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Very Human, Very Divine (XVI): Obedience, Opening our Heart

Remaining open to God's voice expands our heart and enables us to be, like Jesus, in the concerns of his Father and our Father.

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Mary and Joseph *went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover* (Lk 2:41). All the men of Israel were required to undertake this trip. Mary, like many other women, accompanied her husband on this journey of prayer and remembrance of the wonders God had worked for his people. And Jesus? He may have begun accompanying his parents from a very early age. In any case, we know that He traveled with them when twelve years old. And on that trip something surprising happened.

A surprising event

On the way to Jerusalem and during their stay in the Holy City, everything went well. And also during the first day of their return journey – or so it seemed to Mary and Joseph, until they realized that the Child was not in the caravan. So they had to retrace their steps. They couldn't find Him in Jerusalem either. As time went by,

their anguish grew. Saint Josemaría imagined Mary and Joseph crying because of their worry. They no longer knew what to do.^[1]

On the third day they went once more to the Temple, probably to pray and see if they could find out anything about where Jesus might be. Perhaps someone, responding to their inquiries, told them about a young boy who was seen speaking with the doctors of the Law. And when they found Him there they were astonished (cf. *Lk 2:48*).

Those who heard the Child's words were also astonished, although the reason for their surprise was different from what caused Mary and Joseph to be amazed. The doctors were amazed at the wisdom shown in Jesus' answers. But for his parents this was nothing new. What did surprise them though was what Jesus had done. Mary asked Him for

the reason for his extraordinary behavior: “*Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been searching for you in great distress*” (Lk 2:48).

Our Lord’s response is no less surprising than his conduct. In fact, they did not understand what He told them (cf. Lk 2:50). We want to go deeper into his answer, because it can teach us many things about the dispositions of Jesus, whom we want to imitate. And we want more than merely a superficial explanation of the drama of this dialogue. So we will focus our attention on three teachings we can draw from this scene. We will discover two of them in the attitude of our Lord; the third, in how Mary reacts.

The will of the Father

“*Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be about my Father’s business?*” (Lk 2:49). Of

course they knew this. Jesus even seems to take it for granted by his question. He simply wants to make clear the connection between his behavior that so surprised them and the reason that makes it understandable.

If Jesus' answer left Mary and Joseph perplexed, even more so the way a Christian acts can sometimes surprise a person who has not yet discovered God's love, and who therefore does not aspire to be a contemplative, to foster a strong and deep relationship with Him. Much of what a Christian does will seem perfectly reasonable to any upright person. But they may find some points hard to understand, because the final end to which their own life is directed and which guides their reasoning is quite different.

The desire to be about the concerns of his Father guides Jesus' life. "My

food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work” (Jn 4:34). “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will” (Mt 26:39).^[2] And this desire guides his life right to the end, *to the point of death, even death on a cross (Phil 2:8)*. And it is precisely this love for the will of the Father that enables Him to judge accurately about the value of human affairs: *“my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me” (Jn 5:30)*.

This is the key to leading a happy life. God is infinitely good. He loves us and desires our happiness here on earth, and forever in heaven.^[3] No one knows what contributes to building that happiness as well as He does, to creating in us the conditions enabling us to discover, appreciate and let ourselves be conquered by all the good – God Himself, the Holy Spirit – that He wants to infuse in us.

Loving God's will does not mean being ready to submit to some rules to obtain a reward that will be granted to us if we overcome certain tests. Rather it means trusting in God's love and building our lives on that trust, because we know that our Lord wants to share his happiness with us: *we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him (1 Jn 4:16).*

In the scene, Jesus reminds us that it is worthwhile seeking God's will, also if we need to suffer, and even make others suffer. But sometimes it isn't easy to decide what doing what God wants means in practice. What is God's will for me here and now? If we are faced with the dilemma of stealing or respecting the property of others, or telling the truth or lying to obtain more money, the answer is obvious. But there are many

situations in which it is more difficult to discern the right answer, since several of the options may be good and we aren't sure which one is best in this specific case: whether we should accept a job, or make a purchase or go on a trip, or change our regular schedule, etc.

