

11. Being helped to judge rightly. Obedience.

What I was saying about the evangelical judgment of our interest is an important aspect that, according to me, is not sufficiently emphasized in formation, even in formation to live out the vows and promises.

In fact, I realize that 90% of the infidelities to a vocation and to the commitments it implies, both in the religious life and in the lay life, come from an error, or at least from a confusion, in judgment about what is best for us. At times we have this confusion of judgment concerning others, and then, especially if we are appointed with the formation or guiding of a community, we risk causing serious damage. If, for example, I were driving a car and I were convinced that the best thing for my Fiat 500 is to shoot along at 200 km per hour, and moreover to do so on a little mountain road, this error in judgment will end up with me dead and rigid in the bottom of the valley, along with whomever I was carrying in the car with me. If, then, instead of driving a Fiat 500 I were the driver of a bus, my error in judgment could bring fifty or so people to destruction.

You will say that one would have to be pretty stupid to be convinced that you can drive 200 kph on a mountain road. The real problem in these cases is not stupidity, because as babies or before being informed about something, we are all basically stupid. The real problem is the lack of humility that leads us to think that a judgment that comes from ourselves is better than asking advice or trusting the experience of another, that is, that what one thinks and judges on one's own is more certain than what one learns.

How much damage superiors and formators cause if they lack the humility to ask, to learn, to listen in order to form for themselves a right judgment about what is good for themselves, for the community, for each person we meet! Unfortunately, in human society, and often in particular in ecclesiastical societies, one is thought to be all the more responsible and authoritative the less he must ask, learn, and listen to others. Here we find the whole importance of synodality, and for this reason synodality, before being a question of practice, is a question of humility in the seeking the truth and goodness of what we judge, decide, and do.

If we understand this, perhaps after some experience of errors and disasters provoked by our proud autonomy of judgment and behavior, we understand why the first vow that the Church, and in particular St. Benedict, asks us to make is the vow of obedience.

I do not know if there is a more concise and profound definition of obedience than what St. Benedict puts at the beginning of chapter 5 of the Rule: "The first step of humility is obedience, which comes naturally to those who cherish Christ above all, because of the holy service they have professed, or because of dread of hell and for the glory of everlasting life" (RB 5:1-3).

In these few verses there is everything. Deep down there are all the vows and commitments of our vocation, but also of every baptized person, in every form of vocation.

Obedience without hesitation, without delay, without putting anything between what has been asked of us and the “yes” that accomplishes it, does not mean automatism, like when you push a button and the machine immediately does what it is supposed to do. Immediate obedience really means *immediate freedom*. For we are not made to function like machines, but to choose, to choose between yes and no. Jesus also reminds us of this: “Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one” (Mt 5:37). If there is no freedom that decides, that chooses, there is no humanity. The demon can no longer choose to say yes to Christ: it has chosen an eternal “no,” and wants to drag all mankind into this rejection of Christ. How sad are all these personalities of politics, and show business, and thought, who are so sold as slaves to the power of evil that they can no longer say yes to Christ, that is, yes to the truth, to life, to love, to true peace! How important it is, then, for us to live out our obedience with truth and love. The point is not at all to obey so that things function well, just like a machine, like a computer. No, the point is to say yes to Christ with constant, ever renewed freedom, on every occasion, even the smallest.

Obedience, says St. Benedict, “comes naturally to those who cherish Christ above all.” The obedience we are asked to cultivate is the yes of those who are in love, the freedom of hearts who are passionate about the Lord. Having nothing more precious to oneself than Christ corresponds in positive form to the affirmation of St. Paul: “For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ” (Phil 2:21). To seek the interests of Christ really means holding nothing dearer than Him, nothing more precious than Himself. One does not hesitate to obey, because before thinking of one’s own interest, one thinks of Christ, is interested in Christ, does not want to lose Christ, even if he would lose his life for Christ, or all that he has, or the autonomous space of his freedom. We live in a culture in which all fight to preserve the autonomous space of their own freedom without realizing that in such a space they are alone, they remain without love, simply because in this autonomous space there is no room for the others, there is room only for themselves. Let’s think of the millions of babies aborted to “preserve” the free space of those who should welcome them. What freedom remains for you without that son or daughter that you did not welcome? What remains to you is a freedom cut off from its destiny of love, of becoming love, of being fulfilled, like the freedom of God, in charity, in Christ’s gift of self to all, in particular to the smallest and weakest.

I always feel small and disciple-like to those who welcome a child who, because of disease or other reasons, ends up limiting their freedom of action, their freedom to do what they would like. I bow down and learn, for there one sees that whoever says this yes find themselves with an infinite freedom, that of loving as God loves. The freedom for which we make a vow of obedience.