

THE EVANGELICAL COUNSELS AND THE TOTAL GIFT OF SELF

• Jacques Servais •

“Gospel obedience, which is the interior form of the counsels, because it is the essential and decisive act of the gift of self, in effect conforms the consecrated person to the obedience of Christ who redeems the world.”

1. Obedience: the constitutive element of the evangelical counsels

As St. Thomas Aquinas affirms, and with him the entire tradition, obedience is first among the three evangelical counsels. These counsels, of course, constitute an organic whole; it is impossible to separate them one from another. Like faith, hope, and love, they reciprocally complete each other in the one and multifaceted grace of the imitation of Christ. However, just as of the three that “abide,” “the greatest is love” (1 Cor 13:13), so too does obedience have pride of place among the counsels.

Arranging them schematically, we could say that the question of marriage or virginity should be clarified before a person enters the novitiate, and the question of holding onto or freely renouncing one’s goods arises and finds its response as a rule at the moment of the profession. But it is the question of one’s free submission to Christ—who is known, loved, and followed in an obedience that is not only spiritual but also “carnal” (Péguy!)— which in a very special

way will accompany the consecrated person through to the end of his life. As the initial counsel, virginity¹ is also the most natural thing in the state of the counsels, and if one were to have difficulties in this area, it would be a sign that one is not really called to this state: for far from being something that needs to be cultivated for its own sake, virginity has no other meaning than to fix one's attention on the Lord, as one chooses to be like him a "eunuch for the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 19:12), in an attitude of humility that forbids any self-regard. As for poverty, it is never chosen for itself, as if the goods of this world constituted as such an obstacle on the road of Christian perfection: it is relative to the service of the mission received in the community to which a person belongs. Its demands will vary according to the circumstances of time and place, and the value of the sign that it might happen to take in a particular situation. Nevertheless, poverty cannot be—any more than virginity can—an ascetic practice that a person adopts in order to achieve a personal ideal: its gospel significance is not at all to foster a sort of stoic self-sufficiency, but far more to conform the consecrated person to Christ who, making free use of the goods he needed, "being rich . . . made himself poor," "emptying himself" (Phil 2:7) in order to "enrich [humanity] through his poverty" (2 Cor 8:9).

¹Although canon law and the Magisterium typically employ the more common expression "counsel of chastity" (cf. *CIC* can. 573 § 2; *Lumen gentium*, 44), we prefer to use the term "virginity" to designate voluntary celibacy "for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 19:12), in order to "mind the affairs of the Lord" (1 Cor 7:34). Virginity, as St. Thomas remarks, ought not to be confused with chastity: the latter implies abstaining from the disorder of concupiscence, but not from carnal pleasure, such as that permitted to spouses; the former, by contrast, demands the definitive renunciation of all sexual pleasure (*ST* II, q. 152, 1 ad 2): "Virginity is considered a special virtue, superior to chastity." While spouses are bound to chastity, consecrated people are bound to virginity (*ST* II, q. 152 and ad 5). Aquinas, who explicitly begins from the perspective of a world marked by original sin, sees in chastity above all the name of a virtue that he distinguishes formally from virginity. This latter, however, possesses its intrinsic beauty, its "*excellentissima pulchritudo*" (*ST* II-II, q. 152, 5), for it refers to a purity more ancient and more enduring than sin, ultimately that of God the Son himself, in the image of whom man was created. On this, see Gregory of Nyssa, *De virginitate*, cap. II. In the post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation of 1996—just as in some of his more personal writings—John Paul II spontaneously starts from this same perspective, though in a more explicitly christological sense: "Embracing virginity, the consecrated person makes the virginal love of Christ his own and confesses him to the world as the only-begotten Son who is One with the Father (cf. Jn 10:30; 14:11)" (*Vita consecrata*, 16c).

In fact, virginity and poverty are not lived in spirit and in truth except insofar as they are embraced in a spirit of obedience, which is not only the external form of the counsels, but also their interior form. Without obedience, the former would end up turning into the opposite of that to which it is ordered; it would merely serve to enclose the person into a guarded personal sphere, rather than opening him up even unto his innermost affective core. Without obedience, poverty would risk devolving into a rigid habit, diametrically opposed to that to which it is supposed to bear witness: unrestricted availability in relation to the superabundant riches that God reserves to those who love him above all things. Obedience dispossesses the disciple of these two “virtues,” and by the same token it confers on the two other counsels their positive evangelical significance of the radical surrendering of one’s entire will to the Lord: “. . . when you become old, you will extend your hands and another will gird you and will lead you to where you do not wish to go” (Jn 21:18). In it, the renunciation of the goods of the earth and of the body’s capacities loses its importance, while the essential becomes, in its light, the indifference of a freedom that no longer has disposal over even its power to give itself. Of the three counsels, obedience is primordial, because it confers on the evangelical life the elasticity that stretches the consecrated person to a boundless openness. By breaking down, little by little, the limits that each one of us is always tempted to place on the divine demands, it makes a reality in him of the Apostle’s words: “You are Christ’s and Christ is God’s” (1 Cor 3:23).

