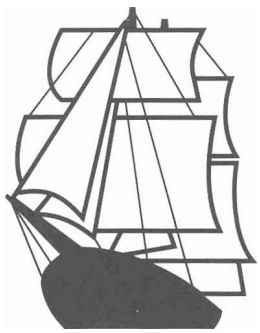
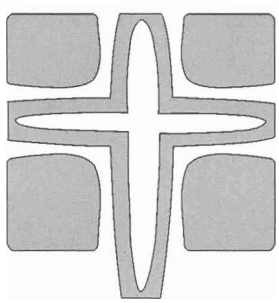


The MAST Journal

Religious Life and Constitutions, Part I



The Journal of the
Mercy Association in
Scripture and Theology

Vol. 14, No. 1
2004

Discernment and our Vow of Obedience

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Discernment, "disentangling the voice of God from the noise of other voices,"[1] has been a growing preoccupation in religious life in our reinterpretation of our understanding of vowed obedience in the last four decades. If the God quest lies at the heart of religious life, hearing the voice of God and responding to it profoundly transforms the role of obedience in our lives from unquestioning acquiescence to the commands of legitimate authority to a continuing process of personal and communal discernment. As a life form, religious life focuses our commitment to follow Jesus and his way of life within the context of our communal charism of mercy. The vow of obedience as a dispositional and juridical practice is only meaningful and Christian if it strengthens our commitment to this gospel way of love. This love leads us to embody the beatitudes and the works of mercy, as well as working to make the reigning of God in our world a reality. An adult, obediential response makes sense only in a context of trust and relationship, of intimacy with and love of God experienced in contemplative prayer, and in apostolic activity and in our relationships with one another in community.

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This relational context begins most fundamentally in our relationship with God. It is expressed in our desire to recognize and respond to God's will in our relationship with one another in community as we together discern our common call to religious life within this particular institute. Our graced experience and our testing of vocation must disclose to us both God's trustworthiness and the trustworthiness of the Institute, its office-holders, and its members.

From Law to Love

Sandra Schneiders, in *New Wine-Skins,* most clearly describes this shift from a servile, blind obedience to the rule and the prescriptions of authority that required a Sister to obey even when in doubt about the appropriateness of a decision unless it was manifestly sinful, to a dialogical form of obedience based on a complex process of discernment seeking to find the will of God for both the individual Sister and the community.

The title of the piece identifies the change in understanding: "Religious Obedience: the Journey from Law to Love." Schneiders described in this essay, first circulated as early as 1976, accurate in 1986, and timely today, the need for a theology of mediation of the will of God that recognizes multiple forms of human mediation and a theology of discernment rooted in religious freedom. She contrasts a rule of law versus a law of love that is at the heart of the gospel and of Christian discipleship.

For those who have vowed obedience, our "total commitment to the will of God is contextualized in the persons and institutions of the congregation entered."[2] The community constitutes a privileged mediation of God's will for us, but not the exclusive mediation of God's will. Equating human mediation with God in some magical way, is truly an idol. Adult responsibility requires each of us to discern the proportional claims of the gospel and our

community norms or legitimate commands of authority in each particular situation. "It is the process of discernment which prevents the alienation of personal authority and responsibility that would turn obedience into magic."[3]

Discernment

It is also this ongoing process of discernment that evokes the realization that there are multiple voices within us. We recognize that we have internalized this struggle between law and life, seeking approval, validation, appreciation, acceptability, and security through pleasing another, following the rules and not making waves. Responsible choice based on discernment and following our own consciences may place us in uncomfortable conflict with legitimate authority, custom, and other members. A discerning practice of obedience requires a reflective, contemplative style of life. How else can we distinguish among these internal voices, including our own self-centered and resistant one?

The writer Herman Hesse describes such focused silence as the background against which this discerning contemplation can occur. He aptly describes the characteristics of some of the voices that present themselves deceptively as the voice of God. He says:

> The soul that waits in silence needs to disentangle the voice of God from the noise of other voices, the ghostly whisperings of the subconscious self, the luring voices of the world, the hindering voices of misguided friendship, the clamor of personal ambition and vanity, the murmur of self-will, the song of unbridled imagination, the thrilling note of religious romance. To learn to keep one's ear to so subtle a labyrinth of spiritual sound is indeed at once a great adventure and a liberal education. One hour of such listening may give us a deeper insight into the mysteries of human nature, and a surer instinct for divine values, than a year's hard study or external intercourse with others.[4]

