

## “ENTERING INTO OBEDIENCE”

Paul Béré, S.J.

*Institut de Théologie de la Compagnie de Jésus  
Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire*

When my novitiate was finishing the Father Master wisely warned me that in my life as a Jesuit, the vow of obedience would be my battle ground. What was he really telling me? What were the signs he was reading? These were provocative questions. Now perhaps it is Providence, through the voice of the editor of CIS, who is inviting me to reflect and to share my experience of the vow of obedience. If culture is the matrix for all humanity, then it is not surprising that mine shaped the understanding of my relationship with Christ through meditation on the vow of obedience. The old Latin saying holds: *Quidquid recipitur ad modum recipientis recipitur!* (One receives after the manner of the receiver!)

The reason for my choosing the title “Entering into Obedience” is to underline the character of this modest and yet dynamic experience. Of the three vows I confess that I would not on my own have chosen to write about this will be the one. My understanding of this experience is like speaking about an adventure in faith. It is like the grain of mustard seed so tiny that there is not much to show. That being said, I will give a brief presentation of my cultural experience of obedience and follow with the major stages of my faith-journey which served me well in the school of obedience.

### *Obedience is structural in my homeland*

To begin my life in the Society of Jesus, I had to leave my country, Burkina Faso (West Africa) for Cameroon (Central

Africa). This geographic change marked my entrance into a new way of being in the world; the uprooting gave me a desire to understand the Society beyond knowing various members and over and above what I had read. In a word, I longed to know the interior spirit of the Society of Jesus.

The high altitude of West Cameroon with its temperate climate favours attentive listening to the words of the one with authority; in the Society, the Master of Novices has the mission to transmit to us the spiritual and cultural patrimony, both ignatian and Jesuit<sup>1</sup>. I remember well his discourse on the vow of obedience and the reference to the letter of Father General Pedro Arrupe on readiness and availability. I was not yet feeling

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the full impact of this vow when translated into our mission: *to go* wherever we are sent. In the context of my family, however, to leave and go to far off lands for reasons of work was becoming a common experience. To do something asked for by someone in authority seemed to me quite “normal”, because my people are organized according to a monarchical political system. To obey

authority is fundamental in our social system in which the notion of obedience is associated with listening. A child who obeys, we say of him, “he listens”; he “hears” what he is told. For an adult whose manner is reprehensible, we say of him: “he does not listen to his elders!”; “he does not hear the words!”. As we understand it, two realities go together: the words and the act (“*Verba et facta*”). The actions are interpreted in light of the words; every action is putting the word into practice. It is also by the word that we can rectify some misdemeanour. Thus, a word engenders action, interprets it and rectifies it if needed. The word is thus very important.

The spokesperson for authority must know how to deliver the word as accurately as he can. He is aware of the true value of the message and of the importance, pertinence and relevance to the life of the one who issues the command. We understand that among ourselves: the king or the chief

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<sup>1</sup>I am taking this distinction from P.Taft: “Ignatian” is whatever comes from the experience of Ignatius; “Jesuit” arises from circumstance of place and of person and is in the spirit of Ignatius for those who follow him.

speaks through an interpreter and, in case of error one does not correct the word of the king but that of the intermediary (messenger or interpreter). In my society the monarch, himself, is subject to the requirements of the Tradition and these are protected by the wise elders who surround the king. If he has hindered in some obvious way the good order of society he must withdraw from the world. This withdrawal is issued as a last resort, thus allowing him to keep his dignity and noble character. In recompense, even if the argument were to be proved acceptable, the outcome avoids blemishing the significant role that the figure of authority incarnates.

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This cultural background disposed me to “listen to” every word coming from authority, to present my disagreement privately and unconsciously to appreciate the credibility of the message issued by a superior whom I looked upon (or still perceive) according to the norms of my society: that is, as someone who, in giving an order, carefully chooses his word, is coherent, etc.

### ***Obedience as vow: a road to freedom with multiple challenges***

When I pronounced my vow of obedience, I gave my word. I was affirming my readiness to go wherever I would be sent, to do what was being asked of me and to interpret everything with an upright spirit, investing myself wholeheartedly. The cultural matrix, need I repeat, is not only living but it is also enduring. Adjustments would be made along the way.

