ST. JOHN PAUL II ON OBEDIENCE AND ITS SPIRITUALITY IN RELIGIOUS AND CONSECRATED LIFE

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Introduction

The vow of obedience is one of the principal commitments in the life of religious communities, deeply rooted in Christian theology and spiritual practice. According to Judith Schaefer, obedience is traditionally understood as "the submission of one's individual will to the will of another for the achievement of a greater good, usually spiritual perfection and/or apostolic mission."[1] However, she argues that, in the context of religious life, obedience is strictly understood as "submission of the will to God mediated through one's religious superior in all things required."[2] According to the *Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life* (CICLSAL) document, "The Service of Authority and Obedience," obedience generally begins with listening. Such an act is conditioned by a particular attitude seen in one like a son or a daughter. CICLSAL explains, "It is that particular kind of listening that only a son or daughter can do in listening to his or her parent because it is enlightened by the certainty that the parent has only good

1. Judith Schaefer, *The Evolution of a Vow: Obedience as Decision Making in Communion*, edited by Bernard J. Hiberath, Bradford E. Hinze, and Matthias Scharer (N.J.: LIT Verlag, 2009), 15.

2. Schaefer, *The Evolution of a Vow,* 15.

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things to say and give to him or her."[3] One of the three evangelical counsels—alongside the vows of poverty and chastity—obedience forms the foundation of religious life. These counsels are rooted in the teachings of Jesus Christ, particularly in His call for radical discipleship and the imitation of His own life of self-giving. In religious communities, the vow of obedience reflects a commitment to live according to God's will, as discerned through the guidance of legitimate authority within the Church. In the Catholic tradition and teachings, this vow is not merely an external observance but is intertwined with the theological understanding of surrendering one's will to God. As the CICLSAL reminds us, "Obedience to God is the path of growth and, therefore, of freedom for the person because this obedience allows for the acceptance of a plan or a will different from one's own that not only does not deaden or lessen human dignity but is its basis."[4] This vow holds particular significance for a religious congregation or institute as it reflects the charism and mission, rooted in the heroic faith and sacrifice of the founders and members, as the greatest testament of their obedience to God and imitation of Christ's kenotic sacrifice. The religious members live out their vocation in imitation of Christ's or their founder's total submission to God, expressed through their witness to the faith and obedience to Church authority.

St. John Paul II, a prominent theological figure of the 20th century and a charismatic pope during his time, offers an enriched understanding of obedience, particularly within the framework of his teachings on human freedom, personal

3. Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL), *The Service of Authority and Obedience*, Roman Curia, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccscrlife/documents/rc_con_ccscrlife_doc_20080511_autorita-obbedienza_en.html, para. 5. Hereafter CICLSAL.

4. CICLSAL, *The Service of Authority and Obedience*, par. 5.

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dignity, and the theology of vocation. In one of his apostolic exhortations, *Vita Consecrata,* he said that obedience (also chastity and poverty) is "the source of true freedom" and it "appears as the most radical way of living the Gospel on this earth, a way which may be called divine."[5] The vow of obedience in the religious life should be seen as a dialogue—a free and conscious response to God's call and through His instrumentalities that allows one to express one's submission to God's divine plan indirectly. Rather than blind submission, obedience involves listening, discernment, and a cooperative relationship with God's will through the exercise of willful submission to the authority of superiors and fellow brothers and sisters of the congregation. In this way, one fosters deeper communion and participation in the Church's mission.

The paper seeks to explore and deepen the theological understanding of the vow of obedience and its spirituality in the context of a religious and consecrated life through the lens of St. John Paul II's teachings on obedience. Integrating his theological insights aims to provide a renewed understanding of obedience that emphasizes freedom, mutual dialogue, trust, listening to the Spirit within, and the active participation of religious in discerning God's will. This enriched interpretation hopes to contribute to the spiritual growth of religious and consecrated persons and strengthen their commitment to living out their respective charisms in today's world.

The Theological and Religious Context of the Vow of Obedience

This section discusses obedience within a theological and religious context. It examines obedience as a spiritual/

5. John Paul II, *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Vita Consecrata* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1996), 24 & 11-12.

theological vow and social virtue. The chapter emphasizes the vow of obedience and its essential character, which, contrary to common and secular belief, means aligning one's will with God, which fosters personal and communal holiness as its reward or fruit. This kind of obedience is modeled after Christ himself and his relationship with his divine Father in heaven. It reminds us that blind obedience is of the past. Today, there must be a balance between obedience and dialogue, ensuring obedience remains a conscious, faith-driven act rather than an unquestioning submission to authority.

