

## OBEDIENCE

# PATH TO UNSUFFERING AND TRUE FREEDOM IN THE THINKING OF THE SPIRITUAL FATHERS

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(Received 16 November 2012, revised 15 January 2013)

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### **Abstract**

This study exposes the problem of obedience in the light of Holy Scripture and Holy Fathers (especially in the work of Saint John of the Ladder). All the great teachers of monasticism insist on this issue: without obedience, it is impossible for the soul to get rid of the vices of pride, of vainglory and all those that belong to the irritable part of the soul. Obedience is seen as the key that opens the door to the love of God and to the neighbour's. The result of Adam's sin is known to all believers and also is its healing through our Lord Jesus' obedience to His Father to 'the death of the cross'. Only through obedience it was possible to delete the accusation and guilt for disobedience and only through obedience to God's will, man will be able to redeem himself.

*Keywords:* obedience, freedom, virtue, Saint John of the Ladder

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### **1. Introduction**

From the perspective of profane thinking, the problem of obedience is paradoxical and appears as an antithesis, difficult to harmonize, between order and freedom [1-4]. It is well known that the Greeks were great admirers of order and harmony, as well as truthful defenders of freedom. The notion of freedom, for the Greeks, had a profound meaning. By freedom, the Greek understood, above all, the freedom of choice firstly in the social and public relations of the individual.

Later, in the Stoic anthropology, the opposition to slavery is founded on the principle of inner, intangible freedom, enjoyed by each individual, of the right to be freely responsible for his/ her own life (*autarkeia*). In the Greek thinking we find also the belief that, the laws governing the cosmos impose certain necessities to the human life, and that is not pure freedom. Of course, "it is difficult to understand how the Stoics, with their fatalistic tendency, could remain in the history as great champions of individual liberty" [5]. The Universe is governed by order (*taxis*), which requires '*subordination*' or '*submission*'

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(hypotage), and time is subjected to fate (*moira, fatum*) [6]. It is also known that the Stoics had developed a system named by Clement of Alexandria ‘organization of senses for Science’, which meant that there is a need for psychology, which opposes freedom [7-9].

Philo of Alexandria was a great defender of freedom. He has the great merit of placing human freedom in relation to God’s freedom, Who can perform miracles, respectively, He can fulfil completely free acts in a world governed by cosmic laws [10]. Through this, the great Philo wanted to point out that obedience and freedom – in a higher plan – are reconcilable.

## **2. The intrinsic link between the virtue of obedience and human freedom in the light of Holy Scripture**

From the perspective of the Holy Scripture, through obeying God, man becomes free and, conversely, by deliberate disobedience he becomes a slave to sin. Restoring freedom was committed by Jesus’ obedience, even “the death of the cross” (Philippians 2.8).

Analyzing biblical texts, on this issue, we find that only the obedience to God is liberating, in a plenary meaning (any other obedience becomes submission to world). In regards to the attitude of obedience of Jesus towards the Father, that is not considered a submission (*hypotage*), but a ‘listening’ (*hypakoe*, in Latin *ob-oedientia*; *ob-oedio* indicates the same root explained as the listening: *ob-audio*, I bow my ear). Jesus willingly received the word of God and, as the very Word, consubstantial with the Father, He is listening in Person. Consequently, according to the Gospel of John, obedience best characterizes the relations of Jesus with the Father. Researchers consider that the whole chapter 17 of the Fourth Gospel is a final hymn of the harmony between two wills [11]. In turn, Christians are called also to understand and live obedience, as way of following Christ [12], in His obedience, He Who hears and fulfils the word and will of the Father.

Through His obedience to the Father, Jesus Christ became ‘Lord’ (Philippians 2.8) and also the unique Christian Law (1 Corinthians 9.21). It is also recommended obedience to the legitimate human authorities provided that, within them, faith to recognize “the authority of God” (Romans 13.1-7). At the same time obedience is the sign and fruit of faith that frees us from the bondage of the law (Romans 3.28, Galatians 2.16) [5].

## **3. Relationship between obedience and faith**

Divine Revelation teaches that obedience, above all, means to believe in God: “obedience of faith” (*hypakoe pisteos*) (Romans 1.5, 16.26). Abraham’s faith was received by the biblical tradition as the most normative example of natural bond between faith and obedience (Hebrews 11.8). In the light of biblical revelation, human freedom appears in the writings of the Fathers in the relationship between man and God. Just as they defend the freedom of God in

Providence, they insist also on free human responsibility before the calling that God addresses to man. Saint Justin Martyr and Philosopher fought vehemently against the Stoics arguing that free will is the prerequisite and the foundation of the humble [13], and St. Basil the Great says, “What a mindless is not to give each good and evil by his merit” [14].

