



Contributed by Father Raphael Ma, C.R.

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5TH SUNDAY OF LENT

March 21, 2021

GATHERING TIME

(10-15 Minutes)

Introduction to the Word:

One word that generally makes people very uncomfortable these days is the word “obedience.” Its etymological roots come from the Latin term *ob-audire*, which means “to hear or listen to.” Fundamentally, obedience is about listening.

But the word for many people brings to mind horrific abuses of the past. Perhaps it calls to mind the spectre of an authoritarian Church of a bygone era, which seemed all about the “rules” at the cost of people. Or perhaps the infamous “Nuremberg defense” – *Befehl ist Befehl*, “an order is an order” – where the defendants appealed to be held not responsible because they were only following orders. And given the rise of populism in some parts of the world today, it seems that the world would be a safer place if obedience were downplayed rather than praised.

And in a somewhat less dramatic way, obedience just generally seems to us in our society to be opposed to mature human development. Obedience seems like an infantilizing shortcut to control people who are unable, or not given the opportunity to think for themselves. A mature person, we say, is someone who thinks for themselves and determines their own course of action.

And yet, in the light of COVID-19 and the difficulties we are having with trying to slow the spread of the virus, the problems with our society’s negative view of obedience are also beginning to show.

And so we arrive at this Sunday’s readings, which are not only about obedience, but perhaps more dramatically, obedience unto death. And so we find ourselves face to face with this uncomfortable word. Can there be anything redeemable about obedience?

In the Constitutions of the Congregation of the Resurrection, the vow of obedience of its members is explained as not only having a practical benefit – bringing about “a unity of purpose and action” – but more importantly, as a Christian act, “a response to Christ’s invitation to share in his paschal mystery, because when we sacrifice our will to the Father we die to self and rise to a new life.” That, and a “prophetic sign of the resurrected life where every person will be united to the will of God.”

Warm-up Activity (about 8-10 minutes):

Some questions to reflect on by yourself or with a group:

1. What is obedience?
2. Have I seen or experienced a situation or situations where obedience became problematic?
3. What place, if any, does obedience have in my life as a Christian?
4. What images or stories come to mind when I think about Jesus' obedience?
5. Can a mature person also be obedient?

The Table of the Word

If you're of a certain age, and grew up in a Catholic family, you may have heard the phrase "Offer it up!" before. Often, parents said this to their children, or nuns to their students in response to some complaint. Stubbed your toe? "Offer it up!" Not looking forward to having to do something boring or difficult? "Offer it up!" Often given with no explanation, this theologically pregnant phrase came across to many as little more than a pious-sounding child management technique.

But the meaning of the phrase "Offer it up!" has to do with the Mystical Body of Christ. St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is quoted in the Catechism's treatment of the subject:

"From this it follows that if one member suffers anything, all the members suffer with him, and if one member is honored, all the members together rejoice." (CCC 791)

And Pope St. John Paul II in his encyclical on suffering, *Salvifici Doloris*, quotes St. Paul's letter to the Colossians:

"I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake" [Colossians 1:24]

Realizing this sense of our connectedness as members of the Mystical Body of Christ, and the real ability to help one another through this connection gives many people a renewed sense of purpose in their suffering. This is what the phrase "Offer it up!" is supposed to encourage. But in the interests of living a more integrated Christian life, it is also important to be able to connect our personal spiritual approaches to the liturgy, so that it is "in some way derived from it and lead[s] the people to it." (CCC 1675)

And what comes to mind for me, is the Eucharistic prayer, where we offer with Christ, all that we have received: "In the Eucharistic sacrifice the whole of creation loved by God is presented to the Father through the death and the Resurrection of Christ. Through Christ the Church can offer the sacrifice of praise in thanksgiving for all that God has made good, beautiful, and just in creation and in humanity." (CCC 1359)

And especially the doxology at the end of the Eucharistic prayer: "This sacrifice of praise is possible only through Christ: he unites the faithful to his person, to his praise, and to his intercession, so that the sacrifice of praise to the Father is offered *through* Christ and *with* him, to be accepted *in* him." (CCC 1361)

Penitential Rite:

Leader: "Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him."

Lord Jesus, you came to reconcile us to one another and to the Father,

Lord Jesus, you heal the wounds of sin and division,

Lord Jesus, you intercede for us with your Father,

Lord, have mercy.

