

“DO AS HE TELLS YOU” THE WAY OF OBEDIENCE

Michael Whelan SM¹

I believe it is helpful, when we are seeking to understand and live out the Christ Life, to look for the human ground of those behaviours and practices that we would want to claim as “religious.” More specifically, what is the human ground of those ideals and practices we want to bear witness to as disciples of the Risen Lord? Searching for the human ground is no more nor less than a central implication of the Incarnation: God has chosen to enter our world in the flesh, in a given moment of history, in a particular cultural and social context. In acting in this way, God has confirmed the flesh and history and culture and society as the chosen place of our redemption.

There is a threefold corollary implicit in the Incarnation. Our maturation as human beings is:

- a process of emergence rather than imposition – that is, life is an unfolding of our human potential, an inside out process under the sway of grace,
- a process of facilitation rather than mastery – that is, life is a conversation rather than an egocentric project,
- a process of participation rather than control – that is, life is a mystery to be lived rather than a problem to be solved.

We should, at the outset, acknowledge an irony in this. Authentic faith helps to keep us grounded in what is real. However, T S Eliot has reminded us that “humankind cannot bear very much reality.”² Since religion is quintessentially the endeavour to be real, it is not surprising that we cannot bear very much religion. Yet we do not dare discard it. So we shape religion to suit our desire not to become real. Religion, in this perverted sense, serves to unground us and enable us to evade what is real, while we are all the time patting ourselves on the back that we are about the business of holiness.

So I invite you to join me in a simple and mundane exploration. Where do you, in your ordinary daily life, find the call to obedience? Where is the human ground of this central disposition?

PART I

The obedience pattern

Recall a time when you ate or drank too much, or you overworked, or you slept too little because you willfully wanted to do this or that, or you got too much sun because you did not bother to take precautions that you knew you should have taken, or you simply did something in the face of contrary messages. Typically, when we do such things – when we overdo it or act against our better judgment or the better judgment of others – we engage in a process that is more or less one

¹ Michael was ordained as a Marist priest in 1972. He is currently Director of Aquinas Academy adult education centre in Sydney. He presented this paper at the Marist Laity Conference in Sydney, April 18 2008.

² T S Eliot, “Burnt Norton”.

of defiance. We know we should not eat this, drink that, work those hours and so on. But we do it. And we pay a price!³

Apart from the psychodynamics of this sort of behaviour – so typically human and perhaps more likely to occur in the young – we might ask the foundational question: “What is happening here?” Approach it from another angle: “What *should* I have done?” I should have paid attention to what my body told me, what experience had taught me; I should have listened to the factors involved in the situation and submitted to what “life” was suggesting to me, or I should have listened to the advice of wiser heads, and so on.

Such mundane situations will be more or less trivial or more or less significant in their outcomes or consequences.⁴ It seems much more significant generally, for example, to listen to those deep movements of the human spirit than the urgings of the body. I might pass off the occasional incident of eating or drinking too much, for example, with a little embarrassment and some humor; I cannot pass off so easily the fact that I have defied the voice of my conscience and willfully lived out a script contrary to the deepest urgings of my very being and the genuine desires of my heart.

We could say that life invites and calls us to a pattern here – we might call it the “obedience pattern.” This “pattern” can be characterized as having three distinct and interdependent movements:

- listening,
- hearing and
- submitting to what seems to be true and good.