Obedience is a powerful form of social influence, compelling individuals to respond to direct orders from authority figures. According to Milgram, it is fundamental to communal living: "Some system of authority is a requirement of all communal living."[6] This behavior embodies respect and mindfulness toward rules, laws, and commands, acting as a psychological mechanism—a "dispositional cement that binds men [and women alike] to systems of authority."[7] However, the perception of obedience often carries a negative connotation, as many view it as the antithesis of freedom. Anderson provocatively describes it as "a rock of offense" because it represents the sovereignty against which freedom-loving individuals have historically revolted.[8] This perspective may stem from a rationalist viewpoint that, as St. John Paul II articulates, leads to an insensitivity toward revelation and divine transcendence. Such rationalism encourages self-centered individual-

6. Stanley Milgram, "The Dilemma of Obedience," *The Phi Delta Kappan* vol. 55, no. 9 (May 1974): 603-606. See p. 603.

7. Milgram, "The Dilemma of Obedience," 603.

8. Bernhard W. Anderson, "The Biblical Ethic of Obedience," *The Christian Scholar* vol. 39, no. 1 (1956): 66-71. See p. 66.

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ism, which hinders true human relationships.[9] In contrast, Tuttle argues that obedience is "a convenience—a very great convenience, and, at certain stages, an indispensable convenience,"[10] particularly for children who can be guided to follow commands. While Tuttle views obedience as less noble in a democratic context that values choice.

Peter Baelz supports this argument, saying that "among that obedience has fallen out of favor, no longer ranking among the top virtues in contemporary society."[11] He points out that many people do not respect authority, leading them to question the moral value of the internal promptings that drive obedience. Nevertheless, Baelz emphasizes that obedience transcends merely following authority; in Christianity, it signifies a "proper response of man [people] to God."[12] Christ epitomized this kind of obedience, showcasing a "symphonic" harmony between obedience, love for God, and existence itself. In this light, understanding obedience through the lens of Christ's exemplary behavior reveals its essential role in guiding individuals within society and in their spiritual lives.[13]

However, one should note that "obey" in Hebrew means "listen."[14] In the biblical context, it means hearing God's call or word, which presupposes a personal relationship between the hearer and the speaker. This sense of obedience has been

9. John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* [Apostolic Exhortations] (Kerala, India: Carmel International Publishing House, 2005), 681:7.

10. Harold Saxe Tuttle, "Obedience: A Necessary Convenience," *The Elementary School Journal* vol. 43, no. 6 (Feb 1943): 343-346. See p. 343.

11. Baelz, "Obedience," 186.

12. Baelz, "Obedience," 187.

13. Joshua R. Brown, "Christ's 'Symphonic' Obedience: Exploring Hans Urs Von Balthasar's Archetypal Experience through Han Confucianism," *Pro Ecclesia* vol. 25, no. 4 (2016): 439-458. See p. 439.

14. Anderson, "The Biblical Ethic of Obedience," 66.

forgotten when many consecrated religious persons think of obedience. Hearing is not necessarily passive. It requires the active involvement of the hearer in what is being heard. It is an active mode of listening where the one who hears responds to the hearing. The response, whatever that is (either not answering yes or no to the call), is considered an active movement of one's inner self toward the hearing. In this sense, obedience implies dialogue. To be more specific, the kind of obedience that this study considers is religious in nature, that is, religious obedience, which has its distinct character and meaning compared to other notions of obedience, like civil obedience. As Fr. John Lozano puts it, "religious obedience is submission, freely chosen as a distinctive trait of a certain type of Christian existence, to a human authority which, as such, is not part of the ecclesiastical hierarchy although it has an ecclesiastical significance."[15] Similarly, Fr. Peter Cotel defines religious obedience as "consists in this, that man for the sake of pleasing the Lord, voluntarily puts himself in a state of subjection to another in whatever he may command that is not contrary to the rule."[16] Karl Rahner sees religious obedience not like that of a child who obeys their parents. In "Reflections on Obedience," Rahner explains,

> Superiors should not act as if by nature or by reason of their office they are more intelligent, more clever, more morally steadfast, or more provident and wiser in the ways of the world. This may be true in individual cases,

15. John M. Lozano, C.M.F., *Discipleship: Towards an Understanding of Religious Life*, translated by Beatrice Wilczynski (Chicago: Claret Center for Resources in Spirituality, 1980), 221.

16. Fr. Peter Cotel, S.J., *Principles of Religious Life: An Explanation of the "Catechism of the Vows,"* revised and adapted to the Code of Canon Law by Fr. Emile Jombart, S.J., translated from the 4th French edition by Fr. T. Lincoln Bouscaren, S.J. (New York: Benziger Brothers, Inc., 1926), 213.

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> for the world is not so constructed that only the more stupid become superiors.[17]

The *Catholic Encyclopedia* also defines religious obedience as the "general submission which religious vow to God, and voluntarily promise to their superiors, in order to be directed by them in ways of perfection according to the purpose and constitutions of their order."[18] Similarly, the CICLSAL reiterates that the "first act of obedience on the part of the creature is that of coming into existence in conformity with the divine *fiat* that calls one into being."[19]

While obedience is a fundamental concept in various contexts, including psychology, education, religion, and social relationships, this study draws its reflection and analysis from theological-religious and spiritual rather than social, though the social dimension remains valuable.

St. John Paul II's View of Obedience and Its Theological and Spiritual Foundations

Pope St. John Paul II consistently taught that the vow of obedience is at the heart of consecrated religious life. His homilies and writings present religious obedience as an imitation of Christ's obedience unto death (Phil 2:8) and a path to true freedom and holiness. This section examines St. John Paul II's reflections on the vow of obedience for consecrated individuals, highlighting its theological foundations—especially its Christocentric, ecclesial, Trinitarian, and pneumatological dimensions—and exploring his spirituality of obedience.