Christ, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

Let us pray (together)

By your help, we beseech you, Lord our God, may we walk eagerly in the same charity with which, out of love for the world, your Son handed himself over to death. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever. Amen.

SCRIPTURE REFLECTION TIME (45 minutes)

*(As Christians we believe that the **WORD** of God we hear proclaimed each Sunday is an empowering word, and that God is present in the word proclaimed. This is the word that God wants us to hear today. The dynamic of the small Christian community, namely, reflecting on our life story within the context of this word, and sharing the insights of these reflections, is such that God's Spirit becomes present, and the gifts of the Spirit are experienced as empowering and life giving.)*

FIRST READING (Jeremiah 31.31-34)

A reading from the book of the prophet Jeremiah.

The days are surely coming, says the Lord,
when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.
It will not be like the covenant that I made with their fathers
when I took them by the hand
to bring them out of the land of Egypt –
a covenant that they broke,
though I was their husband,
says the Lord.
But this is the covenant
that I will make with the house of Israel after those days,
says the Lord:
I will put my law within them,
and I will write it on their hearts;
and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.
No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other,
“Know the Lord,”
for they shall all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord;
for I will forgive their iniquity,
and remember their sin no more.
The word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

SECOND READING (Hebrews 5.7-9)

A reading from the letter to the Hebrews.
In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications,
with loud cries and tears,
to the one who was able to save him from death,
and he was heard because of his reverent submission.
Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered;
and having been made perfect,
he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.
The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

GOSPEL (John 12.20-33)

A reading from the holy Gospel according to John. **Glory to you, O Lord.**

Among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus.

Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. The person who loves their life loses it, and the person who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

“Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.

“Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say – ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.”

Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.”

The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, “An Angel has spoken to him.” Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the rule of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”

Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

The Gospel of the Lord. **Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.**

(Allow two minutes for quiet and for a brief reflection on a meaningful word or thought)

Lectio Divina means “sacred prayer through sacred reading.” It was a popular form of prayer in the early Church. This word proclaimed today is God's own word, God's way of speaking to you today through God's own Spirit. So take a few moments to be quiet, allowing this word you have just heard to touch you or soak into you as you reflect quietly on the three readings. Is there a word or thought that somehow attracts you or has your interest? If so, simply identify it and describe it in a few words.

COMMENTARY:

First Reading:

Jeremiah's prophetic mission took place during the reigns of the last few kings of Judah, and saw the destruction of Jerusalem, and also the final exile. In the earlier part of his mission, God sent Jeremiah to challenge and call the kings, the priests, the false prophets, and the people to conversion. But in the later part of his mission, from which our first reading comes, God sends Jeremiah with a message of consolation.

And the consolation is this “new covenant” – and this is the only time the term “new covenant” appears in the entire Old Testament. The people of Israel must have wondered what this meant, and when it would come about. What would be new about it? We hear “... I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.” This is a reference to the Old Covenant that God made with the people through Moses, which was written on stone tablets by God, but which God says through the Prophet Jeremiah that the people broke that covenant. This new covenant will be written, not on stone, but on people's hearts.

We also get insight into the nature of this “new covenant” with Jeremiah's use of the spousal language of the Old Testament prophets: “...a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband.” Other prophets like Hosea, Ezekiel, Isaiah, also use this language to demonstrate the closeness and intimacy that Israel's covenant relationship with God is supposed to have.

The use of the verb “to know” also gives us a sense of that: “... for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.” The word “to know” means what it does in English – to know, to understand, to reveal – but it also has spousal connotations, as in the book of Genesis when we hear that “... the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain” [Genesis 4:1]. Again, this new covenant being proclaimed by Jeremiah is good news in light of what was going to happen in Jeremiah’s time to the Temple and the city of Jerusalem, both signs of their covenant with God.

Second Reading:

In our second reading, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews alludes to the agony of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane: “...Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death.” And then there is this mysterious phrase: “... he learned obedience through what he suffered; and *having been made perfect* ...” How can it be that Jesus was “made perfect”? If Jesus is Divine, He is already perfect. How can he be made perfect?

Perfect can mean having no faults, or it can also mean being complete. And it was in this second sense that Jesus was “made perfect.” Although Jesus was perfectly obedient to the will of the Father in the sense of hearing and listening, and being willing to carry it out, Jesus’ “reverent submission” mentioned in our reading was not yet complete until He had undergone His “hour,” which we will hear about in this Sunday’s Gospel.

