

ON AUTHORITY AND OBEDIENCE

THE Editor of BLACKFRIARS having asked me to offer its readers some thoughts on Authority and Obedience, I purpose setting down certain great principles of St. Thomas Aquinas. To these principles, set down in his own (translated) words, I will add a few words of commentary that the average reader may be helped to the fuller significance of the text commented.

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1.

Just as the acts of natural things proceed from natural powers, so do human actions proceed from the human will.

In natural things it behoved the higher to move the lower to their actions by the excellence of the natural power bestowed upon them by God.

And so in human affairs also the higher must move the lower by their will in virtue of a divinely established authority.

Now to move by reason and will is to command.

Wherefore just as in virtue of the divinely established natural order the lower natural things need to be subject to the movement of the higher, so, too, in human affairs in virtue of the order of natural and divine law, inferiors are bound to obey their superiors (*Summa Theologica*, 2^a 2^ae. Qu. 104, Art. 1).

(a) It will be seen at once that the great synthetic mind responsible for this argument has asked his readers to see the matter of Authority and Obedience, not in a local, but in a cosmic setting.

(b) He expects his readers to see, as he sees the Cosmos, or Universe, as a Union of Nature and Will; *i.e.* of beings lacking any knowledge, and of beings endowed with know-

ledge and, therefore, capable of actions following knowledge. For St. Thomas the Universe is a world of Nature and a world of Will: a world of beings whose every action is necessary, and a world of beings having some actions that are necessary and some that are free.

(c) Note the terse and almost paradoxical principle, 'To move by reason and will is to command.'

In other words, a command is an appeal to reason. Indeed, setting aside the theological virtues of Faith, Hope and Charity, Obedience, though not man's highest act of reason, is yet the most virtuous and therefore most reasonable act of man (*ibid.*).

(d) Notice, again, that the natural order is 'divinely established' and is therefore divine, though not divine and supernatural. Thus Faith may be more than reason, and grace may be more than nature; but neither faith nor grace is more divine.

2.

Honour denotes reverence due to a person in witness of his excellence.

Now two things have to be considered with regard to man's honour.

The first is that a man has not from himself the thing in which he excels; for this is, as it were, something divine in him. Wherefore on this account honour is due principally not to him but to God.

The second point that calls for observation is that the thing in which man excels is given to him by God that he may profit others thereby (*Ibid.*, Qu. 131, Art. 1).

(a) The readers of these wise words should not overlook who was their writer. They were written by one whom future ages have recognised as almost uniquely gifted. Moreover, in the short span of forty-seven years he has enriched man's mind as perhaps no one except his Master has enriched it. There is autobiography in the principle that

whatever gift a man has, he has it 'that he may profit others.'

(b) He is but expressing in another way the fundamental doctrine of the Unity and Brotherhood of Man. As God's gift of men's eyes is not given for eye-sight but for man, so, too, a man's gifts of body and soul are not given mainly for the man himself, but for his fellow-men.

(c) We are at once in touch with that social truth which makes authority proclaim itself as 'the Servant of the Servants of God.'

(d) The last phrase of the argument we will set down by itself, lest the uniqueness of its truth and force be overlooked.

Wherefore a man ought so far to be pleased that others bear witness to his excellence as it enables him to profit others.

From this phrase of St. Thomas we may reasonably define Authority as 'self-conscious moral power over others.'

(e) Authority is power over others. But authority is not as such physical power over others.

Nor, indeed, if we use the word accurately, is authority psychological power over others. Authority is moral power over others.

The appeal of authority to our obedience is not an appeal to our fear—nor even to our good sense; but an appeal to our good-will. But this good-will presumes both good sense and fear lest we should act against our good sense and our good-will.

(f) Moreover, just as ultimate intellectual principles are self-evident, so is ultimate authority self-conscious. Both ultimate intellectual principles and ultimate authority are self-assertive only when they are denied, and their denial is to the hurt of others.

(g) But if authority should always be self-conscious and rarely self-assertive it should never be self-seeking. God's gifts to a part, and even to the leading part, of a whole are

not given primarily for the part but for the whole. Yet only in the perfection of the whole will there be found the whole perfection of the part. Hence the danger of such phrases as 'seeking self-expression' or 'seeking self-perfection,' coloured as they are by the idea that 'self' is the end of—self.

(h) Therefore if self-consciousness is the first quality of authority, the first aim of authority is self-sacrifice. Authority is not divinely commissioned to a man that he may have an opportunity to express himself, still less to assert himself; but to sacrifice himself.