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17. Karl Rahner, S.J., "Reflection on Obedience – A Basic Ignatian Concept," translated by Erwin W. Geissman, *CrossCurrents* 10, no. 4 (1960): 363-74. See pp. 363-364.

18. Arthur Vermeersch, "Religious Obedience," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11182a.htm.

19. CICLSAL, "The Service of Authority and Obedience."

The Christological Foundation of Obedience based on St. John Paul II's Teachings

St. John Paul II anchors the meaning of the vow of obedience in the example of Jesus Christ, frequently citing St. Paul's hymn in *Philippians* 2:6-8 (Christ "humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross"). In his 1984 apostolic exhortation, *Redemptionis Donum*, he expressed that by acknowledging this obedience, "we touch the very essence of the Redemption."[20] This obedience is characterized by Christ's total surrender to the will of God, culminating in His crucifixion. This profound act of obedience amidst personal suffering highlights His deep commitment to fulfilling the divine plan for humanity's salvation. Those who profess this vow aim to "share in the obedience of that 'one man' by whose obedience all will be made righteous" (Rom. 5:19). Hence, monks, nuns, and religious brothers or priests decide to emulate Christ, "who, by an obedience which carried Him even to death on the cross, redeemed humanity and made it holy."[21] This Christocentric perspective transforms the religious vow of obedience into a living re-enactment of Christ's submission to the Father. It transcends a mere external act of following rules. When those in consecrated life take this vow, they are not merely agreeing to abide by the directives of religious superiors but are committing to imitate Christ's perfect submission to the will of the Father. This commitment is tailored to their unique calling, reflected in their work, relationships, and various aspects of religious life. In his 1983 address to the Jesuits' audience, he emphasized that "obedience on the grounds of faith should be a sign of your close imitation of Christ, who was obedient even to

20. John Paul II, *Apostolic Exhortation Redemptionis Donum* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, March 1984), 14.

21. Ibid., 14.

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death on the Cross."[22] In other words, the obedience expected from Christians, especially those who commit to religious life, must mirror Christ's own, as He chose to humble Himself and submit entirely to the Father's will, even accepting suffering and death freely out of love.

Equally vital to understanding John Paul II's view of religious obedience is to see obedience not as servile but as filial. It is an act of voluntary submission rooted in love. *Vita Consecrata* says, "obedience, practiced in imitation of Christ...shows the liberating beauty of a dependence which is not servile but filial."[23] Servile obedience, often marked by fear or coercion, leads individuals to comply out of obligation or threat, lacking the inner freedom essential for genuine human flourishing. In contrast, filial obedience reflects the relationship between Jesus and the Father. It is "a reflection in history of the loving harmony between the three Divine Persons"[24] of the Holy Trinity. Those who obey out of filial love do so freely, motivated to honor their beloved. This deeper relationship is characterized by love and gratitude, not by anticipating punishment or self-interest. By labeling religious obedience as "filial," Pope John Paul II suggests it represents a more authentic submission, recognizing God as a loving Father whose will is benevolent and life-affirming. Thus, obedience becomes a personal expression of love and trust, reflecting a free choice to follow God's will.[25] He said that "the obedience to which you commit-

22. John Paul II, "Homily to the Members of the 33rd General Congregation (Sept. 1983)," para 8, https://jesuitportal.bc.edu/research/documents/1983_johnpauliihomilygc33/#:~:text=Christ%20is%20your%20sole%20treasure,also%20the%20Synod%20of%20Reconciliation.

23. John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata,* 21.

24. Ibid.

25. John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* [Encyclical] (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993).

ted yourselves by consecrating yourselves without reserve to God through the profession of the evangelical counsels is a particular expression of interior freedom, just as the definitive expression of Christ's freedom was His obedience 'unto death.'"[26] Thus, authentic obedience represents the fullest exercise of freedom, not its negation.

The evangelical counsels, particularly the vow of obedience, are expressions of the Kingdom of God already present, pointing toward its future fulfillment. The consecrated person, through obedience, lives a sign of the ultimate reign of God.[27] It means that the religious who live out the vow of obedience are following Christ's example of submission to the Father and embodying **the already-but-not-yet** Kingdom of God. While living out in the present, their obedience anticipates the perfect obedience of all creation to God that will be realized in the eschaton. **Through their lives, consecrated persons proclaim that the Kingdom of God has already begun to break into the world and that it will one day come in its fullness.**

The Trinitarian Foundation of Obedience based on St. John Paul II's Teachings

Another fundamental principle of religious obedience is its Trinitarian nature. The obedience of Christ ultimately reflects an expression of Trinitarian love, specifically the Son's love for and obedience to the Father. Consequently, the obedience of the consecrated individual possesses a Trinitarian character. "The characteristic feature of Jesus – the chaste, poor, and obedient one – are perpetually evident amidst the world,"[28] through

26. *Redemptionis Donum,* 13.