We can not but mention Clement of Alexandria who, in his dispute with the Gnostics, is the apostle of free will and seems to believe in the existence of a special feature that is responsible for our choices. Thus Clement exceeds the philosophers. Here is the text: “Will shall preside at all, for logical powers were born to serve the will” [15]. Clement denies strongly that the process of knowledge would be mechanic: the image is common both to man and animal. But man judges images, consent is in our power and without it there is no opinion, no judgment, no knowledge [7, p. 225-226; 15, p. 142]. Truth of the faith, says Clement, is an inspiration (*prolepsis*), an idea that comes to us, but also a willingly accepted inspiration (*prolepsis hekousios*), whom we freely say ‘yes’ and assimilate [16].

#### 4. The meanings of obedience

The spiritual Fathers and the monastic literature generally praise obedience and stress the importance of this virtue in the process of salvation and perfection. Saint Diadochus of Photice considers that the basis and foundation of spiritual life is obedience, because it not only destroys worldly pride, but it also brings humility. “It is known that obedience is the first in all beginning virtues, because it destroys the pride and bears in us the humility. Therefore, for those who remain in it with joy, it becomes entry and door into the love of Christ. Ignoring this, Adam rolled in the depths of hell; and our Saviour loving exactly that, for our salvation, obeyed His Father to the Cross and death. And doing so He was not in anything beneath His greatness. For extinguishing the fault of human disobedience through His obedience, He brought back to happy and eternal life those who live in obedience. Therefore, this should be taken care of by those who start the fight with their self, brought by the devil. For, this going forward, will not show without wandering all paths of the virtues”. [17]

All the great teachers of monasticism insist on this issue: without obedience, it is impossible for the soul to get rid of the vices of pride, of vainglory, and all those that belong to the irritable part of the soul. Saint Diadochus considers obedience as the key that opens the door to the love of God and to the neighbour’s. The result of Adam’s sin is known to all believers and also is its healing through our Lord Jesus’ obedience to His Father to ‘the death of the cross’. Only through obedience it was possible to delete the accusation and guilt for disobedience and only through obedience to God’s will, man will be able to redeem himself. There is nothing that emphasizes more the value of obedience, as a prerequisite for salvation, as the monks’ crucified life. That is why monks use to say: “*obedience = life, disobedience = death*” [18].

Analyzing its importance and significance, Saint John of the Ladder dedicates to the virtue of obedience a very large chapter [19]. He says that “obedience is the absolute denying of a man’s own soul, which is clearly showed through the body” [19, p. 78]. We should not understand this remark of Saint John in that obedience means a dissolution of the soul, but entrusting it in the hands of God. Obedience is death of death and life avouchment, affirmation of the spirit to the body, to stop the body from eternal death. It is not just about the renunciation to evil wills, but a surrender of the good will in the hands of God; it is a rational surrender for the liberation from passions, a waiver to selfish existence in isolation, through its agreement with God’s rationality. This ‘*surrender to God*’ of one’s own wills, is shown through the deeds manifested in one’s body, fulfilling only those acts, through the body, that are pleasing to God.

It is shown then that “obedience is incomprehensible movement, willing death... receiving threat with no worry, unsought answer before God, fearless of death, safe floating on the sea of life, sleeping journey” [19, p. 78-79]. We observe that all responsibilities of the one who obeys are passed on the counsellor or spiritual father ordained by God. The one who obeys has only one duty and responsibility: to obey his father, believing that by doing this, he listens to God, Whose will is made known and interpreted by his father. He is therefore released from the concern of what to answer at God’s final judgment, floats on the sea of life without having to endanger the soul and has no fear for the danger of the body and even death. He who listens travels as a child who sleeps while he is being carried in the arms of his father. Saint John gives a concise definition of this virtue, with the value of an apophthegm: “Obedience is tomb of the own will and resurrection of humility” [19, p. 79].

