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On Full and Complete Obedience

Saint Marie Eugenie of Jesus

My dear Daughters,

We had begun before I left, so it seems to me, to speak of several virtues. There is one which I would reproach myself for not focusing your attention on, although everything in religion preaches it. It is the most necessary virtue, the one to which we must devote ourselves most if we want to be religious: you have named it, it is obedience.

“You know that, especially when one is old, one returns to thoughts of one’s early days. The Congregation was founded when we were just a little group, on an obedience which was strict, continuous and so drastic that it went beyond what was suitable on the part of those who commanded, but it is thanks to this that the Congregation was founded.”

When we were told not to say this or that, even in confession, we did not say it; (it was excessive, I do not say that it is something to be done) but when we were asked: “what did you confess last week?” we said it in all simplicity. When we were commanded to do this or that thing, which was absolutely contrary to those we had done the preceding week, we did it. “This week, my daughters, you will write commentaries on the Psalms.” We did not have the faintest idea on how to make these commentaries on the *Happy the man*, the *Why this tumult among nations*, the *Lord, how numerous are my enemies*¹; but no objection was made or admitted.

I remember that one day poor Mother Marie Gonzaga, who was then seventeen years old, began to cry, because this commentary appeared to her beyond her capacity; and that was looked upon by us all as an extraordinary fault. We tried to comment on the psalm indicated, well or badly.

The next week, it was: “My dear daughters, this cannot continue thus, you will become pedantic; you will all study the little catechism and do nothing else.” And the people concerned were persons who were twenty, twenty-three, twenty-five years old, persons who had been called by God to the religious life, coming from families in which they had received their

¹ Ps 1 Beatus vir ; Ps 2 Quare fremuerunt gentes ; Ps 3 Domine quam multiplicati sunt...

education, their instruction, led independent lives; yet never did any objection arise. Obedience was the supreme reason.

It was because of that that the Congregation was founded; if even one had put forward her way of thinking, even if this were just and reasonable, if she had wanted to keep her obedience within bounds would have been broken. We five could not have stayed together; the work of God would have been ruined. We never even thought like that, we did not consider the consequences; how could we have foreseen them? We only saw that we wanted to obey as perfectly as possible.”

If each one of you, my daughters, wants to be true daughters of this Congregation, then you must be marked by generous obedience which does not dispute.

One of the great trials of obedience, a trial in which I find sometimes that souls are weakest, is when a change of Superior occurs. Superiors do not all have the same personality. You may have a Superior who is unassuming, shy, very humble, who never utters “I” or “me”. That may perhaps not be without objection. She has perhaps less authority, not on the side of the Religious I suppose; but it may be that in the school there may be more “laissez aller”, less energy, something less firm; all the qualities of government are not there. She is replaced by a person with a more decided character, more out-and-dry, more firm. But everyone has the defects of her qualities, it is a general rule which almost no one can escape. This Superior has qualities of intelligence, of firmness, but the “I” appears, not perhaps to say; “I have always done well” which would be very bad; but to say; “I am of the opinion that you do that like this..; I approve this..; I blame that.”

And then you will have religious who are troubled, upset; “Oh, my God! Our old Mother was like this, was like that! How difficult obedience is... how could I go to her? Tell her my faults? ... it will be impossible for me to get help... what will I become?...” all this is childishness, weakness. If you had lived in the beginning, among us five, you would have had many other experiences.

This Superior in turn will go; and another will come who, being very capable of running a house, will want to look after everything. I do not say that this is a desirable thing – it is good that each officiere manage her employment, - but these Superiors who have gone through all the employments, enter into all the details; they look after the children; something is missing on the altar; the flowers are badly arranged, they go up the altar to arrange the flowers and the candles. The Economat does not go well. They are consulted at each hour, at each moment what must be done; the marketing would not be made without consulting them. It is again a change. All that has been ordained by God; your obedience must go much higher. If you attach yourself to the qualities of the person, to her nature, to her amiability, to her talents, because she relieved of this or of that burden, it is not a supernatural obedience.

That is a trial which all of us must go through. It is not for me to say it; but it is no less true that I am sixty-one years old; Mother Therese Emmanuel also. The Congregation having been governed for the past forty years by two persons, the day these two persons reach the nec plus ultra (let us say. Eighty) of life and activity, it will be well that at least they res. I tell myself often as I say it to those who rule, that it is necessary to preserve in us the virtue of obedience – full, entire, without weakening. The day, when, for reasons of health or of mental fatigue, they will cease to command, they must obey, they must give example of a whole and total obedience, just as it was in the early days.

If Superiors must examine themselves on this, you, Sisters, must do the same; establish deeply in you this strong supernatural obedience which surpasses all, which preserves the Congregation. Today that we are three hundred, the union must not be less than when we were five. On the obedience of five people the Congregation has been founded; obedience to things that often did not have any common sense, the details of which sometimes I recall, and with which I occasionally amuse you; but anyway; it was obedience which has established the Congregation. You shall be three hundred, four hundred. It is important that people always find in you this virtue of obedience, this fidelity which sees only the will of God, which shuts one's eyes to one's own manner of seeing wherever God is not offender. When we made commentaries on the psalms, when Sr. M. Augustine did some bad cooking, God was not offended. Certainly it was not reason which governed; the things which took place one after another were not reasonable. It was a perpetual change of impressions; of devotions, of thoughts which crossed each other; but on our part, it was an obedience without objection.