The obedience pattern is simplicity in complexity

As it is sketched above, what we are calling “the obedience pattern” – the listening, hearing and submitting – may appear simple. This appearance is in fact deceptive. In the concrete human situation, it is not quite so simple. For example:

- Culture can introduce many “social fictions” and “vital lies” that make it difficult for us to listen and hear accurately what is actually happening; thus, for example, “respectability” – a more sophisticated version of what we call among teenagers, “peer group pressure” – and perhaps fear of criticism or of not belonging may lead us to think, say and do, or not think, say and do, things that are untrue or unreal.
- Family training and the various forms of idealization that can emerge within the dynamics of the family can sometimes stand between us and what is real; thus, for example, we may

³ We should not be simplistic about this sort of thing, treating it like some kind of predictable equation – do this and such and such will always follow. Motivation is one factor that can affect the outcome. Social factors can also be significant. We all know, for example, the dour type who always does “the right thing” and the lack of freedom and absence of *joie de vivre* in them can be sad to see and burdensome to endure. We also know the very likable types who cannot resist a good cream bun and as they eat it they say – as if seeking dispensation – “I really shouldn’t!”. The point in this discussion is to note a *pattern* rather than draw moral conclusions about this or that person’s behaviour.

⁴ We should acknowledge at the commencement of this discussion one of the paradoxes of life: Some of our best learning occurs in our failures and disappointments. Thus one bad experience with alcohol might stand us in good stead for the rest of our lives. Much depends on the response we make. An experience of our limits is sometimes the way to discover our best possibilities.

“instinctively” react and behave in certain ways in groups, regardless of whether those “ways” are appropriate or constructive or good and true, because of our family experience and habits learned there.⁵

- The networks of formal and informal relationships in our lives can develop patterns of deception and pretence that make it well nigh impossible to distinguish the illusory from the real. For example, we may convince ourselves that we are not like the rest of the human race, that we are in fact superior to others. Quite unconsciously we can turn things on their head, the illusory seems real and the real seems illusory, the relative seems absolute and the absolute seems relative, ends seem to be means and means seem to be ends.
- The moral choices we make and for which we are responsible as individuals, may be more or less influenced by selfishness, greed, fear and/or pride. For example, we may rationalize a lack of compassion or generosity as “realism” or “teaching someone a lesson” or “not rewarding laziness.”

Each of the four examples given above – of culture, family, the network of formal and informal relationships and the moral decisions we make – is obviously a variation on the same theme, with the common element self-deception aided and abetted by our interactions with others. We must never forget that we all have a genius for self-deception. We all also have a vulnerability to what Karen Horney has so aptly called “the tyranny of the should.”⁶

There are many ways, in fact, that “the obedience pattern” – of listening, hearing and submitting – can be interrupted, obfuscated, twisted, blocked, confused and so on. One of the great and sad ironies of life is that this deformation of the fundamental obedience pattern can all take place under the heading of “obedience.”

Let us summarize the “obedience pattern” again, in the light of the foregoing:

- a willingness and an ability to *listen*⁷ for what is true and real and therefore good, together with
- a willingness and ability to effectively *hear* what is true and real, concretized in
- a genuine desire to *submit*⁸ to what is true and real.

While we might recognise that it is not possible to enter this process perfectly, we would, perhaps, recognize that there is generally something desirable about it. This pattern seems to be a central dynamic in healthy life formation. Imagine a life in which this pattern is followed more or less substantially from beginning to end, in freedom and grace. This is the stuff of genuine wisdom and depth, richness of humanity and bigness of spirit. People who do live this pattern, more or less, tend to be transparent, grounded, manifesting a deep connectedness beyond themselves, a connectedness that gives them a sense of security and inner strength. Their lives speak to us, not of ego, but of mystery. We spontaneously admire such people. Perhaps this is the sort of thing implicit in Dag Hammarskjöld’s comment:

⁵ Prejudice of one kind or another is an obvious instance.

⁶ See Karen Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth: The Struggle Toward Self-Realization*, W W Norton, 1950.

⁷ The English word *obedience* has its roots in the Latin word *audire* meaning *to listen*.

⁸ The English word *submit* comes from the two Latin words *sub* meaning *under* and *missus* meaning *sent*. The general thrust of the word in this context then is that we are sent under the authority of what is true and real. People who experience this kind of authority in their lives radiate a very different presence from those who have only the authority of the system or their functional abilities or a smooth personality. This is particularly pertinent when it comes to giving moral witness.

