

New Sensitivity in the Authority/Obedience Relationship Since Vatican II

by Julio Suescun Olcoz, C.M.

CHANGES IN THE AUTHORITY/OBEDIENCE RELATIONSHIP

Vatican Council II reflected on the changes happening throughout our world and concluded that the Church needed to relocate itself in this changing world in order to fulfill its mission in the world. And whatever one thinks on how this Council set into motion ongoing renewal, almost fifty years of implementation have yet to bring about the final result. We need to continue the process of relocation and of ongoing conversion.

As one particular example of this relocation that the Church must attempt, the authority/obedience relationship needs to be read in harmony with those societal changes that affect the person in his/her social relations.

In outline form we could sum up these changes thus:

- Today's person strongly stresses the dimension of **personal freedom**. For men and women today freedom is an irrevocable conquest. Consequently, today obedience can never be proposed or required as negating personal freedom, explicitly or implicitly. Nor can obedience be understood as a sacrifice of personal freedom, but rather as freedom's maturation and perfection.
- Today's person seeks to find his/her own self the roots for his/her personal development. **What do not work** for contemporary men and women are **solutions imposed** for obscure and unknown reasons or as something having nothing to do with their lives. This was not so in other times, when we tried to adapt to the famous principle of *quod supra nos nihil ad nos* (*what is beyond us should not concern us*).

- Today's person instinctively reject any formalism. To them it matters not so much to do things as it does to accomplish what one intends in doing them. "So... why am I doing this?" Here is a question one hears not only from children today, but also from adults.
- Today it is preferable to **fight out one's own opinions** within the group rather than with the superior of the group. People recognize the power existing in the group and, when conforming with it, they feel more secure and protected. The superior will be accepted only when he is on target when directing and animating — not because of his own personal methods but rather from his situation as representative of the whole community, sent by the community and towards which it orients people.
- Today it is strongly felt that **nobody decides for us** or, at least, that there should be an effort to have decisions made with our participation.
- Finally let us point out that in our religious or apostolic settings, it is desirable to have a leader who is more a **brother** or a **friend** than one's superior or boss. What has happened is that relationships with the superior have shifted to relationships of such confidence and familiarity that, until a short time ago, would have been unthinkable.

Exercising authority in the Church cannot disregard these attitudes affecting today's person, attitudes applying to anyone's exercise of authority. On the other hand, neither should it especially difficult to adapt the exercise of authority to these requirements, however much the practice may have been otherwise until recently. Furthermore, I dare say that we have already achieved this on the level of principle. Thus we are able to see this in the documents of the Church and in the Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission. We could say that, in this arena, progress in the Church's relocation and updating begun in the Council has been noteworthy.

In *Fraternal Life in Community* (FLC from here on), published in February, 1994 by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICSAL from here on), there is a new image of authority in service of the building up of community life and its mission, as referenced by its evangelical roots of service; as a spiritual authority that favors and sustains the members' self-surrender to God; as a creative authority of unity in a climate favorable for communication and co-responsibility; as an authority that knows to make final decisions in a process of communal discernment. Here the mission makes authority *necessary not only to*

*build up fraternal life in the community but also for the individual member's own spiritual journey.*¹

And *Vita Consecrata* (VC from here on), John Paul II's Apostolic Exhortation published in 1996, while recognizing the absolute necessity of authority in environments such as ours so influenced by individualism, reminds one of the fraternal and spiritual sense of authority such as found in its purpose to involve everyone in the decision-making process, even if the final word is reserved to the superior and the obligation to respect decisions that have been made remains.²

In May, 2008, CICSAL, with the approval of the Holy Father, published the instruction *The Service of Authority and Obedience* (SAO from here on). It emphasized how in recent years the way to perceive authority and obedience has changed as much in the Church as in civil society. And the instruction proposes authority as a triple service — to the person, to fraternal community and to the mission.³

When reviewing the text of the *Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission* we find the authority/obedience relationship to each other described in a way very different from what we have lived and suffered in times still not so long ago. Only as examples I will recall these principles taken from the *Constitutions*:

- *“To participate in this mystery of the obedient Christ requires us all to seek, as a community, the will of the Father. We do this through mutual sharing of experience, open and responsible dialogue....”*⁴
- *“All members, since they have been called to labor for the continuation of the mission of Christ, have the right and responsibility, according to the norms of our own law, of working together for the good of the apostolic community and of participating in its government....”*⁵
- *“Those in the Congregation who exercise authority, which comes from God, and those who have part in this exercise of authority in any way, even in assemblies and councils, should have before their eyes the example of the Good Shepherd, who came not to be ministered to but to minister. Hence, conscious of their responsibility before God, they shall consider themselves servants of the*

¹ FLC, nn. 47-53.

² VC, n. 43.

³ Cf. SAO, n. 3.

⁴ Const. CM, n. 37 § 1.

⁵ Const. CM, n. 96.

community for furthering its own purpose according to the spirit of St. Vincent in a true communion of apostolate and life.”⁶

- *“All members, in accepting assignments given to them by the community, have the authority necessary to carry them out. For this reason, those matters which can be managed by individual members or lower levels of government should not be referred to higher levels of government. That unity of government which is necessary to achieve the purpose and good of the entire Congregation must, however, be preserved.”⁷*

There is no question that a new concept of authority is enshrined in these fundamental principles and as a consequence a new concept of obedience as well. This concept, consistent with the principles of coresponsibility, subsidiarity, and evangelical service already declared in the Vatican II documents, is fully in agreement with church documents, even those written after the *Constitutions*.

In SAO these changes which have modified the authority/obedience relationship, are attributed to, among other things, keeping in mind the value of the individual, the centrality of spiritual communion and, a distinctive and less individualistic way to think about the mission.⁸ Still, these changes are rooted in other, more profound, changes which happened in our society, such as democratic awareness and new concepts of power.

DEMOCRATIC AWARENESS

Perhaps one thing most characteristic, and one which somehow summarizes the change in how society relates to power, might be the rise of democratic awareness. Already Ozanam, in times when it was rare for Catholics to support democracy, writes: *“The more I know of history the more reasons it gives me to believe that democracy is the natural end of political progress and that God is guiding the world towards democracy.”⁹*

Gonzalez-Carvajal¹⁰ has done a wonderful analysis of the authenticity of this sign of the times as manifesting the closeness of the Reign of God. Here we will review the various ways that

⁶ Const. CM, n. 97 § 1.

⁷ Const. CM, n. 98.

⁸ Cf. SAO, n. 3.

⁹ *Lettres de Frederic Ozanam*, Paris 1873, t. 2, p. 251.

¹⁰ L. GONZÁLEZ DE CARVAJAL, *Los signos de los tiempos*, Sal Terrae, Santander 1987.

authority can be understood and exercised. In the democratic mindset, authority is situated in the same base of society which all its members should be serving. The new mentality does not conceive of authority as something originating in power exercised over society but rather as an institution of service to society.

Authority as Participation

Every social relationship is a power relationship in the form of mutual influence. To the degree one exercises social relations, one exercises power and is subject to power. Authority is one form of living out that social relationship and of exercising power.

Each society needs and possesses some form — more or less definitive — of authority. And, to note something essential, without it no society can operate. The Scholastics used to say that authority was the form/structure of society. But this concept of authority is neither primary nor original, but rather secondary and derived, insituted with regard to the Community. Community does not exist because of authority but it is rather authority which exists for the community.

To point to the community as the originating source of power does not question the divine origin of authority, since the *Constitutions*¹¹ clearly affirm this, at least regarding authority in the Congregation; the community is only the concrete form of origin.

These considerations are valid for every class of society, civil or religious. Even Paul VI, in *Octogesima Adveniens* (1971), stated that our times are characterized by two fundamental aspirations: **equality** and **participation**.¹² And Vatican II, in *Lumen Gentium*, has that social relationship terminology spill over into the Church, placing them first with the people of God and later, in service to them, with the hierarchy.¹³

One will notice the same spillover in one of the constitutional principles of the CM already noted. “*All members, since they have been called to labor for the continuation of the mission of Christ, have the right and responsibility, according to the norms of our own law, of working together for the good of the apostolic community and of participating in its government.*”¹⁴

¹¹ Const. CM, n. 97 § 1.

