

FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER THE FEAST OF THE KINGS

Gospel: Saint Matthew 13: 24-30

The excellence and merit of obedience

11.1 First Point

Since obedience is a source of grace for a religious, it can be compared to the good seed sown in a field,¹⁰⁰ which produces a rich harvest for its owner. This, indeed, is the virtue which in persons consecrated to God constitutes the entire merit of their actions, so that no matter how good these may be in themselves, they are of real value only in so far as they are accompanied by obedience. It may be said that what confers the crowning glory on their actions is obedience; however holy these works may be in themselves, unless obedience bestows on them their full luster, the beauty they possess is only apparent. This, it is true, suffices to dazzle those who do not look upon things with the eyes of faith; but truly enlightened persons can discern all their falsity and vanity.

Those who live under obedience should take care that it not be said of them what was stated of the scribes and Pharisees whom the Oracle of Truth himself called whitened sepulchres, attractive enough externally and beautiful to behold as long as one looked at them from the outside, but who were filled with dead men's bones and corruption within.¹⁰¹

For the same thing could be affirmed of religious whose actions are not all performed under the control of obedience. These persons seem to be virtuous in appearance, but in fact they are fundamentally bad and entirely displeasing to God because they are not animated by the virtue which alone should sustain them, the virtue of obedience; without obedience their work, which seems good in the eyes of people, is only a body without a soul and cannot be considered as the work of a true religious.

11.2 Second Point

It sometimes happens that an activity ostensibly performed out of obedience is not totally guided and governed by this virtue, because one has failed in something prescribed by the superior regarding either the time or the manner of complying. Such an action degenerates from what it was; because of this flaw, it becomes a deed inspired by self-will; this defect is the cockle that the demon sows amid the good seed.¹⁰² It is certainly very unfortunate that a deed, good in itself, becomes bad for the want of such a circumstance, and that this single deficiency makes it displeasing to God. This shows what great vigilance religious should exercise over all their conduct, so that their actions may be such as they ought to be in order to please God.

Take care, therefore, that all you do is guided by obedience, and that in all your work there is not the slightest circumstance not subject to this virtue. For God has no regard for an action, even if performed through obedience, unless there is care to accomplish it without neglecting any detail in what is prescribed by the one who commands. According to a maxim of philosophers, to make an action good, everything connected with it must be good, whereas even the slightest defect makes it imperfect. It is no small flaw not to obey as one should, for this is to lack respect for God and not to show the esteem for him that a person should have.

11.3 Third Point

The best way to do exactly what has been commanded by the superior is to place a higher value on obedience (which is what gives worth to the action) than on the deed itself; any act, however remarkable it may be in itself, if separated from obedience is not esteemed by God at all because it lacks what precisely constitutes all its merit, whereas something which might seem of slight importance takes on considerable value in God's eyes thanks to the care which one takes to do it in a spirit of obedience.

What constitutes the merit of a person living in a religious community is not the kind of actions done there, but the perfection of the obedience with which they are done. This is what should distinguish a religious from a secular person. The deeds of the former are sanctified because they are carried out through obedience, whereas for the latter, deeds are sanctified only by their intrinsic merit.

Let us examine whether obedience motivates and rules our conduct. We should give this question our most serious attention.

Another consideration which provides us with further and very notable proof of the excellence of the virtue we have been considering is that it rectifies everything, and something actually bad becomes pleasing to God thanks to obedience, when we are invincibly ignorant of the evil and we proceed in good faith and in all simplicity, having in mind no other intention save that of obeying God.