

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE “IN OBEDIENCE”?

The Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of St. John of Jerusalem, of Rhodes, and of Malta is divided into three classes: the first is made up of those who have professed vows of poverty, chastity and obedience; the third class (the one to which most members belong) consists of men and women who seek to live according to the norms of the Church and commit themselves to the Order. In between we find a second class, Knights and Dames who have not taken religious vows but who make a promise of obedience.

The *Constitutional Charter* of the Order describes the obligations of this second class as follows:

By virtue of the Promise, members of the Second Class oblige themselves to strive for the perfection of Christian life in conformity with the obligation of their state, in the spirit of the Order. (Article 9, par. 2)

While the *Code* spells out in detail the meaning of the vows taken by professed members of the Order, it is less specific about how the obligations of the Second Class are to be fulfilled. Fundamentally, a Knight or Dame in obedience is called to a more intense spiritual life. Before reviewing the spiritual duties specified in our *Code*, it would be helpful to reflect on the meaning of obedience.

When he met with the Knights in Obedience in 1961, Blessed John XXIII provided them with his own motto: *Obedientia et Pax*. Angelo Roncalli had adopted this motto when he was ordained a bishop, and it became the guiding principle of his life. John XXIII took these words from Cesare Baronius, who used to say them every time he kissed the foot of the statue of St. Peter.

Baronius was the most eminent historian of his day, and also a close friend of St. Philip Neri. St. Philip knew that someone with Cesare’s abilities would receive adulation (he was named a cardinal), and in many ways great and small he called his friend to a deep spirit of humility. For example, in spite of Baronius’s erudition St. Philip assigned him to work in the kitchen, so much so that Baronius wrote his name on the wall, followed by the words: “perpetual cook.”

From the example of Cardinal Baronius Angelo Roncalli drew the lesson that obedience meant a willingness to let go of one’s own preferences, to accept whatever duties needed to be done, and not to take one’s position too seriously. In this way, obedience leads to peace. John XXIII confided at the end of his life that this was the secret of his serenity.

To enter into the Second Class of our Order should thus be understood, not as a step up, but as a step *down*. Pre-eminence in a Christian context is tied to deeper humility and greater

generosity. It is important to keep this in mind in an Order which has such a long and distinguished history, and which enjoys a certain worldly prestige. In Catholic tradition, the scapular worn by religious represents the yoke which Christ invites His faithful disciples to assume (Mt 11:29). Therefore, the scapular which is symbolic of the Promise of Obedience is not an honorific decoration, but a visible reminder that its wearer seeks to be of greater service to others.

More importantly, to be in obedience means that one is committed to an ever-deeper conversion of heart, and a desire to embrace the will of God in imitation of the great saints, Our Lady, and above all Christ, Himself. The earthly life of the Son of God began when Mary said, "I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be done to me according to your word." (Lk 1:38) On the night before His death, Jesus begged the Father to take away the cup of suffering which He was about to drink; then he added, "Not my will but yours be done." (Lk 22:43) In every moment between these two events, Jesus and Mary sought to embrace the will of the Father. Each decision to obey, great and small, led them on the path to Calvary. Here, with the Son nailed to the cross and His Mother standing beneath it, the challenging cost of obedience became clear.

In speaking of the virtue of obedience, the *Code* explains that this moves a person "to the imitation of Jesus Christ who became obedient even unto death on the cross." (Article 61) When a knight or dame makes the Promise of Obedience, he or she is given a crucifix and holds it up for all to see. A simple but powerful gesture: in effect, the person is saying, "This is what I want."

To imitate the total obedience of Christ is to strive for perfection, and our *Constitutional Charter* specifies that this is sought according to one's state of life and in the spirit of the Order. Ideally, there should be a harmony between our state of life and the spirit of the Order, although in practice there can be a tension. Our state of life is an expression of our fundamental vocation, unique to each of us but given for the good of the whole Church in our baptism. Membership in the Order of Malta should enhance this fundamental vocation. For example, married dames and knights ought to be better spouses and parents because they belong to the Order, and all members should be actively involved in the life of their parish and community. At times we may find ourselves stretched by the demands of family, community and service in the Order.

