

Abstract

Obedience in the Various Forms of Consecrated Life

The practice of evangelical obedience is determined by the of the form of consecrated life to which a person belongs. Within the last century, the concept of consecrated life has broadened considerably, and has taken on a certain flexibility. Today there are four forms of canonical consecrated life, with more likely to follow; before 1983 there was only one.

Obedience affects all aspects of consecrated life. The manner in which it is practiced is influenced by the diversity of forms. This calls for analysis of what is essential to the universal nature of the sacred bond of obedience. It also calls for analysis of what is intrinsic to the authentic practice of obedience in each particular form. The *essence* of obedience is always the same, the *practice* of obedience cannot be uniform. The unique nature of each type of consecrated life shapes the way obedience will be lived and practiced.

This paper offers an analysis of evangelical obedience, its essence and contrasts, primarily through analysis of Church law for consecrated life with in-depth reflection on the canons on consecrated life and on recent key documents of the Holy See. It also deals with Church history and certain elements of theology and ecclesiology.

Chapter I establishes the *concept of consecrated obedience*. Obedience enjoys a pre-eminence among the virtues as the quintessential expression of love for the Father, and of the purest form of love of neighbor. The counsel of obedience is at the very heart of the consecrated life, the locus of the greatest gift as well as the greatest challenge. This chapter also reviews the concept of “sacred bonds” and offers a phrase-by-phrase examination of canon 601 (on the sacred bond of obedience).

Chapter II follows the *unfolding of consecrated life in the history of the Church*. It examines the origins of this lifestyle and its progress from earliest monastic times up until the late 19th century. This is followed by a more particular look at numerous developments in consecrated life during the 20th century, especially the deepening of the

understanding of consecrated life in Vatican II and post-conciliar documents, and the contribution made by Pope John Paul II.

Chapter III discusses *key particular aspects of the consecrated life* which provide the setting for the manner in which the counsels are to be lived. In particular, the concepts of patrimony and autonomy give unique identity to each institute. The differences among the types of consecrated life are the fruit of the Holy Spirit and are to be maintained. Chapter IV discusses *the current forms of consecrated life* in the light of what is unique to each of them and of how the practices of obedience in each of them must differ, and to what extent. Very significant factors in these differences are the degree and intensity of community life, and the particular mission of a given institute. “Mission” here includes the concepts of contemplation, corporate apostolate, and individual witness.

Chapter V reviews the *sources of authority* for consecrated obedience. The practice of obedience is organized through a careful structure of authority, balanced by sources internal and external; personal, collegial, and textual and comprised of both institutional and charismatic elements. This authority includes hierarchical authorities and internal superiors and universal, particular, and proper law.

Chapter VI looks ahead to *new perspectives*. A fundamental feature in analyzing the way obedience is practiced is the variety of forms of consecrated life. The more forms that arise, the more important is the topic of how obedience is to be put into practice. New forms of consecrated life are currently developing into concrete categories which will likely gain future juridical recognition.

This present study suggests several areas for further reflection. There is a need for more literature (including source material) on the vocations of hermit and consecrated virgin; the seemingly imminent acceptance of consecration of widows, with the accompanying question of whether this can include widowers, also the question of some form of consecration for unmarried men, and a need for a theological study of these forms of consecration. An analytical comparison and contrast between contemplative and active religious life, as well as a study on the degrees of cloister in religious institutes are also interesting topics of further study. Of particular interest will be further research on the

genesis of additional forms of institutes of consecrated life.

Obedience impacts all aspects of life: where and with whom the person will live, his prayer, his apostolic activity, degree of financial accountability, and the extent of autonomy in daily life. It may also include the person's field of study and professional training; the way he spends his free time; and matters concerning illness and even those pertaining to death, burial, and last will and testament. This paper's research results show that consecrated obedience has one fundamental nature, one ultimate juridical source. But the practice of it takes particular shape from the individual charism and form. The consecrated life is not an abstract theory but a reality lived out in countless variations of settings.

Each category of consecrated life fulfills a precise need in the Church and simultaneously allows the other forms to more purely and effectively carry out their own mission. Church law provides a universal foundation for how it is to be lived, but also carefully relegates many of the details to proper law. The practice of obedience by one consecrated person may differ quite notably from that of another consecrated person, and yet the obedience in both cases is genuine. This is not a question of degrees of obedience. The lifestyles are—by the will of God—different, each one quite demanding in its own way. The consecrated person must be faithful to his or her own particular vocation. Whatever the form of consecrated life, it is ultimately based on obedience. And each form requires its own unique practice of obedience.