of blind obedience....

We must have confidence in the will of our superiors as if it were a file in the hands of a craftsman.

C 37 # 2

The decisions of superiors are submitted to the light of faith, since the more we esteem them than our own opinion the better it is.

In both texts one maintains the obligation of obeying, of “submitting one’s will.” However, in the text of the Common Rules one is obliged to submit to the superior not only the will, but also one’s own thoughts (*proprium iudicium*), and, at that, with a “form

of blind obedience” (*caeca quadam obedientia*). In strong contrast, in the Constitutions one is no longer asked to submit one’s own judgment (*sententiam propriam*); and, moreover, while it avoids every image that could suggest something non-rational in obedience (blind obedience, the file), it appeals explicitly to the motive of faith to justify obedience in the Congregation of the Mission. There is no doubt that the texts of the Constitutions presuppose not only an “aggiornamento” that takes into account the psychology of modern man (as the document of the Council “*Perfectae Caritatis*,” 3 [see note 5 just below it] explicitly asks), but also that it offers a theological foundation for obedience that does not appear at all in the text of the Common Rules which is cited.

We propose a few ideas which will give direction to the content of this study:

- There has been a profound change of perspective and of formulation between the normative texts from the time of the founder and the actual texts concerning the way of regulating the practice of obedience and authority in the Congregation of the Mission;
- However, if one wishes to know the true mind of the founder in relationship to the practice of obedience and the use of authority, it is necessary to be aware of other sources of information that also come from the founder himself, other than the Common Rules;
- A good part of the ideas that appear in the Common Rules, but that are no longer held to either in theory or in practice, have their origin in the Rules of other older communities by which Vincent was inspired, or which he simply copied;
- In spite of the undeniable importance of the changes that had also included basic aspects, there is certainly continuity between what St. Vincent held about obedience and authority and what the Constitutions offer us. “Certainly” we say, this is what the the different postconciliar assemblies attempted to do: assure continuity of spirit between St. Vincent and the Congregation of today, in spite of, or, perhaps, through, the changes inspired by the norm of the conciliar document cited above: to formulate the new Constitutions while remembering the “signs of the times” of today without ceasing to be faithful to the spirit of the founder (*Perfectae Caritatis*, 2,3).

Obedience and Authority in the Common Rules

In the Common Rules are named the persons who have authority in the Congregation of the Mission: the Superior General (V 2), the visitor, the local superior, the subordinate officials (V 3, 9); but in all the texts of the Common Rules there is not one single idea about how to exercise authority. One would perhaps make exception for the norm that indicates that one is not obliged to obey superiors if they were to order something dangerous (V 2). There are other limitations to the authority of superiors that are not explicitly mentioned in the Common Rules, but that superiors certainly had to keep in mind: applicable laws of the Church, legitimate civil laws, as well as other norms in force in the Congregation of the Mission relative to the office of superiors.¹

However, within these limitations, the authority of the superior in the Congregation appears in the Common Rules as a practically absolute authority. Absolute here means: the authority of the superior has no control through consultation, collaboration, or participation on the part of those who are not superiors over its exercise (remember that we are speaking here of the text of the Common Rules, not of anything else. It is well known that, even though it is not mentioned in the text, the Superior General had his consultants who in some way contributed to the governance of the Congregation. The general assemblies also had a contribution, of which there were two during the life of St. Vincent. However these are not mentioned in the text of the Common Rules, nor in the rules for the local superior). The only intervention permitted to non-superiors as a contribution to this authority is the suggestion which one might have to make (if they have something to propose) in the weekly community meeting, a meeting whose purpose is so that everyone be informed about what the superior wishes to arrange for the order of the house (V 5).

¹ At least from 1655 there existed some norms or rules for the respective offices of superior general, visitor, local superiors and his "officials," as Fr. Angelo Coppo, C.M., showed in his study "The First Draft of the Rules and Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission from an Unedited Manuscript" (*Annali della Missione*, 3-4, 1957; cf. *Vincentiana*, 6/7, 1957, pp. 62 and 73-74; 3, 1972, pp. 115 ss.). This is a study of a manuscript known as the "Code of Sarzana" which can be found today in the archives of the General Curia of the Congregation of the Mission in Rome. Nobody seems to know up to what point those rules of "offices" were known through the years by those who held the offices which are spoken of in them. In fact, Fr. Coppo ventures to affirm that among the texts that are found in this Code, with the exception of the Common Rules, "nothing other than the text had been considered."

