

The Vow to OBEDIENCE

Gary Riebe-Estrella, SVD

The Latin roots of the word “obedience,” *ob audire*, provide a starting point for this reflection on obedience in religious life.

Interestingly they focus our attention not on doing something, such as putting into action what a superior has decided. Rather they center our attention internally as they speak of our need “to listen to” or “to listen because of.”

Obedience is foremost an orientation of the heart toward what is foundational to religious life; it is not a performance of activities. And that orientation is to the values which incarnate God’s reign.

Fundamentally, there is no vow of obedience, only a vow to obedience, to cultivate an attitude of attentive listening to what the values of God’s reign call us to in the concrete context of our lives today. It is an attitude of attentive listening because of the fact that, as Jesus proclaims, “The reign of God is at hand” (Mk 1:15). It’s a shame that obedience in religious life has been reduced to the conformity of my actions to someone else’s decision. That is a description of how a child behaves in relationship to parents, not of how an adult, called to radical discipleship in baptism and in the vowed life, responds to God’s call to move beyond oneself in order to embrace a new way of human living.

While Jesus never defines in words what he means by the reign of God, the actions of his ministry present a convincing picture of what he believed.

In his interaction with people, whether pharisees or publicans, scribes or sinners, disciples or critics, Jesus lives out the breaking down of the barriers that some have created to separate people from one another. He does so by calling into question the criteria human beings have established to decide who is “good” and who is “bad,” who is “righteous,” and who is “unfaithful.” He bears witness to a world of universal brotherhood and sisterhood as he tells us to call God “Abba” and to pray “our Father.”

It’s no wonder Jesus asserts that he has come not to abolish the Law and the Prophets, but to fulfill them (Mt 5:17).

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For his announcement of God’s reign is both ever ancient and ever new. The creation story in the book of Genesis, when read correctly, announces the same vision of a world of communion.

Unfortunately, too often we read the creation stories in Genesis through what might be called the lens of the Western Enlightenment with its emphasis on the individual. From that perspective we are told that God created each human being, each individual, in God’s image and likeness. Some in our theological

tradition have explained this likeness by highlighting our faculties of intellect and will, reflective of God who is pure intellect and pure will. Others hold it is our openness to the transcendent as the horizon for all knowing and longing which reveals our semblance to God.

It would do us good perhaps to take off our Enlightenment glasses and read the biblical text as it is, with its very interesting emphasis on the plural.

Then God said: “Let us make [*‘adam*] in our image, after our likeness. Let **them** have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air.... God created [*‘adam*] in his image; in the divine image he created [*‘adam*]; male and female he created **them**. God blessed **them**, saying: Be fertile and multiply..... (Gen. 1:26-28; NAB; emphasis mine)

Rather than *‘adam*, humanity, being created in God’s image and likeness as a series of autonomous individuals, the biblical text asserts that God creates humanity in God’s image and likeness by creating us as intrinsically relational beings, i.e. God creates not the first individuals, but the first couple. And as the story in the Garden unfolds, we see that this couple is also in original communion with the animals and plants, that is, with this world. In the later stages of the biblical story we slowly come to understand that our likeness to God resides in our intrinsic relationality because God in Godself is relational, that

is, a community, three in an eternal dance who only together are God.

The validation of this interpretation of the creation story can be found in the story of the Fall. The temptation, we are told, is “to be like gods,” determining what is good and what is evil (Gen 2:5). Rather than letting God define what it means to be human, to be his image and likeness, the first couple want to have that pride of place. When God comes to visit them after they have eaten the forbidden fruit, the man hangs back because he’s making clothing to hide his nakedness.

The sexual difference in the couple, which had been an expression of their complementarity and communion, now is seen as a source of division between them and from God, something to be covered, to be hidden. In their explanation to God of what had happened, they turn on each other and on the serpent, playing out their refusal to accept their intrinsic relationship with each other and with the world. In blaming one another they play God by claiming that they can decide who is better and who is worse, as if they had the right to determine what it means to be truly human, to be God’s image and likeness. Their sin is the original sin, not because it is the first, but because it is the sin against their origins.

The whole rest of the First Testament is the story of God’s calling of humanity to a re-creation of that lost communion. To God’s people who are to be a light to the nations, God gives 10 commandments. The first three assert the beyondness of God. The Israelites are forbidden to make images of God for God has already created his own image, people in their relationship to one another. They must not swear in God’s name as if they were God and held God’s authority, for only God is God. They must rest on the Sabbath because their work is only a participation in God’s; God is in charge not they. And the next seven commandments follow from these: if God alone is God and has created humanity in God’s likeness in the brotherhood and sisterhood we share, then these commandments tell us how

sisters and brothers should live with one another.

