

## FORMATION IN OBEDIENCE AS A JESUIT:

### A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE.'

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On entering the Society of Jesus I had to give up all my plans, my projects, my dreams, which, even without a wound from Pamplona, I had been weaving throughout my youth, as I dreamed about the different ways my life could unfold. This is why my experience of obedience in the Society has been of something which has given me life. Life with all its separations, as when the umbilical cord is cut so that the baby may become independent from his mother and gain strength, but a full life for all that.

### *A Bigger Project.*

I have just started my apostolate in the Society of Jesus on a full time basis. Until last year my time was spent in preparing myself to serve the Lord; to-day it is completely dedicated to fighting the good fight for the Faith! I have been teaching in the Gregorian University in Rome since September 2008. In January of 2001 my provincial called me to tell me it had been decided that I should teach in the Gregorian. At that time I was half way through my second year of Theology. A few months previously I had suggested to my provincial that I complete my law studies by studying for a doctorate, so that afterwards I could divide my time between teaching law and attending to the needs of immigrants. It seemed to

me to be a project that married my liking for law and teaching to my desire to minister to the 'poor' Lord, in this instance in the form of the immigrants, who for years have been entering Spain in great numbers. Instead my provincial asked me to change direction!

When my provincial asked this of me I was surprised. It meant that I would be 37 by the time I finished my university studies, would have to learn three more languages as well as leave my country, my province, my family and my friends – not only those I'd had before entering the Society but also those that the Lord had given me as a gift together with my vocation.

I had already experienced some of the 'holy effects' of obedience before being told of this decision. I can say that in almost all the decisions of any importance that had been taken with regard to my religious life until then – where I should live while

studying philosophy, or where

I should train to be a teacher – I

had declared my preferences,

only to have my superiors ask

me to do something different.

But this decision about the

Gregorian University had a

greater dimension. The place

where he studies philosophy or

acquires teaching skills might make a difference to an individual's life, but it

doesn't have the same importance as a long term decision demanding eight

years preparation.

Throughout these years the greater part of my time has been

dedicated to studying. First of all I had to do my degree in Theology, then

my masters followed by my doctorate. After finishing my doctorate and

before beginning to teach I made my tertianship in order to rekindle the

light of the spirit. During this time I changed my address various times:

Madrid, Rome, Cambridge (Massachusetts), Salamanca, and finally Rome

again. In 8 years I had changed my community 5 times and lived in 4

different countries, all of which placed great demands on me, intellectually

and emotionally. I'm saying this because I think that, to a large extent, it

was obedience that made it possible. With hindsight I think I can say that

obedience has allowed me to go further than I could have ever dreamed or

*obedience has allowed me  
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have ever dreamed  
or considered myself capable of*

Throughout these years there has been no lack of difficult, empty moments. If anything has kept me on course, it has been the knowledge that whatever I was doing was not entirely the result of my own decision. It is true that in so far as I had accepted the mission I was offered, it was the result of my decision, but it was so much more than that. I was not where I was because of some whim or desire or even some initiative of mine –

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however good and holy it might be – what I was doing was part of a much greater project. A project that was shared by other friends and colleagues who were teaching in schools, helping refugees, giving the Exercises and administering the Sacraments. While I was shut away in my room or in the library learning yet another word in Latin, German

or Italian, or searching through old books and current magazines for a way of relating the traditions of the church to present day economic problems, I knew that other Jesuits were ministering in other areas, carrying out Christ's mission in other battle fields. We were all, however, caught up in the same project which went beyond us at the same time that it held us together.

It is becoming evermore clear to me that obedience is only possible to someone capable of inserting themselves in an apostolic body. It is this that allows me to serve the Lord wherever obedience asks me to, knowing that the mission I undertake is far greater than my small task, because it is a shared mission which reaches much further afield than my small area of work. Belonging to the body of the Society has not only allowed me to go beyond my small projects but it has taught me that the fire that burns within me is present in many more places of the world because it is part of a much bigger project.

***Ruled by God's Providence.***

Obedience has allowed me to do this because I have experienced that in obeying one lets oneself "be carried and directed by God's Providence"<sup>2</sup>. Very often this only takes place once inserted into the way of obedience, and even then, only after experiencing the difficulties involved.

When I left my own country and culture, I often felt very vulnerable. I lacked those points of reference which help us orient our lives, as well as all those things and relationships that play such a great role in making our life more human. But I also learnt to trust in God's Providence which gives us everything we need, even though He does not always give it as quickly as our impatient hearts would like. The same God who missioned me, through my Superiors, also made Himself present to me along the road, to explain his Word and the words he addressed to me, and to give me the Bread which allowed me to continue my journey.

