

## MY EXPERIENCE OF THE VOW OF OBEDIENCE DURING FORMATION

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“Living with Jesuits will not be easy for you; they are known for their so-called ‘blind obedience’; to test you, their superior might ask you to plant a dry stick and water it daily. If you refuse to do it, they might pack you home.” This was the reaction of a friend of mine when I revealed to him my plan to join the Society of Jesus. Fortunately, I did not swallow his story and step back from my decision. However, I asked a few others about Jesuits and their ways of proceeding before I finalized my decision. Several people encouraged me to join the Society and my strongest supporter was a Salesian, my best friend in the college. In fact, it was he who briefed me about Ignatius Loyola and his companions and about the works of the Society. I still remember him saying, “Jesuits enjoy a lot of inner freedom and they allow others to grow in that freedom. Their formation is excellent; they have a capacity to touch the hearts of people. I am glad that you find your vocation in the Society of Jesus.”

This is the 24<sup>th</sup> year since I entered the Society; so far no superior has asked me to plant and water any dry stick or to do anything similar – irrational or senseless; so far nobody has imposed ‘blind obedience’ on me. My experience in the Society has been the contrary. I often marvel at the measure of freedom I am relishing here. It is not with rules and norms, nor with ‘do’s and don’ts but with love and care that the Society has been forming me. Obedience in the Society has occurred to me as an invitation to respond to the call of the Lord in genuine freedom. It is grounded, as GC 35 emphasizes,

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“in the desire to be sent effectively, to serve completely, and to create ever stronger bonds of union among ourselves.” (D.4, n.23)

Before joining the Society I had many friends in the college and in my hometown, and I was deeply attached to them. We used to meet everyday and spend hours together chatting, playing cards etc. I had picked up the habit of smoking also. In my first year in the Society, in the Pre-novitiate, I felt hard to adjust with these two things: to be away from my friends and to give up smoking. After a few weeks' struggle an easy solution offered itself. The Pre-novitiate house was situated just 10 kms away from my home, and as I was the only one in that batch from that locality, our director used to send me to the town almost every week for some errand or other. I was very glad to do this service for the community, because of the opportunity it offered me to visit my friends, spend some time with them, smoke one or two cigarettes and come back relaxed. It went on for some weeks and I

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never told anyone about these private visits. One day when I came back after shopping, I saw the director sitting at the veranda reading a news paper. He greeted me, as I entered the house, and asked me gently, “did you meet your friends today?” I felt dazed by that question and looked at him with fear and surprise. Before I uttered even a word came the next

question, “didn't you smoke a cigarette today?” I stood blushed like a school boy caught red-handed by his teacher for some misbehaviour. Ignoring my embarrassment he continued, “I know that you have many friends in the town and you are attached to them, I also know that you have some difficulty to give up your habit of smoking. That was why I kept on sending you to town every week thinking that you may need some more time to overcome these difficulties. Didn't you make use of these opportunities?”

I felt so small before that great man. I told him that I would come back after keeping the shopping bag in the store. When I came back he was in the room. I openly shared with him all that had happened and asked pardon for my dishonesty. He was very calm and he did not ask me any other question but gently told me: “to have friends is not a sin, in fact, we Jesuits are called to build up friendship with people; smoking cigarettes also is not a sin, there are several Jesuits in our province who smoke habitually.” He paused for a while, looked at my eyes and continued, “but

when a person decides to join the Society, he has to say 'no' to many things, both big and small, in his life. Now you have three more months to make a discernment; take this as a test case and see whether you can overcome these difficulties or resist the temptation at least for these three months. If you can't, it may be better that you decide not to join the Society." I did not say anything, but my eyes spoke for me. At that moment I felt freed from those two attachments. Though he continued sending me for shopping every week, I never felt the need of visiting my friends or smoking with them. I consider this experience as my first lesson on obedience in the society. It taught me how a superior can demand obedience and guide a person through genuine love and affection.