Here is where it is most important that we be clear about what it means to make the Promise of Obedience. Those who seek this are motivated by a desire to devote themselves more completely to the Order, and they may ask the pragmatic question, "So, what do I have to do?" The "obligations" are deceptively simple; deceptive, because the essence of the call to obedience is an invitation to a deeper spiritual life. It is not so much a matter of what we do, but *how* we do it. It represents in a way a desire to enter into the "contemplative" branch of the Order; but that contemplation takes place in the world.

As you are aware, the eight-pointed Maltese Cross symbolizes the beatitudes. In our service to the sick and the poor, and in our defense of the faith, we express the outward thrust of

the cross: God's love in Christ reaches out to the four corners of the world. To be in obedience is to seek to enter into the heart of the One who proclaimed those beatitudes. This can only be done by intense prayer, which is why the year of preparation for taking this Promise begins and ends with a five-day retreat.

[For the Western Association, those Knights and Dames in Obedience are members of the Sub-Priory of Our Lady of Philermo. This is the only institution of a Sub-Priory outside of Europe, and very important in the growing maturity of the Order in the United States. Unlike members in Obedience in other associations without a Grand Priory or Sub-Priory, Knights and Dames have the privilege and obligation of learning to live their Promise within this community. No "charism" in the Church is given for the individual, but for the sanctification of the Body of Christ as a whole. In assuming the Promise of Obedience, one also assumes the responsibility of perfecting that Promise in this communal context.]

Article 101 of the *Code* spells out the spiritual duties assumed by those in obedience. Let us consider each of them:

a) collaborate with fellow members in prayer and works and to this end is bound to recite daily the Credo and one Pater, Ave and Gloria;

The fundamental requirement here is collaboration with other members in prayer and works. The specific prayers called for are the "ABC's" of Catholic spirituality, and their meaning is brought out by Pope John Paul in his Apostolic Letter *Rosarium Virginis Mariae* (#32-34). Any of us who pray the Rosary recite these prayers daily. What is distinctive here is that those in obedience offer these prayers for the needs of the Order. More broadly, Knights and Dames in Obedience should frequently renew their intention to pray consciously and specifically for other members of the Order.

b) attend Holy Mass frequently, diligently approach the Sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist according to the advice of their own spiritual director, and participate in parochial life;

We Catholics enjoy a unique privilege: we can take part in the celebration of the Eucharist every day. While not all of us are able to do so, it is certainly incumbent on any in obedience to receive Holy Communion as often as possible. This brings us into communion with Christ Himself and all the members of His Body. If it is true that "an army marches on its stomach," then we who seek to give our lives in service to our lords the sick and the poor need to be nourished by frequent and fervent reception of the Bread of Life. Christ present in the Eucharist strengthens us to serve Christ present in the poor.

Since to embrace obedience means a desire for deeper conversion of heart, it should come as no surprise that those who make this Promise are called to approach the Sacrament of

Penance “diligently.” Those in obedience commit themselves to do the will of God, no matter the cost; our experience of sin reminds us that each of us falls short in this. Contrition, confession, and amendment to do better equip us to enter the battle of discipleship again, with renewed strength which comes from the grace of God.

This section also refers to “their own spiritual director”; in addition to spiritual direction in a formal sense, this could also include a regular confessor, or scheduled conversations with one of the chaplains of the Order. Such direction is one of the principal responsibilities of chaplains, who can offer guidance from the perspective of the traditions and purpose of the Order. What is essential is that each member in obedience meets regularly with an experienced guide to discuss the progress of his or her spiritual life. Taking part in retreats, days of recollection and other spiritual exercises are helpful here as well. However, these communal gatherings are no substitute for meeting individually with one’s spiritual director. A fundamental axiom of philosophy is: “an unexamined life is not worth living.” This is even truer of our *spiritual* life.

Finally, those in obedience should be distinguished by their involvement in the life of their parish. Knights and Dames should participate in the life of the wider Church.