“What must come to pass, should come to pass. Within the limits of that must, therefore, you are invulnerable.”⁹

Perhaps this is also why the words of Polonius to Laertes in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* continue to ring true across historical periods and cultural boundaries:

“This above all – to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.”¹⁰

Beyond social conformity

1945 was one of the most eventful years of the last century. The Second World War ended and the first nuclear weapons were used to devastating effect in Hiroshima and Nagasaki;¹¹ the United Nations came into existence and the League of Nations went out of existence; Franklin D Roosevelt died and Winston Churchill ceased to be Prime Minister of Great Britain; Mussolini was summarily hanged by partisans and Hitler committed suicide; George Orwell wrote *Animal Farm* and Evelyn Waugh wrote *Brideshead Revisited*; the independent Republic of Vietnam was formed under Ho Chi Minh and the Arab League was founded to oppose the creation of a Jewish State in Palestine.

In 1945 the world also became aware of what we have come to call the Holocaust, and the horrifying depths to which the human race had sunk in and through the Nazis ideology – an ideology in which the Catholic Church in Germany shared some substantial complicity. At the Nuremberg trials, begun on November 20, 1945, the world heard an utterly rational but totally unacceptable defense used by those men and women who were being tried for war crimes as the perpetrators of the Holocaust and related evils: “We were only obeying orders.”¹²

The “obedience” spoken of here seems to have little or nothing to do with what we have referred to above as “the obedience pattern” that life formation invites us into and through which we grow to be responsible and accountable adults. True obedience lies beyond mere social conformity or simply and uncritically doing as one is told, though it may, as a matter of fact, include both of these. Healthy life formation must never be identified with social or cultural conformity. Perhaps the most obvious difference between mere conformity and genuine obedience is that

- “The obedience pattern” is a process that seeks the true and the good and the real as such, beyond what this or that person or group might maintain. “The obedience pattern” does

⁹ Dag Hammarskjöld, *Markings*, Alfred A. Knopf, 1964, 48.

¹⁰ Act I, Scene 3.

¹¹ The dropping of the atomic bombs on those two Japanese cities is, arguably, the most stark act of terrorism in the history of the human family. Another stark act of terrorism occurred early in 1943, when the Allies dropped a combination of incendiary and ordinary bombs on the beautiful city of Dresden in order to create fire storms. The effects were devastating, with an unknown number of people being incinerated – perhaps as many as 130,000. Dresden was not of any particular military significance at the time. The bombing was an act of revenge and terror. In March 1945 the United States air force dropped napalm on Tokyo and generated a devastating fire storm that burned tens of thousands of people to death and left many others scarred for life. The US air force later used napalm in Vietnam to achieve similar terrorizing effects.

¹² It was worrying to hear this same defense used by the two French military operatives who had sunk the Greenpeace ship *Rainbow Warrior* in Auckland Harbour on July 10, 1985, killing a photographer on board. The same defense was also used by the US military personnel who tortured the Iraqi men in the Abu Ghraib gaol in Baghdad.

not deny or dismiss the given social order, it merely perceives that order in the context of a bigger order.

- Conformity, by way of contrast, is a process which seeks the maintenance of a certain social order. Whether that social order be true or good or real is not the point. Conformity is also a process by which the individual seeks to be part of that social order. Conformity is also a process whereby the individual avoids the sanctions of that social order used against those who do not conform.¹³

Consider, by way of contrast, the so-called “civil disobedience” – the “social non-conformity” – of people like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Edith Stein, Mahatma Gandhi, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King and many thousands of others in that same century who listened, heard and chose to submit to another voice, a higher order, sometimes at great personal cost. What these people heard took precedence over the prevailing social order and its demands. Who would not recognize, for example, in the choices and commitment made by Bonhoeffer in his obedience, something far more deeply true and good and real and noble than the choices made by those Nazi officers in their so-called “obedience”?