Christian obedience thus contains in a formal way the two other counsels because it is above all the interior attitude, lacking which virginity and poverty would not be able to be authentically rooted in the Gospel. But it is also, and specifically, one of the three vows uttered in the liturgical context of the public profession in a religious or secular institute. In this respect, it likewise has a preeminent position in the consecrated life. St. Thomas provides the central reason for this position: “In the vow of obedience, man offers to God something greater than the rest: his will, the value of which surpasses that of his body, which he offers to God through the vow of continence, and that of external goods, which he offers to God through the vow of poverty.”² The vows of virginity and poverty proceed from the free choice of the one who utters them, but through the third vow, the

²ST II-II, q. 186, a. 8.

consecrated person offers to God the very power to choose freely, “taking every thought captive in obedience to Christ” (2 Cor 10:5), which is most pleasing to God. More than the two others, this vow binds the person himself at the deepest level of his being: henceforward, the consecrated person freely renounces his being “master of himself” in order to “depend on another . . . in a permanent way.”³

In the thought of Aquinas, the criterion is therefore not—and nor is it here—the factor of external dependence, which is marked by random circumstances, but man’s relation to himself, “to the good that is proper to him,”⁴ to his “nature.”⁵ Now, this relation is determined by his creaturehood, by the fact that he is made in the image of God. Man is naturally ordered to God, in whom alone lies his authentic interior freedom. This freedom, too, is always, as St. Thomas explains in his commentary on Romans 6:20, a liberation from the slavery of sin: “Given that man is inclined to justice through natural reason, while sin runs counter to natural reason, it follows that freedom with respect to sin is true freedom, which is united to the servitude of justice.”⁶ The state of the evangelical counsels ultimately expresses, in this sense, the state of ontological dependence vis-à-vis “Him in whom we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). Does this mean that all men and a fortiori all Christians are called to declare, using the words of the Catholic Poor, a renewal movement born at the start of the thirteenth century, *Consilia evangelica velut praecepta servare proposuimus* [We propose to obey the evangelical counsels as commandments]? Does this mean that the evangelical counsels are ultimately the path traced out for all the faithful who mean to give themselves fully to God because of the creaturely obedience that constitutes its foundation?

Encouraged by the affirmations of Vatican II concerning the specificity of religious consecration and its novelty with respect to baptismal consecration,⁷ the Church’s recent magisterium has affirmed the contrary: the profession of the vows of poverty, virginity, and obedience “presuppose a particular gift, which is not accorded to everyone, just as Jesus emphasizes in the case of voluntary celibacy (cf.

³ST II-II, q. 183, a. 1.

⁴ST II-II, q. 183, a. 4.

⁵ST II-II, q. 183, a. 1.

⁶ST II-II, q. 183, a. 4.

⁷“*Intimius consecratur*”: *Lumen gentium*, 44.

Mt 19:10–12).⁸ Like all the charisms of the Holy Spirit that the Lord, having ascended to heaven, distributes in a personal way to those he has chosen on earth (cf. Eph 1:17ff; 4:7ff), this gift entails a mission—and in the present case, it demands the assumption of a determinate form of life: the “sequela Christi,” the “fundamental norm,” as the Council once again teaches,⁹ of the consecrated life. John Paul II indicates what it means that the supreme rule of consecrated persons is to follow Christ according to the teaching of the Gospel. He explains it by drawing a close connection between their mission and the kenotic obedience of Christ such as it is described in the hymn in Philippians (2:6–8). According to him, the call to the life of the evangelical counsels is born in the internal encounter with Christ’s love “unto the end” (Jn 13:1). “Those who accept this call, expressed by the phrase ‘follow me,’ decide to walk in the following of Christ, ‘who through his obedience unto death, and death on a cross, redeemed men and made them holy.’”¹⁰ As in the text from St. Thomas cited above, the evangelical counsel of obedience takes the predominant role, but this time it is placed explicitly in relation to salvation history: through the effective practice of this counsel, consecrated people “join the profound nature of the entire economy of the Redemption” and are able thereby to attain “a special participation in the obedience of the ‘single one,’ the obedience thanks to which ‘the multitude will be made just’ (Rom 5:19).”¹¹

