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Obedience as Dialogue - The Basic Principle of Monastic Life

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Abstract

This study generally outlines some of the spiritual and theological aspects of obedience. Introduced as a fundamental principle of monastic and Christian life, obedience is commonly revealed in the last and most perfect form as a dialogue that involves communion and aims to transmit a new life, the life of the Holy Spirit.

Keywords

Obedience, spiritual father, freedom, dialogue, person, hypostasis, perfection.

I. Preliminaries

In the Divine Scripture of the Old Testament, more precisely in the book of *Deuteronomy*, we find the following exhortation: “Ask thy father, and he will shew thee; thy elders, and they will tell thee” (Deut 32, 7).

In his apophthegms Abba Anthony the Great (†356) interprets this text as being related to *obedience* and exemplifies with some cases of improved monks who have lost their labours because they did not understand the

exhortation of Deuteronomy, that is, they did not understand what obedience is¹.

From the perspective of profane thinking, the question of obedience appears in the form of a difficult to reconcile antithesis between order and freedom. If as the ancient Greeks asserted, the order reigns in the universe, which requires and imposes subordination (obedience) that means freedom is relative. The same idea goes through the entire human thinking to the present day, that is, if man is constrained on a certain level, it necessarily requires that man has a relative freedom. Christ, as God and Man, unties this “impossibility”, placing obedience and freedom in a superior plan to the relative one².

The man who obeys God becomes free and paradoxically, through a free disobedience, he becomes a slave to the sin. This is what the entire Holy Scripture assures us of. Only obedience to God is liberating; any other obedience becomes obedience to the world and to the flesh. Moreover, grace is the one that frees man, the grace that comes from man’s obedience to God and His will³.

The Saviour himself obeys the Father “unto death, even the death of the cross” (Phil. 2, 8), thereby ontologically restoring freedom. Jesus’ obedience to the Father is not submission but obedience, and for the elucidation of this aspect we must also consider the etymological side of the word, which both in Greek [ipacoē] and in Latin [obedientia] has the meaning “to listen”. Jesus willingly receives the word of God the Father, and as He Himself is the Word Consubstantial with the Father, He is the “Obedience” Himself. According to the Gospel of John, the relationships of Jesus and the Father are best characterized by obedience⁴.

Obedience is at the same time a sign and fruit of faith that frees us from the bondage of the law (Rom 3, 28; Gal 2, 16). First and foremost to obey

¹ AVVA ANTONIE 37, in *Apophtegmata Patrum*, PG 65, 88B, [Rom. transl., *Patericul*, Alba-Iulia, 1993, p. 14].

² Tomáš ŠPIDLÍK, *Spiritualitatea Răsăritului creștin. III Monahismul*, transl. by diac. Ioan I. ICĂ JR., Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 2000, p. 69-70.

³ About the relationship between God’s grace and human freedom, see: Dimitrios TSELENGHIDIS, *Har și libertate în tradiția patristică a secolului al XIV-lea: contribuție la soteriologia Bisericii Ortodoxe*, transl. from Neo-Greek by Pr. Dr. Daniel PUPĂZĂ, *Seria Studii*, nr. 17, coll. *Patristica*, Editura Doxologia, Iași, 2015, pp. 40-47.

⁴ Pr. Andrew LOUTH, *Introducere în teologia ortodoxă*, transl. from English by Dragoș MİRȘANU, *Seria Studii*, nr. 11, coll. *Patristica*, Editura Doxologia, Iași, 2014, pp. 100-102.

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means to believe in God: “obedience to the faith” (*hypakoē pisteos*; Rom 1,5; 16, 26). The Biblical tradition sees in Abraham’s faith the normative example of the natural bond between faith and obedience (Heb 11, 8). For this reason, the Church Fathers have refrained from presenting the truths of faith in a rational way, as a conclusion resulting from a chain of logical arguments. Faith is voluntarily accepted, and man obeys it freely⁵.

II. Obedience to the spiritual father

At the beginning we highlighted some aspects of the obedience, but obedience is generally known from the viewpoint of the spiritual father or “geronta”, which is emphasized and stressed in the entire monastic literature. Moses said: “all the Lord’s people were prophets” (Num 11, 29), but with his usual realism, St. Apostle Paul adds the condition that this charism of prophecy should be exercised to serve the others (I Cor 14, 29-32). In monasticism the name of the spiritual father (abba, geronta, staretz) relates to this ascertainment: not everyone is yet worthy of being enlightened directly by the Holy Spirit. There are spiritual men who are able to communicate the will of God to the others⁶.