How might you name some of the voices in you that present themselves as the voice of God? I can sometimes hear the voice of Mercy expectations, or a fatalistic voice that suggests, "Why bother to speak? No one will really listen." Even a cursory reading of the Constitutions reveals this underlying theology of discernment and obedience described by Sandra Schneiders. It begins, "Responsive in faith to God's mercy, Catherine McAuley heeded the call of Jesus to reach out with courage and love to the needy of her time."[5] Catherine discerned her faith response to this persistent call. "We respond to the cry of the poor."[6] To do so requires us to hear the cry of the poor before we can respond. "We carry out our mission of mercy guided by prayerful consideration of the needs of our time, Catherine McAuley's preferential love for the poor and her special concern for women, the pastoral priorities of the universal and local church and our talents, resources, and limitation."[7] The provisions on mission identify the criteria that we agree should inform our discernment about corporate and individual ministries. Even more significant than these is the fundamental criterion, "We rely on the Holy Spirit to lead us. The Word of God opens us to contemplate the Divine Presence in ourselves, in others, and in the universe."[8]

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Vowed Obedience in the Constitutions

Our first obediential response to the way our First Institute Chapter characterized our life and mission in Mercy in our Constitutions is the development of these habits of reflective listening to the voice of the poor, the voice of the Spirit, the voice of the Divine Presence in ourselves, and now, in the ecological age, the voice of the creation itself in our evolving universe.

The articles explicitly articulating our theology of the vow of obedience are quite clear:

> By our practice of obedience we unite ourselves to the obedient Christ whose call and mission led to his death and the redemption of the world. Through this vow we commit ourselves to obey those who exercise legitimate authority according

> to these Constitutions. For serious reasons the Institute president (or her delegate) can normally invoke the vow, either in writing or before two witnesses.[9]
>
> The spirit of obedience impels us to search together for God's will in fidelity to our mission. Responsible obedience requires that we inform our minds and prepare our hearts for dialogue, share our insights and respect freedom of conscience. In this search we listen to one another in love and accept conversion to God's will. When the Holy Spirit gives us the wisdom and the courage to live in this way, We are able to embrace the cross in whatever shape it presents itself in our lives.[10]

These articles draw on all of the themes already highlighted. First, obedience is a virtue required of all Christians in so far as it relates to our discipleship of Jesus. Jesus' obedience to the will of his Abba was more complex than simply following specific devotional observances prescribed in the Torah. Contemporary studies of Jesus within his historical context emphasize Jesus' embrace of compassion for all persons as the dominant value of his ministry.[11] Christian obedience requires our liberating practice of ministry in the footsteps of Jesus' inclusive compassion and resistance to oppression of all kinds.

Seriousness about discerning God's will, rather than efficiency or merely administrative tidiness, implies sustained dialogue and ongoing relationship.

Second, within the context of religious life, our vow commits us to cooperate with legitimate authority within the limits defined by the Constitutions. Legitimate authority includes: the entire governance structure—chapter, institute leadership team, regional assembly, regional leadership team, local coordinators, liaisons, ministry directors, and any other persons who hold delegated authority. This is, of course, one way of describing a complex web of relationships among us. Our common membership in the Institute commits us to uphold the same core values and to organize our lives in ways that support one another in our common mission and way of life.

Simply naming those who hold legitimate authority suggests multiple locations of the mediation of God's will for us and with us. Seriousness about discerning God's will, rather than efficiency or merely administrative tidiness, implies sustained dialogue and ongoing relationship. Adult obedience implies mutuality and self-disclosure. The responsive adult trusts the one(s) in authority enough to be transparent. This transparency might include: one's motives for acting, still inchoate and not yet fully formed desires and leanings, clarity and confusion about one's gifts, one's capacity to render specific service within or outside the congregation, and honesty about disagreement and differing perceptions about a given course of action. Thus as Const. §28 states, "The spirit of obedience impels us to search together for God's will in fidelity to our mission."

Third, the kind of obedience envisioned in this article is intensely dialogical. The new asceticism requires openness and discussion, prayer and dialogue, risking to speak the truth in love, an expectation that the other will listen and respect differences among members. This kind of dialogue is rooted in a shared theology that God speaks through all of us, not just some of us, and that the Holy Spirit gives us the wisdom and courage to live this way. As this process draws to some kind of conclusion and decision, if we truly do desire the greater good and trust God's activity in our midst, we are able to embrace the cross in whatever shape it presents itself in our lives. Desiring to do God's will includes the commitment to act on the outcome of the discernment regardless of the suffering this may entail.

