

A HEART OPEN TO OBEDIENCE

by Sister Mary Bernard Lansang, OSB

In the early 80's, I had the joy of living in community with Sister Concepcion. I have known Sister for years and years as a strict disciplinarian, a committed educator, feared by the students especially the small boys, but very much loved by the teachers and our lay mission partners who worked closely with her. When we were together in the Angeles community, I got to know more of her. She was someone who enjoyed watching basketball games and boxing on TV, someone who had such a compassion for the poor that she would keep in her pocket a candy or a biscuit to give to any beggar in the church *patio*.

I have one experience with Sister Concepcion that has left an impact on me until this day. It was "*hatching season*." Mother Irene, then prioress, informed me that Sister Concepcion was needed in another community. Mother Irene would have wanted to talk with Sister herself but (at that time) we had neither intercom nor extension lines. After the phone call, I went to Sister Concepcion and informed her of what transpired between Mother Prioress and me. I assured her that Mother would call her up regarding the matter. Right away, without any hesitation nor second thought, Sister said, "*When Mother Prioress calls up again, please tell her that she need not talk with me. My answer is YES to any plan that they have for me.*" ***Oh my God, I thought to myself . . . what generosity, what selflessness . . . a YES without any condition!*** I know we have many sisters who have the same spirit: ***women with a LISTENING HEART!***

A Heart open to Obedience

It still remains a fact, however, that some of us, at one time or another, put up a wall of resistance against anything that is contrary to our wishes. St. Benedict knows that obedience is not easy and so he speaks of ***the labor of obedience or the toil of obedience***. There are moments when we cannot accept anything different from our own perspective; at times, consciously or subconsciously, we protect our own interests. Hence, we resist any move to transfer us to another community or to change our assignment. We might even become resentful when what we consider a privileged position of ours is given to another sister. We feel we become powerless.

Our vow of Obedience is meant to remind us that we are to become ***Women with A LISTENING HEART AT THE SERVICE OF THE CHURCH through THE MISSION OF OUR CONGREGATION.***

Our lives as consecrated women must be LIVED WITH CHRIST AT THE SERVICE OF THE KINGDOM.

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Our Mission in Today's World

This year's CEAP-NCR Convention, July 15-19, 2008, had for its theme: ***Nurturing a Filipino Conscience***. The topics revolved around the problem of corruption. ***How can we Teach Values in A Corrupt Society?***

Monsignor Gerado Santos, CEAP- NCR Director, quoted some lines from an article written by Mr. Juan Miguel Luz, former Undersecretary of the Department of Education:

*June 25 issue of the Inquirer cited a World Bank Study: Corruption in RP worst in East Asia. Written by Doris Dumlao, the study points to the Philippines to be the worst among East Asia's leading economies and has shrunk even lower among those seen to be lagging in governance reforms. While Indonesia was the worst last year, it was edged out by the Philippines this year. The World Bank **defines corruption "as the extent to which public power is exercised for private gain, including petty and grand forms of corruption as well as the capture of the States by elites and private interests."***

While it is true that we are not directly involved in matters that entail graft and corruption like the questionable RP-Japan deals regarding the broadband transaction, and that we have a hand in the rice shortage and the rising price of oil and that we are not engaged in the manipulation of public funds, we must admit **that the factors involved in corruption on a macro-level are present in us in varying degrees and different shades.**

We are faced with values of our post-modern society: a consumeristic, materialistic and power-driven society. Consciously or subconsciously, we allow our self-will to dominate us. Greed for power, position and a strong need to control makes us want to assert ourselves even to a point of annihilating others' opinion. We want to maneuver decision-making in community assemblies. Bitterness, anger, or resentment towards a sister make us grumble, thus causing faction in community.

We are called to a mission: to denounce the evil around us and to proclaim Christ's values of justice, truth, peace, compassion, and service to our brothers and sisters. This is our following of Christ.

Michael Casey, OCS speaks of Obedience as a break-away from self-will and opening up oneself to authentic receptivity of God. We are called to follow Christ in the Benedictine way of life. Positive **attachment to Christ necessitates detachment from sub-personal forces.** In chapter 4 of his Rule, St. Benedict makes this point clear and explicit **"To deny oneself in order to follow Christ."**

Let me quote largely from Fr. Casey's writing:

Fervent discipleship is at the heart of Benedictine spirituality. One is fired by a great love for Christ; open to being guided by Christ and willing to deny personal inclinations in order to put Christ's teaching into practice. This is what is meant by describing the Benedictine way as Christo-centric. Whatever asceticism or self-denial is involved in following this way serves only as an instrument to safeguard the primacy of the person's Christian discipleship.

The discipleship is closely linked with humility. Both involve submission to Christ as Master; not being oneself the controller of one's life . . . What great love there must be to cause a man to give so much, to endure so much and to demand so little for oneself. Self-control and self-denial are significant because, when they are authentic, they indicate what is beginning to displace selfishness in the details of daily life.

Fr. Casey further explains that discipleship requires being open to formation by Christ. This involves accepting Christ and His word as it comes to us in myriads of way: at Lectio Divina, or through our conscience and, harder still, when it comes to us through other persons, both our own sisters or from friends and co-workers. Christ comes to us in unexpected ways: in the sudden turn of events, in moments of success as well as in failure. He comes to us in sickness and in death. We embrace everything as coming from God.

Listening to our superiors or to other persons necessitates that we can say "NO" to ourselves. If self-will is our priority, then we cannot be followers of Christ. We cannot follow

Christ in his obedience.