27. John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*.

28. Ibid., 1.

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the consecrated life, thereby directing **the gaze of the faithful toward "the mystery of the Kingdom"** (cf. Mk 10:15). Consecrated men and women, responding to the call of the Father and the inspiration of the Spirit, *pursue* Christ with undivided hearts. From a Trinitarian perspective, the vow of obedience is a manifestation of our identity as children of the Father through the Son. Through their obedience, they aspire to convey their comprehension of being children of the Father, as succinctly expressed by John Paul II.[29]

In *Vita Consecrata*, John Paul II taught that the evangelical counsels, and obedience in particular, place consecrated persons within the dynamic of Trinitarian love: "When poverty is lived according to the example of Christ…it becomes an expression of the total gift of self which the three Divine Persons make to one another…Obedience, practiced in imitation of Christ…is a reflection in the history of the loving harmony between the three Divine Persons."[30] In this profound reflection, St. John Paul II reveals that poverty and obedience are moral virtues and pathways to the eternal love between the Divine Persons of the Holy Trinity. Christ's life, marked by poverty and obedience, becomes the model for how Christians live these virtues. By doing so, they enter into the divine life and reflect the unity, harmony, and self-giving love of the Trinity in history. Poverty, when lived as Christ lived it, becomes an expression of total self-gift, and obedience reflects the loving harmony of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Together, these virtues form a profound spiritual union with God and allow Christians to participate in the very essence of divine love. Obedience thus reflects the Son's **self-surrender to the Father** and the Holy Spirit's action. Moreover, the consecrated

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid., 21.

life "proclaims" the Trinity: "The consecrated life... becomes a confession and a sign of the Trinity, whose mystery is held up to the Church as the model and source of every form of Christian life," John Paul II writes.[31] The fraternal communion that arises from shared obedience in a community is an eloquent witness to the Trinity, mirroring the unity of Persons. It means that the fraternal communion within the Christian community, founded on shared obedience and love, becomes a visible sign of the invisible unity and love within the Godhead. Just as the three Divine Persons of the Trinity are united in their love and mutual self-giving, so is the community united in their obedience to God and love for one another. Through its shared life of obedience, the community reflects the deeper spiritual reality of God's inner life. In short, the vow of obedience possesses a profound **theological depth**. It is Christological (as it imitates the Son) and relationally Trinitarian (sharing in the Son's relationship with the Father through the Spirit's grace). Thus, obedience engages the entire person in response to the Triune God.

The Ecclesiological Foundation of Obedience based on St. John Paul II's Teachings

St. John Paul II also situates religious obedience firmly in the context of the Church, underlining its **ecclesial dimension**. He emphasizes that the vow of obedience in religious life has an **essential ecclesial and missionary dimension**. When a religious person submits to their legitimate superiors for the love of God, it is not only a private virtue but "an ecclesial act." By vow, religious bind themselves "to the Lord in a

31. John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata.*

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special way," but **always "through the Church."**[32] Obedience is lived **within an ecclesial structure**. Consecrated persons promise obedience to their legitimate superiors according to the rule of each institute.[33] This is based on the faith that Christ entrusts authority to the Church's pastors and religious superiors as '**mediators' of His will**. The Letter to the Hebrews exhorts, "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls" (Heb 13:17) – a verse John Paul II frequently quoted to religious.[34] He believed that **religious submission to superiors, given in faith, is an extension of one's obedience to God.** For example, addressing a gathering of Jesuits – who take a special fourth vow of obedience to the Pope – John Paul II explained that the **"most secret motivation"** for their distinctive obedience is that of being able to respond 'immediately, without delay' to the needs of the Church. Here, we see the ecclesial purpose. Obedience makes the religious **available for mission wherever the Church needs,** in union with the hierarchy. He believed the Church counts on religious people's complete and generous obedience as collaborators in her apostolic mission. Consecrated persons are called to "think with the Church" (*sentire cum Ecclesia*) and act in union with the Magisterium and their pastors.[35] This ecclesial obedience ensures that the **charisms of religious orders remain at the service of ecclesial communion** rather than personal whim. He even warned that if the "tether" of the vow of obedience to the Pope were loosened, an elite order could stray into becoming a "freelancing clique…convinced

32. John Paul II, *Special Message of Pope John Paul II for World Day of Consecrated Life*, Speeches, 2005, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/consecrated_life/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_20050202_consecrated-life.html.

33. See *Redemptionis Donum.*

34. Ibid.

35. Ibid.

that its own superior intelligence and moral rectitude allowed it to carve out its own path,"[36] undermining unity. With this, fidelity to the vow of obedience safeguards the religious institute's **communion with the Church's authority**.

