



*Circular  
of the  
Superior General  
# 3*

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**“LET IT BE DONE TO ME  
ACCORDING TO YOUR WORD”**

***IN OBEDIENCE WITH MARY***

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**Manuel José Cortés, SM  
XIV Superior General  
Society of Mary  
(Marianists)**

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IN OBEDIENCE WITH MARY

Dear Brothers:

Continuing along the path of Marian contemplation which I have suggested in my first two *Circulars*, I propose in this one that we pause at Mary’s response to the angel who questioned her in God’s name: “Let it be done to me according to your word” (Lk 1:38).

This is the answer that God hoped for from her. Having delivered the message, the messenger “left her.” God, the Triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, already had that which was desired – and, paradoxically, was “needed” – from humanity: unconditional service, faithful cooperation, complete surrender, in body and soul, to the plan of salvation. Mary had just sealed her unconditional consecration to God’s plan: “Let it be done to me according to your word.”

In these words of Mary are forever synthesized every act of consecration to God, and, therefore, in a particular way, our own religious profession. What we vow publicly at the time of profession is nothing other than a promise, equal to that of Mary, to commit our entire being and our entire life in order that the Word of God “may be done in us.” Thus, having been realized in us, God’s “Kingdom may come” for the salvation of our world.

So therefore, upon inviting you to go deeper into the meaning of these words of Mary, I propose that we pause to consider our life by the light of the consecration that defines it. Our life is consecrated in order that the Word of God might become incarnate in it. What implications does this fact have in our day to day lives? Do we truly live our lives with this in mind? Did we come to religious life to incarnate God’s plan, or rather, to complete our personal or collective projects? How do we truly open ourselves up to the will of God? How can we listen to God’s word in the here and now? What does it mean to incarnate this word? To what aspects of our life must we be attentive in order to do this?...

These and other similar questions form the basis of many of my concerns about religious life today. Yet, more than their possible answers, what concerns me is that these questions are barely present, if not completely absent, among the questions being most frequently asked today within religious life, both individually and collectively. Being as these questions touch the very roots of how we live out our consecration, they should never remain unexamined. I hope that reading these reflections which I share with you here may help us, at the very least, to recover our interior life, provoke some healthy concern, and nourish some subsequent reflection, interchange and dialogue among us. All this will contribute, no doubt, to what will strengthen and revitalize our religious life, and help us avoid letting down our guard in our task of maintaining a religious life that is truly alive. It is in this way that the fruitfulness of our religious life will be clear to us and to our world. Let us not forget, on the

other hand, that the future of religious life depends in great part on its authenticity and the vigor in which it is lived.

I have subtitled this circular *In Obedience with Mary* in the same manner in which the previous two circulars were subtitled, *In Christ with Mary* and *In Mission with Mary*, in order that we not lose sight of our Marianist religious life, in which “By our alliance with Mary, we seek to assist her in her mission of forming in faith a multitude of brothers for her first-born Son.”<sup>1</sup>, and which requires us to live in union with her in all aspects. Among these there is one, logically the most fundamental and basic, and that which sustains all the other aspects, namely, the surrender of our life, as Mary did, in radical obedience to God’s plan. Only in doing this can we become her true collaborators in the mission that the Lord confided to her. If this is the door through which Mary fully entered into her mission in God’s plan, then it must also be our door as well.

I have expressed my reflections in this *Circular* organized under three main topics:

- I. Obedience, at the very root of Christian life.
- II. Living by and for obedience to the Word of God.
- III. Seeking God’s Plan together.

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## I OBEDIENCE, AT THE VERY ROOT OF CHRISTIAN LIFE

### **1.1. At the root of the mystery of salvation in Christ.**

It is Mary’s obedience that opens the doors of humanity to the salvific initiative of God, and it is Christ’s obedience that carries that initiative through to its end. This is how the New Testament presents the dynamic of the mystery of our salvation to us: as the fruit of the perfect union between a plan of love and mercy on God’s part, and obedience on the part of the Son of Man. “Just as through one man’s disobedience all became sinners, so through one man’s obedience all shall become just” (Rom 5:19).

Obedience plays a key role in the incarnation, as well as and above all in the death and resurrection of Christ, as events that respectively inaugurate and culminate God’s salvific plan for humanity.

- The incarnation has as its object the manifestation of the *homo oboediens*. In it the Son assumes the flesh inherent in human nature with the aim that humanity, through him, might offer itself up to God in obedience and thus, be sanctified. “Wherefore, on coming into the world, Jesus said: *Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you have prepared for me; holocausts and sin offerings you took no delight in. Then I*

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<sup>1</sup> RL 6.

said, 'As is written of me in the book, I have come to do your will, O God.'...And by this "will," we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once and for all" (Heb 10:5-7, 10).

- Following the prayer in supplication to the Father, "if it is possible let this cup pass me by. Still, let it be as you would have it, not as I" (Mt 26:39), the obedient oblation of humanity comes to its fullness on the occasion Christ's death, the final step before the definitive exaltation of Christ by the Father: "He emptied himself and took the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of men. He was known to be of human estate, and it was thus that he humbled himself, obediently accepting even death, death on a cross! Because of this, God highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name above every other name." (Phil 2:7-9) "In the days when he was in the flesh, Christ offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to God, who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered; and when perfected, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him" (Heb 5:7-9).

Any reflection, any discourse about obedience and its place in Christian life must begin here, with the contemplation of the obedience of Christ and the meaning which it had in his life, and thus, the place it has in ours.

His life had only one objective: to look for and do the will of the Father. This is the food that sustains him (cf. Jn 4:34; Mt 4:4). To convert stones into bread would serve to placate his hunger, but it would sever the very roots of his being. His power, his singular power comes from the absolute dependence in which he lives. If he were to abandon the Father for even an instant, he would be in absolute solitude. "When you lift up the Son of Man, you will come to realize that I AM and that I do nothing by myself. I say only what the Father has taught me. The One who has sent me is with me. He has not deserted me since I always do what pleases him." (Jn 8:28-29) The will of the Father can appear like a repugnant chalice but, from the moment that it came from God's hand, it is transformed into living water. To reject it would be to die of thirst. "Put your sword back in its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup the Father has given me?" (Jn 18:11) "My soul is troubled now, yet what should I say – Father, save me from this hour? But it was for this that I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!" (Jn 12:27-28)

Jesus cannot be who he is, beloved Son of the Father, except through obedience. If he were capable of even the slightest gesture that did not come from the Father, it would betray his entire being and that would be totally out of the question for him: the Son cannot do anything by himself – he can do only what he sees the Father doing" (Jn 5:19). Thus, the supreme act of his manifestation as Son will also be the supreme act of his obedience. The title of Son of God remains ambiguous – and he squelches it in the mouths of those who would apply it to him – until such a point that it is authenticated on the cross. The revelation of this title as the true Son of God came about, not by his own power, but rather through his radical obedience to the Father from whom all sonship proceeds.

## 1.2. Getting to the roots of living out Christian Faith.

If the Son of God became human, it is so that each human being might become a child of God. If the love of the Father for the Son finds its expression in obedience, it is so that our love might also be expressed in the same way.

On the other hand, whilst Jesus' relationship with the Father was intrinsic and immediate, in our case, this relationship is mediated by Jesus. Our encounter with the Father is realized through Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ the Christian "sees the Father" (Jn 14:9) and comes face to face with the Father. It is, nevertheless, an encounter that happens within "the darkness of faith." The Christian belongs to Jesus Christ in faith, a faith that is a loving trust even before it comes to a clear understanding. Moved by faith, the person places his life in Christ's hands, abandons his desire to follow his own will, in a gesture of radical obedience, he ultimately turns to the Father – to the Father in the Son. Obedience is not faith, but rather the expression of it in concrete life. Without it, the believer would not live as such; his faith would be no more than empty sentiment.