### ***Relation of obedience to authority***

In the novitiate, for example, one day father minister asked me to cut down a tree in the garden (an ecologist would have found matter for disobedience!). The tree was not tall but the branches prevented my tools from getting at the trunk. So I *decided* to trim the branches and free the trunk for an easy access to its base. “What are you doing?” I heard the quiet voice of a brother. I could see his disapproval. Did he want me to cut down

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the tree without trimming the branches! I tried to explain thinking that I had been understood. Now, it happened a little later that Father Master questioned me on Obedience: "Do exactly what you are asked to do." You can imagine what was going on inside me. So began my tough apprenticeship. But, towards the end of my novitiate training I met with Father Provincial on a point of conscience. He was asking what I would like to acquire as a special skill in the Society. My heart was yearning to study biblical sciences. The provincial did not hesitate for a moment to confirm this desire as a response to a need for that mission in our province. This attitude had a great impact on my understanding of the relationship with authority in the Society..

This period taught me that my desires have a place, but I must learn to listen and put into practice what is being asked of me. Blind obedience, as it is called, becomes the original stance for the one who wants to live a life of self-giving. The word that I obey engenders my action and, in this way, unveils some unsuspected dimensions of my personality. I was feeling myself invited to assume this original blindness in welcoming the word of authority to find therein a hidden truth.

Later on, in philosophy, the rector (of Belgian origin) wanted to name me "bidelle" (beadle). Faced with the task of being the bridge between the rector and the community of the scholastics in a rather tough situation, I appreciated his tact, but I asked him if he would find someone else. The reasons were multiple. Above all, the absence of the large community from reunions seemed to me the most decisive. After I had consulted some formation personnel, on the advice of the rector, I then shared with him quite simply the reason that I have just mentioned. I proposed a solution should he still want to name me: to reflect upon our way of living in the scholasticate using the African model of age-groups ("classe d'age"). Fearing that this was a subtle way to prepare a revolt after the manner of *Animal Farm* by George Orwell, the rector appeared reticent. What was the matter?

In certain African societies and cultures, the parents educate the child until he reaches an age where he spends most of his time with others. But, wisely the people recognize that education must continue because the eye that sees does not see itself. The concept of age-group learning answers this need to pursue one's own education with the help of others of one's own generation. A certain rivalry among generations is put in its place allowing for easy and frank questioning without fear and without the elders. My proposal consisted in allowing for an open dialogue among the

scholastics, a kind of fraternal, collective correction to elicit a common call towards a personal and an interpersonal responsibility. The rector conceded the project to me.

The lengthy preparation for and decorum of this innovative meeting gave us courage and an openness to speak among ourselves. Those who got up to speak were free because the formation personnel were not present; it was not likely that anyone was speaking just to please. I gave the report to the rector who then convoked a reunion with the community. It was serene.

The service of authority and an attitude of obedience required from both sides are confidence, openness, communion of purpose and heart. Entering into obedience succeeds when the ways taken from the African culture are in harmony with the culture. In fact, the values that religious life seeks to promote are often found in the culture itself but if there is any discord in the approach the values can be compromised. If the age-group reflection is the best example for conflict resolution why not adopt this African cultural model instead of having to have the superior intervene directly?

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### ***Context and conditions of the mission***

When entering into obedience one is both confronted and challenged by the context of the mission. The milieu makes the experience of the mission light or difficult when carrying out the act of the superior's word. Regency confirmed that experience for me. The commitment, in fact, as a young religious with the students of Libermann College (Douala/Cameroon) had been energizing for me. I lived the joy of the mission: the experience of the gift of oneself for the young people. For such circumstances, I give thanks to God for receiving this mission. I was feeling filled with consolations. But nothing is perfect. The community life was not, alas, exemplary. How many times I said: "What business has brought me here?" I discovered that in spite of the state of our community, the mission was not compromised. This common reference point became a

critical pole for me, a sure sign both of the holiness of our commitments, because the Holy Spirit is at work in it and of the humanness of our experiences, illustrated in our incapacity to be “one heart and one mind in Christ”.

My regency thus taught me that the real conditions of the mission are played out not solely *ad extra*, but also *ad intra*. When a young religious comes to learn to live common life in an apostolic community and to interpret every thing according to the Constitutions of the Society, a wave that surges from the impact of community tensions may at times tend to push him over to go to places that are more gratifying outside the community. Fortunately today the Jesuit community recognizes itself to be an integral part of mission by its witness. One, from now on, faces the challenge of forming relationships with “friends in the Lord”.