During these years I have learnt that obedience is so much more than accepting the mission which Superiors give us. I have felt grateful, but also overwhelmed by fear and trembling, at the confidence shown me by the mission entrusted to me. I

have been overcome by pride, thinking that all this was given me because of my merits, my good qualities, forgetting that absolutely everything about our vocation is a pure gift from God.

*I have learnt that obedience goes far beyond the relationship between superior and subject*

I have felt the support of my companions, friends and superiors; financial support, because my studies have called for an investment, not only of personal effort and time on my part, but of money from the Province, which is the property of Christ our Lord. I have felt supported by the companionship and the friendship of so many people in Spain and also by the friendship that has grown up with Jesuits from other countries and cultures, Jesuits of all ages and sensibilities. I have learnt that obedience goes far beyond the relationship between superior and subject. To live it well we need not only the grace of God but the gracious presence of an apostolic body, which, with all its limitations, strives to live as friends in the Lord.

Obedience can be an instrument of Divine Providence because, as a Jesuit, it is in and through the Society of Jesus that God acts in a privileged way in my life. The superior's decision is much more than the command that a good soldier must carry out. It is the realization of the summons of the Eternal King, who calls us to follow Him, to labour with Him, so that by sharing in His suffering, we may also share His glory.<sup>5</sup> Through obedience we meet the Lord who not only sends us out but also accompanies us along the road.

*Creative Fidelity.*

My being sent to the Gregorian was the outcome of a conversation with my Provincial. I asked him to give it to me in writing. I have carried that letter, the one in which he missioned me, in my Bible for the past eight years. It has been the word of God for me, which at times is as sweet as honey and at others is a double edged sword which penetrates into the very depths of the soul. What has been a great help to me is the fact that in the letter I was not only told where I was going but, in a way, I was given a series of criteria to help me put into practice the mission I'd been given.

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In this I think my Provincial showed himself to be a true son of Ignatius who sent his Jesuits out with precise instructions,<sup>4</sup> even though later, especially if he had great confidence in them, he would give them the freedom to interpret, and even go

against, these instructions, if it were necessary *in the Lord*.<sup>5</sup> I only mention this because probably the greatest difficulties I've had with obedience during my life in the Society have been when I have not had these instructions, these criteria, which serve as guidelines for the realisation of the mission, because these instructions "spur on the runner".<sup>6</sup>

The decree of CG 35 reminds us that discernment ends when the superior arrives at a decision.<sup>7</sup> The decision, however, must be discerned. That is, the one under obedience has to be given not only an order but also criteria to help carry out the order. It is true that sometimes the superior cannot give the reasons for the decision, but he can always indicate the aim of the mission and give some advice on how to make a success of it. The trust that superiors place in those to whom they confide a mission has to be made evident. What is expected of me by sending me to this place? This has been missing in some of the tasks I have been entrusted with. Discernment ends with the superior's decision, and if the decision has truly been discerned, he ought to be capable of offering basic criteria for action. We are encouraged to exercise creative fidelity but it is impossible if we are not given these criteria.<sup>8</sup> In order to be creative in our fidelity we need to know the criteria we have to be faithful to.

*Who Forms Us In Obedience?*

Another difficulty I have experienced in regard to obedience during my formation, which does not result from my own resistance or limitation and – from what I have shared with my companions – seems to be true of others too. This difficulty is related to the way Superiors act. St. Ignatius says that studying demands “in some way the whole person”.<sup>9</sup> It seems to me that if this is true for those in formation, it is true also for the Rector of a house of formation. To be the Superior of a house of formation also demands the whole person,

For obedience to work well, and in my opinion this is especially true during the years of formation, the superior has to be truly present. Presence does not mean interfering, but someone who is there, someone who has the well being of the members of his community at heart, who knows what is going on in their lives and shows appreciation for what they are doing. On occasions I have come across superiors who were more like heads of an office than *father* superiors. The work a person was doing was important, the person himself, less so.

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Merely being present, however, is not sufficient; the superior also needs to be available. This is especially true of the formation years when the need for a superior is greater. This is so because, as is to be expected, life in formation houses is more structured than in an apostolic community, and permissions have to be asked. More important still, however, is the fact that someone in formation needs to be able to check on the direction his life is taking. While responsibility for formation lies primarily with the student himself, the superior, who has been designated by the Society to be its prime representative for the student, lies in second place. Formation is the means of becoming incorporated into the body of the Society. Or to put it in more modern terms, formation is a socialising process which leads the novice, and later the student or brother, towards adapting his former way of life to a new lifestyle. Formation is all about leaving behind this former way of life in order to follow the life of the Society, and make it his

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own. In this socialising process which is formation, the superior is a key element.