"The Christian, like Christ, is defined as an obedient being. The unquestionable primacy of love in Christian life cannot make us forget that such love has acquired a face and a name in Christ Jesus and has become Obedience. Therefore, obedience is not humiliation but the truth on which the fullness of human persons is built and realized. Hence, the believer so ardently desires to fulfill the will of the Father as to make of it his or her supreme aspiration. Like Jesus, he or she wants to live by this will.(...) However, even before being the model for all obedience, Christ is the One to whom every true obedience is directed. In fact, it is the putting of his words into practice that renders one a disciple (cf. *Mt* 7:24) and it is the observance of his commandments which concretizes love for Him and draws the love of the Father (cf. *Jn* 14:21). He is at the centre of the religious community as the One who serves (cf. *Lk* 22:27) but also as the One to whom one professes one's own faith ("You have faith in God; have faith also in me" [*Jn* 14:1]) and to whom one gives his or her own obedience, because only in this does one carry out a sure and persevering following. "In fact, it is the Risen Lord himself, newly present among the brothers and sisters gathered in his name who points out the path to take."<sup>2</sup>

Throughout salvation history, from the Old to the New Testament, we encounter obedience as a characteristic attitude of the believer, indivisibly united to faith. Authentic believers radically obey. Their faith is translated into an offering of their lives to the Word and the plan of God (cf. Heb 11). Among these "witnesses" to the faith, we Christians feel ourselves accompanied, educated and stimulated in a particular way by the woman who is none other than the cause of our faith, the mother of all believers.

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<sup>2</sup> *Faciem tuam, Domine, requiram. The Service of Authority and Obedience* (Instruction from the CONGREGATION FOR INSTITUTES OF CONSECRATED LIFE AND SOCIETIES OF APOSTOLIC LIFE - May 11, 2008), n. 8.

Mary's obedience, which sprang from her faith and is expressed in her "let it be done to me according to your word," is obedience to the Son. She was the first disciple. For her too, he was the Word; for her too, he was the "the one to show the way." Mary's faith develops and becomes effective in her acceptance of the pathway of the Son, in her obedient following, being in communion with the obedience of Jesus. We merely need to recall the second chapter of Luke. From Nazareth to Bethlehem, from Bethlehem to the Temple of Jerusalem, from the Temple of Jerusalem to Nazareth once again and back to the Temple..., in reality it is not she who determines the pathway. Along this pathway, and in the events that punctuate it, she is not the protagonist, as she had been in the triptych of the Annunciation-Visitation-Magnificat. The protagonist now is the Son. The pathway is that of the Son. He proceeds down the path in obedience to the Father, who is the "hidden driver." Mary proceeds down the path as well, but she follows the Son. He himself is following, and she is in obedient communion with him, discovering at every turn the will of God in the story of Jesus, all the way to the cross, experiencing with him the Pascal Mystery, the very culmination of this pathway of life.

Mary's obedience flows from her faith. It is not a consequence of "what she knows," but rather of the certainty of her faith. She is not obedient because she knows God's plan ahead of time. She obeys because she trusts, she confides and she hands herself over to the Son. Her main support is her faith. This would not be the case except for a certain obscurity of knowledge which is inherent to us all.<sup>3</sup> The mystery to which the believer hands himself over is only illuminated when one enters into it; and one can only enter into it – as we have seen in Jesus – through the door of obedience. Faith gives rise to the desire to penetrate the mystery. Obedience permits the mystery to occur, to be made manifest, to come to Light, before our very eyes. Luke admirably shows us this process of faith-obedience-revelation in Mary when he presents her as "astonished" (2:48), "marveling" (2:33) or perplexed (2:50) in the face of what was happening to her, even allowing her to be reproached by her Son for her ignorance (Lk 2:49), but "guarding all these things in her heart" (2:19, 51).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Speaking of Mary's journey as a believer, John Paul II wrote: "*However, it is not difficult to see in that beginning a particular heaviness of heart, linked with a sort of 'night of faith' – to use the words of St. John of the Cross – a kind of 'veil' through which one has to draw near to the Invisible One and to live in intimacy with the mystery (...) Jesus was aware that 'no one knows the Son except the Father' (cf. Mt. 11:27); thus even his Mother, to whom had been revealed most completely the mystery of his divine sonship, lived in intimacy with this mystery only through faith! Living side by side with her Son under the same roof, and faithfully persevering 'in her union with her Son,' she 'advanced in her pilgrimage of faith,' as the Council emphasizes*" (*Redemptoris Mater*, n. 17) (Cf. LG n. 58).

<sup>4</sup> "*To believe means 'to abandon oneself' to the truth of the word of the living God, knowing and humbly recognizing 'how unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways' (Rom. 11:33). Mary, who by the eternal will of the Most High, stands, one may say, at the very center of those 'inscrutable ways' and 'unsearchable judgments' of God, conforms herself to them in the dim light of faith, accepting fully and with a ready heart everything that is decreed in the divine plan. When at the Annunciation Mary hears of the Son whose Mother she is to become and to whom 'she will give the name Jesus' (= Savior), she also learns that 'the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David,' and that 'he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever and of his kingdom there will be no end' (Lk. 1:32- 33). The hope of the whole of Israel was directed towards this...Although through faith she may have perceived in that instant she was the mother of the 'Messiah King,' nevertheless she replied: 'Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word' (Lk. 1:38). From the first moment Mary professed above all the 'obedience of faith,' abandoning herself to the meaning which was given to the words of the Annunciation by him from whom they proceeded: God himself" (*ibid*, nn. 14-15).*

With Mary – and with all those who have preceded us on the path of faith – we learn that the believer is one who, fascinated by the mystery of God’s design manifested in Christ, Word become flesh, hands himself over to Christ because of faith. And, plunging himself into Christ by obedience, the believer belongs to Christ, incarnates him, and “gives birth” to him. In this way we can understand how Jesus would say that whoever does the will of God is not only “my brother or sister”, but also “my mother” (cf. Mk 3:35 par.). Origen, in a well-known phrase that has been reiterated by St. Augustine and St. Bernard among others, asks: “What good is it to me that Christ is born of Mary in Bethlehem, if he is not also born by faith in my soul?” “Any soul that believes,” writes St. Ambrose, “conceives and engenders the Word of God... If according to the flesh, only one is the Mother of Christ, according to the faith, all souls engender Christ when they welcome the Word of God.”<sup>5</sup> Consequently, conceiving Christ by faith without “giving birth to him” through obedience amounts to aborting, in the heart of the believer, the Word of God, which awaits incarnation for the salvation of the world.

## II LIVING BY AND FOR OBEDIENCE TO THE WORD OF GOD

### 2.1. What does it mean to live by the word “other?”

To obey is to do the will of another. By accommodating one’s own desire to the desire of another, is this not a de-personalization? Is it not a contradiction of freedom? Is it possible to live obedience as a value in today’s world?

“The centrality of obedience in the life of every Christian contrasts with the irrelevance with which it is considered and lived in today’s culture, including the Church. In some Catholic environments, it comes across even with a gesture of rejection, perhaps because it is considered as something which goes against the fundamental human values of freedom, autonomy and the following of one’s own conscience, etc. Included in this, on the level of giving witness, while exaggerating a little, we can say that poverty is the most valued (at times unilaterally), chastity is admired (although not always well understood), and obedience is scorned. Perhaps this might be normal. Nevertheless, we must emphatically state that, if poverty constitutes the priority for *giving witness*, obedience ought to be the top priority of the **person** who witnesses.”<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, what defines a witness, as we have seen in Jesus Christ and in Mary, is obedience. Nevertheless, it is not easy to live that obedience which is inherent to Christian life and to religious life in the midst of what we could call the culture-environment of our world.