Becoming *WOMEN WITH A LISTENING HEART.*

St. Benedict opens his Holy Rule with the word, LISTEN. Time and again, we tried to meditate on the word “*ob-audire*” Listen with the ear of your heart. This time, I am borrowing the thoughts and writing of Esther de Waal in her book, “Lost in Wonder.” The writer knows the movements, the yearnings and cravings of the human heart. She knows how thoughts and passions clutter the heart. And so, she writes.

*Uncrowd my heart, O God
until silence speaks
in your still, small voice.
Turn me from the hearing of words,
and the making of words
and the confusion of much speaking,
to listening,
waiting,
stillness
silence.*

David Tomlins, the abbot of the Cistercians of the Abbey of Tarrawarra writes:
“The most deafening voice is our own. Desires, fears, anxieties, and obsessive worries, treadmill of thoughts, issuing from a constantly chattering mind.”

Esther de Waal motivates us to guard our hearts and to keep watch over our thoughts in order to create an attitude and a capacity for cultivating a listening silence, attentive listening and *expectant listening*.

Responsible Obedience: Women with a Discerning Mind

Obedience does not mean just saying YES without making any discernment of what is asked of us. It can happen that the one in authority or the one giving the command can be misguided in her decisions regarding some matters. This can be due to lack of information or some wrong perception on account of some situations that have arisen. Responsible Christian obedience demands from us a discerning mind. If we feel that the command or the decision made by the superior or the council can bring about negative result, it is our duty to speak up openly, candidly and with sincerity, voice our opinion or a dissenting voice. This demands from the superior a magnanimous heart and a sincere desire to seek God’s will and not her own.

The Challenge of Obedience in the Rule of Benedict.

I do not intend to take up all the chapters and passages of the Rule of St. Benedict on obedience. But I want to dwell on Chapter 68: Assignment of Impossible Tasks. Mayeul de

Dreuille, OSB writes a very helpful commentary on this chapter. ***“If it should happen that burdensome or impossible tasks are imposed on one of the brethren, he should accept with all meekness and obedience the command of the one who so orders.***

Comment: The order may have caused a reaction of anger or discouragement. The brother should then make a willing effort to examine the order without passion and even, if possible, try to carry it out. If the difficulty persists, dialogue should begin. Then, he writes an excellent guide to dialogue.

Such a dialogue can be fruitful only if those involved are able to speak together calmly, before God. On the monk’s side, besides patience, meekness, and obedience, there should be an attitude of calm, humility and right-mindedness. The abbot should be approached at a ***suitable moment***, that is, when it could be expected that he also might be suitably disposed, not when he is tired, nervous, or in a hurry.

But, if after the explanation, the one in authority remains firm in requiring what he has ordered, the junior must understand that this is good for him, and let him lovingly trust in God’s aid and so obey.

The brother has to carry out the order given, knowing that this act of obedience is good for him . . . that is, it is good for his soul. He obeys lovingly LIKE CHRIST IN HIS PASSION, TRUSTING IN GOD’S HELP. This brings us to

The Biblico-Theological foundation of obedience as stated in our Constitutions:

Our Constitutions, Chapter II on Profession state:
Obedience unites us in loving response to Jesus Christ
who, as Son, submitted entirely to the Father
by becoming obedient unto death.
the goal of our obedience is union with God
and the fulfillment of His saving will in the world.

Jose Cristo Rey Garcia Paredes, CMF wrote a series of booklets on the evangelical counsels. He explains obedience from the biblico-theological foundation of Christ, sent to do the Father’s will. From early childhood, Jesus lived under the Father’s will. His first recorded words were spoken in the Temple when His parents looked for Him and found Him among the elders, ***“Why did you search for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s House?*** I do not intend to go through all the Biblical passages where Jesus sought the Father’s will. But, we know that His life was lived totally for the Father and the Kingdom. At the end of His life, in the Garden of Gethsemane, He went up to the place of His agony and He cried to the Father, in sweat and blood, ***“Father, let this chalice pass from me; nevertheless, if it is your will, let it be done to me as you will.”***

At the end of His passion. He cried out, ***“Father, into your hands, I commend my spirit.”***

Jesus faced up to the fulfillment of His mission, with a filial commitment, filled with generosity. At every moment, He sought the will of the Father. St. Luke, in his Gospel, presents Jesus as time and again, going up to a lonely place to be with the Father.

This is the secret of our obedience: a life of communion with our loving Father. Pope John Paul II, in his apostolic exhortation VITA CONSECRATA, explains that ours is a life deeply rooted in the example and teaching of the Lord. . . Obedient to the Father’s call and to the

promptings of the Holy Spirit, we have chosen this special way of following Christ with “*an undivided heart.*” Like the apostles, we have left everything in order to be with Christ and to put ourselves at the service of God, and our brothers and sisters. This is a GIFT FROM THE FATHER. LET US CHERISH THIS GIFT and LET US PROCLAIM THE GOOD NEWS THAT OURS IS A LOVING GOD

GUIDE FOR PRAYER

1. VITA CONSECRATA tells us that consecrated life is a GIFT FROM THE FATHER. Spend time thanking the Lord for the gift of religious life in a Benedictine community.

2. Do a LECTIO on the Gospel passages on Christ’s obedience to the Father even unto death:
Matthew 26: 36-48

GUIDE FOR SHARING

1. Share an incident when you found obedience painful or stressful. Share how you struggled through it and what you experienced after having obeyed.

2. What helps you obey even in hard and unpleasant circumstances?

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