¹² *Octogesima Adveniens*, n. 24.

¹³ LG ns.

¹⁴ Const. CM, n. 96.

This does not deal just with the right to be named to the office of superior, which itself could have its difficulties, since Article 100 of the Constitutions states that *the superiors should be invested with sacred orders*, but rather that even those who are not superiors also participate in governance. This means that governance is exercised participatively. The conclusion made by the Constitutions is partial and limited. “Consequently,” they state, “members should cooperate actively and responsibly in accepting assignments, undertaking apostolic projects, and carrying out commands.”¹⁵ Participation in governance is not limited to this. It extends as well to the process of discernment, planning, implementation and evaluation, all coming from response to the vocational call, as well as in the administration of goods and in some way in the organization of members. From all this it is necessary that no individual in the Congregation should act on his own accord in any matter that pertains to all.

This is also what SAO points out. Superiors, it says, “[will have concern to] be sharing not only information but also responsibilities, committing themselves to respecting each one in his or her own rightful autonomy.”¹⁶ And it adds that “whoever exercises the service of authority will have to be attentive not to give in to the temptation of personal self-sufficiency, to believe that everything depends on him or her and that it would not be important and useful to foster community participation.”¹⁷

Authority as a place for direction

Understood as a relationship of mutual influence, power exercised in the midst of society needs those instances for unifying and coordinating in order to keep society together while in the midst of individualistic aspirations to power apart from any common objectives, and so that it be capable to unite efforts in bringing together the potential of everyone for the good of all. St. Vincent, speaking to the Daughters of Charity, came up with the example of a ship, its captain, and its sailors or also the organization of the human body:

You have entered, then, into the ship where God guides you by His inspiration. A pilot is needed to keep watch while you are sleeping. Who are those pilots? The superiors. They are in charge

¹⁵ Loc. cit.

¹⁶ SAO, n. 25 a).

¹⁷ Loc. cit.

*of admonishing you about all you need to do in order that you arrive to port, safe and sound....*¹⁸

*So that you understand this, imagine it as you would a body, if the arms and the the feet, which are the principal members for action, not want to be united with the body. There would be nothing more ridiculous, they would leave the body mutilated, and they themselves would begin to putrify; because, apart from the body, they would be good only for burial. The same would happen with a community where obedience is not observed. The superior who would not have the virtue of obedience in its proper and needed form, and the sisters who would not practice it, would be dismembered one from the other.*¹⁹

*As for FLC, "The Christian community is not an anonymous collective, but it is endowed from the beginning with leaders for whom the apostle asks consideration, respect and charity."*²⁰

*And, in VC, we read that "those who exercise authority cannot renounce their obligation as those first responsible for the community, as guides of their brothers and sisters in the spiritual and apostolic life."*²¹

So there is no society without authority. We have already said that the Scholastics spoke of authority as the structure of society. Because of this eminently formal characteristic, the institutionalization of power in authority would be more or less in relationship to the concrete situation of the community: its dimension, its complexity, its problematic tendencies.

The concrete structure of this power would depend on the distinctive characteristics of the community; no hard and fast structure can be set down for every community. But it seems fair to establish the economic principle of institutionalization by means of which a community structures and organizes itself when its own needs call for it and for no other reason.

Also in FLC there is acknowledgement of a diversity of ways to exercise authority, corresponding to distinctive forms of community:

"Every community has a mission of its own to accomplish. Persons in authority thus serve a community which must accomplish a specific mission, received and defined by the institute and by its charism. Since there is a variety of missions,

¹⁸ SV IX, 167.

¹⁹ SV IX, 419.

²⁰ FLC, n. 48.

