

Fr. Tom's Celestial Musings

The Year of the Priesthood

Part 5: Obedience¹

Last month, my “Celestial Musing” focused on one of the three evangelical counsels—celibacy. This month, I will address another one of the counsels—obedience. As a newly-ordained priest, I remember seasoned priests telling me that obedience was far more difficult to live than celibacy. After ten years of priesthood, I’m not sure I agree with them. Instead, I think all three of the evangelical counsels—celibacy, obedience, and poverty—are equally difficult to live because they are so intimately connected to one another.

Obedience, lived in diocesan priesthood, is not about a priest being bossed around by his bishop or by God. Rather, it is a radical surrender rooted in listening. The word obedience literally means “to listen.” The counsel of obedience is a priest’s willingness to listen to God’s desire for him expressed through the bishop, prayer, and the needs of his parishioners. Gisbert Greshake, in his book, The Meaning of Christian Priesthood, explains a priest’s listening, writing—

Only he who can surrender himself, that is, who can listen and go out from himself and give himself, is also able to let himself be worn out by the justified and sometimes not so justified wishes and expectations of those around him. One who is available through obedience is able to put aside his own wishes, prejudices and favorite interests, for the sake of others.²

This quote helps us to see one of the common fruits coming forth from authentic obedience and celibacy—both create freedom and availability for serving other people. Another commonality between the two of them includes contemplative prayer. Authentic obedience and authentic celibacy can only be lived through a life of contemplative prayer, where the charism of listening is constantly being developed and refined. Additionally, these two counsels constantly invite priests into humility. This can be seen very clearly in the life of Jesus Christ, who was both obedient and celibate. In Paul’s letter to the Philippians, we read—

Though [Jesus] was in the form of God, [he] did not regard equality with God something to be grasped at. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness and found in human appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.

-Philippians 2:6-7

As with all of the evangelical counsels, obedience invites priests to model their life on the life of Christ, who was “obedient to death.” Since every Christian is called to model his or her life on the life of Christ, the virtue of obedience is rightly called an “evangelical” counsel, in other words, it is meant to be demonstrated and taught to other people. It is not meant to be hidden or discreet, but rather, it is meant to be shared and encouraged.

Just as priestly celibacy stands in opposition to the world’s skewed view of sexuality, obedience stands in opposition to the world’s skewed view of freedom. True freedom isn’t about our being able to do whatever we want, but rather, it is a surrender and sacrifice that allows us to be who God created us to be. Such surrender and sacrifice can not only be talked about as “obedience” and “celibacy,” but also “poverty,” but we’ll save that evangelical counsel for next month!

¹ In honor of the “Year of the Priesthood,” announced by Pope Benedict, this is a twelve part series on the priesthood

² Gisbert Greshake, The Meaning of Christian Preisthood, 1989, pg. 134.