Obedience, which lies at the heart of the evangelical counsels, thus appears as the direct path leading the one who is chosen for this form of life to play his role of co-actor in the drama of Redemption. There where, through the special grace given to him, he voluntarily gives to his creaturely obedience the form of a love that “gives his life for those he loves” (Jn 15:13), he is led to surpass the natural sphere of his own desires and capacities and to participate in the saving work of Jesus, the one who, “being divine,” “renouncing the joy that he possesses” (Heb 12:2), was expropriated to the point that his love took on the form of kenosis. In order to understand the meaning of such a mission, it is good to fix our eyes on “the pioneer and perfecter of our

⁸*Vita consecrata*, 30.

⁹*Perfectae caritatis*, 2.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 1.

¹¹*Redemptoris donum*, 13.

faith” (ibid.): indeed, it is in him that we find the sole criterion of the total gift of self in which man is conformed to God in an identity of destiny that preserves the difference of natures.

2. *The Son’s loving obedience:
the source of the work of salvation*

The work of our salvation that Christ performs has its primary source in God’s merciful love, the love that it makes manifest (Rom 8:39; cf. 35).¹² In order to reconcile the world, and us, who are “by nature children of wrath” (Eph 2:3), the Father “gives his Son for all of us,” and with his Son, “he gives us all things” (Rom 8:32). “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but have eternal life” (Jn 3:16). The gift or the sacrifice in question implicitly brings to mind, in St. Paul, the sacrifice of Isaac (cf. Gn 22:16), but its significance does not become fully apparent except in the light of the act by which Jesus “hands himself over into the hands of men” (Mt 17:22), desiring “to learn, as Son, obedience through suffering” (Heb 5:8). Without obedience, there is no salvific sacrifice. *Si fuisset passus non ex oboedientia, non fuisset ita commendabilis* [If he had not suffered out of obedience, it would not have been so praiseworthy], St. Thomas observes.¹³ The passion of obedience, nevertheless, is not, with Christ, a simple act of resignation; it is rooted, for him, in an active consent. He is not only the sacrificial lamb (cf. Jn 1:29), he is also the priest of the sacrifice (Heb 4:14ff). John’s theology explicitly emphasizes his sovereign freedom: “No one takes away my life, but I lay it down of my own accord; I have the power to lay it down and to take it up again” (Jn

¹²Of course, as St. Thomas notes several times, the motive of the Redemption is “satisfaction for sin” according to the order of justice (cf., for example, *Comp. Theol.*, cap. 200), but, he adds, the fact of demanding a satisfaction on man’s behalf is, with God, the manifestation of “a more abundant mercy” (*ST III*, q. 46, 1 ad 3) in man’s regard. He cites Ephesians 2:4.

¹³*In Phil* 2.1. No doubt, the Common Doctor emphasizes the exemplary aspect of this obedience: “Christ gave us an example of obedience, humility, fidelity, justice, and other virtues which are necessary for man’s salvation” (*ST III*, q. 46, a. 3 [no. 2]). But elsewhere (*III*, q. 47, a. 2), he shows that Christ’s suffering through obedience is what confers on his voluntary act of sacrifice a properly salvific character.

10:18). If Christ went to meet his suffering, he did so “voluntarily,” Aquinas explains, “in order to free man from sin.”¹⁴ Obedience and freedom converge in “the blood of Christ who, by the eternal spirit, offered himself as a spotless victim” (Heb 9:14). The sacrifice, strictly speaking, consists in offering to God his spirit, the interior sentiments of a soul that desires to please him by carrying out what he demands. “Christ offered himself for us in his passion; and this work—voluntarily bearing his passion—was supremely pleasing to God, as stemming from charity. It is therefore evident that Christ’s passion was a genuine sacrifice.”¹⁵ If the passion was a genuine sacrifice, it is because it was a free act on his part, in which the thing sacrificed was one and the same with the person making the sacrifice, the victim was one and the same with the priest, and above all it was an act of obedience inspired by love.¹⁶

We ought to center our attention on this loving obedience, because it will shed a definitive light on the total gift of self that the one who pronounces the evangelical counsels makes to God. It is good first of all to grasp the uniqueness of Christ’s obedience before we consider the possibility of participating in it through grace. There are four characteristic aspects of this obedience that we can point out here.¹⁷

The Incarnation, which distinguishes Jesus from all other human beings, is a free act of obedience that the pre-existing Son of God performs with respect to the Father in the Holy Spirit. It corresponds, as Ignatius of Loyola depicts it for our contemplation,¹⁸ to a

¹⁴ST III, q. 46, a. 6 (no. 4).