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<sup>5</sup> *Exposition of the Gospel according to Luke*, II, 26.

<sup>6</sup> From the intervention of Fr. Pascual Chávez, SDB, Superior General of the Salesians and President of the Union of Superiors General, at the conclusion of their 71<sup>st</sup> Semi-Annual Assembly, May 30, 2008.

Here lies the idea that a person becomes oneself by oneself. This leads, at the very least, to the idea that freedom is equal to independence. As a result, and given the fact that we do need others, a relationship of “dependence” which derives from that need is only acceptable inasmuch as it is useful for obtaining our own desires and purposes, never those of the other person. The opposite would be synonymous with servility and alienation. Said in another way, today there exists a widespread and acceptable obedience that we could call “functional” (what is needed so that there exists a social order and efficiency in concerted action), but a type of obedience which we could call “existential,” upon which one’s own life can be built, is rejected. It is the latter obedience, nevertheless, that we see clearly in Christ (“my food is doing the will of the Father”) and in Mary (“let it be done to me according to your word”). It is this type of obedience that we profess.

We need, therefore, to be clear in order to live this obedience with authenticity in this context, without falling into the deviations that distort it and betray its meaning. If we are honest, we must recognize that, when we least realize it, unless we are vigilant the individualistic self-sufficiency that impregnates our culture-environment seeps in through our pores. Thus, without knowing how, one day we find ourselves, religious, dreaming secretly about those days we call “vacations,” far from the “control” of community life, whenever our work commitments permit, or longing for a community in which, beyond those minimum requirements of the *Rule* which are essential for any living together or common work, there is the “freedom” to do whatever we want, without having to be accountable to anyone – all under the pretext of needing to feel more “ourselves.” That is to say, we find ourselves aspiring to “be a little more free” in the same way our society does, as if we can only “be ourselves” by shirking obedience. Without realizing it, we are infected with the idea that all authority limits our personal development. We accept obedience, therefore, as something necessary to make “things function,” but not for leading our lives toward their true fulfillment.

Indeed, the first danger to which the culture-environment exposes us is the loss of a true sense of authority in human life. This danger has been around for a long time and has been repeatedly analyzed in our past through circulars that the superiors general of our Society have dedicated to the vow of obedience. Already Fr. Caillet, with the experience of the French Revolution still fresh in mind, complained about the airs of independence that penetrated the environment, undermining the basics of authority.<sup>7</sup> At the end of the nineteenth century, Fr. Simler warned that this tendency could undermine the recognition of the very authority of God in our lives and, following the wake of the social doctrine of Pope Leo XIII, he dedicated an extensive and profound circular to explaining the divine basis and concept of authority.<sup>8</sup> Later, now well into the twentieth century, Fr. Kieffer, responding to a request

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<sup>7</sup> “A wind of independence seems to have blown in a particular way on modern generations ever since the philosophy of the XVIIIth century worked to sabotage all authority by means of sophisms and mockery, feeding people with the big word ‘liberty,’ which for it is nothing else than untrammelled license to do and say anything.” (Circular n° 52: *Le vœux d’obéissance*, March 2, 1859, Circulaires P. Caillet, p. 355)

<sup>8</sup> J. SIMLER, *Instruction sur l’autorité*, Circular n° 68, March 25, 1896. “Who among us does not know that, in political assemblies, in discussions, and even in ordinary intercourse, most people speak and reason as if men were absolutely their own masters, having no account to give to any one after this life; as if power originated in number, strength, skill, success, and not in an authority superior to humanity; as if God did not exist, or took no interest whatever in the affairs of humanity.” (n. 3) “The Church repudiates sovereignty of the monarch by the same right and for

made to him by the General Chapter of 1934, also wrote a circular about the vow of obedience, proceeding directly from the basis of authority already developed by his predecessor. “Everywhere it is repeatedly said – he wrote – that today’s world suffers from a crisis of authority... and the counterpart to this is a crisis of obedience.”<sup>9</sup> Fr. Juergens returned to this same subject in the post-war era<sup>10</sup> and, finally, so did Fr. Hoffer.<sup>11</sup>

The critical tension having to do with authority over the last two centuries has produced, without a doubt, positive effects along the lines of the dignity of the person and the respect due, consequently, to one’s freedom and one’s autonomy, versus authoritarianism of all types, including religious, of dreadful memories in the distant and not-so-distant past. Yet things become dangerous when the rejection of an alienating and oppressive exercise of authority becomes a rejection of authority itself and the subsequent affirmation of the independence of the autonomous individual.

“The culture of Western Society, strongly centered on the subject, has contributed to the spread of the value of respect for the dignity of the human person, positively fostering the person's free development and autonomy.

Such recognition constitutes one of the most significant traits of modernity and is a providential given which requires new ways of conceiving authority and relating to it. One must also keep in mind that when freedom tends to become arbitrariness and the autonomy of the person, independence from the Creator and from relationships with others, then one finds oneself before forms of idolatry that do not increase freedom but rather enslave.

In such cases, believers in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, in the God of Jesus Christ, must embark upon a path of personal liberation from every idolatrous

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*the same reason that it repudiates sovereignty of the people, of the multitude, of the number, in order to maintain the sovereignty of God alone.”* (n. 86)

<sup>9</sup> F.-J. KIEFFER, *Instruction sur le vœu et la vertu de l’obéissance*, Circular n° 3, January 22, 1935. It is interesting and continues to be the case today, the description that Fr. Kieffer gives of the crisis of authority in the introduction to his circular: “*On all sides we meet the statement that the modern world is suffering from a crisis of authority. Authority finds it difficult to produce its credentials, at least such credentials as would be recognized by the modern world, and the repercussion is a crisis in the matter of obedience. The value of all commands, or the reason for them, is freely disputed everywhere, with the result that inferiors are inactive before an authority which does not dare to assert itself, or rise in revolt in order to destroy in it all desire to assert itself. The crisis we have mentioned involved authority in the family, as we ourselves see only too often when parents who have surrendered before the demands of their children come to tell us of their defeat and ask us to regain control over these children who have too early gained their independence..... The crisis involves political authority also...every aspect of public life is freely criticized, and how every representative of authority can be hailed before the bar of popular opinion. And it is still a fortunate thing if all forms of ridicule are not dragged into the discussion to kill off whatever authority the official still tries to exercise. It might be added that, in the crisis of authority, youth runs the greater risk of being corrupted. Thus it has been said that “at twenty man is revolutionary and at forty he is a conservative.” The reason is that on entering life the young man feels himself face to face with infinite possibilities; he finds pleasure in making experiments of all kinds, and thinks that his life is enriched by every experiment he tries. From this it is but a step to a real mania for independence and to irritation against everything that implies restraint of liberty and, as is said, “impedes the development of the personality.” Later on, friction with the realities of life, disappointments, and experiences that are at times decidedly painful, destroy certain illusions, suggest a more moderate pace, and prepare for the acceptance of a discipline which is at length recognized as really necessary”* (Kieffer, circular no. 3 (January 22, 1935), pp. 37-38)

<sup>10</sup> S.-J. JUERGENS, *Les difficultés de l’obéissance*, Circular n° 29, March 28, 1955.

<sup>11</sup> P.-J. HOFFER, *L’obéissance religieuse*, Circular n° 9, May 12, 1959.

cult. It is a path which can find its motivation in the Exodus experience: a path of liberation which leads from the acceptance of the common scattered way of thinking to the freedom of adhering to the Lord and from the monotony of one way of looking at things to itineraries that bring one to communion with the living and true God.”<sup>12</sup>

We know that the human person is a relational being, who becomes such in relation and not in independence. We are the fruit of the relationships in which we live, in which we have lived and continue living. When we affirm that, we do not refer to superficial or merely occasional relationships, but to those that we can call “foundational,” those that form us as persons: relationships that have been and that are liberating, those that continue to bring out in us our best selves as human beings beyond what is purely instinctive; those that have been and are, perhaps, oppressive and alienating. What is certain is that, for better or for worse, without these, we would not be who we are. They are there and there they will continue to be. They are unavoidable. And whoever claims not to be shaped by these has yet to examine the depths of his life or has not attained enough clarity to recognize their presence.