²¹ VC, n. 43^a.

there must also be a variety of kinds of communities and thus a variety of ways of exercising authority.”²²

And SAO stresses the relevance of each community’s charism, when it is time to exercise authority in service of directing and coordinating the efforts of all for one common mission.²³

The Congregation of the Mission is a missionary community. *“The Vincentian community is, therefore, organized to prepare its apostolic activity and to encourage and help it continually.”²⁴* It must be the mission then, and not other applications of religious life, which determines the level and form of community structure and consequently that of its authority. Furthermore, when the mission is becoming ever more differentiated and specialized today, this merits particular attention, so that not everything has to pass the criteria and competence of the superior.

Obedience in faith is not submission of human wills but rather a replicating of the attitude of the Son who, in order to fulfill the Father’s loving design, *became obedient even unto death.*²⁵ And thus obedience is required not only of subjects but of all confreres in community, subjects and superiors, submitting to the supreme authority of the Word that has been proclaimed to us as expression of the Father’s loving design.

For this reason we should not be questioning so much, or at least alone, the obedience and submission of the confreres to the Superior as much as the service of the superior to the missionary community that desires to obey the Father’s call, in continuation of the mission of the Son sent to evangelize the poor. If the superior were to focus on imposing his authority, on having his will strictly followed, even with a flattering paternalistic style, authority would be perverted with authoritarianism established in its place.

Along the same lines, overcoming the temptation to command requires placing first the law’s object over subjective interpretations by the superior presently on shift. This is not about smothering the spirit with the letter of the law, but rather overcoming one’s own personal preferences and ideosyncrasies. Right on target are our formulas for taking the Vows of the Congregation. They speak of obedience to superiors in accordance with the Constitutions. The same sense is rich in the teaching of St. Vincent. For if the superior

²² FLC, n. 49.

²³ Cf. SAO, n. 25.

²⁴ Const. CM, n. 19.

²⁵ Cf. Const. CM (C. 36).

were to command something that is against the will of God or the Constitutions, one would not need to obey.²⁶

St. Vincent cautioned us about the malign effects of the office of superior and everyone's experience tells us at which point one would be right to not to rely on the human condition when able to command and dominate.

*The deceased lord cardinal de Berulle, great servant of God, used to say that it was better to be underneath, where the situation of little ones is the most secure, and that in the high and elevated places there is some kind of sickness and danger; for this reason the saints have always run from honors and our Lord, so to prove this to us by his example as well as with his word, said concerning himself that he had come to the world to serve, and not to be served.*²⁷

It is the Community's responsibility, by participating in the decision-making process, to assure that the superior does not give into this dangerous sickness about which St. Vincent warned and which every one of us has been able to witness.

Authority as Command

If authority in any society has to be something, and we have already seen that it is part of the very essence of society, one has to recognize the power to administrate, to issue a final order after all the discussion. But this does not mean to say that it has to be the regular way of exercising authority, but rather its extreme case.

Since Vatican II, when this new way of conceiving authority was institutionalized, all church documents still state that the superior has the right to the final word in decision-making.

Also in PC we read: *High level superiors should listen to their brothers and promote collaboration for the good of the insitute and of the Church, while still clearly maintaining their authority to administrate and to order what needs to be done.*²⁸ Note that this deals less with imposing as with promoting collaboration, since all exercise of obedience has to be done in freedom.

In FLC, the final decision is considered as the culminating point of a discernment process which the superior should encourage: *“Community discernment is a rather useful process, even if not easy or automatic, for involving human competence, spiritual wisdom and*

²⁶ Cf. SV IX, 423.

²⁷ SV XI, 51.

²⁸ PC, n. 14.

personal detachment. Where it is practiced with faith and seriousness, it can provide superiors with optimal conditions for making necessary decisions in the best interests of fraternal life and of mission."²⁹

In VC, it is said openly and explicitly: "*While authority must be above all fraternal and spiritual, and while those entrusted with it must know how to involve their brothers and sisters in the decision-making process, it should still be remembered that the final word belongs to authority and consequently that authority has the right to see that decisions taken are respected.*"³⁰

The final word cannot be confused with the only word, even though it could be the last word because no more is allowed to be said. Authority exercised consistently with the new mindset comes to the last word only after a long process of discernment, where everyone's involvement has been promoted, even to achieving consensus if possible. There, if well formulated by the Superior, the actual final word of everyone involved can be stated. If what must happen is the extreme limit, where one appeals to the power to have the last word, so very far from fraternal consensus, this would affect normal relations in a community; authoritarianism would have been established, bossing others around, not obedience.