Very often in monastic literature is mentioned and even praised the form of obedience that ‘*judges not*’, has ‘*no reason*’ and is even ‘*blind*’ [20]. The obedient monk allows himself to be led as a dumb being (alagon), term generally attributed to animals. Having doubts and even reflecting too much on the correctness of the received command is considered an act of insubordination, an attitude incompatible with the perfection of monastic obedience [14, col. 888 B]. According to Saint John of the Ladder, to obedience must obey not only the body, but also the mind. “Obedience is of the one who is capable of it, not submission of the one who is not capable. For we will not name the irrational being obedient or disobedient.” [19, p. 78] Although many spiritual writers insist on this, however, to assign an exclusive importance to this aspect of obedience, is to lose sight of the beautiful theological vision that justifies it. The great organizer of Christian monasticism – Saint Basil the Great – noticed the big difference between unreasonable creatures and man: the first execute the will of God, but without understanding it. Man is called to notice it ‘*in virtue*’, to know it and understand it. Then, the understood word becomes the object of a vision and personal conviction [21]. The antinomy thus finds its meaning and fruitfulness: who obeys ‘*blindly*’ becomes ‘*seer*’, if obedience is inspired by faith, it may be the beginning of vision. Saint John of the Ladder states that whoever obeys this way is cured of ‘*blindness*’ [19, p. 385-403].

Texts that talk about a total or ‘*blind*’ submission most often refer to the relationship between the spiritual father and his son, a relationship that is not of legal nature. These texts show that the spiritual father – most often an old monk – enjoys total confidence from his young apprentice and therefore the latter blindly obeys him.

We must also mention that in the Eastern monastic tradition, when entering into the monastery, the novice is informed that he owes ‘*unconditional*’ obedience. Although it is called ‘*unconditional obedience*’, it is still subject to something: it is done in the name of God. “It is a willingness for God. Because it is assumed that the one who commands, does it in the name of God, for God’s purpose and for the salvation of the one who subjects himself. Any command and obedience are authentic only when they fall within the spiritual purpose promised by our Saviour and perpetuated by the spiritual tradition. In this context, obedience can not become an instrument of terror and exploitation.” [22]

Obedience shall not diminish human dignity, but rather strengthens it by assuring man that he is on the path to the Kingdom. When obedience is simply conformism without motivation and spiritual meaning, then it becomes humiliation. When the command is meaningless from a spiritual point of view, arising from the passionate will of he who commands, then it is tyranny [22, p. 127-128]. The wisest of the Fathers did not exercised their right to command, but with discretion and wisdom. The one who commands does not create for himself the right to command, but the listener creates this right for him, as he decides to obey. He who commands has to do it with his own example and he shall not command what he can not accomplish [20, p. 190].

In the monastic spirituality, the practice of obedience becomes first of all an *exercise* and then a *skill* known as ‘*cutting the will*’. Its practice required that at first monks to live in communion for several years, and only after learning it they could embrace hermitic life or idioritmia.

This is highlighted by Saint John of the Ladder: “All who are preparing to undress for the stadium of understanding confession; all who are trying to take Christ’s yoke on their neck; all who are looking to put their burden on the necks of others; all who hurry to register will fully their gains (from labours) and expect that in their return they receive the freedom; all who walk through this giant sea, floating uplifted on the shoulders of others, know that they have started travelling through a short and rough road, having on it a single possible wandering: it is called the order of self (idioritmia). He who cast this one in choosing what seems right and spiritual and acceptable to God, reached the target before hitting the road. Obedience lies in not believing oneself in those good until the end of life”. [18, p. 80-81]

Obedient is the man who rejected the order of self and follows the teacher. The one who judges and takes into account all details, despises; he who despises, no longer listens. Saint John suggests that “parents call singing a weapon, the prayer a wall, the tear an immaculate bathroom. And happy obedience they considered confession (i.e. martyrdom), without which none of those enthusiasts will see the Lord”. [19, p. 82] And then continues: “He who submits, gives

himself a judgment regarding him. For if he listens to the uttermost the Lord, even if it seems that he does not do it to the uttermost, he is freed from his condemnation. And if he fulfils his will in certain things, even if it seems that he listens, he carries his burden himself". [19, p. 82]

Based on trust, obedience can become a free and voluntary act, virtue meant to establish interpersonal communion. Obedience as a virtue, but as free and voluntary act, removing distance and antagonism to cultivate closeness, mutual respect and confidence creates the good habits. In this case, obedience is a natural and necessary need, both individually and socially. Obedience as virtue is thus a conscious and free act of submission to the superiors establishing through communication and communion the order of progress in personal and social life [23].