The power with which these “foundational” relationships, essential and unavoidable in the formation and development of a person, are introduced into our lives, is what we call authority. In childhood, and in every infantile manner of living, authority comes imposed from without and these “foundational” relationships are lived in a passive way. But that does not mean that it is proper for an adult to reject every type of relationship that conditions a person’s life. What is appropriate for an adult is to be conscious of these relationships, discern their “authority,” discard those that have no merit and enter into those that the person truly ought to have. The challenge that one faces, when emancipated from childhood dependence and taking one’s life into one’s own hands, consists in consciously and freely giving that life over to a “foundational” relationship that may lead it to its fullness and not just “save it” untouched by committed relationships. “Whoever saves his life will lose it,” said the Lord. Full development of a person does not consist, therefore, in the rejection of all authority (after all, whether aware of it or not, we always live “subject” to some authority) but in the recognition of what truly leads to fullness in our lives.

“Whoever loses his life for my sake, will save it,” the Lord continued. The believer knows that giving his life over to the Lord’s hands in order to do his will, to make that relationship with the Lord the truly “foundational” relationship of his life, is to bring that life to its fullness. This is because he has discovered in the Lord that unique authority which exclusively seeks the good for the other person, an authority that is imposed without subjugating, requests without dominating, gives without asking anything in return, and always respects the freedom of the other person: the authority of pure love. “To be a disciple according to Christ’s pattern,” wrote Fr. Hoffer, “the religious must be willing to lose his very life. The sole growth which he can expect is growth in the love of God. It all hangs together. Since this love unifies all his faculties, it makes him grow to maturity in every respect. It develops him on all levels much like the saints who completely and unequivocally sacrificed their human personalities to seek God alone, such as St. Francis of Assisi and St. John of the Cross, who nevertheless, by way of

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<sup>12</sup> *Faciem tuam...*, n. 2.

by-product, became the most attractive of personalities with a full appreciation of all the joys of creation. But the development of personality was by no means the direct aim of their lives nor did they enjoy the gifts of creation for their own sakes. These qualities were but springboards for raising themselves to the source of all beauty, God. “*He who loses his life will find it.*”<sup>13</sup>

To live by the word and for the word of another, when that other is the Other, with capital letters, not only does not breach human freedom but is a condition for it. There has been no freer person than Jesus because there has been no person more obedient to the Father than Jesus. By following Jesus, the religious is transformed by his obedience into becoming a witness to true freedom, the kind that leads a person to the fullness of life.

“Today, it is not rare that the mission is addressed to people concerned with their own autonomy, jealous of their freedom, fearful of losing their independence.

With their very existence, consecrated persons present the possibility of a different way for the fulfillment of their own life, a way where God is the goal, his Word the light, and his will the guide, where consecrated persons move along peacefully in the certainty of being sustained by the hands of a Father who welcomes and provides, where they are accompanied by brothers and sisters, moved by the same Spirit, who wants to and knows how to satisfy the desires and longings sown by the Father in the heart of each one.

This is the primary mission of the consecrated person: he or she must witness to the freedom of the children of God, a freedom modeled on that of Christ who was free to serve God and the brothers and sisters; and moreover to affirm with his or her very own being that that God who formed the human creature from clay (cf. *Gen 2:7, 22*) and knitted that creature in his or her mother's womb (cf. *Ps 139:13*) can form his or her life, modeling it on that of Christ, the new and perfectly free man.”<sup>14</sup>

This testimony is possible only if obedience takes root, as we have said, in the foundational experience of the love of God, only if in our life it is true what the scribe, enamored by the law, said in his psalm to the Lord: “I will run the way of your commands **because you give me a docile heart**” (*Ps 119:32*).

## **2.2. Attentive to every word that comes from the mouth of the Father.**

Adult obedience is based on that foundational relationship upon which life is built and from which its meaning and content are obtained. It cannot be, therefore, a merely passive attitude, which only gets activated when it receives an order. As our Founder said, obedience has not been perceived correctly if it is understood only as “not disobedience”.<sup>15</sup>

Having committed his life to obedience, the obedient servant doesn't only wait to be asked. He lives watching the eyes, lips and hands of his Lord, constantly scrutinizing his

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<sup>13</sup> P.-J. HOFFER, *L'obéissance religieuse*, Circular n° 9, May 12, 1959, n. 56.

<sup>14</sup> *Faciem tuam...*, n. 15.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. G.-J. CHAMINADE, *Instruction sur l'obéissance*, May 12, 1840, n. 14.

master's face until he becomes a true expert in knowing his master's desires. To live by and for obedience to the Word of God presupposes, therefore, that one set up one's entire life by active and attentive listening, as a search for and a discernment of God's will. The search, the listening, and the discernment are essential elements for living out obedience.

a) *Search.*

“The Lord asks the first disciples, who, perhaps, still uncertain and doubtful begin to follow a new Rabbi: ‘*What are you looking for?*’ (Jn 1:38). We can read into this question other radical questions: What does your heart seek? What concerns you? Are you looking for yourself or are you looking for the Lord your God? Are you pursuing your own desires or the desire of the One who made your heart and wants to bring it to fullness, as he knows and understands it? Are you running after only passing things or are you seeking the One who does not pass away? ‘In this world of dissimilarity, with what do we need to be concerned, Lord God? From the rising of the sun to its setting I see men overwhelmed by the turmoil of this world: some look for riches, others, privilege, others yet again the satisfactions of popularity,’ observed St. Bernard.

“‘Your face, O Lord, I seek’ (Ps 27:8) is the response of the person who has understood the uniqueness and the infinite greatness of the mystery of God and the sovereignty of his holy will but is also the response, even if it is only implicit and confused, of every human creature in search of truth and happiness. *Quaerere Deum* has always been the quest of every being thirsting for the Absolute and the Eternal. Many today tend to consider any kind of dependence humiliating, but the status of creature in itself implies being dependent on an Other and, therefore, as a being in relation, dependent on others.

The believer seeks the living and true God, the Beginning and the End of all things, the God not made in his or her image and likeness but the God who made us in his image and likeness, the God who makes known his will, who indicated the ways to reach him: ‘You will show me the path of life, fullness of joys in your presence, delights at your right hand forever’ (Ps 16:11).”<sup>16</sup>

At the root of obedience is the experience of not possessing the keys to life and, hence, the need to search for them and receive them from the Other. In this sense, obedience is the sister of poverty, in that it urges us to search for and beg for food that we, ourselves, do not have. Therefore, it is an impossible attitude for those who are convinced of their security and certainties. The person who already knows or believes he knows everything, the one who is sure of his knowledge, who is dogmatic, who needs nobody to tell him what to do, cannot enter the pathways of obedience, and much less the pathways of religious life, which can be one of the most demanding. We all have experience with this type of person, either ourselves or others. It is something that we need to keep in mind during the initial discernment of vocations. My many years working in initial formation have taught me that, with regard to the candidates who come knocking on our door, one should fear much more the

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<sup>16</sup> *Faciem tuam...*, n. 4.

“holy” securities and certainties than the “human” doubts and vacillations. Perhaps the best question to ask as you open the door is not “**what** do you seek?” but “**whom** do you seek?”...