The Pneumatological Foundation of Obedience based on St. John Paul II's Teachings

Another theological foundation of obedience, often implicit, is pneumatological – relating to the Holy Spirit. John Paul II highlights that the ability to obey in faith is a gift of the Spirit at work in the Church. In *Redemptionis Donum*, he wrote that Christ's example **derives from the "total availability to the Holy Spirit,"** a characteristic of religious obedience.[37] The Holy Spirit prompts individuals to undertake the consecrated life and **guides them in living out obedience**. The "promptings of the Spirit" led men and women of every age to embrace this special way of following Christ. It means, therefore, that theological reflection on obedience cannot omit the role of the Holy Spirit in inspiring and sustaining it. The vow is **taken "in the Holy Spirit"** (invoked in the liturgy of religious profession), and only by the Spirit's grace can one live an obedience that transcends natural motives. He notes that obedience makes a person particularly sensitive to the mysterious action of the Holy Spirit, the direct and personal guide of souls.[38] In fact, the entire consecrated life, he says, is "prompted by the Holy Spirit" to be an "abiding re-enactment in the Church" of Christ's obedient mission.[39] This underscores that religious obedience is not mere submission to human authority, but first

36. George Weigel, *Witness to Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 425.

37. John Paul II, *Redemptionis Donum*.

38. Ibid.

39. See *Vita Consecrata.*

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a **listening to the Holy Spirit** who speaks through Scripture, the Church, one's rule, and even the events of life. In John Paul II's spirituality, we shall see that attentiveness to the Spirit in one's heart is a key component of obedience.

St. John Paul II's Spirituality of Obedience

John Paul II's homilies and teaching documents illustrate a **spirituality of obedience** – a lived attitude of **listening**, trust, and self-gift to God. He often spoke in pastoral and poetic terms about how consecrated persons should understand and live out their vow.

Listening to God and His Word

At the core of obedience is listening. John Paul II frequently emphasized that religious obedience begins with an attentive hearing and listening of God's voice. This happens primarily through Scripture and prayer. In the Jubilee 2000 homily for religious, he reminded consecrated persons that their "first vocation...is to be with [Christ], to be in communion with him, listening to his words in constant praise of God."[40] Thus, obedience is rooted in **contemplation**. It is a habitual openness to God's Word and desire. He also referenced the long monastic tradition of ***lectio divina*** as part of the life of obedience. Western monks, he notes, seek a balance of prayer and work expressed in "conversion of life, obedience and stability, and in persevering dedication to meditation to God's word (*lectio divina*), the celebration of the Liturgy and prayer."[41] In cloistered communities, the whole day is structured as an act of listening to God, whether in the silence of one's cell or the chanting of the Divine Office.

40. St. John Paul II, *Homily, [IV Day of Consecrated Life]* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, February 2000).

41. See *Vita Consecrata*.

John Paul II saw this immersion in Scripture and prayer as essential for an obedient heart. He taught that the Holy Spirit "opens our hearts to his inspiration" and draws consecrated people into deeper **"love for the Father"** so that obeying God becomes one's delight.[42] Indeed, **the Blessed Virgin Mary** stands out prominently in his spirituality of obedience. At the Annunciation, Mary's fiat – "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be done to me according to your word" (Lk 1:38) – is the perfect act of obedience in listening faith.[43] John Paul II often held Mary up as "the first of the consecrated," whose "yes" to God's word enabled the Incarnation. He encouraged the religious to cultivate Mary's listening heart and her docility to God's Word at every moment.[44] For John Paul II, a **listening obedience** means an interior posture that actively seeks God's will through Scripture, prayer, and openness to divine promptings. Notably, he himself was an intensely prayerful man. His biographers observe that **he would spend long hours in prayer, seeking to conform himself to whatever God might ask**.[45] This personal witness lends credence to his exhortations that obedience flourishes in a life of deep prayer.

Obedience through Mediators: Superiors, Community, and Signs of the Times

For John Paul II, obedience to God necessitates attentive listening to and adherence to the guidance provided by human authorities who embody God's will in the world. This may encompass leaders within religious communities, ecclesiastical authorities, or even the wider framework of societal structures entrenched in moral and spiritual values. He underscores

42. *Vita Consecrata*.

43. *Redemptionis Donum.*

44. Ibid.

45. Weigel, *Witness to Hope.*

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that God's will is frequently conveyed to us through **human instruments**—such as priests, bishops, educators, or parents—who direct others along the pathway of righteousness. Just as the Incarnation of Christ signifies that God's love and will are manifested in human form, obedience within the Christian life constitutes a response to God's will as it is mediated through genuine human experiences. In this regard, obedience is not characterized by passive submission but is rather an active, responsive engagement with God's plan as it unfolds in the world.

Among the mediators within the sphere of religious life are the lawful superiors of the institute. John Paul II articulates that by adhering to superiors **"who hold the place of God,"** religious individuals fundamentally obey God in faith.[46] He consistently reminded the religious community that their vow extends not only to God in a somewhat abstract manner, but also tangibly and concretely to those who serve in the capacity of God, specifically their superiors. By embracing this notion of **"concrete submission"** of their will to a human superior, the religious provide a compelling testament that God is trustworthy and actively engaged through the Church's order.

Listening to One's Heart and the Holy Spirit Within

The spirituality of obedience articulated by John Paul II is profoundly internalized. It underscores that the Holy Spirit communicates within the depths of an obedient heart. He posits that consecrated life is embraced by individuals who are obedient to the Father's call and the promptings of the Spirit.[47] Practically speaking, this necessitates that a religious individual cultivates an attentive conscience and an acute sensitivity

46. *Redemptionis Donum*.