In continuing the analysis that he makes to obedience Saint John dedicates an ample space to the reports: on the repentant thief, on Isidor, on Laurentie, on the treasurer, on Avachir, on archdeacon Macedonius, on Saint Mina, on Saint Acacius and on John Savoitul or Antioch [19, p. 83-135]. Saint John writes that he saw in that monastery "people of great veneration and holiness, spending as children in obedience and with the highest praise, their humility" [19, p. 88]. Asking what 'comfort' have they found in so much effort, some of them said they "found deep humility, through which they managed to banish from themselves the whole war, while others have gained the perfect callousness and the lack of pain to gossip and harsh words" [19, p. 88].

Particularly impressive and evocative is the story about Isidoros. He was a native of Alexandria, from a noble family. Wishing to embrace the monastic life, the monastery abbot said to him: "If you decided to take the yoke of Christ, I want you to get used first and foremost to obedience". Isidoros replied: "As iron surrenders to the blacksmith, so I, you holy, I give myself to you". Enjoying this response, the abbot gave Isidoros the ascetic rule and said to him: "I desire you to stay, brother, at the gate of the monastery and kneel in front of every soul that enters and exits saying: 'Pray for me, Father, for I am possessed by evil spirit'. And he obeyed this as the angel the Lord."

He did so for seven years, managing to gain the deepest humility. The abbot was impressed by Isidoros' obedience shown during the seven years and he wanted to ordain him (probably to the priesthood), but he refused, considering himself unworthy. Saint John asked this great Isidoros, what work had in his mind, what was he thinking while sitting at the gate? "I considered, he replied, that for my sins I sold myself. That is why I was doing penitence with all bitterness, with compulsion and blood. And after one year, I did not have sorrow in my heart, waiting the payment from God for patience. Passing another year, I considered myself unworthy, in my heart, of the monastery life and of seeing and speaking with the other monks and of sharing the divine Mysteries and of looking at someone in the face, but with eyes looking down, and even below in mind, I was asking those who went in and out to pray for me." [19, p. 90-91]

A little distress suffered for God is greater than a great deed committed without trouble, because willingly accepted trouble proves faith and love. Rest arises from the idleness of consciousness. That is why in trouble saints have proved themselves in the love of Christ and not in rest. It's worth more enduring pain, than suffering doing a good deed. "He who receives the troubles of the present awaiting goodness later found out the knowledge of the truth and will rescue himself easily from anger and sorrow." [19, p. 132-133] He who receives the troubles as tests succeeds in knowing better the complexity of his nature, than that for whom all goes smoothly and who limits his knowledge only to a surface one, shallow, of his being.

In the story of Saint Mina we find the recommendation. "Stick in the wood of the soul, as in a cross, your mind, as an anvil which is beaten, mocked, reviled, derided, wronged as incessant blows of hammers, but soft, not suffering any crushing, but remains full, smooth and firm. Throw your will as a garment of shame and enter the arena stripped of it, even if it is a rare and hard thing to find. Dress up the breastplate of faith that can not be broken or torn apart by unbelief... Hold in the reins of righteousness the senses of touch, that jump brazenly ahead. With the remembrance of death restrain your eye that wants to search out every moment the greatness of bodies and their beauty. Bring to silence, through taking care of itself, the curious mind that wants to condemn the brother for un-carrying, showing in an undeceptive way all the love and mercy to its neighbour..." [19, p. 100-101] The phrase '*your will*' in this passage is contrary to the will of God, it is the individualistic, selfish will, who '*dresses*' man in clothes unpleasant to God and the others, giving him a harsh appearance. He, who will not forsake this selfish will of his, is the enemy of God and of his fellow men and is unable to bear the unpleasant privations of labours, because he relies only on his limited power.

After that it is shown that "of obedience is born the humility, of humility is born the unsuffering, if, in our humility, our Lord remembered us and saved us from our enemies (Psalms 135.23). Therefore nothing will prevent us from saying that of obedience arises unsuffering, through which comes the humility. For unsuffering starts from humility, as the law of Moses." [19, p. 112-113]

He, who obeyed and then went out of obedience, would know the heaven where he was. Saint John concludes on this issue, stating that: "As trees swayed by the wind deepen their roots, so those who spend obeying acquire strong and steadfast souls. He who has spent in silence, knew his weakness and, striving, surrendered to obedience, he, being blind, looked towards Christ without effort." [19, p. 134-135]

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