Outside of this small occasional contribution to good government (a contribution that, on the other hand, it is not said that the Superior must accept), the Common Rules do not mention any more than numerous topics that the subject must obey or rely on the Superior's permission. Here is an incomplete list of these topics:

Order of daily life

- eating outside of the set time (V 12)
- entering the room of another (V 13)
- talking with the novices (VIII 5)
- writing and receiving letters (V 11, IX 7)
- seeing the doctor and taking medicines (VI 14)
- letting externs into the house (V 14, IX 5-6)

Distribution of work

- dependence on the orders of the superior (II 10)
- to help any member of the community (V 8-10)
- in the spiritual direction of other persons (IX 2)
- in missions (XI 3)
- in hearing confessions (XI 4)
- in other pastoral works (XI 8)
- in consultations in cases of conscience (XI 9)
- in the work with the Daughters of Charity (XI 11)

Material goods

- various norms concerning their distribution and management (III 3-6, 9)

Themes of conscience and of the spiritual life

- problems of conscience and temptations (II 16-17, VIII 8, X 11)
- concerning dangers against chastity (IC 4)
- concerning help for the discouraged (XII 4)
- to help against vanity and ambition (XII 4, 9)
- penitential practice (X 13, XII 14)
- mortifications (X 15)
- adding acts of piety to those foreseen in the Rules (X 21)
- selecting books for spiritual reading (X 8)

As one can understand by a simple glance, there is hardly an aspect of the life of the other members of the community that is not under the control of the authority of the superior, except that at

times the other members can tell him how he should use his authority. So that the superior who knows well the Common Rules (given that if he has immersed himself habitually in the history of the Congregation of the Mission, precisely to obey what is foreseen in the same Common Rules, which lay down the rule that they should be read in their entirety every two months XII 14) but at times is unfamiliar with the other teachings of the founder (given that until relatively recent times one has given scant attention to the letters and conferences of St. Vincent), could find himself tempted to use his authority in a discretionary, arbitrary way, including at times approaching despotism, whenever he avoids violating in an uproarious manner the limits imposed by civil, divine, or ecclesiastical law. In effect, in the Common Rules there is not one word about how the superior should use his authority not only in conformity with the radical evangelical teachings about the use of authority among the disciples of Christ, but also not even as St. Vincent wished, a façade that we know from sources different from the Common Rules, which shall be cited below.

If the word “despotism” hurts a reader because he has a more delicate sensibility, or because he never had the experience of suffering it in his community life, or that others had suffered because of it, we would refer him to known cases of despotism that were not small from past history, and not so past history in the Congregation of the Mission. As an example, look at no less a person than a superior general, P. Bonet, who had no scruple in calling despotic the actions of some superiors, and that in 1719, scarcely 60 years from the death of the founder; “Some superiors dispose of material goods as they wish, without consulting the procurator or the other officials of the house (NB this participation, which means ‘taking into account,’ and ‘consulting,’ is not foreseen in the Common Rules). They believe themselves to be in charge of the goods of the community, and think that they can dispose of them in a despotic manner” (Collection of Circular Letters of the Superiors General of the Congregation of the Mission, Paris, 1877, Typ. Chamerot, p. 319).

One must admit without any difficulty that in the theme about which we are speaking the content of the Common Rules seems very scant for the genuine style in which St. Vincent wrote them and gave them to the Congregation. This poses the problem of how to explain such a strange incongruence in a man who had nothing incongruent in his speaking or in his working.

We will hazard an explanation: on the theme of which we speak, Vincent de Paul is not original, and he does not show forth his true personality (even though he does so in many other themes in the Common Rules, and above all in chapter II), but he also simply lets

himself be influenced by the style of the Rules of other Orders and Congregations before him. P. Coste signals many dependencies, including a literal copying, of norms taken from the Society of Jesus.² As a result, there are many norms found as well in the Constitutions of St. Ignatius of Loyola that are in the Common Rules. However, one must also note that St. Vincent was inspired by the rules of many older orders,³ to the point that one will never know if St. Vincent did his borrowing from the Society of Jesus, or from other older Rules which St. Vincent undoubtedly was aware of and consulted.