¹⁵ST III, q. 48, a. 3, citing Augustine’s *De civitate Dei* (6 and 20).

¹⁶“The Father handed over the Christ, and the Christ handed himself over out of love,” says St. Thomas in ST III, q. 47, a. 3 ad 3, simply affirming thereby Christ’s freedom and his loving obedience inspired by the Father. Cardinal De Lulo (*De incarnatione*, disp. XXVI, sect. VIII, n. 102) proposes on this issue the following formulation: it is because he did not want to ask for the dispensation of the precept he already bore that Christ was free, the divine commandment notwithstanding.

¹⁷Here we take up and develop in a free way the synthesis that Hans Urs von Balthasar presents in “Über den Gehorsam in den Weltgemeinschaften,” in *Acta Congressus Internationalis Institutorum Saeculorum* (Milan, 1971), 1024–1032; here we refer to pages 1025–1026.

¹⁸*Spiritual Exercises*, nn. 101–109.

trinitarian decree in which the Son participates as a Son who allows himself to be sent by the Father into the world (cf. Jn 6:38). His coming into the world in order to save it from sin and death is a supreme testimony of God's love for the world. "I always do what is pleasing to him" (Jn 8:29), says Jesus in this regard: his consolation is to love the Father by wholly doing his will, which means to love human beings because the Father loves them. Making reference to Psalm 40:7–9, the tenth chapter of Hebrews describes this first coming, which directly relates to sin (Rom 8:3; 2 Cor 5:21): "When he came into the world, Christ said . . . : You gave me a body" (Heb 10:5) destined to become "a unique sacrifice" (cf. Heb 7:27) for sins; "I thus said: Here I am. I came, O God, to do your will" (Ps 40:8; cf. Heb 10:7). The effective power of this sacrifice arises from the resolution of the Son who, from the first moment of the Incarnation, puts himself totally at the disposal of the plan of salvation, in an existential act of pure instrumentality.¹⁹ In him, in contrast to the prophets who came before him and the saints who will come after him, person and mission, eternal procession and temporal mission, constitute (without confusing the distinction of orders) a perfect unity.²⁰

The instrumental availability that characterizes Christ's obedience is carried out within the context of the diastasis between the objective and subjective dimensions that govern the mortal and transitory existence that is his and ours. In the Incarnation, the Son allows himself to be made man, and it is the Holy Spirit who takes the active role as he moreover does not cease leading and inspiring Jesus in his free, loving obedience. This is the case not only in his activities (cf. Lk 4:1,14,18), but even unto his innermost feelings (cf. Lk 10:21). When the Son is made man, the divine love that eternally joins the first two Persons of the Trinity, in fact, takes on the form of an opposition within the unity of the Holy Spirit: insofar as he proceeds

¹⁹We thus see here, though in relation to the very Person of the incarnate Son in his concrete historical destiny, the idea that was dear to St. Thomas, namely, of the *caro [Christi] instrumentum [coniunctum] divinitatis* (ST III, q. 49, a. 1 and 50, 6).

²⁰To be sure, because of his idea of "subsistant relation," St. Thomas refuses to posit a direct relation between eternal filiation and temporal filiation (ST III, q. 3, a. 5 ad 1; 35, 5). We nevertheless note that *de facto*, in his theological meditation on the temporal unfolding of Jesus' life, the *doctor communis* unifies Christ's mission and person, just as the Gospel does, the former revealing the exceptional and specifically divine character of the latter.

from the Father, the Spirit of love manifests himself in the form of the “commandment” (Jn 10:18 and *passim*); insofar as he proceeds from the Son, he manifests himself in the form of self-denial (“in order to do, not my own will, but the will of the One who sent me,” Jn 6:38 and *passim*). The Incarnation—unto the extreme consequences of death on the Cross—was decided upon in the communion of love between the Father and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the witness of this irrevocable intra-trinitarian decree, guarantees its execution (cf. Mt 1:20; Lk 1:35). To be sure, insofar as Jesus is God, his obedience is inspired by the very love that the Father shows him. But insofar as he is man—and archetypal model of every human creature—he receives the directives from the Father, and does so in a twofold manner. In contrast to the typical situation of the immanent Trinity, Balthasar remarks in this respect:

The Spirit does not appear in the first place in the life of Jesus as the subjective intra-divine intimacy between the Father and the Son, but as the One who presents to him in an actual and objectified way the paternal will, and does so in a twofold fashion: on the one hand (just as in the prophets) as inspiration and a mission received immediately from above; on the other hand as the prior gift given to the Son in the earthly form marked by the law and the promises: and the Son has to treat these things as a unity.²¹

The incarnate Son does not experience any tension whatsoever within this diastatic relation between his will and the Father’s. On the one hand, he proclaims that he does not act independently for a moment (Jn 5:19 and *passim*); on the other hand, his activity of perfectly manifesting the activity of the Father does not impede the expression of his own will (“Father, I wish . . . ,” Jn 17:24), sure that his Father will always listen to him (cf. Jn 11:41). Hence, the third aspect that Balthasar indicates: “Jesus shows in his existence a perfect identity between obedience to the Father and the assumption of a personal responsibility in the carrying out of his task.”²² The very foundation of Christ’s will on earth is nothing other than love, and the joy, contained in love, of being able to serve the Father by making himself the servant of men. With him, filial docility does not reduce

²¹Balthasar, “Über den Gehorsam in den Weltgemeinschaften,” 1025.

²²*Ibid.*, 1026.

to the passive acceptance of circumstances. It penetrates the whole of his person, including his intelligence and will, which are part of the perfection of his human nature.²³ In each of the acts of his existence, from his conception to his Passion and Cross, Jesus acts, as man, with the power of a will that is fully free within its own order. To be sure, it is in total communion with the divine will that prompts it to respond in a deliberate, active way to the external and internal solicitations of the Spirit who directs his earthly life in the Father's name.

Christ's obedience is ultimately "obedience unto death, and death on a cross," according to the teaching of Philippians 2:8, which is taken up again in the letter to the Hebrews. The Church Fathers did not hesitate to see a profound connection between the Incarnation and the Cross.²⁴ The Passion is, as it were, the intrinsic saving power contained in the plan of the Incarnation. God the Father, says Aquinas, "foreordained according to his eternal will the Passion of Christ for the liberation of the human race," and Christ himself "handed himself over to death by the same will and the same action by which the Father handed him over."²⁵ The Gospel shows us how Jesus walks, in the

²³ST III, q. 18, a. 1: On this point, see the definition from the Third Council of Constantinople: "We likewise proclaim there to be in him . . . two natural wills or capacities to will and two natural activities, without division, change, sharing, or confusion. The two natural wills are not . . . opposed to one another. But his human will follows his divine and almighty will, it does not resist it, nor does it set itself in opposition to it. Instead, it submits to it" (DH 556). According to St. Thomas, who expounds the traditional doctrine, Christ's human will possesses a value of its own which cannot be reduced to that of an inanimate instrument, incapable of acting on its own: "The humanity of Christ is not, in God's hands, an inanimate instrument, which would be moved without moving itself. It is a living and rational instrument that moves itself at the same time that it is moved" (ST III, q. 7, a. 1 ad 3). In Christ, the human operation depends, of course, on the divine virtue, which is its principal efficient cause, but it emanates directly from the spiritual soul. It is through the mediation of the soul that the Word acts in his humanity, that is, through the instrumental causality proper to human nature. Within its order, Christ's soul is master of its acts and thus collaborates actively in the work of salvation.

²⁴Tertullian: ". . . *At vero Christus mori missus, nasci quoque necessario habuit, ut mori posset. . . . Forma moriendi causa nascendi est*" [But Christ was truly sent to be killed, and it was also necessary that he be born, so that he might die. . . . The form of dying is the cause of his being born] (*Liber de carne Christi* 6: PL 2, 764A–B). See, among other witnesses, that of Athanasius, *Oratio de incarnatione Verbi* 20 (PG 25, 129C–132C) and 44 (173C–176B).