And let us not be naïve about this: The Nazis hanged Bonhoeffer literally days before the surrender and long after it became obvious that surrender was inevitable. Genuine obedience may be resisted because the prevailing social order threatens death to those who obey a higher order. The unreality of social conformity may therefore be far more attractive – or at least less threatening – than genuine obedience.

The obedience pattern in the fields of living

Are we to say then, that the laws and customs of society and the maintenance of social order are in fact irrelevant to the whole question of “obedience”? That is probably not a helpful way to think about the issue, if for no other reason than that it appears too cut and dried, too either/or. Human life formation is far more mysterious and complex than that. Ambiguities and paradoxes abound in concrete life formation. And social order and its maintenance – for all their considerable limits and imperfections – are generally, for the most part, worth promoting.

It is probably more helpful to think of the obedience pattern taking us ever more deeply into the true and the good and the real and therefore into life-giving relationships. Following the obedience pattern takes us progressively into who we most deeply are and where we belong in the mystery that life is.

The obedience pattern includes *listening*, *hearing* and *submitting* in all the dimensions of our lives. Depending on how effectively we enter the obedience pattern with regard to these dimensions of our lives, we will be more or less free, more or less true and good and real human beings. To the extent that we simply allow any or all of these dimensions to dominate us uncritically, we will tend, more or less, to lose our freedom and be more or less dislocated from what is true and good and real. The “disobedient” life leads to unreality, the “obedient” life leads to reality.

¹³ A variation on this theme of social conformity presented as obedience, may be seen in the relatively modern development of what some have called “victimology.” Put simply, it is typified in the defense: “Don’t blame me, I am a victim of . . .” It represents a refusal to be accountable and responsible and makes it difficult for genuine victims to be heard and justly and compassionately treated.

There are many times in our lives when it is undoubtedly a good and reasonable thing to conform to the social custom and thereby maintain a certain social order. In fact, this will almost certainly be the case for most of us most of the time. For example, I may not feel like it but I will give my seat in the bus to an elderly person, or shake hands with someone who has behaved badly towards me, or treat a violent murderer with justice and decency or wear a uniform, that I do not like, as part of my work, or conform to the rules of the road, or engage in the processes of voting for elected members of parliament even if I do not particularly like them or their policies, and so on.

In an emergency such as a bad bushfire, it is clearly necessary that someone takes charge and others do as they are told. All of this can quite reasonably be considered as part of the general obedience pattern of a deepening and healthy life formation process.

However, if these sorts of things are done *merely* out of a desire to conform and *merely* out of a desire therefore to be part of maintaining a certain social order, that would seem to be falling short of what one might expect from a mature human being. Such a motivation in fact lends an *absoluteness* to conformity and social order. This is a form of idolization or idealization. We might be applauded for it but we will not enhance the sense of reality in either ourselves or the our society.

Forums of obedience

From the foregoing it is obvious that:

- the obedience pattern, when engaged intelligently and generously, will lead to greater *awareness* of what is happening in and around myself and
- this awareness can lead to greater *freedom* and
- this freedom can facilitate greater *participation* in the mystery that is life.

This cycle of living generated by the obedience pattern, when repeatedly and consistently entered with generosity also develops and refines *conscience*. When we respond well to this development and refinement of conscience, we are drawn more and more deeply into the heart of living and the ultimate paradox of dying in order to live.