An Alienating Relationship with Authority

However, if experiences with dialogue and relationship with authority have been untrustworthy, it will be very difficult to engage in this kind of robust give-and-take. An alienated relationship with authority leads to distrust, deception, withholding of information, and active and passive non-compliance with decisions. We may have quite different assumptions and practices of authority throughout the institute. Each regional community has its own

history in relationship to styles of leadership and degrees of participation in governance. The vast majority of present members have mixed experiences in our history. We have known both respectful and dialogical authority and we have known exclusion from decision making and controlling authority that needed no input from the members or those affected by decisions. We may have quite different expectations about how we expect to be treated, how we expect to participate in governance, and how we expect to arrive at decisions both personally and communally. Our conversations about reconfiguring bring these differences to the fore. It matters how we arrive at decisions as well as who participates in such decisions if we desire to continue to foster discerning obedience.

To complicate the picture even further, many of us have experienced alienating authority in the church and in other institutions in which we serve. How resilient we are in responding to these multiple challenges is often rooted in our personal histories and our subsequent working through of these earlier histories both therapeutically and spiritually.

Leadership and Obedience in a Discernment Model

Leadership and governance in this model is not easy. Where imbalances of power exist in dialogue, it is incumbent on the more powerful to create the conditions of safety that foster dialogue and integrity of word and deed. Leadership needs to share the emerging data not just with other positional leaders, but with the actively participative members as well. Leadership and power reside in members as well as in elected leaders. When authority respects these dynamics, the base is mobilized toward support for emerging outcomes of the whole drift of accumulating information, feelings, interior movements, and espoused values. But this cannot happen unless information is shared in a timely fashion and if resistance to change is not carefully respected and challenged.

It is impossible to predict where we will be as an institute in our reconfiguring process in months to come. However, despite intense feelings of disempowerment, resistance, disagreement, shock, dismay, resignation, and fatalism to the unveiling of the template and the survey, the Institute Leadership Team in its Foundation Day Letter of December 12, 2003, demonstrated a discerning and dialogical response to the response of the members. The team had intended to initiate an invitation "to be a listening, discerning community." The multiple forms of response led to shaping a different kind of decision for May 2004. They then outlined action steps to reach this new decision and invited further prayer and reflection in our reception of the survey results. It became clear that members needed to be more involved than they had been prior to the template meetings. They initiated a new mode of dialogue of members with the ILT in the call-in sessions, as well as engaging different constituents in various modes of conversation, reflection, and dialogue.

Where imbalances of power exist in dialogue, it is incumbent on the more powerful to create the conditions of safety that foster dialogue and integrity of word and deed.

It might be helpful for us to reflect on whether or not we filled in the survey. What was going on inside of us if we did not fill it out? Did we talk to anyone about our feelings and our thoughts? If we did complete the survey? What did it take to work through it? What kinds of feelings arose? What were some of the internal voices that clamored for attention? Were they voices from the past of an alienated relationship with authority? What was threatened? What were the values we wanted to preserve? Did we e-mail the ILT as well as write comments on the survey? How much conversation and reflection did it take for us to do that? Did we participate in any other formal or informal forums that helped us shape our response? Did we consider any of this obedience? Did we consider any of it discernment?

The survey is only one potential kind of expression of the spirit of obedience and participation. Were there other ways we would have preferred to be involved in giving feedback on the

emerging reconfiguring? What have been some of the fruits of the ILT's getting membership's attention on more dramatic organizational change than some expected? Where does this excitement and energy come from? Are we feeling a deeper connection between our vow of obedience and the reality of institute members? How might we embrace this as challenge and growth into a new reality?

The direction of Catherine's revisions is toward leaving considerable judgment to the Sisters themselves. She appears to have wanted her Sisters to make prudential judgments themselves first when faced with conflicting responsibilities and to make explanations later.

This extended example of one dance of authority between leaders and members suggests the potential for deepening our appropriation of vowed obedience in the context of institute membership. As we continue to work through the re-imagining and reconfiguring process across the Institute, are we as members willing to expand our communal identities? Do we take the claims of Chapter decisions and directions seriously? Do we recognize that they need to reach down to the grassroots or they are relatively meaningless if we do not receive them? What might be required for ownership of these decisions when the Chapter takes on a life of its own during the course of its deliberations? Do our present processes and preparation for Chapter enliven and empower participation and thereby ownership?

Where is the voice of God in this process and what is it calling asking of us? Can we embrace God's will as Catherine did even when it unfolds in unpredictable and unexpected ways?