(i) A few months before the Good Shepherd gave His life for His sheep, some of His sheep said angrily to Him, 'Thou givest testimony of Thyself. Thy testimony is not true.'

The Good Shepherd answered them: 'Although I give testimony of Myself, My testimony is true; for I know whence I came, and whither I go' (John viii, 13, 14). All the Authority His human nature has, it has as a gift from God to be used for the good of others, and the perfect use of that gift for others will mean finally the exaltation of His human nature to the right Hand of God.

3.

A thing is said to be natural in two ways. First, because it is from nature as from an active principle; thus it is natural to fire to produce heat.

Secondly, according to a passive principle; because, to wit, there is a natural inclination to receive an action from an external principle. Thus, the movement of the heavens is said to be natural by reason of the natural aptitude in a heavenly body to receive such movement (1^a 2^{ae}, Qu. 6, Art. 5).

(a) St. Thomas has here broached the great distinction between a being's powers and its possibilities; between what can be done by a being and what may be done with a being. Thus a stick of crayon can do little or nothing

by itself; but with a stick of crayon Michael Angelo can give us immortal cartoons.

(b) We are thus reminded of what is commonly overlooked; that every active being has a natural inclination to act and a natural inclination to be acted upon. In other words, an active being can be moved either by an object or by a higher being. Thus the eye is moved by an object of shape and colour; yet it is also said to be moved by the will to turn towards or to turn from an object of shape and colour. Or again, a stone has a natural inclination to fall if left alone, yet it has equally natural inclination not to fall but to mount, if some external force throws it upwards.

Some men of to-day wishing to justify all sexual uncontrol argue that the inclination towards sexual pleasures is a natural inclination of the body. But they overlook the psychological fact that it is an equally natural, but higher inclination, for the body to be controlled by the ethical reason. Thus they overlook the principle that a being's inclination to be moved by the higher is its highest inclination.

4.

Since the habit perfects the power in reference to act, then does the power need a habit perfecting it unto doing well (which habit is a virtue) when the power's proper nature does not suffice for the purpose.

Now the proper nature of a power is seen in relation to its object. Since, therefore, the object of the will is the good of reason proportionate to the will, in respect of this the will does not need a virtue perfecting it.

But if man's will is confronted with a good that exceeds its capacity whether as regards the whole human species, such as the Divine good which transcends the limits of human nature—or as regards the individual, such as the good of one's neighbour, then does the will need virtue,

And therefore such virtues as direct man's affections to God or to his neighbour are subjected in the will as Charity, Justice, and suchlike virtues (1^a 2^{ae}. Qu. 56, Art. 6).

We shall find it difficult, if not impossible, to point out the full significance of this passage, if our readers do not see the difference between the act of a power and the end of a power. To illustrate the distinction. The act of the eye's power is seeing. Yet seeing is not the end of the eye's power of seeing. Even in an evolutionary theory of eye-sight the eye has developed or survived not because it is the fittest, but because the being endowed with sight was fittest to survive. Some beings have survived because they did not see.

Biologically speaking, the eye has the power of seeing not for the sake or pleasure of seeing but for the sake of moving and of working. In other words eye-sight is for the sake of mind-moved feet and hands.

(b) This may enable us to see that the object of a power can move that power to its act, but as the end is higher than the act only a higher power can move a power to its end. The eye of itself cannot seek to guide the feet and the hands. That guidance can come only from the higher power, the will, which seeks the whole being that has hands and feet and eyes.

(c) But man is a rational being, and therefore a being that can know both God (the First Cause of its being and lasting) and its neighbour (the secondary cause of its being and lasting). By his nature man is in relation to God and his God-given neighbour. Now relations between one person and another person beget, or are begotten of, duties. Therefore the individual man who by a natural inclination seeks his own perfection as an object must seek the good of God and his God-given neighbour as an end.

Only by reaching this end will man reach his ultimate perfection.

5.

If we speak of *legal* justice (*i.e.* directed to the good of the community) it is evident that it stands foremost among all the moral virtues, inasmuch as the common good transcends the individual good of one person. But even if we speak of particular justice it excels the other virtues for two reasons.

The first is because justice is in the more excellent part of the soul, *viz.* the rational appetite or will.

The second reason is . . . that justice is somewhat the good of another person (2^a 2^{ae}, Qu. 58, Art. 12).