47. *Vita Consecrata.*

to the movements of the Spirit. In *Redemptionis Donum,* the Pope expressed that evangelical obedience renders one particularly attuned to the mysterious action of the Holy Spirit, the direct Author of all holiness. This assertion highlights the pivotal role of the Holy Spirit in sanctifying the faithful and the Church. The action of the Spirit is inherently internal and profoundly personal, facilitating a renewal **of the individual's desires, attitudes, and actions** within the depths of the heart and mind. This transformation operates as a mystery, encompassing the interior workings of God within the soul, often transcending human comprehension. It embodies a **grace-filled process,** frequently imperceptible in its immediate effects to the believer, yet impactful in its overarching outcomes.

The view of obedience as the Holy Spirit speaks within is the affirmation of human agency or freedom, and that of God's will does not create a conflict. Take, for instance, the Constitution of the Society of Jesus. It says,

> Obedience is always an act of faith and freedom whereby the religious recognizes and embraces the will of God manifested to him by one who has authority to send him in the name of Christ. But both the superior who sends and the companion who is sent gain assurance that the mission is really God's will if it is preceded by special dialogue.[48]

When rightly lived, obedience becomes a supreme act of freedom because it entails aligning one's will with what one sincerely discerns as God's will—even when that will be presented through external authority. This model of obedience, rooted in the teachings of St. Ignatius of Loyola, requires the religious to be interiorly free. That is, one must be free

48. Society of Jesus, *Constitution of the Society of Jesus,* section 3, 150:1, https://www.manresa.ie/sites/default/files/2024-09/Constitutions%20and%20Norms%20SJ%20ingls.pdf.

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from ego, fear, self-interest, or resentment. Without this inner freedom, obedience becomes servile. With it, obedience becomes self-offering. It is a liberation from self-will in favor of divine mission.

Today, we are accustomed to the Spirit speaking without and within through the Church authorities, superiors, and our interiority. In relation to the vow of obedience, it means that we will each have to discern the authenticity of the Spirit speaking within the individual.

Dialogue and Fraternal Trust

A notable aspect of the post-Vatican II spirituality of obedience, as reflected by John Paul II, is the importance of **dialogue** between superiors and those who heed their guidance. Before Vatican II, obedience in religious life often resembled a rigid**, authoritarian framework** in which superiors issued orders, and subordinates were expected to follow them unquestioningly. In contrast, Vatican II introduced a more **relational** perspective on obedience, emphasizing the **dialogical nature** of interactions between leaders and their followers. Obedience has shifted from a simple command-obey relationship to one characterized **by mutual respect, understanding, and collaboration**. This interpretation encourages communication and active **listening from** both parties. Furthermore, Vatican II emphasized that obedience transcends mere rule-following. It represents a response **to God's calling** and **a commitment** to communal living. It is framed as a form **of discipleship**, where one listens attentively to God and the community, with the superior evolving from simply issuing commands to guiding, discerning, and assisting individuals in responding to God's will in their lives.

Trustful Surrender

At the heart of John Paul II's spirituality of obedience is **complete trust in God and surrender to His providence**. He often used words like "surrender," "abandonment," "self-gift," and "offering" to describe the inner posture of an obedient soul. **Surrender** is perhaps one of the most powerful terms he used to characterize the interior life of someone truly obedient to God. It suggests a **total giving over** of oneself to God's will, a **letting go of control, and** acknowledging that **God knows better** than the individual what is truly good for them. In this context, obedience is an act of **trust** and **humility**, where the person yields to God, surrendering their own desires, plans, and control in favor of God's purposes. He also connected this surrender with **martyrdom** and witness, which the Congregation of the Korean Martyrs and many other congregations can attest to through martyrdom narratives. Ultimate obedience may mean literally sacrificing **one's life**, following Christ to the Cross. The Holy Father held up the 20th-century martyrs as exemplars of obedient surrender, and he beatified and canonized many of them. He saw this extreme trust – "Obedience unto death" –as a victory because it shares in Christ's resurrection.[49] For most religious, daily life will not call for a bloody martyrdom, but it does call for a "white martyrdom" of dying to self-will. John Paul II assures that dying with Christ leads to life and resurrection in one's ministry. Self-abandonment is a fundamental act of **spiritual freedom** because surrendering oneself to God releases an individual from the myriad anxieties and burdens that typically arise from the desire to control every facet of life. By letting go of this excessive need for control, individuals can redirect

49. See John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis* [Encyclical] (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, March 1979), 21.

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their focus to diligently following God's call, instilling a sense of trust that He will lead them on the right path.