This aspect involves the relationship between freedom and obedience, as well as some essential things in the relation geronta-disciple, freedom-obedience. First, the spiritual son’s obedience to geronta is not imposed, but freely and willingly offered. The will of the disciple is enveloped by the will of geronta and it is freely placed in his hands. He does not destroy the will, but receives it as a gift. It is clear that the obedience imposed to the will is morally worthless. The old man does not ask the disciple only some external facts but to offer his heart to God. The voluntary character of obedience is emphasized in the Orthodox service of tonsure of monasticism. The scissors are placed on the Gospel, and the candidate himself has to take and hand them over to geronta, and this is done three times. Only

⁵ T. ŠPIDLÍK, *Spiritualitatea Răsăritului creștin. III Monahismul*, p. 71.

⁶ The idea of spiritual paternity is present in the practice and writings of early monasticism, see: Ieromonah Gabriel BUNGE, *Părintele duhovnicesc și gnoza creștină după avva Evagrie Ponticul*, transl. by diac. Ioan I. ICĂ JR., Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 2000, pp. 7-11.

when the novice gives the scissors for the third time, the igumen may proceed to tonsure his hair. This gesture becomes permanence in the life of the monk, a continual and voluntary offering of freedom, and the growth of the monk in Christ is measured precisely by this permanent offering. The connection between geronta and the disciple becomes a dynamic one with infinite forms. Each situation the monk deals with will become a new form of self-giving under the guidance of the spiritual father⁷.

The relationship between geronta and the disciple is mutual: one learns from another, one advises the other. There are countless examples in which the disciple corrects his spiritual counsellor, or the counsellor becomes wise by his disciple's behaviour⁸, demonstrating that obedience does not mean bondage, but dedication and communion. Within this framework obedience exceeds geronta-disciple bilateral relationship, becoming three-dimensional. Their relationship is related to God as the third member of this relationship, Whom the meaning of their ministry is connected to⁹.

In this relationship of obedience geronta is a mystagogue. He does not apply a certain rule or recipe to his disciples but gives them a personal relationship and makes himself a parable of living¹⁰. The elder or the spiritual father is not merely a spiritual mentor, because the most important aspect is neither the teaching nor the authority, nor the training, but the birth of the disciple to a new spiritual life¹¹.

III. The dialogical aspect of obedience

In the middle of the 4th century, through Saint Pachomius the Great (†346), the monastic life took the form of cenobitic or communal monasticism, a form that will develop the monastic communities in the

⁷ Kallistos WARE, „Paternitatea spirituală în Ortodoxie”, in: Irénée Hausherr, *Paternitatea și îndrumarea duhovnicească în Răsăritul creștin*, transl. by Mihai VLADIMIRESCU, Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 1999, pp. 18-19.

⁸ *Patericul*, Capitolul II, 10, Episcopia Ortodoxă Română, Alba-Iulia, 1990, p. 253.

⁹ Daniel LEMENI, *Duhul a suflat în pustie. Lumea duhovnicească a Părinților deșertului*, Editura Renașterea, Cluj-Napoca, 2014, pp. 69-70.

¹⁰ See the examples from *Pateric: Apophthegmata Patrum*, Avva ISAAC PREOTUL 27, PG 65, 224D, [Rom. transl., *Patericul*, p. 108] și Avva PIMEN 174, PG 65, 304C, [Rom. transl., *Patericul*, p. 188].

¹¹ Irénée HAUSHERR, *Paternitatea...*, pp. 193-197.

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history of monasticism and of the Church¹². Or, this kind of life is basically communication with others. Communication undoubtedly passes through the word, the word involves dialogue, and so we discover a deeper layer of obedience, namely the dialogue.

By obedience the man enters into direct dialogue with his Creator, and he listens what the Creator communicates about the divine teaching and will. This is possible because man is the image of God; he is a person, hypostasis after the eternal Hypostasis. God is Person, and He is Hypostasis. “The hypostasis is the image of the Absolute and without beginning God’s being”. This dimension is not limitative, but reveals Him who really lives: “I am” (Ex 3, 4; John 8, 58). “Nothing made or divine can live or be apart from this dimension of the hypostatic God”. Through obedience the two hypostases are put “face to face” in a direct sharing. In such a relationship, man is given the awareness of his own “hypostatism”, when the image of God is embraced above all; he is mostly given the experience of his extremely limited individuality¹³.