*b) Listening.*

If it is possible to live in obedience to the Lord, it is because God has connected, and keeps on connecting, with each one of us. God has done this, and continues doing it, in human terms within our grasp: in Sacred Scripture, in the life of the Church, in the events of history, in the charismatic life of the Society of Mary, in the concrete circumstances of our life... -- and also within the depths of our being by the Spirit which has been poured out into our hearts. We do not have a distant God, who hides in order to be searched for, but rather a God who is near, who searches for us. Yet, in order for God’s communication to be effective, God must find us listening. The obedient person is, as the etymology of the word indicates, a “listener.”

“‘Listen, child’ (*Pr* 1:8). First of all, obedience is an attitude of a son or daughter. It is that particular kind of listening that only a son or daughter can do in listening to his or her parent, because it is enlightened by the certainty that the parent has only good things to say and give to him or her. This is a listening, full of the trust, that makes a son or daughter accept the parent's will, sure that it will be for his or her own good...

For the Lord God, Israel is a child. Israel is the people whom he has chosen, begotten, brought up, held by the hand, raised to his cheek and taught to walk (cf. *Hos* 11:1-4), to whom — as the highest expression of affection — he constantly addressed his Word, even if this people did not always listen to it or considered it a weight, as a ‘law’. The entire Old Testament is an invitation to listen.”<sup>17</sup>

The place *par excellence* to listen to the Lord is in prayer, in particular that type of prayer that our Founder called the “prayer of faith and of the presence of God,” and what he defined as “a calm attention to the presence of God, which prompts the soul to look upon God in the light of faith, with all the attention it can command...and never tires of looking upon the Lord.”<sup>18</sup> Through intimate prayer with the Lord, in which, by means of listening, contemplating, and scrutinizing our hearts regarding faith, there develops in us an interior affective knowledge, we enter into a state of being “in tune” with God on both levels of feelings and of the will. “When faith has made considerable headway in a soul, Fr. Chaminade continues, it loves to dwell in the thought of the presence of God and of the Sacred Humanity of Christ. Faith binds us in a way with God; it brings us into communication with God, merges our spirit with God’s spirit, our heart with God’s heart. The light of God’s Spirit passes into ours; we see things only as God sees them; we judge them as God judges them; gradually our prejudices are scattered; we become adepts in the science of God, and this is the science of the saints.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, nn. 5-6.

<sup>18</sup> W-J CHAMINADE, *Writings on Mental Prayer* (MP) - 373.

<sup>19</sup> MP 377a.

It is in the same sense that the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life, in its recent instruction on authority and obedience, directed its exhortation about daily meditation on the Word of God:

“The loving and daily encounter with the Word shows one how to discover the way to life and the way through which God wishes to free his children, nourishes one's spiritual instincts for the things which are pleasing to God, conveys the sense and the taste for his will, gives peace and joy for staying faithful, making one sensitive and ready for all the expressions of obedience: to the Gospel (*Rm* 10:16; *2 Th* 1:8), to the faith (*Rm* 1:5; 16:26; *Acts* 6:7), and to the truth (*Gal* 5:7; *1 Pt* 1:22).”<sup>20</sup>

However, the attitude of listening to the Lord cannot be limited to prayer or meditation on the Word. For one to live in obedience to the Lord, a listening attitude must permeate one's entire life, constitute a style, a particular stance before the reality of everyday life. This is because that, as we have said, is where the Lord goes to meet us. Thus, the reception of and listening to the Lord in prayer should be extended and projected in one's reception of and listening to the Church, the community, one's brother or sister, the poor, the sick, the imprisoned..., in each circumstance and event of life. Otherwise, what is considered to be prayer, is not so, and the purported experience of God through it, is a hoax.

Finally, we cannot forget that listening demands the serious work of asceticism in order to silence the voices and the “noises” that interfere with listening. Here must employ at full force the preparatory virtues of the Marianist tradition, in particular the five silences. How can we listen to the Word of God if we don't first silence our own words? How can we give God our attention when we are so distracted?

*c) Discernment.*

Obedience to the will of God requires obedience to the Spirit. The Spirit is the internal motor of our personal and communal life and it continues to push history toward the full realization of the Reign of God. The life, death, and resurrection of the Lord were not the final destination but rather the point of ignition in a new era of the History of Salvation, the era of the Spirit. Not everything has already been said or established. “I have much more to tell you but you cannot bear it now. When he comes, however, being the Spirit of truth he will guide you to all truth. He will not speak on his own but he will speak only what he hears, and will announce to you the things to come. In doing this he will give glory to me, because he will have received from me what he will announce to you” (*Jn* 16:12-14).

The Acts of the Apostles shows us how the first Christians were guided by the Spirit. St. Paul emphasizes how the Christian is no longer governed by an external law, like a slave, but from within, as a son. “When the designated time had come, God sent forth his Son born of a woman, born under the law, to deliver from the law those who were subjected to it, so

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<sup>20</sup> *Faciem tuam...*, n. 7.

that we might receive our status as adopted sons. The proof that you are sons is the fact that God has sent forth into our hearts the Spirit of his Son which cries out ‘Abba’ (‘Father!’) You are no longer a slave but a son! And the fact that you are a son makes you an heir, by God’s design” (Gal 4:3-7). The consummation of the plan that the Father confides to Jesus occurs when Jesus sends his own Spirit, which liberates us from servitude and allows us to live with the life and dignity befitting a son. This life of a son will no longer be a life of pure submission to an extrinsic law, but rather the exercise of a free and living responsibility in which all must discern “the things that really matter” (Phil 1:10), that which befits the conduct of sons, that which can be, at any given moment, most pleasing to the Father, that which can contribute effectively towards building filial relationships among all those who share in the fraternal life of the Kingdom of God.

So history, both general and personal, remains open. The Spirit strives to carry it to its fullness, moving us from within by inspiration, by breath, by impulse. In order to live in obedience to the Spirit’s calling, we need, therefore, to develop a sort of sixth sense which permits us to perceive it and then distinguish it from other movements or internal impulses that do not come from the Spirit. We need to be experts in **discernment**.

"To discern" means to examine, to reckon, to select, to distinguish and to scrutinize. If prayer is the place *par excellence* for listening, personal examen is the place for discernment. Not examination of conscience, but that of the heart, the examination of one’s reactions and the repercussions of these reactions in our life. It is this personal examination which enlightens us about what is really going on, about that to which we feel inclined and about what makes sense.

This discernment is not the fruit of intellectual knowledge, but of the sensitivity of the heart – and our sensitivity is not as neutral as we think. Furthermore, it is the manipulator of reason. We are our sensibilities. We are neither what we think we are nor what we desire to be at any given moment in time, because that continually changes. We are our sensitivities. We did not need to wait for the philosophies of suspicion to lay bare the manipulateness of our emotional life about our image of God, even to the point of making God a vulgar projection of our own shortcomings and desires. St. Ignatius and other great spiritual figures already understood this: we must escape the danger of “bringing to God what I want,”<sup>21</sup> to confuse God’s voice with my voices, God’s Word with my own.

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<sup>21</sup> With this expression between quotation marks, I allude to the *Prelude for Making Election*, a key text for discernment in a portion of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, which goes as follows: “In every good election, as far as depends on us, the eye of our intention ought to be simple, only looking at what we are created for, namely, the praise of God our Lord and the salvation of our soul. And so I ought to choose whatever I do, that it may help me for the end for which I am created, not ordering or bringing the end to the means, but the means to the end: as it happens that many choose first to marry—which is a means—and secondarily to serve God our Lord in the married life—which service of God is the end. So, too, there are others who first want to have benefices, and then to serve God in them. So they do not go straight to God, **but want God to come straight to their disordered tendencies**, and consequently they make a means of the end, and an end of the means. So that what they had to take first, they take last; because first we have to set as our aim the wanting to serve God,—which is the end,—and secondarily, to take a benefice, or to marry, if it is more suitable to us,—which is the means for the end. So, nothing ought to move me to take such means or to deprive myself of them, except only the service and praise of God our Lord and the eternal salvation of my soul” (Spiritual Exercises 169).