So that the reader may form an idea of up to what point some Rules were copied from others during the centuries, we place a list, without comment, of some norms that already appear in the Rule of St. Pachomius, from the fourth century. Many of these rules are found in numerous Rules written after him, including those of St. Ignatius of Loyola, and the Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission as well: leave the house always accompanied by another and with permission (IX 11); do not accept anything from anyone without permission (III 3, 5); do not keep anything in your room without permission of the abbot (II 4); do not lock the door of your own room with a key (III 8); do not leave your room without being decently dressed (VII 6); do not enter into the cell of another monk without permission (V 13, 14); do not eat outside of the hours for meals without permission (V 12); do not invite anyone from outside the monastery to eat (IX 6); when on journeys, stay in a related monastery (IX 16); do not take anything from one monastery to another.⁴

Obedience and Authority in the Teaching and the Practice of St. Vincent

As one can anticipate from what is above, it is rather easy to note styles different from one another, not small discrepancies and even contradictions, between the way of exercising authority and the

² *El Señor Vicente. El grand santo del grand siglo*, CEME, Salamanca, 1990, tomo II, p. 10 [*Le grand saint du grand siecle*, Paris, 1932, tome II p. 13].

³ *Monumenta historica Societatis Jesu*, vol 64, series tertia, tomus secundus, pp. CCV ss.

⁴ The Rule of St. Pachomius is the first known rule of the cenobitic life. It had great influence on the ancient rules of the East, like that of St. Basil, and in the West, where it was known through the Latin translation done by St. Jerome. Its influence is readily seen in the writings of Cassian and of the rule of St. Benedict, and, through it, it influenced many later rules. You can easily find the rule of St. Pachomius on the internet in Latin or in Castilian (and in other languages as well) with the aid of a good search engine.

practice of obedience as they appear in the text of the Common Rules, and the way to dispose of the personal practice and the numerous ideas of the founder as they appear in letters and conferences.

In the teaching of St. Vincent, the legitimacy of the use of authority in the Congregation is based in the traditional idea, which comes from St. Paul, that authority has its origin in God, and demands immediate obedience. "When the superior says 'I order,' because he has authority from God, one cannot circumvent his order without circumventing God and that which He asks of us" (XI 119, 241) [XI 199-200, 349].⁵ Only legitimate superiors have authority in the community, and for that reason "a superior must always reserve to himself the freedom to celebrate, to preach, and to accomplish all public acts, and to send to do them whoever it seems opportune to send" (IV 186-187; VI 513) [IV 189-190; VI 560]. And also: "It is not up to the community to elect the procurator... or the other officials, but it is up to the superior general or the visitor to name them" (VII 406) [VII 475].

This is the traditional vision, a vision rather pyramidal according to which authority descends from a high point in which one meets God, to an increasing number of persons closer to the base (superior general, visitors, local superiors). But the members of the Congregation who find themselves at the base of the pyramid have no form of participation in the exercise of authority, except the passive participation to obey. This vision of authority certainly forms with sufficient solidity the very drastic vision of authority that appears in the Common Rules. While the superior acts within the limits of the law of God, of the Church, and of just civil laws, his concrete decisions cannot be appealed, just as the will of God cannot be appealed.

By no means is this a false vision of the origin of authority in the Church and in the Congregation, but it is certainly incomplete, and easily exposed to uses and abuses that are more or less authoritarian. One could always justify the mandate, even when one gives an order arbitrarily, as founded in the last instance in the will of God Himself. What is missing to this vision so that it be complete is to remember that, besides the witness of St. Paul, there is an earlier and more important witness from Jesus Christ Himself, for whom the one who has authority is above all the servant of his brothers, and for this reason he cannot treat them as subjects or inferiors. St. Vincent writes to a confrere recently named superior to encourage him to accept the office: "I ask you, in the name of Jesus Christ, that you

⁵ References in parenthesis () are from Coste; those in brackets [] are from the Spanish version SVP.ES (note of the Editor).

serve the community in his place" (II 252) [II 299]. And in another letter to another superior: "Those who run the houses of the Company should not look upon the others as inferiors, but as brothers" (IV 53) [IV 51].