“This knowledge reveals that we are created hypostases, endowed with free self-determination”, who can work both positively and negatively towards “The Maker and Our First Image”¹⁴. The Creator made the human, free and undetermined hypostasis pure, but only in a potential way that will be updated. We are going through a longer or shorter process of becoming in order to update the hypostatic form of our being. To assimilate the life of the other involves assuming the manifestations of that person, especially his will in our being. Obedience is therefore an opening to the realization of the hypostatic potential in man. It updates the principle of perichoresis between hypostases on the human scale. By obedience a hypostasis takes in itself the other hypostasis¹⁵.

The movement of our spirit inspired by obedience returns the created hypostasis to the Hypostasis of God, and puts man in a dialogical

¹² Stelianos PAPADOPOULOS, *Monahismul – munte greu de urcat*, introduction and translation by Pr. Cornel TOMA, Editura Sofia, București, 2004, pp. 71-80 și Maciej BIELAWSKI, *Monahismul bizantin*, transl. from Italian by Andrei MĂRCUȘ, Editura Galaxia Gutenberg, Târgu-Lăpuș, 2007, pp. 111-117.

¹³ Arhimandritul Sofronie SAHAROV, *Nașterea întru Împărăția cea Neclintită*, transl. from Russian by Ierom. Rafail NOICA, Editura Reîntregirea, Alba-Iulia, 2003, p. 232.

¹⁴ S. SAHAROV, *Nașterea întru Împărăția cea Neclintită*, pp. 232-233.

¹⁵ Ieromonah Nicholas SAHAROV, *Iubesc, deci exist. Teologia arhimandritului Sofronie*, transl. by diac. Ioan I. ICĂ JR., Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 2004, pp. 270-275.

relationship with God. From this perspective, obedience is a personal and hypostatic way of life. It means life lived in a personal connection with God and with our spiritual father, always giving priority to the will of the other. Obedience engages the heart of man, because the heart is the place where the principle and the centre of the human hypostasis lie and where the work of updating the human hypostasis as the image and likeness of God takes place¹⁶. Man enters into this living theology through an uninterrupted dialogue with his Maker contemplating Him in the spiritual space of his heart. It is imperative to discover the hypostatic principle, because eternity, deification, and the fullness of union with God belong to it.

The monk's obedience grows from an external practice to a hypostatic existential orientation by which the labourer assimilates the will of God and thus the divine mode of existence. It becomes an active work of our spirit that yearns to follow the commandments of Christ, a work that enlarges the heart of the disciple, enriches his mind and gives him a new life. Thus monasticism is above all the spiritual gift of humility, which the monk cultivates through the labour of obedience. Obedience is addressed to the heart of the person whom the principle and centre of his hypostasis lie in¹⁷.

IV. The fruits of obedience

Inside us the labour of obedience develops the power to love all people, to hear the voice of God, and to see His will. This makes man like the Son of the Father Who took all mankind. The disciple carries in himself the resemblance to the divine universality of Christ. He learns to live his various states and situations not in an individualistic way, but as a participation in the state of all humanity. Without obedience the man remains in a closed circle, and the love of Christ cannot penetrate and fill the soul of man, and it cannot give sense to his existence¹⁸.

“In the soul of the one who works obedience it develops the co-suffering with all mankind, and his prayer gradually acquires

¹⁶ Arhimandrit Zaharia ZAHAROU, *Omul – țința cercetării dumnezeiești*, transl. from English by monahia PORFIRIA and monahia TECLA, Editura Doxologia, Iași, 2016, pp. 182-183.

¹⁷ Arhimandritul Zaharia ZAHAROU, *Lărgiți și voi inimile voastre!*, transl. from English by monahia Mariam VICOL, Editura Reîntregirea, Alba-Iulia, 2009, p. 207.

¹⁸ N. SAHAROV, *Iubesc, deci exist*, p. 171.

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a cosmic character, and becomes self-bearing the whole Adam, that is, hypostatic, in the form of the all-encompassing prayer of Christ in Gethsemane. In the state of this prayer, man feels his own union with all mankind, and the love for his neighbour that is for all mankind, becomes natural to him. Such a co-suffering prayer is truly serving the salvation of the world, and both the common Christian and mostly the priests are obliged to come to it sometimes, especially during the Divine Liturgy¹⁹.

V. Conclusions

By obedience a way of life is transmitted, namely the spiritual life, that is, the life of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit living through Himself and penetrating within us conveys His divine life to us. Therefore, the spiritual life is not our own life: for example, the life of prayer or silence or the hesychasm. All these are elements of the life in Christ. The spiritual life without the prayer of the heart or without mission, and social love as people understand it today might exist. However none of this means spiritual life. The spiritual life is the Holy Spirit Himself.

¹⁹ S. SAHAROV, *Nașterea întru Împărăția cea Neclintită*, pp. 240-241.