Jesus’s announcement of the coming of God’s reign brings the story to its end stage. Beyond proclaiming the same message of human communion in his ministry, Jesus bears the consequences of living into God’s reign as those who

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make up reasons to divide people from one another decide to kill the one who would turn their world upside down. And yet even as he steps into death,



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Jesus refuses to separate himself from his killers or from his faithless disciples. With no rage against them, he prays for their forgiveness and holds intact the bonds of his relationships. In his resurrection, we find that Jesus’s faith holds true. Love brings life beyond the power of death and Jesus is now present in communion with all his sisters and brothers.

It is to this story that religious are called to listen attentively and to be willing to pay the price for breaking down divisions, recognizing the common sisterhood and brotherhood of all, turning upside down the world of those who would claim “to be like gods” by determining what is good and what is evil.

The attentive listening that is the living out of the vow to obedience takes place within the community which is the institute, within the community which is the church, and within the community which is the world. However, it is never a listening to the institute, the church, or the world, but to the values which allow community to flourish in each of these settings.

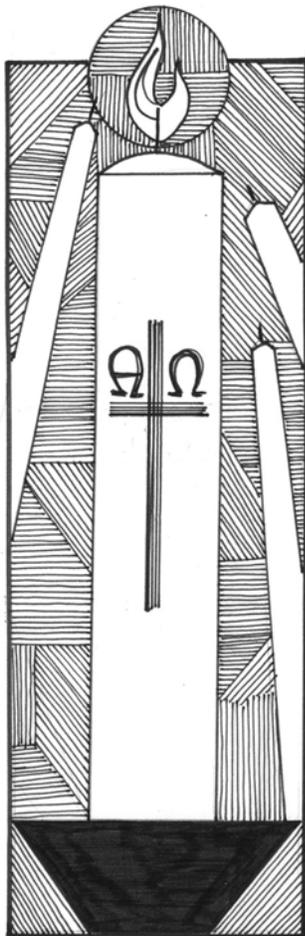
Because we human beings are incapable of sustained development, sin enters into people’s lives as we prefer self to the other, our group to another group. This happens in all three arenas: our congregations, our church, and the society in which we live. The prejudice toward self influences what we hear as we listen and how we interpret the consequences of what we hear.

Communal discernment, when done judiciously and prayerfully, can allow us the opportunity to correct our hearing and to balance our reactions. Such discernment is called for in our individual congregations as well as among them as we seek not only to listen attentively, but to hear correctly and to act responsibly in cooperating with the coming of God’s reign.

Likewise there needs to be communal discernment between our congregations individually and corporately with the wider church and with our world. This

discernment is not the same as dialogue. Dialogue is the action of two parties talking to each other. Discernment is the action of two or more parties listening attentively to the birthing of God's reign and parsing out with one another in prayer what they believe they have heard. The end product is not convincing the other of what I hold to be true, but of mutual faithfulness to the values and actions which make human communion a possibility.

Because of the all too human prejudice in favor of self over the other, in religious life we sometimes have to live with poor decisions in our institutes and as members of the larger church. However that is simply part of living with human frailty, and it should not be confused with the vow to obedience. Even in such difficult times, living our vow demands our continuing to listen to what the values of God's reign call us to. That may find its heart in working for the conversion of those who are authoring our hardships, who are resisting the call



of God's reign. In that case, as in Jesus', we are called not to rupture communion by violent reactions, but to suffer through with integrity, holding on to what we have prayerfully discerned as our call and allowing our witness in love to call our sister or brother to conversion and to renewed communion. That can be a tough pill to swallow at times. But our sensitivity to the sin in our own lives can keep us from denying our bonds with those who sin against us.

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on the restoration of human communion and not on the dynamics of power. In fact, it unmasks naked power for what it is, an attempt by human beings to usurp the place of God in determining what is good and what is evil, who is faithful and who is not. The authenticity of mutual discernment is what grounds authority within our institutes and in our church. Inauthenticity in ourselves or in others lays bare the use of pure power.

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the paschal mystery in our relationships with one another and the communities to which we are bound. Only self-sacrificing love can effect redemption from sin; only self-sacrificing love can constitute true community.

Having completed his service as vice president and academic dean at Catholic Theological Union, Gary currently offers workshops and presentations on religious life and on the dynamics of intercultural life and ministry.



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