

THE SUNDAY AFTER THE FEAST OF THE KINGS

Gospel: Saint Luke 2: 40-52

On the necessity of obedience

7.1 First Point

Today's Gospel relates that Saint Joseph and the most Blessed Virgin went to Jerusalem with Jesus, then twelve years of age, to celebrate the feast of the Passover, and that when they returned after the days of the festivity were completed, Jesus remained behind in Jerusalem. His parents came back looking for him; when they found him in the midst of the teachers, they brought him back with them to Nazareth, where he was subject to them,⁸¹ as Saint Luke tells us. The Gospel gives us no more information about his life in Nazareth, up to the time when he left to preach the Kingdom of God. An admirable lesson for all those responsible for teaching Christian truth to others! Jesus Christ made himself ready by submission and obedience to carry out the great task of the redemption and the conversion of souls, because he knew that nothing can ensure the success of this mission more certainly and more effectively than preparing himself for it by a long practice of a humble and submissive life. That was why in the early Church, especially in the East, it was customary to choose for bishops, persons who had lived for a long time under obedience.

You whom God has called to a ministry which requires you to labor for the salvation of souls should prepare yourselves by the practice of obedience over a long period of time in order to make yourselves worthy of so holy a role and to be able to achieve great good in your exercise of it. The more faithful you are to the grace of Jesus Christ who wishes to see you become perfect in this virtue of obedience, the more will God bless your efforts, because whoever obeys his superior obeys God himself.⁸²

7.2 Second Point

What should further encourage you to exact obedience is that the first end we should have had in coming into this house was to obey those in charge, because, as Saint Bonaventure so rightly says, obedience is the foundation of communities, without which they would fall into ruin. Saint Teresa also observes very correctly that a community cannot survive without obedience and does not even deserve the name community if this virtue is not observed in it, even if all the other virtues are practiced there to an eminent degree. Such was the case of those cenobites who, as Cassian relates, were living without any bonds of obedience and were judged for that reason by the ancient Fathers of the desert to be a monstrosity, not a real community.

The practice of obedience was also the first injunction given to Abbot Postumus by the angel who taught him by God's command: the first rule to be observed by those who wish to live in community is to obey those appointed to guide them.

Reason itself demonstrates the necessity of obedience in a religious society, obedience being the virtue which establishes order, union, peace, and tranquility among those who belong to it. Indeed, without obedience each one would act as he saw fit; trouble, disorder, and chaos could not fail to enter and thereby subvert the community from top to bottom. For, says Saint James, every house where there is division will fall into ruin.⁸³

Because obedience is the most necessary of all the virtues required for life in a community, it should be the one which you should cultivate most particularly, because without it we cannot for long sustain ourselves in our state.

7.3 Third Point

For every state, says Saint Thomas, there is a particular grace special to it; consequently, it is a necessary virtue for all those who belong to that state if they wish to sanctify themselves and find salvation there. For each one of you this grace is the grace of obedience, because obedience should be the characteristic of persons living in community. It is this that should distinguish them from people living in the world, enjoying their full liberty. This is why Saint Lawrence Justinian says that whoever wishes to enter a religious society must first of all renounce his own will. Saint Bernard, to make us understand that it is this renunciation that sanctifies, says that this is what Jesus Christ meant when he gave us in the Gospel the first means of reaching perfection, namely to deny yourself.⁸⁴ Saint Vincent Ferrer says that Jesus Christ will never give his grace to anyone in religious life who refuses to be governed by the superior.

Because we can not be saved without the grace proper to our state, and because the special grace needed by a person living in community is obedience, you should make every effort to possess it as nearly perfectly as possible. It is true that there are other virtues you need to practice in order to fulfill your duty, being involved as you are in exterior work, but be quite convinced that you will never carry out your duty in a really adequate manner unless you possess perfectly the virtue of obedience. This is why you should apply to yourself the words of Pope Saint Gregory in his Dialogues, that the first and principal virtue you should claim for your practice is obedience, because it will be in you the source of all the others and of your sanctification as well.

82 Lk 10:16

83 Mk 3:25

84 Lk 9:23