In addition to the exercises called for in this section of the *Code*, we should also note that a document published by the Order in 1993 (*Spiritual Recommendations for Members of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta*) recommends that all in obedience pray some part of the Church’s Liturgy of the Hours (Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer and Compline; or the Little Office of Our Lady) and recite daily five decades of the Rosary. While most lay people are familiar with the Rosary, the Psalter is a jewel which many need to rediscover. Although the praying of psalms was a universal practice for many centuries, in more recent times it came to be viewed as a matter to be left to monks, or to clergy obligated to pray the Breviary. The Second Vatican Council reformed the Office, and urged that all Catholics pray Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer when possible. It is most fitting that Knights and Dames who seek a life of greater holiness join in the daily sanctification of time by praying the psalms inspired by the Holy Spirit.

c) take part each year in a course of spiritual exercises of at least three full days in an approved place, and take part in courses and meetings for formation and instruction called by the Superiors;

The spiritual emphasis of the Promise of Obedience is highlighted here. Those preparing for obedience take part in two retreats; once the Promise is made, they also commit themselves to an annual retreat together with others who have made this Promise. They also take part in other formational meetings called for by their superiors. These retreats and meetings have as their goal the continual deepening in zeal and prayerfulness which should mark all who are in obedience. [*Members of the Sub-Priory of Our Lady of Philermo form a religious community of mutual support, especially with regard to their obligations in the Order. For this reason it is particularly important that the annual retreats be made together. Only by exception should a*

member in Obedience absent himself from the community retreat.]

The document *Spiritual Recommendations* exhorts those in obedience to read the Scriptures, the writings of the Fathers of the Church, and documents of the Magisterium. They are to “acquire a suitable knowledge of dogma, Catholic morality and the history of the Church.” One very effective tool in responding to this recommendation is to be found in the study of *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which brings together the biblical, patristic and magisterial elements of our Catholic tradition.

d) follow the spiritual rule of life approved by the Grand Master, with the deliberative vote of the Sovereign Council.

This spiritual rule has yet to be developed, but when it is approved it will provide a structure for the spiritual life of those in obedience, and underscore how Knights and Dames in Obedience share a common purpose with all those throughout the world who have made the Promise.

While awaiting the development of this spiritual rule, it would be helpful to consider additional points to be found in *Spiritual Recommendations*. Knights and Dames are exhorted to take an active part in the charitable works of the Order. Furthermore, although they do not take vows, those in obedience are called to embrace the Evangelical Counsels (poverty, chastity and obedience) according to their circumstances.

1. Chastity: “As is the case with every other Christian, Knights of Obedience ... have the obligation to observe chastity according to their state of life...”. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* describes chastity as “the successful integration of sexuality within the person and thus the inner unity of man in his bodily and spiritual being.” (*Catechism* #2337) The succeeding paragraphs in the *Catechism* describe the nature of the integrity sought for here.

2. Poverty: “A Knight of Obedience ..., while living according to his proper social state, should avoid unnecessary expenses, in order to help the poor and sick to the best of his ability.” In a Letter written to members in obedience, the Grand Master specifies the meaning of poverty in this way: “If one needs something, it does not have to be the most expensive or fashionable. A serviceable watch does not have to be a Rolex. Is membership of the smartest club necessary? Unassuming dress and a sober life-style, avoiding too ‘worldly’ entertainments and gatherings, should be the norm. The ideal is to deprive oneself of luxuries while retaining a dignified level of life.” (“Letter to all Knights of Justice and members in Obedience” by HMEH Frá Andrew Bertie, December 8, 1998)

3. Obedience: “By committing himself through obedience to Superiors in all that concerns the life of the Order, the Knight of Obedience ... ought to understand that

obedience means conforming his own will to that of his Superiors; this is a true expression of the promise which he has pronounced and the moral engagement he has undertaken.” This certainly means a willingness to take on responsibilities in the Order, but again the spiritual element should be noted: conforming one’s will to that of his or her Superiors. This is at root a matter of the heart, and speaks to the inner spirit of conversion.

After speaking of the spiritual qualities called for by those in obedience, the next article in the *Code* considers the criteria to be used in assigning those in obedience to various duties. These should be suited to a person’s state in life, abilities and so on. The fact that this article *follows* the one dealing with spiritual duties is very significant, especially in our day. We tend to be a very pragmatic people, but the *Code* of our Order highlights that what is essential to obedience is a deepening of one’s spiritual life. Specific tasks can be undertaken with generosity of heart when a Dame or Knight is striving to embrace a more intense life of prayer. Those who desire to enter the Second Class of the Order of Malta seek above all this more profound life of prayer. This prayer is their greatest service to other members of the Order and to our lords the sick and the poor.