In the early years of religious life the superior is the Society's main representative. The provincial is a distant person. Those in formation have not been in the Society long enough to have made friends there nor to have gained the experience which would afford them a wider vision of the human group into which they are inserting themselves. Obedience is not something that can be cultivated in solitude; a student does not learn to be obedient on his own, he learns to be obedient to the superiors that formation puts in his way; and only in so far as these superiors fulfil the role to which they are called, will he learn obedience. Formation in obedience depends on two elements: the superior and the one in formation. In order to develop the attitudes necessary for a healthy obedience – transparency, trust in the superiors, self-denial – the superior must embody those qualities that facilitate a relationship of obedience. That is to say, the superior must be present, he must know how to listen and he must have time. This implies that the superior's first priority has to be the care of those under him. Any other task must take second place.

When a superior has a hundred and one things to attend to, when a superior always seems to be busy, or when a superior, even when he is actually in the house, is not accessible, when a superior has other jobs about which he is far more passionate than he is about attending to the problems of a young person who is wondering how his life is going to fit in with the life of the Society of Jesus, this superior is not going to be seen as someone who listens, as someone who is open to the life, the reasons and the worries of those in formation and who, from this perspective, discerns the mission or task most suitable for him. A superior who has other priorities will end up being, not someone who forms, but someone who simply gives permissions. This is not the obedience of the Society of Jesus, this is a manager who regulates life in a house of residence for pious students. In the times we live in, when our numbers are diminishing in many places, I think it is important that formation in obedience should not be undermined by too much activity on the part of the superiors.

### *Curet Primo Deum*

Finally, there is one other thing that has helped me live out my obedience throughout my years in formation: the desire to be a man of

God. I was sent out to teach without any instruction. Without knowing who I was or what my abilities were, I was given a series of responsibilities. The one that weighed heaviest on me was that of being a teacher in the boarding school where I worked, as I had never before been responsible for the discipline of a big group of students. The first months were very difficult for me because of the work load, the novelty of it all, plus the lack of direction and meaning of working in a team. What caused me most anxiety was the idea of not being able to manage the discipline of the boys. It was here, however, that the Lord reminded me that the most important thing for a Jesuit is not to teach well, nor to get his students to behave well. He has to try and achieve this, it is true, but the really important thing, the one thing that gives importance to this, and to everything he does, is to be a man of God. I suppose that this is nothing more drawing on my own experience to express what the Formula of the Institute says to every Jesuit: "throughout your life, try to keep before your eyes, first of all God and then the way of life of the institute"<sup>10</sup> Basically what I want of my life in the Society of Jesus is to serve God. The way in which I do this is secondary.

### ***Conclusion***

In the long run I think that our greatest help in obedience is the fact that by entering religious life we have relinquished control over our own life – a vocation to marriage, if well understood, should also have the same implication – and we achieve this through concrete, human, channels which are both great and finite.

At the beginning of my apostolic life I can only understand what I do if I see it as participation in a bigger project, participation which can only be measured through the Society of Jesus in the Church. The Lord led me to the Society, and I feel that it is through the Society that He accompanies me and cares for me. This is realised through the superiors – especially when they know how to act as channels of Divine Providence and devote themselves completely to being superiors – and through the whole body of the Society which "is the way to go to God."<sup>11</sup>

*Translated by:  
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<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank Pascual Cebollada and Carlos del Valle, friends in the Lord, who read the original text and helped me to improve it. Any defects or exaggerations to be found there, however, are mine alone!

<sup>2</sup> Cons. 547.

<sup>3</sup> Exercises no. 95

<sup>4</sup> See, among others, St. Ignatius' instructions to the priests sent to Trent (Letters 1, 386-389), the instructions to the priests sent to Germany (Letters 12, 239-242) and those given to priests sent on ministries (letters 12, 251-253).

<sup>5</sup> Ignasi Salvat, *Servir en misión universal*, Manresa. Vol 27, Bilbao-Santander 2001, page 201.

<sup>6</sup> Letter of St. Ignatius to Fr. Peter Canisius (Letters 1, 390-394)

<sup>7</sup> General Congregation 35, decree 4: Obedience in the Society of Jesus, no. 20

<sup>8</sup> Idem. no. 27

<sup>9</sup> Const. 340

<sup>10</sup> Formula del Instituto 1.

<sup>11</sup> Idem.