It would be fitting to remember here St. Vincent's advice to a young missionary recently named superior, Father Antoine Durand:

*Live with the rest of the confreres cordially and simply, in such a way that, to see them together, no one could determine which is the superior. Decide nothing about any matter, no matter how unimportant it seems, without knowing especially the assistant's opinion. As for me, I gather all mine when some difficulty in governance needs to be resolved, whether spiritual or church or temporal matters; when dealing with these, I consult also with those in charge of them; I request even the opinion of the brothers in what has to do with the care of the house and its offices, given the knowledge they have about these things. This is done so that God blesses the decisions made out of common agreement. I beseech you to make use of this way of doing things in order to discharge your office well.*³¹

But the superior also can feel tempted to let everything go, abdicating his responsibility and depriving the community of a service that is due to them. Placed between the temptation of

²⁹ FLC, n. 50.

³⁰ VFC, n. 50.

³¹ SV VI, 71.

authoritarianism and the abdication of his duties, the superior should choose to **work with** the confreres, to call out everyone's gifts and dedicate them to one common Project, impelled by the Spirit, in obedience to the Father.

VC acknowledges that *"in these years of change and experimentation, the need to revise this office has sometimes been felt. But it should be recognized that those who exercise authority cannot renounce their obligation as those first responsible for the community, as guides of their brothers and sisters in the spiritual and apostolic life."*³²

For this reason, SAO notes: *The one who presides is the one responsible for the final decision, but he or she should not come to this by themselves, without respecting as much as possible contributions given freely by all the brothers and sisters. Community is what its members make it; therefore it is essential to initiate and encourage the contribution of every person so that they experience their duty to offer their own contribution of charity, competence and creativity.*³³

AUTHORITY IN THE EVANGELICAL COMMUNITY

In every form of authority, even ecclesiastic, there is, then, a participative power, an obligation to orient and a right to make decisions. The Gospel must be the handbook to which any exercise of power is conformed.

The Attitude of Service, Basic in every Christian Community

In conformity with the New Testament (NT) texts, fraternal relationship in the grass roots is more important than the exercise of authority from the top of the community structure. The NT concentrates its attention on fraternal life, where everyone's situation is stressed as being active subjects and servants, one for all.

In apostolic communities all participate as active subjects, bearers of the breath of the Spirit; all have the right to speak, everyone is equal, no one is superior to the other, there are no bosses but only brothers. We might say that the name that best captures the style of such communities is fraternity, brotherhood. One brotherhood of everyone united in the same faith, baptized in the same baptism, and subject to the one and same Lord, Jesus Christ. The whole

³² VC, n. 43^a.

³³ Cf. SOA, n. 20 e).

community is called to exercise the kind of critical thinking which is called the discernment of spirits: *“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God;³⁴ test everything; hold fast to what is good,”³⁵* and judge as to what is authentic gospel: *“But there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ,”³⁶* and determining the credibility of truthful prophecy; *“Brothers and sisters, do not be children in your thinking.”³⁷* The whole community takes on the duty to take care of the tasks when they become necessary: *“I will send any whom you approve with letters to take your gift to Jerusalem;³⁸* to encouraging everybody: *I urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them”³⁹* and even to taking care of its leaders: *“We appeal to you... to respect those who labor among you, and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you.”⁴⁰* This active and responsible participation of everyone was not just some beautiful theory as the book of the Acts and the First Letter to the Corinthians demonstrated to us in practice. There Paul appeals to the community to discern and to decide about concrete cases which had been found to be particularly difficult for them.