There are cases in which St. Vincent writes or says things directly, that are contrary to the norms that he himself had given in the Common Rules. In VIII 3, the Rules had made provision for an elaborate ritual of gestures of respect and deference to superiors by those who are not superiors. But he writes in 1656, one year after the rules had been edited and printed: In some places and on some occasions, it is permitted each one look at his rank in the priesthood, according to age, to learning, of jobs, etc., but among us this is not observed (V 777) [V 609]. In another letter in the same year: "Let him live with his brothers cordially and simply, in such a way that when they are seen together no one can know who is the superior" (VI 68) [VI 66].

One can mention as well other aspects in which the explicit teaching of St. Vincent offers, if not a straightforward contradiction, a vision of the exercise of authority of which not even a whisker appears in the Common Rules. As indicated above, there is no mention in the Common Rules of the possible collaboration of those who are not superiors in the governing of the Congregation, and it says as well that they are held to obey "with a kind of blind obedience." In strong contrast, look at what Saint Vincent writes: "It is so far from the truth that it is bad to seek counsel, that, to the contrary one must do so when a task of considerable weight is involved, or when we cannot decide on our own.... In our internal life we consult consultors and other persons of the Company when it seems necessary. I ask many times even the coadjutor brothers in the things that concern the offices they hold. When this is done with the necessary precautions, the authority of God, which resides in the superiors and in those who represent them, suffers no impairment. Rather, the good order that follows this way of dealing makes that authority more worthy of love and respect (IV 39, cf. also III 167, 421, V 53) [IV 35; cf. III 185, 462; V 53].

In spite of the quasi-sacred vision implicit in the Common Rules about authority, a vision that seems to be inevitable only if it is thought about as coming from God, Vincent had an extremely critical opinion about the human aptitude to exercise authority and was even a pessimist. If those who have authority "were impeccable and infallible they would not need it [to have counselors]. But since they are capable of sinning and of committing mistakes, it is not just that they do not have persons from whom to ask advice" (II 528; cf. II 343; VII 505-506) [II 618; cf. II 410; VII 595-596].

Vincent de Paul does not think in any way that the desire to have authority, basing oneself on the idea that it is a gift from God, could be good. Those who want authority “want the devil in their body” (XI 59) [XI 138], or they have “an evil and diabolical spirit” (XI 61) [XI 141]. Nor is it any guarantee the fact that, since authority comes from God, he who receives it enjoys certain advantages for his sanctification and salvation. Vincent says: “I tried for a long time, and I see that for the greater part this happens, that this state of being superior and in government is so evil that it leaves by itself and by its nature (NB note how crude this expression is if we remember that authority comes from God), a malignancy, a villainous and cursed stain. Yes, my brothers, a malignancy that infects the soul and all the faculties of man... unless he is one of those men who is consumed by God. However, believe me, brothers, of these there are very few” (XI 60) [XI 139].

Summing up what has been said in these last lines: if one wishes to know how in practice the exercise of obedience and authority relate to one another according to the mind of St. Vincent, it is good to be well familiar with the Rules that St. Vincent left for his Congregation. It is good, but it is not sufficient. One has to be familiar with many other ideas concerning this theme that St. Vincent shared throughout his life in his letters and conferences to the confreres. If you do not have this second source, trying to govern with only the text of the Common Rules in hand can lead, with a certain facility, to trying to govern with arbitrary ways, not very reasonable, and in an almost despotic manner, everything that makes up the Congregation, the provinces, and the local communities.

