

Reflection On Obedience

The discernment process required for someone to become an ordained priest in the Anglican Communion could be seen as ‘jumping through hoops’ or ticking the boxes. What I have learnt in this journey can be captured in what the Rule of St. Benedict says about obedience. Etymologically, the word obedience in Latin (*oboedientia*) and Greek (ὕπακοή) implies not only that there is a ‘listening to’ or ‘hearing a voice’ or ‘submission to what is heard’, but also that there is an implied authority. Thus, there is no obedience without authority. These two work hand in hand. In my spiritual journey it took awhile for me to realize this tandem nature of obedience and authority. I was born in South Africa at a time when authoritarian leadership was the standard...with police, teachers, parents, and church leaders etc. Authority was strict, swift, and absolute. Questioning or resisting authority had costly consequences. In many ways this undermined my respect for authority and my ability to trust those in authority. It took a lot of work, spiritual discernment, and digging into my heart to understand how I related to those in authority and how I understand obedience. The following connotations of obedience were drilled into my conscious:

- Obedience meant, in my experience, doing what others said with no questions asked.
- Showing obedience was seen as doing what you were asked to do, immediately, the first time you were asked, whether fair or unfair.
- There was no space for questioning, resistance, or grumbling under your breath.

These were the expectations I lived under and somehow became my default parental style. Whether stressed, in a hurry, or wanting efficiency (which is always), I found myself voicing similar platitudes to my kids. I heard myself saying, “Obedience is doing it the first time, without asking questions.” “Obey right away with no talking back.” However, over time, parenting has taught me how to cultivate obedience not demand it. I had to learn the mutuality between discernment and obedience. I have found it a struggle, but have been leaning into and learning from the rule of St Benedict. It makes these three points about obedience:

- The abbot speaks for Christ. His authority is not personal. He is obeyed not as a person is obeyed, but as a representative of a far deeper and more subtle authority.
- The abbot’s concern is care of the soul.
- Benedict recommends mutual obedience.

(The Rule of Saint Benedict Vintage Spiritual Classics edited by Timothy Fry)

In the Anglican and Episcopalian tradition, my understanding of the abbot’s role is played by the bishop, priest and parish leadership. The diocesan leadership works hard in developing rules and policies around the process for ordination to Holy Orders. As someone who was discerning the call to the priesthood, I needed to be discerning with others for my call. I needed to obey my bishop and diocesan leadership, but also there is a sense of mutual obedience about what God’s call is for me. I had

the privilege of experiencing this kind of mutual discernment in both the Diocese of Table Bay (Cape Town) and the Diocese of North Carolina. Individuals who are discerning the call to the Holy Order (priesthood) could be frustrated with these rules and policies developed by the diocesan leadership, seeing this mandate as a somewhat laborious process. However, if entered into with an attitude of mutual discernment and obedience, it can be life giving and liberating. In both these dioceses, I have learnt that I need to pay attention to the Spirit of God. For example, during the weekend that the Commission on Ministry (Vocational Guidance Committee) in Cape Town was discerning about my vocation to the Holy Order, my wife's stepmother was dying in a hospital in the USA. My father-in-law had to care for his wife alone. My wife was torn between supporting her husband's vocation and caring for her 'far away' father. When she passed away my father in law was left in grief and loneliness. Mutual discernment was required of both myself and my wife about the priority of serving our family. Should we move to the USA? When we heard the news about my acceptance to be a candidate for ordination in Cape Town, I felt sad about the news. I realized I was hoping that the committee will say I am not a suitable candidate for ordination, making my decisions about my family much easier. But alas, the church wanted me to be a servant in its church. Another mutual discernment process was required between my bishop and myself, about the best way to serve my wife and her elderly father. This mutual discernment was created by those in authority and enabled me to learn to trust and listen to others in positions of power without being a yes man.

Obedience is being aligned to the Lord as seen in John 6:38, "For I have come not to do my will but the will of him who sent me." Obedience is a spiritual virtue that needs to be cultivated and its fruit is faithfulness. People who walk and know your journey of faith will notice that you are faithful in small things.