We can discern several different forums of living in which this cycle of life unfolds. The first forum within which the obedience pattern must be entered is *myself*, my very being. All the great wisdom traditions promote the pursuit of self-awareness. A life built on self-ignorance is too prone to manipulation and the kinds of compulsive inner forces that arise from unacknowledged anxiety. John Henry Newman puts it simply:

“I am what I am or I am nothing. My first elementary lesson of duty is that of resignation to the laws of nature, whatever they are; my first disobedience is to be impatient at what I am, and to indulge an ambitious aspiration after what I cannot be.”¹⁴

When I face myself, when I consistently and persistently *listen* lovingly and honestly and critically to what is going on with me; when I actually *hear* those voices of truth and goodness and reality and acknowledge them and allow them to release their wisdom and give form to my

¹⁴ John Henry Newman, *A Grammar of Assent*, Image Books, 1955, 272f. Thomas Merton writes similarly: “For me to be a saint means to be myself. Therefore the problem of sanctity and salvation is in fact the problem of finding out who I am and discovering my true self.” (*Seeds of Contemplation*, Anthony Clarke, 1972, 25.)

life through that wisdom; when I *submit* to that truth and that goodness and that reality, I grow in truth and goodness and reality. In this way my life becomes a beautiful and unique instance of graced emergence. I thus fulfill my vocation as a human being: To be the place where God enters the world, again and again.

My obedience to my very being interpenetrates my obedience in many other forums of living. These other forums include *my family of origin, society* (including the various sub-sets to which I belong) and my *work*. There is literally, in fact, no part of my life in which I cannot fruitfully apply the obedience pattern. There is no time in my life at which I will ever be able to say, “There is no more need for me to enter this obedience pattern.” It is a central dynamic of any healthy life. We will be as genuinely alive as we have been genuinely obedient.

PART II

New Testament words for obedience

In both the Hebrew of the Old Testament¹⁵ and the Greek of the New Testament, the words used which we translate as *obey, obedience* and *obedient*, all have a close relationship with the various words we translate as *hear* and *listen*. One scholar summarizes the use of those Greek words in the New Testament:

*The Greek verb akouō and the noun akoē, as used in the NT have both meanings (ie physical hearing and the apprehension of something with the mind) though originally these words denoted only the former. Various compounds are used to denote apprehension with the mind. Eisakouō and epakouō stress attentive listening, while the emphatic forms hypakouō and hypakoē (literally hear beneath) mean to obey and obedience. The linguistic and conceptual relationship between akouō and hypakouō recurs in Old and Middle English in the use of the same word for both hear and obey. It can still be traced in some modern languages, eg German hören and gehorchen. The former includes the latter, and in some contexts can be substituted for it. Conversely, parakouō and parakoē (literally hear beside) denote inattentive hearing, missing, not hearing, and thus disobedience.*¹⁶

In the world of the Covenant, *listening* and *hearing* are profoundly significant. The word must be heard and heeded. The phrase “Thus says the Lord” recurs again and again. Yahweh has a conversation with his servants Moses¹⁷ and Isaiah.¹⁸ They listen, hear and go forth. In the prophetic writings the prophet must both see and hear in order to interpret visions.¹⁹

¹⁵ We do not have space here to consider the Hebrew words for *obey*. As a sample, see Deuteronomy 6:4-9. There you have the beginnings of the Jewish prayer known as *Shema*. To this day the *Shema* is said morning, noon and sunset by the men of the family in the orthodox Jewish tradition. The word *Shema* – the first word of the prayer – may be translated as either *hear/listen* or *obey*, depending on the context. Scholars tell us that the Old Testament concept of obedience contains both the sense of intelligent listening and willingness to submit to the will of God that is heard in this way. In the Septuagint – the Greek version of the Old Testament written for the Jews in the Diaspora – the words *akouō* or *akoē* are used consistently for the Hebrew *Shema*.

¹⁶ Colin Brown, *The International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, Volume 2*, The Paternoster Press, 1976, 172.

¹⁷ See Exodus 3:1-15. Later Moses is referred to as the one with whom “the Lord used to speak face to face” (Exodus 33:11).

¹⁸ See Isaiah 6:1-13.

¹⁹ See for example Amos 7-9 and Jeremiah 1:11-19.