Do you know how this unreasonableness can become reasonable? There has not been on earth a saint more gentle, more reasonable than St. Francis de Sales. You remember how, when he wanted to decide the vocation of St. Jeanne de Chantal, he said. "Well, daughter, I have resolved what I must do with you; you must enter the Poor Clares." "Father, I am ready." "No, you are not healthy enough; you must be a Sister of the Hospital of Beaune." "All that you judge best, Father." "It is not yet what I will, daughter; you must be a Carmelite." "I am ready to obey, my Lord."

I do not say that one can act thus with any confessor. St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Alphonsus de Liguori and other saints excluded explicitly from obedience the choice of a state of life. This must be chosen personally in the light of God and one must not engage all of one's life through obedience. Thus when parents wish to marry you off, you are not obliged to obey. St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Alphonsus Liguori say this question is excepted.

But St. Jane de Chantal was in quite a different relationship with St. Francis de Sales; she had in him absolute trust, she recognised in him an extraordinary sanctity, had made to him a private vow of obedience; and when he saw her so pliant, so ready for everything. "No, daughter, he told her, I want something else from you." And then and there he declared the plan he had for his Institute. There you see how the wisest man wished to assure himself that this soul did not have any self-will, that she was without attachment or desires.

Later on, in a little thing, St. Jane de Chantal once failed in obedience, and she regretted it all her life long. You all know this story as I do; but I will repeat it to you; it gives an idea of the degree to which a particular Superior² must obey her Superior General, and an officiere, her hierarchical Superior. It was at the profession of St. Jane de Chantal and her first companions. President Favre had promised for that day the gift of an altar; but, as he had not yet given it, the sisters persuaded the saint to employ for the ornamentation of the chapel four or five golden pieces, found in their money box, and which St. Francis de Sales had assigned for the needs of the sick. They alleged that it would not be contrary to obedience, since they would be replaced promptly when Pres. Favre paid; they were so insistent that the good Mother condescended to their request.

But as soon as this was made, this little grain of sand began, says Mme. De Chaugy, to trouble the clear and limpid eye of her conscience; and that same evening she informed St. Francis by

² "particular Superior": expression used by Mother Marie Eugenie

a little note. He came the next day to the monastery; he looked very serious, and he told her when he greeted her. “Daughter, this is the first disobedience you have committed towards me; I have had a bad night, I felt so displeased with it.” This gave the Mother such remorse that the Saint had a hard time consoling her, and all her life, at the remembrance of this fault, tears would fill her eyes.

You know that independent monasteries are subordinate to the Bishop in a manner which is not that of the monasteries with a Superior General; these congregations depend on Rome, and each monastery depends on the centre. The obedience of St. Jeanne de Chantal towards St. Francis de Sales was therefore like that of a local Superior³ towards the Superior General.

I do not enter into the essence of the virtue, each one of you has at hand treatises on this matter; but seek out yourselves how you can establish in you obedience as perfect as possible; how you can remove every obstacle, every objection, every judgment, every reaction which is opposed to perfect obedience; how, if you are far, you could depend always on the motherhouse; how, if your Superior is changed, you remain in the right way, in the view of faith which always makes one see the sign of the authority of Jesus Christ and not the person.

No matter where you may be, see this authority in the persons in charge, in every person who commands you, in a spirit of faith and generosity. Therein lies the merit of obedience; this is what renders it such a great virtue. The Saints say that it founds and nourishes all the other virtues. If it is absent, there is no other which can replace it; if it is imperfect, if it is accompanied by complaints, objections, moans and regrets, it is a weak obedience which is nothing but a mere appearance of virtue. One does not disobey, one does not go out absolutely from dependence; but what would be most pleasing to God, what would give Him most glory, what would be a virtue, is not there. We do not fail in the vow; but we are not in the virtue.

Soon you will be meditating the mysteries of Jesus as a Child. May your soul be attached to Him; look at the manner in which He obeyed, in so many circumstances, so many people! And now how He obeys any priest who goes up to the altar, no less one than the other! The Curé d’Ars went up the altar, Father Hyacinthe also. Our Lord obeyed in both cases. St. Francis de Sales went up the altar, Luther also. When after his apostasy he continued to offer the sacred mysteries, Our Lord always obeyed his word as He would have obeyed that of a Saint.

This ever living obedience is the means through which you receive the Sacraments, the strength of your souls, you consolation at the hour of death. If Our Lord were to obey only him who merits it, who would guarantee your having received communion, your having been baptised, forgiven? Our Lord has not placed any exceptions to His obedience. He has instituted authority, Superiors, the government, and He wants your obedience to be simple, without exception.

You must not be like that person, a bit crazy, who used to say. “I do not like this priest, he moves too much; he is Spanish; I am not sure if he has pronounced the words of Consecration, I will not receive Communion at his Mass.” Another Mass would begin; “That one looks distracted. That other one looks too old...” and she sometimes heard eight Masses without going to Holy Communion. We must not be like that in obedience. It is laughable, but we often act thus, when, before recognising Our Lord and going to Him, we make so many objections in things that pertain to obedience.

³ “particular Superior”: expression used by Mother Marie Eugenie

I say this for the Sisters who are going away; I say it for those who remain. May your strength be in an obedience which is supernatural, constant, leaning on God. May it be something from which we never deviate and to which we will be always attached.