Furthermore, the NT emphasizes that Christians should make themselves servants one to the other. *“Through love become slaves to one another”⁴¹* writes Paul to the Galatians and *“be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ”⁴²* he admonishes the Ephesians. Mutual service is set up as the norm for relationships among the brothers and sisters.

In the Letter to the Philipians,⁴³ fraternal relationship is deduced from the reproduction in each one of the same sentiments of Christ who, being God, made himself one of us and obedient up to death. The obedience of Christ is practiced in the life of service, since the *“Son of Man came to serve.”⁴⁴* And Jesus is most certainly the Servant. Following Christ the humbled servant, brings the Christian to face a life where nothing is done out of rivalry, egoism or self-conceit,

³⁴ 1 Jn. 4:1.

³⁵ 1 Tess. 5:21.

³⁶ Gal. 1:8 ff.

³⁷ 1 Cor. 14:20.

³⁸ 1 Cor. 16:3.

³⁹ 1 Tess. 5:14.

⁴⁰ 1 Tess. 5:12-13.

⁴¹ Gal. 5:13.

⁴² Ef. 5:21.

⁴³ Phil. 2:1-11.

⁴⁴ Mc. 10:45.

but rather from a perspective that considers others as superior and that has each person looking out not just for his/her own interests but rather in the interest of all the rest.⁴⁵ This is what allows the Christian to resolve the apparent paradox to being free while living as slave of others, because instead of giving free reign to his instincts, he subjects his needs to the law of the Spirit of Christ who consummates his mission in giving up his life for others. The Letter to the Galatians resolves the fulfillment of Christian liberty in this way: *“For you have been called to freedom... only do not use your freedom as a opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.”*⁴⁶ For the Christian to serve is to reign, to live in freedom, to truly become a Christian, to triumph. The Lord’s example, dramatized so well in the washing of the feet, is without doubt an invitation to everyone. *“... I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.”*⁴⁷

In Christian Communities, the superior must be the servant of servants

New Testament texts which make reference to service certainly are recommended to all Christians. Mk. 10:41-15 speaks of *whoever wants to become great* and of *whoever wishes to be first among you*, proposing to them that he be a servant and a slave. The same is found in Mt. 20:26-27. The desire to be great and to be first is universal and so the teaching is valid for everyone. Luke has amplified the text making it directly applicable to the leaders of the community: *the greatest among you must be like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves.*⁴⁸ So, if all Christians must be servants of the brothers and sisters, then those leading the community must excel at it.

In Service of the Word

SAO makes a fine presentation of the consecrated community as a listening community. Above all in reference to listening to God who, having spoken in different ways at other times, in this final epoch has spoken to us in his Son.⁴⁹ To incarnate in each one of us the ideal

⁴⁵ Cf. Phil. 2:3-4.

⁴⁶ Galt. 5:13.

⁴⁷ Jn. 13:11 ss.

⁴⁸ Lk. 22:26.

⁴⁹ Cf. Heb. 1:1.

Christian, to incarnate the Word that today God proclaims to the world, is the first response in obedience to the call and is the expression of our consecration to God. This obedience to God extends itself to the obedience of confreres, gathered in the name of the Lord, accepting those human mediations made manifest in each day's ordinary activities.⁵⁰

If, as it is written in VC, it is the Spirit who guides the communities of consecrated life in their completion of their mission to serve the Church and humanity, according to their particular charism,⁵¹ it necessarily follows that the first function of authority would be to encourage discernment with the confreres, out of this inspiration with which the Spirit guides the community. And then to nurture the confreres' faithfulness to the same Spirit who calls each one of us, gathers us together, and sends us forth.

St. Vincent once said to a superior: *Continue, Father, submitting yourself to God's plan and conforming yours to that of our Lord, who is full of humility, meekness, concerning himself always with others while accommodating himself to everyone else's mood and weaknesses, having as his final goal the glory of the Father and the good of souls, both in general and in particular.*⁵²

In FLC it says that "if consecrated persons have dedicated themselves to the total service of God, authority promotes and sustains their consecration."⁵³ Right away we ought to see how helpful to the consecration of persons have been the various kinds of spiritual activity, different kinds of communities and apostolates, adapting the charism to distinct communities, but we would be able to conclude along with this document that authority is "a function which is both necessary for the growth of fraternal life in community and for the spiritual journey of the consecrated person."⁵⁴

In Service of Encouraging the Response

Following the habit of listening should be the desire for a response. And this also would have to come from the whole community, from the generous contribution of each one according to his abilities. The community's participation has to happen in all aspects of social life and activity, in projects, decisions, implemen-

⁵⁰ Cf. SOA, nn. 4-10.