Unfortunately, the practice of daily examen has declined in our lifetime and has disappeared from the set of practices that are introduced to our candidates in formation. Nevertheless, it is vital in the spiritual life and, above all, in the practice of truly responsible obedience. Discernment is an ongoing challenge; it cannot be programmed, but rather it needs to be applied when moved by “the spirits;” it is an attitude of continuous vigilance. Deliberation about a topic can be programmed, but not discernment. We must be aware, attentive and awake. “Watch and pray so as not to fall into temptation,” was the last advice of Jesus to his disciples. We pray little, but we watch even less.<sup>22</sup>

Examen makes us conscious of what really is moving our world from within, but it is not sufficient. Examen is not enough. We need to accompany it with a work of asceticism which purifies the heart’s motivations, its “loves” (confessed or unconfessed), which bind and govern it, which impede it from being free to be carried by the one who truly frees and fulfills it. We cannot forget that only “the pure of heart will see God” (Mt 5:8).<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> “The examen is considered by the Constitutions as the practical observance of the precept of the divine Master: ‘Omnibus dico, vigilate! - I say to all, without exception, keep watch on yourselves!’ This is sufficient to commend it to all religious and to have them prize it” (Const. 1839, a. 43) Fr. Chaminade insisted on the importance of the practice of general examen, of what is called “particular examen” and of meditation, following the teaching of St. Ignatius, for whom this was as important, or more so, than prayer in the exercises and in the spiritual life. Just have a look at, among others, the plan of life devised for Mlle. Thérèse de Lamourous (MP 11) or the introduction of points for examen on retreats (cf. MP 337-353) or Chaminade’s considerations in directing the practice of mental prayer (MP 505).

<sup>23</sup> It is good to recall here what Fr. Chaminade said on this matter: “The savior of the world teaches us that the indispensable condition for seeing God is to have a pure heart. It would profit the soul nothing to be enlightened by the most striking splendors of faith if the heart were not pure. For the soul would frustrate its life of faith and render itself all the more guilty, more miserable. It follows that all our efforts, all our trials and all our struggles must be directed toward the purification of the heart. This is really the whole purpose of Christianity. For, to have a pure heart is to love God alone, to seek God alone, and to strive toward God with all our energies...” (MP 515-516)

### III SEEKING GOD'S PLAN TOGETHER

“By his submission to the Father,  
Jesus redeemed the world and was glorified.  
In order to share in his obedience,  
we offer our wills unreservedly to God  
and enter fully into a community and a Society  
whose members  
**seek together to fulfill the Father's will.**”  
(RL 29)

This article from our *Rule of Life* begins the section dedicated to the vow of obedience within the chapter on Consecrated Life. With it the ultimate justification is stated and the two dimensions of it are shown: a vertical dimension, the offering of our will to God without hesitation, and a horizontal dimension, the integration into “a community and a Society whose members seek together to fulfill the Father's will.” All that we have said so far in this *Circular* has been, basically, a commentary, more or less developed, on the first part. It is fitting at this point to move on to the second part so as not to deprive our obedience of that which, as we will see in the text that follows, properly characterizes it as religious and Marianist within the Church.

#### 3.1. An obedience that “con-vokes.”

At the root of religious life, as in all of Christian life, is the renunciation of our own will in order to seek and follow the will of God, prolonging the saga of the whole cloud of witnesses in faith-obedience (cf. Heb 12:1), who, following Jesus, have preceded us on the path of incarnating the salvific design of the Father.

St. Benedict began his rule with these sentences: “Listen carefully, my child, to your master's precepts, and incline the ear of your heart. Receive willingly and carry out effectively your loving father's advice, that by the labor of obedience you may return to Him from whom you had departed by the sloth of disobedience. To you, therefore, my words are now addressed, whoever you may be, who are renouncing your own will to do battle under the Lord Christ, the true King, and are taking up the strong, bright weapons of obedience.” Fr. Chaminade recalls: “Religious life is a continual immolation of man to God, and especially of his will by obedience. After the example of the divine Master, he never wishes to do his own will, but always and only that of God”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> *General Regulations of the Novitiate of St. Laurent, Bordeaux*, MARIANIST DIRECTION (MD) III, 246.

In this sense, beyond the formality of the vow,<sup>25</sup> religious obedience is a type of Christian obedience, that is to say, participation in obedience is part of the obedience of Jesus, which we have treated before, and which is common to all Christianity. It still seeks to find God's will and to be open to it. So then, what distinguishes it? How is it different?

It is distinguished precisely by the fact that it is an obedience which responds to a call that is shared with others and which, by this fact, "con-vokes," "in-corporates," as the *Rule of Life* puts it. It is not a merely personal or individual obedience, but one that is exercised in a shared way, integrated into a collective obedience, communitarian, with other persons who have received the same particular vocation in the Church. Of course, in religious life there exists the personal and non-transferable call, the "nominal" call (each one is called by name), but this is inscribed within a common, shared vocation.

In the context of Christian obedience, religious obedience acquires its own character, not so much because of the vow in and of itself, but by the particular mode in which the religious searches for, and follows the will of God. If the layperson does it through conjugal life or by joining lay institutions in the society in which the person lives, the religious does it in common with others who have been called, like him and with him, to incarnate a particular way of life loved by God, inspired by the Spirit for the good of God's Kingdom. Because the call is shared, we can say that obedience is also shared.

That way of life loved by God, which generically we call "religious life" in the Church, becomes defined fundamentally by being a life lived in fraternal communion in the service of mission. Community and mission: the religious is "con-voked" by obedience *to* both and the religious lives it *in* both. Both are, at the same time, its fruit and the context in which it is exercised.

The first fruit and the first context of obedience is common life, the place of communion from which the religious searches for, listens to and discerns the will of God.

"This testimony of consecration takes on special meaning in religious life because of *the community dimension* which marks it. The fraternal life is the privileged place in which to discern and accept God's will, and to walk together with one mind and heart. Obedience, enlivened by charity, unites the members of an Institute in the same witness and the same mission, while respecting the diversity of gifts and individual personalities. In community life which is inspired by the Holy Spirit, each individual engages in a fruitful dialogue with the others in order to discover the Father's will. At the same time, together they recognize in the one who presides, an expression of the fatherhood of God and the exercise of authority received from God, at the service of discernment and communion. Life in community is thus the particular sign, before the Church and society, of the bond which comes from the same call and the common desire — notwithstanding differences of race and origin, language and cul-

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<sup>25</sup> In the paragraph following the one just cited, Fr. Chaminade adds: "*The vow of obedience considered materially in its object, would not provide sufficiently for the perpetual sacrifice of the will, since it does not oblige directly and of itself except in the rare circumstances when legitimate superiors give an express command*" (*ibid.*, 247).

ture — to be obedient to that call. Contrary to the spirit of discord and division, authority and obedience shine like a sign of that unique fatherhood which comes from God, of the brotherhood born of the Spirit, of the interior freedom of those who put their trust in God, despite the human limitations of those who represent him. Through this obedience, which some people make their rule of life, the happiness promised by Jesus to "those who hear the word of God and keep it" (*Lk* 11:28) is experienced and proclaimed for the good of all. Moreover, those who obey have the guarantee of truly taking part in the mission, of following the Lord and not pursuing their own desires or wishes. In this way we can know that we are guided by the Spirit of the Lord, and sustained, even in the midst of great hardships, by his steadfast hand (cf. *Acts* 20:22-23)."<sup>26</sup>

If community life is the first fruit and the first context of religious obedience, the last is mission. I do not use the term "last" to indicate less important, but completely the opposite. It is the end toward which the call points.