Entrance into theology opened my eyes to a new era of peace and tranquillity after the regency. Before going there, I had to plan my three years for serious study in theology, with biblical languages, and a good mastery of English that was the teaching language of the Institute of Theology. A fax from the provincial arrived in Nairobi and asked me to

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complete the theology in two instead of three years since I already had two before entering the novitiate. Stunned, I met the rector who told me simply: “We must obey! Register in the second year and work on the first year courses”. From the practical point of view the question was resolved; I had nothing on my conscience. There were only the simple words of Eddie Murphy to put me on the right track of an authentic entrance into obedience. To the new arrivals, he said in substance: “It depends on you to be happy or unhappy, whatever the situation in which you find yourself”. In the night of my uncertainties these realistic words resounded in my ears like the word of a prophet: a man who speaks in God’s name. He called me to go beyond my feelings and frustrations.

The apex of the discovery of this vow showed up during my special studies. The mission that I received after my theological studies was to specialize in biblical sciences. The best place for such formation, I was told, was the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome. The joy of beginning finally what I longed so eagerly to do made my obedience simple and even agreeable. My enthusiasm carried me on the wings of an eagle. The mission

of biblical studies itself lifted my spirits but I experienced in common life in such a special climate the tough demands of the vow of obedience. I received some discourteous comments and questions. "For *whom* are you about to study at the biblical institute?" a fellow professor and companion asked me. "You do not have the cultural depth required for exegetical studies!" another affirmed. Other companions, and not the least, waited only for my return home.

Thanks be to God, many companions graciously offered me their friendship and it was like a gentle zephyr. When, however, I was faced with such negativity, I naturally asked my provincial to send me elsewhere for my studies. But his decision was clear: "You are to stay at the Biblicum". It is only human to be always looking for the better place where one can be guaranteed peace of mind and heart, so necessary in research work that is recognized as arduous. God, however, leads us where he wishes by tortuous paths. He stirred up and sustained in me through the winds and tides a "yes" that came from the depths of my heart. God, it is said, does not promise us a tranquil crossing but he assures an arrival at a good port (cf. Jn.11:33). The grace of obedience was in this context, the discovery that God acts through the support of some companions of the community, that through them he will intervene even at the last minute and that he dwells in the heart that suffers under obedience.

### ***An act that engages the whole body***

This lesson served me well in my ministry of teaching at the Institute of Theology of the Society of Jesus, in Abidjan, Ivory Coast. It was after a year of transition that I was engaged in planning the two-fold level of teaching and research for 2008-2009. And since the Society has just been living the directives of the 35<sup>th</sup> General Congregation, the Institute has organized a week of appropriation of the texts of the Congregation. The first day I read and meditated upon decree no. 1 in which the Society renews its readiness and availability to serve the Church. And just then the Secretary for the special synod of October 2008 on "The Word of God in the life and the mission of the Church" telephoned me. He asked me to meet him in Rome for the work that the Pope had just entrusted to him after the death of Mgr. W. Egger. I had to abandon my plans for 200-8 to enter into a project to

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which I had not given a thought. After discernment the superior and some companions encouraged me in this service of the Church. For a young Bible professor it was certainly a moment of grace to live this celebration of the Word of God. Entering into obedience, however, turned everything upside-down. We look at Mary, the Mother of the Word, who renounced her own plans to hear God say: "As the heavens are above the earth, so my ways are higher than yours and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Is 55:9).

This involvement in the service of our Churches made me touch the finger of the grace of obedience. I value above all the awareness that

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through me, it is the Society, in general, and my theologate community, in particular, who were entering into the obedience. This obedience has its cost. It was for me the occasion to experience something behind our individual and communitarian attitudes.

Spiritual forces do not operate only within the person who enters into obedience; they act also through all the members of the community called to bear the mission of each one.

### ***Conclusion***

What is the conclusion? Obedience for mission as a dimension of my life as a Jesuit is gradually deepening in the crucible of real life situations. It is a dialogue between the conception of obedience such as I inherited from my culture and the conception of the Church of the Western tradition. In short, I have learned that for best entering into obedience, I need to pay attention to several aspects:

- *The conditions of the mission:* one can find oneself in places of great consolations or of strong contradictions, but the essential thing is *to respond* to the situations rather than *to react* to them.

- *Going beyond oneself:* mission is greater than that I can perceive it to be; acting out of obedience, I recognize that something unsuspected



happens and that the entire Society becomes open and ready for the action of the Spirit of God.

- *The servant of authority*: every authority by definition promotes growth and I am grateful for these servants who have helped me. It has happened that others have chosen to avoid their responsibility by silence or distance. A proverb of my people keeps coming back to me: "May the bindweed of the glade, without any tree to encircle, wrap itself around God". God is the tree on whom the one who obeys reclines!

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