Obedience and Authority in the Constitutions

30 years before the Constitutions of 1984 other Constitutions were written to respond to the mandate of the Church to update the old Constitutions to the prescriptions of the Code of Canon law of 1917. In these Constitutions of 1954 there is nothing new concerning the theme we are developing, nor was there any intent to revise them according to the “signs of the times,” but only a simple literal copy of various texts from the Common Rules, including the idea of submitting one’s own judgment to that of the superior, and the harsh expressions of “blind obedience” and the “file” (n. 183). As opposed to the Common Rules in these Constitutions are mentioned all the different types of assemblies and of advice in all the levels of authority.

This edition of the Constitutions had a short life, a little more than 10 years. It could not stand up to the real avalanche of new ideas and

of the change of sensibility that came along with the Second Vatican Council, and its mandate to revise the Constitutions and the Rules of all the orders and congregations to adapt them to the conciliar teachings. The Congregation of the Mission accomplished this revision in three successive general assemblies, the first which took place right after the close of the Council, and the last in 1980. This last assembly drew up the Constitutions that were approved by pontifical authority in 1984. We now pass to look at what the new Constitutions say about the relationship between obedience and authority in the community life of the Congregation of the Mission.

The Constitutions establish in n. 96 a type of “democratic” principle concerning the subject of authority in the Congregation of the Mission. Now not only do the superiors expressly nominated monopolize authority, so to say, but rather “all the members of the Congregation... have the right and the obligation... to participate in the government of the same, according to our own law.” In n. 98 there is a concrete application of that principle through the idea of subsidiarity. Having lived it today, that principle and idea would have been without a doubt pleasing to St. Vincent, but it is difficult for us to imagine him writing them down as they are in those two numbers of the Constitutions. The “proper law” of the Congregation of the Mission never included such a “democratic” principle, nor the idea of subsidiarity from the time of its foundation until 1984. However, neither that principle nor that idea are very distant from many of the things that Vincent said and did, including the very important theme of government of his community. For example, in setting down the Common Rules, which was without doubt a project “by a team” and delegated to others on many points, all that was there was not exclusively his.

In strong contrast to the Common Rules, the new Constitutions offer ideas about the good use of authority in the Congregation of the Mission. Even though here it also says that “authority comes from God (97, 1),” it adds immediately the evangelical principle that all those who have authority “should keep in mind the example of the Good Shepherd, who came not to be served, but to serve,” and thus “should consider themselves the servants of the community.” There is nothing in these statements that St. Vincent would not have subscribed to, but he did not include them in the Common Rules, nor, as far as we know, in any other official document of the Congregation of the Mission, even though he expressed them more than once in spoken or written word, as we have already seen.

Nor is it said in the Common Rules in a direct and explicit way why authority exists in the Congregation of the Mission. A simple reading of Chapter V, which treats of obedience, leaves the reader

with the painful impression that authority exists in the community above all so that there be order in the life of this community. Thus, it would also have pleased the founder without a doubt what the Constitutions say on this point: the superiors are the servants of the community “to promote the end proper to the community according to the spirit of Vincent”; that is why, by implication, that obedience is owed to the superiors: to promote the end proper to the Congregation.

In n. 97, 2 the principle is maintained that the taking of decisions is always the competence of one person only, and what it excludes is the taking of decisions by vote (except in general assemblies, as well as in the General and provincial councils concerning the matters expressly indicated by the Constitutions). However, one does not wish to have decisions proclaimed like edicts over those whom the decision affects, but rather that there be established “a dialogue with the companions.” As a kind of institutionalization of that dialogue two helps are offered to the local superior: the domestic council (134, 2), and the community project (Statute 16), which has to be worked out by the whole community. This last, which refers to the community project, is something completely new in the history of the Congregation, of which one finds not a hint in the time of St. Vincent. There is more: it would be incompatible with what St. Vincent himself expressly says in the quote that we gave above (IV 186-187 [IV 189-190], about how the local superior is the one who assigns offices and jobs in the community as he sees fit. Would it be senseless to suppose that Vincent de Paul would have also approved today the idea of the community project, nullifying expressly that which he himself wrote in the Common Rules concerning the power of decision of the superior: a power not moderated in the text of the Common Rules by anything or by anyone among the members of his community?