A wealth of texts from St. Thomas would show his deep-seated conviction that the common good is greater than—he even says ‘more divine than’—the individual good, but as obedience to persons and laws is an act of justice to the common good, it is clear that obedience to lawful authority is man’s highest act in the merely natural order.

6.

In matters touching the internal movement of the will man is not bound to obey his fellow man, but God alone.

Nevertheless, man is bound to obey his fellow man in things that have to be done externally by means of the body.

And yet since by nature all men are equal, he is not bound to obey another man in matters touching the nature of the body; for instance, in those relating to the support of the body or the begetting of children.

But in matters concerning the disposal of human actions and human affairs, a subject is bound to obey his superior within the sphere of his authority (2^a 2^{ae}, Qu. 104, Art. 5).

After a lapse of thirty years I can remember an interview with a self-taught Trade Unionist, whom I recognised almost as a genius and his fellow Trade Unionists recognised as a scoundrel. In the few minutes when speech was between us, the Church came incidentally into our discus-

sion. He said: 'Your Church is the only institution that defines the limits of its authority.'

(a) Catholic teaching, whilst recognising the value of earthly authority, equally recognises the limits of that power.

(b) The internal world of thought and will as such, owes no obedience to earthly power.

Even in the outward sphere of human action, no authority, civil or ecclesiastical, has unlimited power. If the things of God must be given to God, the things of Caesar must be given to Caesar because all lawful authority, even Caesar's, is one of the things of God, and by giving them directly to Caesar we give them indirectly to God.

7.

Things that are of human right cannot derogate from human right or divine right.

It is not theft, properly speaking, to take secretly and to use another's property in case of extreme need; because that which he takes for the support of his life becomes his own property by reason of that need (*ibid.*, Qu. 66, Art. 7).

(a) It is a fundamental principle of Catholic social teaching that no human power or authority has the right to take away man's natural and supernatural rights.

Although, as we have seen, the common good is a greater and more divine thing than the individual good, yet it cannot be sought by destroying the individual good.

(b) As all rights are but the moral power of fulfilling duties, even the rights of the highest human Society, the Realm, are based on duties.

Hence the *Rerum Novarum* says: 'Rights must be religiously respected wherever they exist.'

'It is the duty of public authority to prevent and to punish injury and to protect everyone in the possession of his own.'

(c) But who says duty, says obedience. It is therefore clear that obedience is demanded of the Superior no less than of the subject.

8.

The power of jurisdiction is not granted to a man for his own benefit, but for the good of the people and the glory of God.

. . . inferior Prelates (are) those who rule their flock not by feeding it, but by feeding on it (Supp. Qu. 8, Art. 5).

A spiritual Prelate being not a Master but a dispenser (*non est dominus sed dispensator*), his power is given unto edification and not unto destruction (2^a 2^{ae}, Qu. 88, Art. 12 *ad* 2).

Rulers (*principes*) are appointed that they may further the good of the people. But if they wish to reduce them to slavery this is an abusing, because a using of the free as slaves. . . .

The Prelates of the Church owe to their subjects all they have and are (*in Matt. ii, 27*).¹

The teaching about authority was never more publicly recognised than in the days of St. Thomas, and never more urgently needed than in the world of to-day.

If it is only bad rulers who feed on their flock rather than feeding it, what are we to say of those rulers whose personal or national ambitions make the young of their flock into cannon-fodder?

9.

He saith to Simon Peter: . . . Here He sets down three things necessary for the prelate:

Obedience when He saith *Simon*, which means *Obedient*—which is necessary for the prelate; because

¹ *Praelati Ecclesiae totum quicquid habent quicquid sunt subditis debent*. St. Thomas' Commentary abounds with epigrams.

who cannot obey his superiors cannot command his inferiors (*In Joannem* xxi, 15).

As nothing can be better for a man to use well his power over the multitude, so nothing can be worse than to use it badly² (1^a 2^{ae}. Qu. 2, Art. 4 *ad* 2).

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In reading these almost incredibly wise words of the Dumb Ox of Sicily we lose much if we overlook the days when they were written and the man by whom they were written. They were the days when this almost incredible wisdom was at the service of a great King, St. Louis; whose life and death were this wisdom followed.

The problem to-day, as for the day of St. Louis and St. Thomas, is the problem of obedience. If only they who obey should command, and if power abused is an evil, and the higher the power, the greater the evil, earthly power has now no more urgent call than to search with lamps where has been its disobedience.

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² *Sicut optimum est quod aliquis utatur bene potestate in regimine multorum, ita pessimum est si male utatur.*