⁵¹ Cf. VC, n. 42^c.

⁵² SV IV, 556.

⁵³ FLC, n. 50.

⁵⁴ VFC, n. 48.

tations, etc. Without this happening it might seem all right to spread out those distinct moments of activity to particular people in the community, as if some individuals should plan, others should decide, and still others implement. Participation requires the involvement of each and every one, according to his situation and capacity, in all the distinctive phases of activity.

Identification of community participation with some generous concession on the part of the superior as a favor to the community is inviting a perverse concept of authority that considers the leader as owner and not administrator of the power exercised. Community participation must not come as some largesse of the superior, but rather as the exercise of an inalienable right, to which there follows correlatively an obligation, and which is rooted in one's belonging to a community.

The superior, according to the description of his functions in the CM Constitutions, is there to encourage the participation of all: moving the confreres towards co-responsibility (Const. CM, n. 25 2°; n. 37 § 2); engaging them in the works of the community (Const. CM, n. 129 § 2); calling them together to make decisions (Const. CM, n. 24 2°; n. 97 § 2; n. 37 § 1); having them face problems that arise and not dealing with decisions already made; guiding them towards consensus (Const. CM, n. 37 § 1); gathering legitimate initiatives from each one, identifying, respecting and valuing their gifts (Const. CM, n. 22); formally announcing or officially declaring decisions made together in the Spirit (Const. CM, n. 37 § 2; n. 97 § 2).

This is what we can call a service of animation. Animation comes from the heart as an interior principle of movement and life. The Holy Spirit is like the soul of the Church and of every community in the Church. The Spirit in St. John is called Paraclete, which means advocate, defender, consoler. And much of all this the superior has as his function in the community. In a way, he makes this help of the Spirit present and felt.

The apostles visited the communities to animate them. We hear from Paul and Barnabas that they visited throughout the communities *exhorting the disciples to persevere in the faith*.⁵⁵ And in his letters, Paul rarely uses the voice of command; but rather, with a tone very intimate and familiar, he says, *I beg you to lead a life worthy of [your] calling*....⁵⁶ Exhortation is a function of animation. To animate is to blow softly over the coals, rekindling the fire without putting it out. Animation is positive action. Above all it has

⁵⁵ Cf. Acts. 14:22; 11:23; 13:43.

⁵⁶ Cf. Eph. 4:1; 2; 2 Cor. 5:20; 6:1.

nothing to do with reprimanding, prohibiting, but rather helping the confrere to grow, nurturing each one's vocational response towards its full response, offering one's services to help him develop his gifts. The superior needs to enable action and excellence in the confreres. If he is not above his own concerns, if he does not conceive this animating function as his principal task, he will tend to reprimand rather than energize, criticize rather than praise, close up within himself rather than open up possibilities in others.

We could point out three areas for effectively stirring up a response:

Animate for a Gospel way of life

This concept of animation does not mean that the Superior has to approve everything, because the object of animation is the attainment for the end of the Community: following Christ evangelizing the poor. As such it is not about approval but rather is the expression of one's conversion to the Lord and faithfulness in following the call.

It is not enough for a Superior to be an excellent organizer and work motivator, if at the same time he is not an animator of living out Gospel conversion, an animator of communion with the Lord in the service of whom we consecrate all our apostolic activity and to whom we direct our whole life in prayer, and who makes himself present in the love of confreres.