To end this section, John Paul II's spirituality of obedience, marked by listening, humility, trust, and courageous surrender, presents a practical way to live out this vow. He encourages individual religious members and their superiors to cultivate an **"obedience of faith"** (Rom 1:5) through prayerful dialogue and discernment. Listening to God's voice, obeying His will through human mediators, following the Holy Spirit within, and embracing obedience with trust and joyful surrender all contribute to this understanding. Under his guidance, obedience is far from passive. It involves creative cooperation with God's grace, requiring the full engagement of intellect and will, directed by love. Remarkably, John Paul II relates obedience with genuine **freedom and human fulfillment**, contrasting with modern theories that oppose freedom and obedience. "Those who follow the Lamb wherever He goes" (Rev 14:4) – a phrase he uses to describe consecrated souls – are paradoxically the freest and most joyful, for they have discovered the pearl of great price.

Contextualizing Obedience and Its Practices within a Religious Congregation or Institute

This section discusses how St. John Paul II's insights and ideas can be concretized and contextualized using my personal experience as a professed member of a religious congregation. Though I believe similarities abound regarding experiences related to assignments, work, and the like, this is not to say that the same character or scenario can be found in several other congregations or institutes.

Within a religious congregation, obedience is woven into the fabric of daily community life. The community members

regard obedience not merely as an external rule to observe but as a meaningful choice that resonates deeply with their faith and identity. In their view, to obey is fundamentally to "hear God's word or call" speaking through various mediations – their superiors, their community, and the needs of the Church. Perhaps, religious constitutions explicitly teach that the vow of obedience is anchored in attentive listening to God's voice. This commitment goes far beyond passive submission. It entails actively engaging the soul in discerning and carrying out God's desires. Each decision or assignment is part of an ongoing conversation with God.

Practically, a religious community has instituted concrete practices to ensure that obedience is lived as a dialogue and a communal discernment rather than a one-sided command. A key element of this practice is understanding the role of religious superiors. Superiors (such as those in charge of formation) are not seen as mere authority figures issuing orders. They are regarded as spiritual mentors and stewards entrusted with the brothers' welfare. The relationship between the superior and the brothers or sisters is characterized by mutual respect and trust. Superiors are called to embody the humility and servant-leadership of Christ, who "came not to be served but to serve" (cf. Mark 10:45). This means that a superior's task is not to exert power for its own sake but to guide and accompany the brothers toward holiness and the fulfillment of God's mission. Superiors strive to imitate Christ's example of gentle authority – providing direction and correction when needed, but always with love, patience, and understanding.

One concrete practice illustrating this ethos is the regular community meetings and consultations. Important decisions in the community – whether they concern the assignment of ministries, community projects, or the daily schedule – are

usually preceded by times of collective discussion and prayer. Each brother or sister is encouraged to voice their thoughts, concerns, and insights with candor and respect during these meetings. This forum allows the community to seek the Holy Spirit's guidance. It is understood that the truth may emerge through the members' contributions, not only from the superior. The superior, for his part, attentively listens to the brothers' or sisters' viewpoints. By fostering such dialogue, the community follows the injunction of the Church that superiors should consult their brothers or sisters, and all should collaboratively discern God's will. While the final decision and responsibility rest with the superior (perhaps in the case of some congregations, if not all, to whom the community has entrusted authority), that decision is informed by the community's "collective wisdom" and discernment. This process reflects the early Church's own practice, for example, in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 15:1-29), where the apostles and elders met to discern God's will on a contentious issue, and the resolution came from communal discussion guided by the Holy Spirit.

When a decision or command is given, the members approach obedience thoughtfully and prayerfully. Someone does not obey "automatically" or unthinkingly. Rather, one interiorizes the instruction as part of his dialogue with God. For instance, if a superior assigns you a task outside your comfort zone or personal preference, you are invited to see this not simply as "an order to follow" but as "an opportunity to hear God's voice" through your superior's request. You would likely take the matter to prayer, asking for the grace to understand and embrace God's will in this situation. In conversation with your superior, you might seek clarification or express any difficulties, not in a spirit of resistance but in pursuit of understanding God's intention. This practice aligns

with St. Ignatius of Loyola's classic counsel that superiors and subjects should strive to find God's will together, with subjects allowed to manifest their needs or opinions humbly to superiors. This process encourages open communication. By doing so, obedience becomes a Trinitarian relationship –the superior listens to you, while you listen to your superior, and you both listen to God. Genuine obedience, therefore, involves actively listening to God's voice, which often speaks through human authorities and community dialogue.

As a religious community member, our daily life provides many ordinary contexts in which this obedient dialogue with God is exercised. The community members live according to a common schedule that includes times for prayer, work, meals, and ministry. Adhering to the community timetable is an act of obedience that everyone accepts for order and the common good, even in small tasks. For example, a brother might be assigned a seemingly mundane duty such as cleaning the chapel, preparing meals, or organizing the community's library. At first glance, such chores could appear purely routine or even tedious. However, from a spiritual outlook on it, one can say that no task is "merely secular" or insignificant. The brother or sister is encouraged to carry out the chore conscientiously and with love, offering it to God. One recognizes that obeying these small matters imitates Christ's humility in washing the disciples' feet. Each simple act of obedience – sweeping the floor, washing dishes, running an errand – becomes a chance to practice virtue. Through this obedience, one cultivates humility (by placing the community's needs above their own convenience), patience (by enduring monotony or difficulty with minimal to no harm complaint), and charity (by serving others quietly). Over time, this faithful performance of duty can spark an inner transformation. Many can testify that tasks one initially disliked became, through obedience and grace,

moments of unexpected closeness to God. In other words, even the tiniest aspects of daily existence can reveal God's will and presence if approached in a spirit of obedience and love.