²⁵ST III, q. 47, a. 3, c and ad 2.

freedom of love, toward the “hour” of his return to the Father (cf. Jn 16:28), which the Father alone knows (cf. Mk 13:32). Jesus knows with certainty that it is for this hour that he came and that he will not be able to go through it except in the dark night of obedience. When, with Mary of Bethany’s gesture, he recognizes that the hour has finally come for the Son to be glorified (Jn 12:23), he hands himself over to it (cf. Jn 12:27; 13:1; 16:32; 17:1) in a surrender that will lead to the most extreme humiliation. The hour itself, in the final consideration, bears the traits of a hard obedience, accompanied by “internal trembling,” being “troubled” (Jn 11:33 and *passim*), and even “fear and anxiety” (Mk 14:33), for the burden of this obedience, in contrast to the disobedience of the one who made the many sinful (cf. Rom 5:19), remains a demand that far surpasses anything that his human nature could bear. As Balthasar explains with a reference to Adrienne von Speyr, it is an obedience that “allows simply to happen what no man could positively *will* to happen (‘if it is possible, let this cup pass me by’), even more, in the experience of being abandoned by the Father, which means at the same time that he is no longer able to recognize the meaning of his mission in this night.”²⁶

3. *The spirit of sonship: responsibility and transparency*

Obedience in the consecrated life does not have only the ascetic or functional significance that one normally ascribes to it; rather, it possesses a properly co-redemptive virtue. Gospel obedience, which is the interior form of the counsels, because it is the essential and decisive act of the gift of self, in effect conforms the consecrated person to the obedience of Christ who redeems the world. To be sure, this latter obedience alone is perfect, and that is why it is correct to introduce here, in talking about obedience in the *sequela Christi*, an open and transcendent comparative, such as we find in the rule of the Society of Jesus: *ad maiorem obedientiam et maiorem voluntatum nostrarum abnegationem* [towards an ever-greater obedience and an ever-greater renunciation of our will].²⁷ The incarnate Son perfectly glorifies the

²⁶Balthasar, “Über den Gehorsam in den Weltgemeinschaften,” 1026.

²⁷*Formula Instituti* (1550), no. 4, in *Constitutiones I*: MHSJ, vol. 63 (Rome, 1967), 377. The expression corresponds to a correction of the *Formula* of 1540 (“*ad perfectam mortificationem . . .*”: *ibid.*, 27): “*Mayor abnegación propia, sin dezir perfecta*”

Father: as man, he wills nothing other than to do everything that the Father commands him; his human obedience totally carries out his divine will *qua* Son eternally united to the Father. It is through him that human beings, sinners and believers, receive the living image of God's glorification, and, the more their faith burns within them, the more it will increase their unconditional obedience, which rests on his unique and boundless obedience. The unreserved availability that lies at the heart of the gift of self to God in the life of the counsels is, in the finite creature, essentially an openness with respect to everything and anything God desires or might desire. The *magis* that inwardly animates the total gift of self immediately expands the soul's disposition to the dimensions of the actual and future divine demands. In particular, obedience confers on the existence of the consecrated person the flexibility that makes him grow and leads him beyond the twofold temptation of spiritual voluntarism, on the one hand, and, conversely, the purely passive surrender to God's action in him, on the other. In the first case, that of temporal activism, the temptation, which is inherent in a unilaterally ethico-aesthetic conception of obedience, consists in the fact of unwittingly taking one's own will to be God's will; in the second case, the temptation, which is inherent in mystico-quietist spirituality, consists in the fact of underestimating the active presence of the Creator and Redeemer in the world, and in man himself as the source of involvement in the first person.²⁸ For a well-lived obedience invites the consecrated person to open himself constantly anew to the grace that precedes him, the grace that is there before he acts, and which allows him to accomplish the actions that are in conformity to his vocation. It is precisely in this way that filial obedience (cf. 1 Cor 3:23) leads him to discern and to bring about what God has *prepared* for him, as the Apostle says: "We are . . . his handiwork, created in Jesus Christ for the good works that God [the

(*ibid.*, 301), because perfection belongs to Christ and to him alone. In this respect, Ignatius underscores more than once the unique character of the kenotic obedience: "Being in the glory of such a power, of such a wisdom, and of such a goodness, he placed himself under the power, the judgment, and the will of man, who is infinitely small" (*Epistolae* I: MHSJ, vol. 22 [Madrid, 1903], 124; cf. *Epistolae* IV: MHSJ, vol. 29 [Madrid, 1906], 671).

²⁸On this subject, see Jacques Servais, "Impegnarci nel mondo oppure 'farci indifferenti verso tutte le cose create' (EE.SS. 23)?," in *Valgono ancora per l'uomo e la donna d'oggi gli Esercizi Spirituali di sant'Ignazio*, ed. H. Alphonso (Rome, 1998), 57.

Father] has prepared in advance in order that we may accomplish them” (Eph 2:10).