In the theme of obedience there has been a rather profound reformulation which affects not only the manner of practicing it, but also its theological-evangelical foundation, a theme which is more radical in the Constitutions than in the Common Rules. The Common Rules had proposed, as an example for the obedience of the confrere, the example of Christ Himself, not so much to the Father, as to such human beings as their fathers or as legitimate authority (V 1). The Constitutions propose the example of Christ, obedient even to death, in whose imitation every confrere must be disposed to do always the Will of the Father (C 36). This Will is to be sought in community (C 37,1), an idea which also does not appear in the Common Rules.

The Common Rules and the Constitutions coincide, as mentioned above, in the idea that only he who has authority has the power of

decision (except in those cases which have been indicated above). This is not said in the Common Rules; however, something essential is said in the Constitutions: one is to obey the decisions of superiors “in the light of faith,” a precision totally necessary so that the act of obedience not be a mere act of disciplinary acceptance of what authorities have ordered, as could happen in an army, a business, or in a political party. The Common Rules and the Constitutions come together in the “style” or way of obeying with “promptness, joy, and perseverance.” Concerning the important theme of the submission of “one’s own judgment,” we return to what was said above on this theme.

Conclusions

1. The obedience which the Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission propose today is as radical and as exigent as that proposed by the Common Rules. It is actually more exigent, if one compares the phrases used in both to express its radicality: obedience unto death following the example of Christ in the Constitutions; the image of the file and of blind obedience in the Common Rules.

2. The formulation of the way of exercising authority and obedience in the Constitutions is more dense in theological content than in what appears in the Common Rules. According to the Constitutions, all exercise of authority in the Congregation of the Mission must be an act of service in imitation of Christ; all obedience must be the obedience of faith, also in imitation of Jesus Christ in his obedience to his Father. Even if one certainly supposes all these ideas, none of them expressly appear in the Common Rules.

3. Keeping in mind the suggestion of *Perfectae Caritatis*, 3⁶ in the text of the Constitutions the way of ordering and the manner of obeying has been “humanized.” Those who hold authority are asked to dialogue with their companions before taking decisions; those who do not have authority are still asked to obey even though their opinions do not coincide with those who hold authority. However, no longer must they renounce their way of thinking, nor need they think the way those in authority think.

⁶ “The way of working, of praying, and of living, is to be adapted according to the actual physical and psychological conditions of the members.... According to the same criteria, one is to revise the form of government.”

4. Even if the Common Rules speak of the evangelical counsels in their totality (RC II 18), in the paragraphs that speak of obedience neither the Common Rules nor the Constitutions express the relationship that should exist between obedience and mission. It would be greatly desired that the Constitutions express this, if for no other reason than a pedagogical one, so that the confrere, whether superior or not, who rereads or meditates on those paragraphs relative to authority and obedience always remembers that both are ordered to complete the mission proper to the Congregation.

5. A more “modern” or “human,” not to mention a more “evangelical” way of expressing in a constitutional text the relationships between authority and obedience does not guarantee in and of itself that these relationships will be more human or evangelical today than they were in the past. Through the new formulation we try to avoid old abuses of authority and limited forms of obeying, but the problems of a good harmonization between authority and obedience go on today, about as they did in the past. We refer to perennial phenomenon of the small gains made when one obeys, or the eternal temptations to use authority for one’s own enjoyment, or to let oneself be drawn into authoritarian inclinations, or, on the other hand, to fear requiring the obedience needed.

6. An unresolved, thorny problem still standing happens today when the decisions of authority oblige something to be done that goes against the proper nature of the Congregation, or simply when it has nothing to do with it, and obedience is demanded when those who ask for it do so “according to the Constitutions and Statutes” (C 38, 1). This is a thorny problem truly, but we will not enter into it here. As was said at the beginning, this article is limited to a comparative study of what the Common Rules say and what the Constitutions say, concerning the good exercise of authority and obedience, and the relationship between the two.

Bibliographical Note

An abundant bibliography on the theme of this study can be found in the *Diccionario de Espiritualidad Vicenciana*, CEME, Salamanca, 1995, in the article *Authority*, and in the article *Obedience*, both written by P. Miguel Perez Flores. The bibliography is in Latin, Franch, and Castillian. For bibliographies in other languages, you will have to use other sources not accessible to the author of this work.