"Religious obedience is at once an imitation of Christ and a participation in his mission. It is concerned with doing what Jesus did, and, at the same time, with what he would do in the concrete situation in which a religious finds himself or herself today. Whether one has authority in an institute or not, one cannot either command or obey without reference to mission. When religious obey, they offer this obedience in continuity with the obedience of Jesus for the salvation of the world. This is why everything which, in the exercise of authority or obedience, indicates a compromise, a diplomatic solution, the consequence of pressure, or any other kind of temporizing, is opposed to the basic inspiration of religious obedience, which is to align oneself with the mission of Jesus and to carry it out in time, even if such an undertaking is difficult."<sup>27</sup>

### 3.2. Charismatic mediation.

The community and mission to which the religious is called are determined by the person's own charism. The religious does not feel a "generic" call to religious life. The calling does not exist in the abstract, but rather in its diverse charismatic realizations. The Lord does not call certain Christians to become religious without some more specification. The Lord calls them to be Franciscans, Carmelites, Jesuits... or, as in our case, to be Marianists. The implicit obedience in saying "yes" to the call of the Lord is, therefore, also and in itself, obedience to the charism. This charism arises in the Church like a wind, an impulse, a call from the Lord, expressing his will. Founders receive it directly from God, through the inspiration of the Spirit. The rest of us receive it through the *Rule of Life*, recognized by the Church and lived out on a daily basis within the Institute.

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<sup>26</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Vita consecrata* (March 25, 1996), n. 92.

<sup>27</sup> CONGREGATION FOR INTITUTES OF CONSECRATED LIFE, *Potissimum institutioni. Orientations about formation in religious institutes* (February 2, 1990), n. 15.

“There are many Religious Institutes in the Church, each differing one from the other according to its proper character (cf. PC 7, 8, 9, 10). Each, however, contributes its own vocation as a gift raised up by the Spirit through the work of outstanding men and women (cf. LG 45; PC 1; 2), and authentically approved by the sacred hierarchy.

The very charism of the *Founders* (Evang. nunt. 11) appears as an ‘experience of the Spirit,’ transmitted to their disciples to be lived, safeguarded, deepened and constantly developed by them, in harmony with the Body of Christ continually in the process of growth. ‘It is for this reason that the distinctive character of various religious institutes is preserved and fostered by the Church’ (LG 44; cf. CD 33; 35, 1; 35, 2; etc.). This distinctive character also involves a particular style of sanctification and of apostolate, which creates its particular tradition, with the result that one can readily perceive its objective elements.

In this hour of cultural evolution and ecclesial renewal, therefore, it is necessary to preserve the identity of each institute so securely, that **the danger of an ill-defined situation be avoided, lest religious, failing to give due consideration to the particular mode of action proper to their character, become part of the life of the Church in a vague and ambiguous way.**”<sup>28</sup>

The call to the religious life occurs by means of the charism. The charism delimits the will of God for the religious and establishes ways to incarnate it. It concretizes both the way one lives community life as well as the way one carries out the mission. In this way it makes religious obedience incarnate, preserving it from any vagueness or ambiguity.

This principle is enormously important for the discernment of a personal vocation. Thanks to this principle, whoever feels called has objective elements to verify whether this call is real or not. The call must find a type of “harmony” in the recipient, the one who receives it. Ignorance or indifference in regard to the particular charism of the institute to which the individual feels God is calling him, the desire or search for something that the institute does not contain, or the absence of the personal capacity required to live that institute’s mode of community life or mission – all are evident signs that the supposed call is imaginary.

But, above all, this principle is important for centering the very experience of a vocation, once discerned. Religious profession contains all this in a single “yes” to the Lord’s call and, hence, a promise of obedience to the charism. Without this obedience at the very

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<sup>28</sup> SACRED CONGREGATION FOR RELIGIOUS AND SECULAR INSTITUTES – SACRED CONGREGATION FOR BISHOPS: *Mutuae relationes. Pastoral criteria regarding relations between bishops and religious in the Church* (May 14, 1978), n. 11.

This other, more recent text repeats the same idea: “*Consecrated persons moreover are called to the following of the obedient Christ within an ‘evangelical project’ or a charismatic one, inspired by the Spirit and authenticated by the Church. Approving a charismatic program that is a religious institute, the Church guarantees that the inspiration that animates it and the norms that regulate it can provide a path for seeking God and holiness. Therefore, the Rule and the other indications concerning the way of life also become means of mediating the will of the Lord: human mediation but still authoritative, imperfect but at the same time binding, the starting point from which each day begins, and also for moving forward in a generous and creative impulse towards that sanctity which God ‘wills’ for every consecrated person.*” (*Faciem tuam...*, n. 9)

root of our life and our mission, the will of God will not be fulfilled in our lives. We cannot forget that we vow our “yes” to the Lord publicly in the Church, “according to the *Rule of Life of the Society of Mary*.” In this commitment of global obedience to the life and mission that belong to the Institute, we profess our vows, including that of obedience.

In our particular case, as we know, our religious profession includes the special vow of stability. By this vow, we make it very clear that our consecration is none other than an act of obedience to the charism. By the vow of stability, we commit ourselves to the Society of Mary, with the charism that it incarnates, and this is how we obey the Lord. The understanding of an alliance with Mary that our Founder gave to this vow gets its meaning precisely from this dimension of obedience.

### **3.2. A shared obedience, “Co-responsible.”**

At this point, we can better understand the scope and meaning of the last phrase of the cited article: “and enter fully into a community and a Society whose members seek together to fulfill the Father's will.” We can immediately see that, with this understanding, obedience cannot be passive, but must be active. Religious obedience does not consist in doing simply what others command me to do, but rather in actively participating in the common search for the will of God.

The presentation of obedience as limited to the context of relationships with authority has not helped the understanding of this principle in the past. As we have seen, in the not so distant past, especially considering the full history of a religious congregation, problems with obedience were approached by a defense of authority on the one hand, and the call for submission on the other, as if only some have the sole mission of seeking God’s will, leaving to the rest the role of mere compliance.<sup>29</sup> It is not that this was treated from an erroneous perspective (we dealt with this above), but the perspective was insufficient for the correct understanding of religious obedience and grasping all that it involves. A vocation is communal and we all are committed in the search for what God wants to call us to in the concrete here and now. This search is served by ministries and various other means (there are meetings, assemblies, councils, chapters, superiors, assistants, councilors...) but the responsibility for the search itself is shared and nobody can or should feel unconcerned about it.

The assimilation of this principle in our *Rule of Life* has necessitated a long path of reflection. It is good to recall this, not only out of a hermeneutical interest, but also and above all in the interest of our lives. Has this long road of reflection been reflected in our life? How has it been put into practice?

