

In general we think of obedience as something peculiar to religious since their vows of poverty, chastity and obedience are how they are often identified. But obedience is something we are all trained in from our earliest years of life. A child from its earliest months and years of life has to learn what is for its good and what is not. Any parent knows how crucial it is for children to learn what is harmful to them and what is life-giving. A child that is recalcitrant, learns the hard way and may have to be spanked from time to time if it is going to learn what serves its own best interests.

The Christian is the “hearer of God’s word” and for God ‘s self-revelation in Jesus to be central in her or his life, she or he must not be a hearer only but one who puts God’s word into action. It is the great Karl Rahner who calls the Christian the “Hearer of the Word,” the title of one of his finest works. This book as been described as follows:

"A contemporary classic, the best key to understanding Rahner's omnia opera, and the single best effort to show how the human spirit in the world can bear the word of the Spirit who enters human history". -- Andrew Tallon

What I have come to see as a monk is just how much of my whole day is about hearing God’s word spoken in the depths of my being all day long. Just this morning as I am typing this, there are about three or four things that need to be done and I’m trying my best to hear the Spirit telling me what my priorities need to be. What a grace it is to be exposed to God’s Word all day long that we might hear it and put it into practice! This is why I think Lay Cistercians have just as much opportunity to practice holy obedience as monks do, if they want to grow into being children of God, into what will give them the greatest joy and happiness.

As I have quoted in the notes given out on this chapter of Roberts’ book, the last paragraph on the first page is crucial for understanding obedience. The whole of our lives is to be lived in the presence of an all-loving God who as our Creator “has chosen to respect the dignity and freedom of his children, so he does not force their accomplishment of his desires. He elicits it, drawing it out as gently as possible from their free will so that it may express their love, not their fear of punishment.” This sums up the thrust of this whole chapter, of how the obedience that is being asked of us is to be an expression of the free gift of ourselves in response to someone who deeply loves us. It is so important that we allow ourselves to be

exposed to the depth of God's love, whether this be in the Scriptures, in the awareness of how blessed we are by family and friends, by the gift of our human nature, the fact that we have within us the capacity of enjoying eternal life with an ever-gracious God.

Roberts gets into how "other created beings intervene in order to communicate God's will to us" and therefore we must accept what he calls "a system of mediation." It is our life of prayer, it seems to me, that goes a long way in helping us to accept the way God's draws near to us through those with whom we live and who serve as authority figures in our lives. If we develop an ever-deepening life of prayer, we become more and more aware of how God is speaking to us through the lives of those with whom we live or are in frequent contact. Prayer creates within us a growing sensitivity to divine messages. Real prayer grounds us into an abiding awareness of the many ways in which God's love becomes manifest.

In my notes there is mention of how "the authority that God has ordained for us is not to lessen our own gifts and talents but to bring them to full fruition." We all have different gifts and as we put them to use and learn to appreciate the varied gifts of others, all our lives are wonderfully nourished and enriched. I see this as what the Holy Spirit wants to take place in the coming Synod in October where there will be again an open sharing about what is unfolding within the Catholic Church. For the participants to allow this to happen, there will be a growing need for careful listening so as to allow their horizons to be expanded, to see God's work within the global community.

Roberts gets into the thinking of St Paul who reminds us that as we enter into the obedience of Christ to the Father, we are also called upon to share in Christ's suffering. He quotes from the Letter to the Hebrews that speaks of how Jesus, "Son though he was, he learned obedience through what he suffered." None of our lives escapes a share in Christ's suffering, called as we are into a mystery much larger than any of us can begin to fathom. We are brought into God's saving work of redemption for the good of all of humanity, for the whole of the human family. Somewhere in the writing of St Paul, he tells of how we are to fill up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ. None of us will be able to even begin to understand what God is bringing about through the suffering that is so much a part of life in our world today. The suffering of so many of the Palestinians in Gaza is something I cannot

understand but trust that God is making use of both Israel and all those enduring this great pain.

Many more things could be said about obedience but what it is to foster, as Roberts points out, “is the conversion of the human heart so that nothing whatever be preferred to the love of Christ.” By one’s obedience in whatever walk of life, one unites himself or herself with Jesus who “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave” as St Paul points out in his letter to the Philippians 2:7. Some of the best studies in Christology in recent years work are based on Phil. 2:6-9 which for me is one of the best descriptions of God’s love for us in Christ Jesus. Knowing this love we are empowered to walk in it. Central to our whole Christian life is experiencing this divine initiative.

Let us now get into what Augustine Roberts calls **CENOBITIC STABILITY**. I think we all know the value of stability in our lives if we reflect a little on what happens to us in times of instability. A lot of different things can happen over the course of our lives. There are times when we need to move to a new residence, take up a different job, pursue opportunities that are given us but unless these are grounded in stretches of stability our lives will remain shallow and superficial.

As indicated in my notes, as monks we really only make two vows, those of conversion of life and stability. Through stability “God is able to work in our lives, to purify our hearts, break through all our defenses so that we may surrender ourselves totally to the working of divine grace.” This I believe to be the principal reason monks were attracted to the desert for there, they were free from distractions, from whatever might pull them away from encountering the living God.

One of the great burdens of our modern world is the availability of distractions. It is so easy to go online with a computer and spend hours watching what is going on in others peoples’ lives. This can be educative, but also an escape from facing what is happening in our own lives and taking responsibility for it. The young of today are having a hard time owning their own thoughts and feelings, finding what is truly meaningful for their lives since they are constantly being distracted by the media. What happens is that they are unable to face what is really happening deep down within themselves. I know I can all too easily let myself be distracted by the media from issues I really need to be facing and be attentive to at certain times of the day.

At one point, Roberts quotes from the Rule of St Benedict that tells of the reward of stability: “Our wages will be the reward the Lord has promised: What the eye has not seen nor the ear heard, God has prepared for those who love Him. The Workshop where we are to toil faithfully at all these tasks is the enclosure of the monastery and stability in the community.” (RB4,76-78) Roberts goes on to point out how “enclosure is a physical structure. Stability is something personal. It is interpersonal communion or, more precisely, it is perseverance in the communion. That is to say, it is a commitment to persevere in the dynamism of conversion from self-will to the love of Christ that constitutes the heart of the monastic community.”

Let me suggest that as Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani, you take a closer look at what serves this function of community in your own lives. Each of you is a member of a family or live within a marriage relationship, or are members of a Church community, contribute to a social structure around you. One or more of these serve as your community context and as you are faithful to whatever may be demanded of you, there takes place in your lives this conversion from self-will to the love of Christ. So, I would encourage each / all of you to take a close look at those members of the human family that stimulate or call you into this deeper love of Christ.

Whenever any one of us is called to “this deeper love of Christ” it may be a trial for us, a time when we have to make a difficult decision whether to serve our own interests or those of God that serve the good of others. As Roberts reminds us: “The trial must be faced here. Benedictine stability places us in a situation where sooner or later we arrive at the heart of every human situation, which is a choice between despair and the total gift of self to God. It is an identity crisis at the deepest level of our being... Human nature tries by every possible means to escape this fundamental question.”

This is happening in every one of our lives whether in a monastery or as Christians out in our world of today. We come right up against the fragility of our human nature and are given the most life-changing opportunity to learn by experience our total dependence on the living God. This is where a real death to self happens as Merton frequently wrote about, but it is precisely here where we discover our “true selves” born in the image and likeness of God. Commitment to stability is commitment to letting this happen and in the process create a more caring and loving world to live in. Amen!