Obedience also involves the readiness to accept apostolic assignments and transfers for the sake of the mission. The congregation likely engages in pastoral and evangelical. Superiors, after discernment, may ask a brother or a sister to take on a new ministry or responsibility. For example, one is assigned to serve in a parish, teach in a school, care for the poor, or perhaps assume a leadership role within the community. Such assignments are given considering the community's needs and the member's abilities, but they might still be challenging for the individual. A young priest (like months-old or two-year-old in the priesthood) might be sent to a remote mission, or a brother/sister who prefers contemplative work might be asked to handle administrative duties. In these situations, the vow of obedience is tested and proven. The brother, trusting in God, accepts the mission from his superior as God's will for him at that time. The process is typically accompanied by dialogue. The superior would explain the reasons and confirm through prayer that this is indeed what God is asking, and the brother/sister might share their feelings or fears. By saying "yes" to the call, the brother imitates the Blessed Mother Mary's *fiat* ("Let it be done to me according to your word," Luke 1:38). In doing so, one finds that one's obedience opens one to growth. One discovers talents one did not know one had. Such episodes reinforce the community's understanding that when God (through obedience) asks for something, He also gives the strength to fulfill it. One's trusting surrender accomplishes an external task and deepens one's faith and reliance on God.

Importantly, as religious members, we see obedience as a collective or communal act. When each member lives

obediently, the whole community benefits. One can speak of obedience as a "unifying force" in the congregation. By conforming to God's will as a body, they move together harmoniously towards their common goals. This unity is especially evident when the community faces major decisions or undertakes significant projects. For example, if your congregation is discerning whether to open a new mission station or initiate a particular apostolate, all the members may be involved in prayer and discussion. After due discernment, suppose the leadership decides to proceed with the project. Even brothers who initially had reservations will practice obedience by embracing the decision as "our decision under God." They set aside lingering personal opinions and throw their support behind the community's direction. This common obedience ensures a unified plan execution, preventing factions or undermining attitudes. It also gives each member a sense of contributing to something larger than themselves – "not my will, but God's will be done through us." If conflicts or differences of perspective arise (as naturally happens among any group of humans), the vow of obedience helps resolve them. This kind of mutual submission for the sake of God's will guarantees that personal agendas do not derail the community's mission.

The religious community life gives flesh to the theology of obedience. It illustrates how structures like superiors, constitutions, meetings, and daily routines can be oriented toward listening for God's will as a community. Obedience is woven into everything from the smallest daily chore to the largest missionary undertaking. Through their practices, religious communities strive to ensure that obedience is not an impersonal imposition but a spiritually enriching process that involves dialogue, discernment, and mutual support. It is a way of "hearing God's call" daily and responding in faith. By living this way, members maintain that their vow of obedience

truly contributes to both personal growth and the vitality of their communal apostolate.

Conclusion

In an era that frequently venerates individual autonomy, the teachings of John Paul II illuminate the beauty of a commitment **to God**. As he articulated, religious obedience does not constitute a denial of human dignity, freedom, will, or rationality. Instead, it represents a **leap of faith** that activates one's highest faculties in submission to divine Wisdom. This obedience possesses an ecclesial testimony, as it "demonstrates the liberating beauty" of a life entirely devoted to the service of God. Furthermore, it bears a prophetic and eschatological testimony, preserving within the Church the enduring truth that "God is God" and His Kingdom alone prevails. John Paul II expressed profound gratitude and confidence in consecrated individuals who embrace this vow "generously and faithfully," referring to them as "distinctive witnesses of love" within the People of God. He relied upon their obedience to yield "fruits of holiness and apostolate" for the Church and the world.

In conclusion, the homilies and writings of St. John Paul II delve deeply into the concept of religious obedience, characterizing it as a journey of radical discipleship that mirrors the life of Christ. This obedience encompasses a *vow* made within the ecclesiastical community, serves as a daily *virtue* to be embodied in everyday life, and is ultimately a self-giving offering to God. John Paul II presents an intellectually profound and spiritually uplifting understanding of obedience by weaving together Thomistic theology, personalist philosophy, and the rich experiences of the saints. His teachings, as evidenced by numerous citations, emphasize that **the vow of obedience is fundamentally rooted in love—specifically,** a consecrated

person's love for Christ and His Church. This commitment is a response to the immense love demonstrated by Christ, who is referred to as "the obedient One" and whose saving love is expressed through obedience, acting as a guiding *light for the world* and a ferment of renewal within the Church (as noted in *Vita Consecrata* concerning *the* influence of consecrated life on culture). Ultimately, John Paul II's perspective not only calls upon those in religious life but all members of the faithful to rediscover the joy and freedom that arises from the heartfelt acceptance of God's will, encapsulated in the prayer: "Let it be done unto me according to Your word" (Luke 1:38).