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<sup>29</sup> Even though there were calls for the exercise of authority that favored the participation of all, the Second Vatican Council did not wholly eschew this approach in #14 of *Perfectae Caritatis*. Other later documents from the magisterium, as we have seen, further developed this principle of co-responsibility and a common search (cf. *Faciem tuam...*, n. 12)

Co-responsibility in obedience appears in more recent history as one of the fruits of the ecclesiology of Vatican II. In our case, it was the General Chapter of 1971, precursor of the current *Rule of Life*, which became the echo of the Council: “In the World today, the understanding of authority and obedience has undergone evolution. This evolution has had its repercussions in religious life and created various difficulties...There have also been difficulties in harmonizing the traditional role often given to superiors with the principles of collegiality and subsidiarity, principles widely accepted since Vatican II.”<sup>30</sup>

*Collegiality, subsidiarity*: new words, new concepts which, in order to be integrated into the experience of obedience, require new forms but also new “mentalities.” “Although the nature of authority such as it is presented in our Constitutions has not changed, the actual decentralization of authority and the practice of subsidiarity raise the question of the specific role of the provincial administration. The General Chapter is convinced that it is precisely the present situation that urges the provincial administration to fulfill a leadership role more vital and necessary than ever. The concept of leadership is not in any way opposed to the concept of authority. Rather, it indicates one way of exercising authority. The provincial administration exercises creative leadership by persuasion, encouragement, coordination, stimulation, evaluation and example.”<sup>31</sup>

*Animation* was also another new concept that became incorporated into the vocabulary of the Chapter regarding obedience. In the words of the General Chapter of 1976, which dedicated one of its documents to government by animation,<sup>32</sup> “to animate means basically to give life. To give life to a group, it is not enough to command, especially if one understands by command to give precepts that limit the conduct of others or to force others to carry out orders imposed from the outside. To exercise authority by animation means also to invoke inner motives through persuasion, encouragement, stimulation, evaluation and, above all, by example”<sup>33</sup>

We cannot deny that this new focus, centered yet again in the exercise of authority, has provoked a crisis regarding authority, not in its foundation, but in its practice. To understand authority in this way is easy; to practice it in this manner is difficult. It requires qualities and abilities that are not very common. Confronted with difficulty, the tendency is to avoid exercising any authority. Also, if that tendency toward avoidance is united with the other tendency, still persistent, toward a passive experience of obedience, which only becomes active with the exercise of authority, the result is a notable vacuum in the experience of this very essential dimension of our religious life. This vacuum causes it to lose the prophetic and missionary dynamism that should characterize it, since it is intrinsically connected to the dynamism of our obedience, our search and assimilation of God's will in our lives, in the here and now.

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<sup>30</sup> Doc 4, n.23. (cfr. nn 23-30)

<sup>31</sup> Doc 5, n. 3.

<sup>32</sup> Doc E, nn 101-124.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*, n. 105.

We must repeat, in order to get out of this vacuum, we have to remove the practice of obedience from the limited field of relationship with authority and place it on the horizon of our common vocation, where it should exist and find its true foundation. Not everything depends on the exercise of authority, nor does everything depend on the submission of the brothers. The dynamism of our obedience requires a spirit of renunciation and sacrifice, but this is not what nourishes. Rather, the shared passion for responding with authenticity and coherence to the communal call of the Lord is what truly gives life.

The *Rule of Life* has taken this very approach and has developed it in the introduction to Chapter 7 of Book II. I will not repeat it all here nor will I spend time with commentary. Suffice it to say that we should go back and carefully read articles 7.1 to 7.8. In them you will see how they present an urgent call to co-responsibility and to participation in government, that is to say, in the orientation of the Society. This would enable “many factors to make their proper contribution: **our common aims; our structures; interaction among men united in the same vocation;** the Superior and the assistants; and finally, in a unique way, each individual religious.”<sup>34</sup>

#### Note about making decisions in common

" Under the guidance of superiors,  
important directives for community life  
are determined after a sincere effort  
by all the members  
to discern the will of God  
through prayer and discussion." (RL 42)

“Participation consists in the active collaboration of all members,  
as much as possible, in planning, making,  
executing, and evaluating decisions.  
Dialogue and communal discernment are helpful means to attain  
full participation.” (RL 7.4)

These two articles of the *Rule of Life* are a clear call for the participation of all in making decisions that effect community life. This has to do with an obligation of obedience and an important exercise for the common experience of it, as we have already mentioned before. It is also, however, a delicate practice and we must be very careful about the dynamic. It seems to me that in order to achieve its intended result, there needs to be a good deal of care and concern on the part of all. Clearly, I am referring to those decisions of a certain importance, which affect life and mission, and not minor or particular questions.

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<sup>34</sup> RL 7.7.

1. In the first place, one should not confuse this with a “parliamentary” sort of process. In a parliament, there is conflict and confrontation between groups and factions motivated by various interests and ideologies. What is most important is the power of the dialectic, the capacity to argue, if not manipulate, in order to get one’s way, to obtain the prize of a favorable vote. This type of dynamic is incompatible with community life, which is based on the principle of communion and not of confrontation. Furthermore, it undermines the root of evangelical communion as it systematically marginalizes the very person who is its center and axis, the weak one. The incompatibility of this dynamic with community life is sufficiently evident in our experience. Have we not ever been witnesses to the passive silence of those Brothers who consider themselves inferior, or less educated, or less capable in the realm of the dialectic process? Is it not true that these processes create particular difficulties in communities where “big shots” and “heavyweights” abound? The principle of communion ought to prevail above all else. At times, in order to safeguard it, it could be necessary not to submit a final decision to a vote, which sometimes is despotic, in order to give it over to the power of the superior, who, through his personal relation with each brother, is able to guarantee communion. Every brother ought to feel welcomed and heard. Every brother ought to feel welcomed and heard.
2. A climate of true dialogue must be guaranteed, meaning mutual interaction in search of answers. This presupposes that each person enters into the process in “search” because he is convinced that he does not possess the fullness of truth and that he needs the other to enlighten him. Similarly, and so that the mutual interaction can take place, it is necessary to guarantee a climate of freedom and confidence, which enhances the desire to make one’s own contributions to the process and allows these contributions to be positive. Confidence and freedom are violated if there are brothers who are motivated by unacknowledged purposes or if there are those who feel judged or pre-judged in their intentions. To create this climate of freedom and confidence is the task of each and every one of us. If only one person violates it, everyone is disturbed. We know by experience how only one person, with his attitude, can block the dialogue of an entire group.
3. The ideal would be if every process of decision-making in common were an authentic process of “community discernment,” but, it cannot always be that way. Discernment, as we have explained above, is based on the affective realm of “motivations” and not only on the intellectual realm of “reasons.” “Reasons” are of the objective and notional order, while “motivations” include reasons but also the affective dimension. In a decision-making process, so that the decisions might be good ones, reasons are necessary and must be shown, but above all, it is also necessary that it be clear that the motivations behind the decisions are purified. The fact that the process of discernment must enter into the realm of the “reasons of the heart” those which, many times, as Pascal said, “reason knows not” (when they are not being hidden), makes the process truly demanding and difficult. It requires a considerable amount of human and spiritual maturity to bring these reasons to light and, furthermore, to

be disposed to submitting them to purification in mutual interaction.<sup>35</sup> But the difficulty should not keep us from entering into the process and we can always have as our goal that each time our decision-making process gets closer and closer to true discernment. As the *Instruction* about fraternal life in community said: “Community discernment is a rather useful process, even if not easy or automatic, for involving human competence, spiritual wisdom and personal detachment. Where it is practiced with faith and seriousness, it can provide superiors with optimal conditions for making necessary decisions in the best interests of fraternal life and of mission.”<sup>36</sup>

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Dear brothers, in times of change and of searching, it becomes more urgent than ever to live in obedience to the Lord, in docility to the Spirit. The search for the will of God, and the unconditional surrender to that will, are essential for us. All new creation comes from the Lord, but in order for it to operate the Lord continues to look for us to say with Mary: “let it be done to me according to your word.” May these reflections contribute to the renewal of our willingness to live with her in obedience!

Your brother in Jesus Christ, Son of God, become Son of Mary  
for the salvation of the world,

Manuel J. Cortés, SM  
Superior General

Rome, April 12, 2009.  
Feast of the Resurrection

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<sup>35</sup> " This process of discernment is sometimes painful, but it will succeed in the measure that the members are mature and remain open to the Lord as he speaks through their brothers.." (RL 42)

<sup>36</sup> CONGREGATION FOR INSTITUTES OF CONSECRATED LIFE, *Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor. Fraternal Life in Community* (February 2, 1994), n. 50.