Consonance with Catherine

Catherine McAuley approached discernment and obedience in her own way within the context of her times. Her "Suscipe" was born from a trusting relationship with God. Her God-centeredness yielded a peaceful serenity with which to cooperate with God and others in creating and sustaining the Institute. She founded a religious community that was not part of her original plan. But when she realized the church would only support her project if she embraced religious life, she made the required novitiate. Although she wrote that she experienced considerable joy in her novitiate process, her novice director's training in obedience imposed opportunities to practice virtue when she was publicly reprimanded for her mistakes or faults. Catherine softened this kind of ascetical process in the Rule.

She was concerned that all her sisters share the same lively confidence and trust in God that she did. She focused their vision on the possession of God, and tried whenever possible to alleviate their anxiety. Catherine maintained a highly dialogical style of leadership within the fledgling community. She encouraged a discerning and creative attitude in the sisters that she sent on new foundations. She expected them to adapt to local circumstances. She left them free to discover how best to develop their ministries within the new context. She fostered independent yet connected local authority.

When she dealt with obedience directly, she made a number of changes in the Presentation Rule. She limited the role of the superior in the interior lives of the Sisters. She "recommended that the sisters make known their penitential works and mortifications"[12] but she omits practically a whole sentence that placed the Sisters under the spiritual direction of the local superior.[13]

She left her Sisters free, monitoring only their voluntary penance that could have debilitating effects on their ability to undertake the works of mercy. Catherine's Rule describes an attitude of

love between the Sisters and their superiors. She did not want a fearful obedience. Catherine also omitted a sentence that encouraged the Sisters "not only to fulfill the commands of their superiors but to endeavor to anticipate their wishes"[14] as well as reworking the section of necessary absence from communal exercises. The direction of Catherine's revisions is toward leaving considerable judgment to the Sisters themselves. She appears to have wanted her Sisters to make prudential judgments themselves first when faced with conflicting responsibilities and to make explanations later.

Religious obedience in Catherine's day clearly involved "renouncing one's own will and resigning it without reserve to the direction of . . . superiors."[15] Despite this, there is much evidence in Catherine's life of a creative fidelity to the deepest impulses of God's Spirit. This is most clearly manifested in her letters to the leaders in the new foundations and in the clarity with which she articulated her vision of active apostolic religious life in The Spirit of the Institute." Catherine learned to trust deeply "that God's will would be manifest when God wished and that the timing would be right. So even through she suffered from impatience at times, in the larger picture she knew that God's will would be known and that God's grace would be sufficient for her to do it."[16]

Conclusion

This kind of trust and patient waiting on God is one of the fruits of discernment. Discernment develops organically over time in different ways corresponding with our spiritual development. Ordinarily, we first come to know and understand ourselves by sifting through and reflecting on our experience. We then come to distinguish the truly good from evil or to distinguish the good from apparent goods. Finally, God's Spirit gifts us with illumination not only for ourselves but for others we may accompany in ministry or serve in community leadership.

The Quaker, Patricia Loring, describes discernment as:

> The ability to see into people, situations, and possibilities, to identify what is of God in them and what is of the numerous other sources in ourselves—and what may be of both. It is that fallible, intuitive gift we use in attempting to discriminate the course to which we are . . .led by God in a given situation, from our other impulses and from the generalized judgments of conscience.[17]

Catherine's patient waiting, thoughtful reflection, contemplative spirit, and deep trust in God's providential care for her enabled her to develop discernment to a high degree. She consulted, she listened, she prayed, she learned from experience. Do we have the courage and deep trust in God and in the goodness of the members of our Institute to join with one another for the well-being of the whole institute through our discerning obedience as we search for God's will together?

Notes

1 Herman Hesse, *Steppenwolf.* New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963, 43.
2 Sandra M. Schneiders, *New Wine-Skins: Re-imagining Religious Life Today* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1986) 165.
3 Ibid., 165.
4 Hesse, 43.
5 Const. §1.
6 Const. §3.
7 Const. §7.
8 Const. §9.
9 Const. §27.
10 Const. §28.
11 Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1994) and Albert Nolan, *Jesus before Christianity* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1976,1992).
12 Mary C. Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy* (South Bend, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 313
13 Ibid., 313, n.55.
14 Ibid., 314, n.56.
15 Ibid., 313, Rule, 19.1.
16 Helen Marie Burns and Sheila Carney, *Praying with Catherine McAuley* (Winona, MN: St. Mary's Press, 1996.),105.
17 Patricia Loring, "Spiritual Discernment: the Context and Goal of Clearness Committees." Pendle Hill Pamphlet 305(Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1992), 3.