The first of the three parts that make up SOA is dedicated to explaining the kind of help from authority to live out one's own consecration (vows), to respond to the call that one has heard, being obedient by following the Son obedient until death, doing so by means of human mediations.⁵⁷

Animate for the Apostolic Mission

Practically the only task that the Constitutions assign specifically and properly to the superior is that he "*should promote the ministries of the house and show that he and the community are concerned for the personal development and activity of each confrere.*"⁵⁸

The Superior needs to know how to call forth and encourage discernment of the calls felt, to stir up a passion for the apostolate in the community, to protect the community from fatigue, to clarify misunderstandings that could arise concerning its members, to keep the community tied to the provincial's authority, and, by means of

⁵⁷ Cf. SAO, nn. 7-9.

⁵⁸ Const. CM, n. 129 § 2.

information about what it is doing, to gladden the community in celebration. In FLC, finally, we find it written that celebrating together also contributes to the apostolate.

*“Being able to enjoy one another; allowing time for personal and communal relaxation; taking time off from work now and then; rejoicing in the joys of one’s brothers and sisters, in solicitous concern for the needs of brothers and sisters; trusting commitment to works of the apostolate; compassion in dealing with situations; looking forward to the next day with the hope of meeting the Lord always and everywhere: These are things that nourish serenity, peace and joy. They become strength in apostolic action.”*⁵⁹

The third part of SAO is dedicated to this animation of apostolic life by authority,⁶⁰ while its second part concerns the authority’s service for making communities truly fraternal, united in one spiritual communion, faithful to the inspiration of the Spirit in service of the Reign of God.⁶¹

Animate for community participation

Animation for the sake of work comes about from the stimulus of co-responsibility and out of confidence in the value of the people, who with their limitations, provide a valid response which the Lord makes sufficient for His designs. But it is not enough to have excellent workers. The Community is made up of brothers who have to learn to consider the concerns of others as important as their own. And this is not to set up some hodgepodge of services where everyone does everything with nobody responsible for anything. Certainly, distributing tasks well seems necessary, since it is impossible for everybody to be good at everything. Still, along with attention to the tasks and responsibilities of each confrere arises the concern to help everyone towards success in the enterprise entrusted to them, so that, at some occasions, one might need to fill in and substitute common tasks, permitting others to complete specific tasks. All of this requires that each one sees the concerns of others as his own. And indeed they are, just by being the community’s concerns.

The Constitutions speak of an integration of individuals into the Community through personal self-giving, of the regard that is given to personal privacy by the Community’s advocacy of personal self worth, individual initiatives being evaluated in light of the end and

⁵⁹ FLC, n. 28.

⁶⁰ Cf. SAO, nn. 23-27.

⁶¹ Cf. SAO, nn. 16-22.

spirit of the Mission, all so that our diversity and each ones gifts contribute to build up communion and make the mission fruitful.⁶²

This is not about a superior endeavoring to get his subjects to collaborate with his plans but rather to interest them in collaboration that is complete and free, united in a plan, well laid out and implemented together. In SOA we are reminded of the example of Benedict XVI who, when asked at the beginning of his pontificate what his plan was to lead the Church, responded: *“My true plan for governance is not to do my will or to follow my own ideas, but to set out along with all the Church, to listen, for the Word and the will of the Lord and to allow myself be by guided by Him, so that it is He who guides the Church in this time of our history”* (n. 12).

Still, the superior might yet feel the easy temptation to revert to governing like a boss, to use his power to say the final word, unnecessarily anticipating the end of discussion. He will overcome this temptation only when deeply convinced that true authority over the community is manifestly shown by the Lord who by his Spirit keeps us united and promotes the Community using many paths of faithfulness. Authority to make decisions is not exercised with Gospel legitimacy except through a process of faithful seeking and a sincere, trusting dialog with the confreres.⁶³

From this perspective, evangelical authority is, before all else, a moral strength characterized more by a willingness to serve others rather than to lord over them. Some have contrasted effective authority with coercive authority. The first assists the growth and development of others, the second accomplishes nothing other than their dominance.

Translation: DANIEL P. BORLIK, C.M.

⁶² Const. CM, n. 22.

⁶³ Const. CM, n. 37 § 1; n. 97 § 2.