The “ever-greater” totality, to which the gift of self seeks to correspond in consecration, takes the form of the three vows that refer reciprocally to one another at the various levels of a personal sacrifice within the present conditions of our earthly existence. The first level is related to the most external sphere: the milieu and the goods that are to be found there; the second is more interior: it touches bodiliness and its highest function, the generative capacity, which concerns a good, procreation, which is constitutive of man himself. Nevertheless, it is only at the third level that we reach the specific order of revelation. The stoic renounces the first two forms of good,²⁹ but not the innermost sphere of self-consciousness, of personal thoughts and free self-determination. It is on this point of obedience, and not only on that of poverty or continence, that the Christian must be “ready to justify his hope before those who demand an accounting” (1 Pt 3:15). The four characteristic aspects of christological obedience that we have just described provided a decisive criterion for judging the authenticity of the gift of self. The great monastic rules, like that of St. Basil or St. Benedict, amply illustrate how the obedience of those who are baptized, and even more those who are consecrated, has its roots deep in the obedience of Jesus. This obedience thus serves as a paradigm according to which they can model their following in his footsteps.

In the preamble to the *Moral Rules*, just as he does from the very first rule of the *Little Asceticon*, Basil lays before the monk the image of this archetypical obedience. In his writings, he presents the Son’s Incarnation as the greatest act of obedience: the Son did not come to the world on his own authority but placed himself entirely at the service of his Father’s saving will. Over the course of his life, Jesus remained faithful to his mission. To do the Father’s will is the motivating force of his life, it is his *raison d’être*, his food. His deeds themselves bear witness to his union of will and love with the Father. He is the Father’s voluntary instrument in the midst of human beings, for he does not do anything that does not originate with the Father. He remains within the plan that the Father has traced out for him, in an attitude of perfect receptivity, not seeking what pleases *him* but solely what is in conformity with the Father’s good will. At the culminating

²⁹Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Zur Theologie des Rätstandes,” in *Gottberitesleben* (Freiburg, 1993), 163.

moment of his life, faced with suffering and death, he abandons himself to the Father in an ultimate renunciation of self: “may your will be done, and not mine!”³⁰ His obedience is a supreme act of love which has its source in the very love of the Trinity.

It is precisely here that the Christian’s gift of self finds its standard. The love that moves and drives him forward demands nothing else from him but that he love with the whole of his being in an unconditional way. As Basil teaches:

When, inspired by so many words . . . , the soul comes to understand the immensity of glory and to admire the excess of humility and the submission in Him who, being what he was, obeyed the Father unto death for our Redemption, I think that she will enter into an experience of love: love for God the Father “who did not spare his own Son, but handed him over for our sake” (Rom 8:32), love for the Father’s Only-begotten Son, who was obedient unto death for our redemption and our salvation.³¹

This loving obedience, which has its source and its model in Jesus, is nevertheless not without objective reference. “When we are assigned, as a single rule and goal, to observe God’s commandments in a manner pleasing unto him, it is impossible for us to do it perfectly without conforming our behavior to the will of him who imposes them on us.”³² If he wishes to seek and to do the will of God in all things, the Christian must learn obedience from the Gospel.³³ Obedience will not become perfect until he observes the Gospel’s commandments with neither limit nor condition, “fulfilling the most important ones even while obeying the least of them.”³⁴ This obedience to the Gospel, understood here as the totality of revealed doctrine, puts the Christian in communion with Christ, brings him into an intimate relationship with Christ and allows him to participate in his Sonship.³⁵ To fail to observe the commandments, according to Basil, is “proof that one does

³⁰*Moral Rules*, no. 12, 4; *Little Rules*, q. 261 (cf. Lk 22:41–42; Mt 26:39).

³¹*Little Rules*, q. 172.

³²*Great Rules*, q. 5.

³³*Moral Rules*, no. 2, 2; cf. 12, 4.

³⁴*Ibid.*, no. 46, 3.

