

Text for the Times : *Obedience*

Man is in his fallen state because of his own disobedience. Disobedience springs from pride which, as St Bede says, does its own will. In his pride and disobedience man is separated from God and can only return to him by following the path of virtue, by making reparation through humility and obedience. Christ who came to do the will of his Father is a model for our obedience. Religious obedience is but Christian obedience in the wake of Christ's own, carried to its conclusion by which we are made one with him.

Satan was the first to begin to question the commands of obedience. 'Why', he said, 'did God command you not to eat of the tree of good and evil?' (Gen. 3). Before this, man who was without guile obeyed without reserve, not so much because of the reasonableness of the command but because of the authority of the commander. For just as faith in what human reason has experienced is not meritorious, so obedience is separated from the virtue of humility when the reason for the command is in agreement with it. But you wish to hear why we should act or cease to act in accordance with another's will or command. The reason is because in this way especially we are imitators of Christ, as dearest sons; and we walk in the love with which we loved us. He was made obedient in all things for us, not only to assist us but also to be an example, so that as he behaved so may we behave in this world. For confidence consists in this, as the blessed John says. Therefore he was made obedient in all things to his Father unto death and to the will of Mary and Joseph. (*Isaac of Stella. Second sermon for the feasts of Saints Peter and Paul.*)

Therefore, 'he who comes to me, I will not cast him out, because I have come down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me'. There is considerable mystery in these words 'he who comes to me, I will not cast him out'. Then adding the reason why he would not cast out the man coming to him, that is the man believing in him, he said, 'because I have not come to do my will but the will of him who sent me'. Who is it who will be cast out from that delightful and very pleasant resting place, whither the servant who does his master's will is invited to enter, except the proud man? Except the soul trusting in itself and seeking to be in its own possession? Nor would the psalmist have said 'Is not my

soul subject to God?', if he had had control over it. The soul which is subject to the grace of God through humility will never be cast forth, but will enter into the joy of its Lord. Therefore so that pride, the cause of all diseases, might be healed, the Son of God came down and was made humble. What is man to the proud? God was made humble on your account. Perhaps it makes you feel ashamed that a humble man is imitated: at least imitate a humble God. The Son of God came among mankind and was made humble. You are taught that you should become humble, you are not taught that from being a man you should become a beast. God was made man, but you, a man, recognize that you are a man. The whole of your humanity is that you should know yourself. Thus because God taught humility, he said: 'I have not come to do my will, but the will of him who sent me.' This is a recommendation of humility. For pride does its own will, humility does the will of God. And so 'he who comes to me, I will not cast him out'. Why? Because 'I have not come to do my own will but the will of him who sent me'. I have come humbly, I have come to teach humility. I have come as the master of humility. He who comes to me will be incorporated into me and will become humble. He who clings to me will be humble because he will not do his own will but the will of God; and so he will not be cast out. Because Adam was proud he was cast out. But Christ who became humble 'has been raised above every name which has been named in heaven or on earth'. (Eph. 1). The teacher of humility came not to do his own will, but the will of him who sent him. Let us come to him, let us enter in to him, let us be incorporated into him, that we may not do our own will but the will of God. And he will not cast us out because we are his members, because he wished to be our head teaching humility. Only the humble can come to him, only the proud will be cast out from him.

(St Bede the Venerable. Commentary on John 6, 37–8).

Through our superiors we are subject and cling to Christ and to God. The friend of the bridegroom stands and listens; but the bridegroom sits and teaches. To speak and to order belongs to those who are masters, but to hear and obey to disciples, joyfully because 'the Lord loves a joyful giver' (2. Cor.), gladly as this friend of the bridegroom (John the Baptist) hears and is glad because of the bridegroom's voice. Many are glad at many things they hear, but not because of the bridegroom's voice. Many willingly obey many things which are ordered but not because of the bridegroom's voice. When they hear what they want, they rejoice for themselves, and in this way they have already received their reward. And so when they are ordered to do what they want, they are obedient willingly but to their own desires; nor do they have anything to hope for from the bridegroom. For what is not done for him will receive no reward from him. Thus the voice of the spouse is the whole ecclesiastical ordin-

ance and whoever judges or despises it cannot be the friend of the bride. The voice of the bride is the word and commands of our superiors. He who despises or neglects them, breaks out into enmity; or if he fulfills them in a lukewarm way or slowly, or with rancour or murmuring, he cannot attain friendship, because he is not gladdened by the bride's voice. The bridegroom is the Word of God, his voice all that happens to us. For whatever happens in the context of time has been with the Word of God for all eternity.

In short the whole essence of religion and obedience is to love what God loves simply because God loves it; to hate what God hates simply because it is hateful to his way; to will what God wills simply because he wills it; and not to will what is displeasing to God, simply because God does not will these things for us.

(Isaac of Stella. Second sermon on the birthday of John the Baptist).

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