I would like to recall another episode which happened during my regency. One of my friends, a junior, had some misunderstanding with his director. As a result, my friend took a dislike to his director and began to express it, sometimes even publicly. The director, on the other hand, was determined to teach him a lesson. He wrote a complaint to the rector asking him to take action against the junior. The rector called the junior and spoke with him. He understood that the problem was not that serious as it was presented by the director. He wanted to make the junior aware of his mistakes and save him from this crisis. He could have warned the junior and asked him to obey his or the director's instructions. In that case the junior might have rebelled and left the Society. But the rector chose another way. He knew that this junior and I were friends. So he called me and explained to me the issue and requested me to make him aware of the problem and ask him to change his style of response to the director. My mission was not difficult. In an atmosphere of friendship and love he could see his faults and accept them; he began responding positively to the director. Without any force he even went and apologized to the director for his rebellious reactions to him. Recently I heard this director speaking highly of his old junior who is a formator now. Whenever I think of the vow of obedience, I remember this rector and his efficient way of dealing with the almost 'lost brother'. Not his position or authority but the well-being of his little brother was his sole concern. Without imposing obedience on the junior who had been already hurt by his immediate superior, he helped him obey. He really knew and practised the true spirit of the vow of obedience, that it is not a whip to punish or chastise but a cord of love to bind together and unite.

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There is a text in the General Examen which, in my opinion, expresses the core of the vow of obedience in the Society. "One who comes to work in the kitchen or to help the cook, must humbly obey him in all that belongs to his office. Should he fail in this, he is likely to fail with superiors too, since true obedience does not look at the person but to the motive, and if this is none other than our Creator and Lord, then it is the Lord of all that is obeyed." (# 84). Let me give the example of a Jesuit who made me understand the meaning of this text. I was a student of theology and was

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asked to chair a session in one of our Province gatherings. There was a hot debate on one particular issue and I could not handle that conflicting situation well. Several members wanted to express their opinion, but I could give chance only to a few and others were not happy about it.

Somehow I managed the scene and completed the session. I was a bit upset about the whole affair, especially about my performance. To my surprise ten minutes after the meeting a seventy year old Jesuit came to me and asked pardon for not obeying me during the session. He told me that he had spoken two or three times without waiting for my permission. According to him, it was a violation of the vow of obedience. I became wordless before his great humility. When he left me I murmured a prayer in my heart, "Lord, fill me with that spirit with which you have filled this brother of mine."

In paragraph 28 of the decree on obedience of GC 35 the vow of obedience is explained in the context of community life. The decree says, "We obey our superiors in community so that our common life can effectively support our mission and become a sign of the possibility of human communion our world sorely needs." When I read this paragraph I was reminded of the way our superior helped us to practise the vow of obedience when we were theology students at the RTC (Regional Theology Centre, Kalady, Kerala). There were ten members in our community (seven students and three staff). Once in two weeks we came together for a community meeting where we shared and discussed every aspect of our life. Everyone was free to express his feelings and observations. The superior never blocked us nor interfered with our freedom. Rather he encouraged us and repeatedly

reminded us that we need to imbibe the great heritage of the Society and follow its ways of proceeding. Of course, he corrected us when we deferred from that way, and challenged us when we showed resistance to growth.

When there was something special or significant, he introduced the issue and invited the community for a collective discernment. We experienced a lot of transparency and fraternity in this discernment process. Though he took the final decisions, we felt that we were all part of that decision. A deep sense of belonging was the predominant feeling and the question of obedience or disobedience did not appear much.

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I must confess that more than all the guidelines given in the Constitutions and in the Complementary Norms, it is the lifestyle of some of our senior Jesuits that has taught me the true meaning of the vow of obedience. We have a senior brother in our theologate, even in this modern democratic world the superior's word is God's word for him. He enjoys an inner peace in obeying and he radiates that peace to others through selfless service. It is really a beautiful experience to live with him in the same community. I believe, people like him are our real formators.

I would like to conclude this sharing by referring to another text from GC 35: "For Ignatius and for the Jesuit, obedience is both a grace and gift. It is a path to which we are called by the Lord, and it is the Lord who enables us to follow this path in his service. A personal history of generous response to the grace of obedience allows a Jesuit to serve joyfully and effectively." (D.4, n.29). Looking back at my formation years I can confidently say that I have received this 'grace and gift' in abundance through many of my elder brothers who joyfully and effectively lived the spirit of the vow in their total dedication to the Lord.