The response of young Samuel epitomises the absolute fidelity called for by the Covenant: “Speak, for your servant hears.”²⁰ And because the Covenantal life is a conversation, God too is expected to hear. Throughout the Psalms God is frequently called upon to listen and hear.²¹ In fact, what distinguishes Yahweh from the false gods is precisely that Yahweh is willing and able to be party to the conversation that the Covenant demands and the false gods are completely incapable of such a conversation.²²

In the NT Jesus is the object of obedience: “This is my Son the beloved: Listen to him”.²³ This establishes the structure of obedience in the Christian tradition. Obedience is participating in an ongoing conversation with a view to being drawn more deeply into the Covenant. Obedience – in the full Christian sense – can only be understood in the light of God’s loving action in Christ. Obedience is the natural response to our being loved into freedom by the Great Mystery. Christian obedience is *listening* to God revealed in Jesus’ being, *hearing* God speak in and through Jesus’ life and teaching and *submitting* to the revelation of transcendent Love that takes hold of us through this listening and hearing.²⁴ Jerome Murphy-O’Connor’s summary of St Paul’s understanding of obedience, noting how integral it is to the whole of the Christian life, is helpful:

“‘Obeying’ is the perfect verb to express the full, vital acceptance of preaching. The basic meaning of the Greek *hypakouō* is ‘to listen to,’ but, as its technical use to describe the function of a door-keeper indicates, it means ‘to listen in an effective way,’ to listen and do. In other words, it is a listening that forms an invisible unity with the appropriate response to the claim made. (2Thessalonians 3:14)²⁵

Christian obedience, like everything else associated with the reality of Jesus Christ, is enfleshed. It has its human ground. We are speaking of our participation in the Incarnation – the enfleshing of God – through our lives here and now. This is both gift and task, as Maria Boulding so beautiful notes:

“Like Jesus, you have to listen and listen. It will take you all your life to hear the Father’s word of love for you; indeed it will take you all your eternity.”²⁶

Obedience thus unites us ever more deeply with Jesus in his journey into life. So many times Jesus says in the Gospels: “Follow me”. We enter the paschal rhythm of living through him, with him and in him. Unlike Adam,²⁷ Jesus, in his very being, epitomises the obedience pattern we are all

²⁰ 1Samuel 3:10.

²¹ See for example Psalm 4:1; 39:12; 69:16; 102:1.

²² Thus in Psalm 94:9 we read: “He who planted the ear, shall he not hear?” and in Psalm 115:6: “(The idols) have mouths but say nothing, have eyes but see nothing, have ears but hear nothing, have noses but smell nothing”. Listen also to the beautiful little line in Isaiah 1:18: “Come let us talk this over ...”

²³ Matthew 17:5; see also Mark 9:7; Luke 9:35. John’s Gospel makes much of the thought that Jesus is God’s Word made flesh. (See the Prologue to John’s Gospel.)

²⁴ In passing we could note that the biblical understanding of obedience asks much more of us than a fundamentalist reading of the Word. We are invited into a conversation with God that requires both of us to listen and hear and submit. This conversation calls for discernment and thoughtful response.

²⁵ Jerome Muphy-O’Connor, *Paul on Preaching*, Sheed & Ward, 1963, 231.

²⁶ Maria Boulding, *The Coming of God*, 83.

²⁷ Jesus’ obedience is in stark contrast to Adam’s disobedience. St Paul puts it this way: “By one man’s disobedience (*parakoē* – literally *hearing beside* or *failing to hear*) many were made sinners, so by one man’s obedience (*hypakoē* – literally *hearing under*) many will be made righteous” (Romans 5:19).

called to enter. And, as the baptised,²⁸ in entering that obedience pattern our union with Him grows and becomes ever more deeply the essence of our lives:

Have this mind among yourselves which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of human beings. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient (hypakoos) unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.²⁹

²⁸ We are “baptized into Christ Jesus” (cf Romans 6:3).

²⁹ Phillipians 2:5-11.