It is in this sense that Jesus “learned obedience through what he suffered” – his obedient disposition to the will of the Father was actualized through His Passion: being obedient to the will of the Father even unto death. But as our reading concludes, Jesus’ perfect and perfected obedience becomes the source of salvation for all, because the Father raised Jesus from the dead, and when our obedience to God is “Christian” – that is, it has Christ as its source, its model, and is done in union with Him, we also participate in that closeness of Jesus’ relationship with the Father, which is salvation – the perfect union of everyone with the will of God. And as we saw in the Table of the Word section, we participate in this through the celebration of the Eucharist.

Gospel:

It might seem a bit odd to us to find “Greeks” mentioned in our Gospel today worshipping at the festival, given the way Gentiles were not part of the Old Covenant. But by that time, the people of Israel had had sufficient centuries of contact with neighbouring peoples that some of these neighbouring peoples were attracted to Judaism and its covenant with the God of Israel, and wanted to share in their faith, but did not become full converts to Judaism. And so there was a term for these people, the “God-fearers,” Gentiles who tried to keep the Law of Moses, and tried to observe the religious practices of the Jews. St. Paul includes them in his address in the synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia: “You Israelites, and others who fear God, listen.” [Acts 13:16]

It also may not seem like a relevant detail to us, but Philip and Andrew are both Greek names. And so it is likely that these Greeks who wanted to “see Jesus” approached Philip, because he spoke their language, and Philip went to get Andrew, and together they went to Jesus.

And now the “hour” that has been mentioned several times through the first half of the Gospel of John has finally arrived. The arrival of the Greeks frames the last words of Jesus in today’s Gospel reading: “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”

And after giving them the image of a grain of wheat that does not bear fruit until it falls into the ground and dies – alluding to His “hour” – then Jesus says: “Now my soul is troubled.” In the Gospel of John, Jesus is generally portrayed as being “in control.” Not only in Matthew, Mark, and Luke’s description of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, but even here, we are told that Jesus experiences distress and anxiety at the prospects of the “hour.” Jesus’ “trouble” resolves into a prayer to the Father, which is answered by the voice from heaven, and Jesus moves forward towards His hour.

The judgment of the world and the ruler of this world refers to how the world, though good, has the capacity to become an end in itself, an obstacle to doing the will of the Father. By Jesus' obedience fulfilling of the will of the Father for him, he provides an alternative, which draws all others who are similarly drawn to doing the will of God.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION:

1. How have you experienced the transition from being introduced to God by others, to also knowing the Lord for yourself?
2. Can you think of a situation in your life where you suffered for your obedience to the will of God? What was the outcome? Have you been "perfected" in some way by going through the experience?
3. Jesus said in today's Gospel "Now my soul is troubled." What does this mean to you?

CARING-PRAYING TIME: (15-20 minutes)

1. **Word of the Week:** "...Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."
2. **Suggestion for the Week:** If there is a difficult conversation or decision or act of service for another person that you have been putting off, consider whether now is a good time to try again.
3. **Intercessions: (Response: Lord, hear our prayer)**

We offer our prayers to God, who has written His law in our hearts.

That the Church will share more fully in Christ's obedience to the will of the Father, we pray to the Lord..

That all those who are troubled may know the Lord, from the greatest to the least, we pray to the Lord...

For a greater sense of solidarity with the poor in these final days of Lent, we pray to the Lord...

For those who have died, that Jesus may draw them to Himself, we pray to the Lord.

How can we help you in prayer this week?

Let us pray (together)

We pray, almighty God,
that we may always be counted
among the members of Christ,
in whose Body and Blood
we have communion.

Who lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen.

With hands and hearts united in gratitude for God's favours today, we pray that all those in our influence be moved to be open to your Word and your Spirit, while we pray as one,

OUR FATHER ...

Celebrating the Word, Resurrection Ministries of the Congregation of the Resurrection Ontario-Kentucky Province (including the former Resurrection Centre), 265 Westmount Road North, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada N2L 3G7. (*Celebrating the Word* was founded by Father Frank Ruetz, C.R. deceased 2012). The Scripture version used in this commentary is the New Revised Standard Version (copyrighted by the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA). **website:** www.resurrectionists.ca. **Email:** provincialoffice@resurrectioncollege.ca