³⁵*Ibid.*, no. 22, 2.

not love God and his Christ,” while observing them is the proof of an ever greater love, capable, following Christ, of “bearing his sufferings unto death.”³⁶

In the *Little* and the *Great Asceticon*, St. Basil addresses the theme of obedience within a monastic community. What he describes in this context confirms what we have seen above: the Christian’s participation in the mystery of Christ’s availability with respect to the Father is realized in the form of an obedience with respect to the demands of the spiritual rule. This rule educates the monk in total renunciation, in such a way that, detached from his own ego, he hands himself over to Christ whose life was obedience to the Father. Whoever lives according to this rule allows himself to be guided, accepting “whatever is decided by his superiors, even if it is against his will.” In effect, in the light of what the Apostle says—“do not do what you want to” (Gal 5:17)—“whoever does what he wishes earns the reproach of incredulity.”³⁷ Such an affirmation is based, in Basil, on a certainty that is inspired by faith: whoever resists or disobeys does not act only against the will of a man, he offends God himself. The brother monk must, on the contrary, “convince himself that he resists or obeys, not a man, but the Lord, for the Lord said: ‘Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever despises you despises me.’”³⁸

The teaching is altogether traditional, but in the case of a Christian who observes the evangelical counsels outside of the cloister, it is important not to isolate this teaching from the broader context: the situations of the world through which this Christian must live at the same time his docility to the Holy Spirit. In a spirit of genuine receptivity, imitating, according to his particular call, the simplicity of life (poverty), unconditional love (virginity), and his free submission to Christ in his filial relation to the Father (obedience), he accepts, through these situations, the will of the Creator and Lord who allows himself to be found in all things. It is not only the spiritual rule, but the world itself that provokes in him again and again the gift of self to God and an engagement on behalf of others. The obedience of the one who is sent to these others is rooted equally in the secular terrain, which has its proper laws and which the superior, to a certain degree,

³⁶Ibid., no. 3, 2.

³⁷*Little Rules*, q. 96.

³⁸Ibid., q. 38 (cf. Lk 10:16).

has to respect because he is, at least indirectly, implicated in the given mission. The consecrated person ought not to experience the assumption of personal responsibilities which the situations of the world require as creating a constant tension with the demands of the consecrated life, for if it is lived in a spiritual attitude of praise and service, the acceptance of these responsibilities brings the consecrated person back to the very source of his vocation. Temporal tasks do not represent any less of a means of connecting the Christian to the very act of redemption than the tasks carried out within the walls of a monastery; they may in fact be a greater means. Will anyone say that it is impossible to reconcile the spirit of childhood (in God and in the Church) and the spirit of maturity (in the world)? The obedience that one promises in a secular community is capable of unifying what might appear as a contradiction in the persons whose roots are deeply planted in the *sequela Christi*. It is capable of leading the Christian to places he does not want to go. In this way, what Basil stipulated in his monastic rule is confirmed under new conditions. "If someone has accepted to be incorporated into the community," he wrote, "once he is judged able to serve, even if he believes that the mission received surpasses his capacities, he must leave it to the judgment of the one who commands him thus beyond what he is able, and to show himself docile and obedient unto death, in the memory of the Lord 'who made himself obedient unto death, even death on a cross.'"³⁹

The specific vocation of the Christian called to live in the state of the evangelical counsels consists in letting oneself be molded more and more by the Christ who has come into the world in order to save men, in conforming oneself to Christ, "the Light who penetrates the deepest shadows, to the point of redemptive identification with them, in order to dissolve them from within."⁴⁰ The believer knows that such a conformity, which is not to be confused with ascetic practices, will remain forever inchoate. Who would dare to identify himself with Christ and his work? Whether he "runs," at St. Paul's prompting, or "abides," at St. John's prompting, the consecrated person does not

³⁹ *Great Rules*, q. 28.

⁴⁰ Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Die Johanneischen Themen in der Regel St. Benedikts und ihre Aktualität," in *Und sie folgten der Regel St. Benedikts. Die Cistercienser und das benediktinische Mönchtum. Eine Würdigung des abendländischen Mönchsvaters als Nachlese zum Benediktjubiläum 1980* (Cologne, 1981), 133-143, here: 139.

place his trust in personal activities, but in Him who comes to meet him and who gives to these always fragmentary activities their proper form of completion. Thus, for the consecrated person the essential becomes, not his personal perfection, which he leaves as a secret in the Lord's hands, but, as Balthasar points out, his attitude of being "transparent to God, to the Church, to the instructions of the rule and to his superiors, to fellow members of the community, basically, in fact, to all men."⁴¹ For the total gift of self, such as the Christian is called to practice it, day after day, is born of the interior purity of a life that no longer seeks to hide anything from God, nor from one's neighbor, but who, on the contrary, allows himself to be measured and possessed, moved and led, by Love, without reservation and without limits, the Love that the Father graciously poured into men in his Son, Jesus Christ. — *Translated by D. C. Schindler.*

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⁴¹Id., *Our Task* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1984), 132f.