We can consider the Child Jesus' decision to stay in Jerusalem. We can imagine Him thinking: should I take advantage of this opportunity, even though I won't be able to inform my parents? Or should I go back with them and prevent them from worrying? By his decision, our Lord teaches us that no one can replace us in making that judgment. We are the ones who have to face the situation and decide. The responsibility is entirely ours.

Of course, this is not to deny the value of the advice we receive from others. Just the opposite. No one can

replace us, but others can help us. It is enough to know ourselves a little to notice our own insufficiency and the disorder original sin generates in our desires, reasoning, and behavior. We realize that our feelings – our loves, and our fears – may make our judgment less than objective. Or we may lack information that can only be obtained by considering the situation from other points of view. Hence the importance of remaining open to what others see. This reality, which is so evident, is sometimes hard to accept – especially if the behavior we are considering appeals to us or costs us a lot. And therefore we need to always be ready to value the advice we receive from those who love us and have God's grace to help us; we need to value their help as something God counts on so that we may discern what his will is for us.

“The advice of another Christian . . . is a powerful for knowing what God wants of us in our particular circumstances. Advice, however, does not eliminate personal responsibility. In the end, it is we ourselves, each one of us on our own, who have to decide for ourselves and personally to account to God for our decisions.”^[4] Precisely because we are interested above all in doing God’s will, we need the advice of others, which helps us discover our “blind spots” when, in big and small matters, we seek an answer to the most important question in life: Lord, what do you want from me?

Sometimes we may also receive indications from someone who has the authority to give them. In these cases, Saint Josemaría’s insistence that obedience should not be blind, but always intelligent, is illuminating.^[5] Obeying does not mean accepting without reflection a

decision made by another person. Obedience is also intelligent when our reason judges what is the best way to follow the indication received and make it our own. Even in cases where some circumstances escape us, our obedience can still be intelligent and not blind.

Lord, what do you want from me? It is in this light that the greatness of this Christian virtue is grasped. The life of a person who obeys is not restricted; on the contrary, one's life becomes broader and greater by the willingness to do what God wants, to the point of not wanting to be deceived at the moment of discerning how to put it into practice. We long to resemble the filial way in which Jesus wants to carry out his Father's merciful plans. Therefore to obey we need to have a big heart, the heart of a son or daughter: dreaming God's dreams, aspiring to be the happy person God wants us to be,

risking our life on his salvific plans. Obedience is not, therefore, simply submission, but rather openness; it is not renouncing the need to see, but being able to do so also with the eyes of others who love us and who have God's grace to guide us. It is overcoming, by opening our mind and heart, the tendency to consider ourselves self-sufficient, which can prevent us from seeing things with perspective and realism.

Erat subditus illis

At the end of this episode, Saint Luke summed up in a few words the many years that elapsed between this event and the beginning of Jesus' public life: *he was obedient to them (Lk 2:51). Erat subditus illis.* Saint Josemaría discovered in this brief phrase one of the brief biographies of Jesus provided by Sacred Scripture.^[6]

And here is the second lesson that we can discover in our Lord's attitude. Although his divine nature gave Him more than enough reasons to think that He did not need to let himself be guided by his parents, Jesus teaches us that human authority — in the family, in society, in the Church — needs to be respected. We need it precisely because it helps us discover what God wants from us. Naturally, human authority is not infallible, and that is why no one can automatically transmit to us God's will. But neither are we infallible; we can sometimes deceive ourselves. Hence it is reasonable and even necessary to trust those with authority over us, if we truly want to do God's will. Although a specific indication we receive isn't necessarily identified with God's will for us, we can be sure that God wants us to be ready to follow it, out of love.

Thus we can better understand why Saint Josemaría linked obedience with a love for freedom. “Freedom is very close to my heart – that is precisely why I have such a great love for the Christian virtue of obedience.”^[7] This statement may come as a surprise to those who are encountering Saint Josemaría’s teachings for the first time.

Instinctively, we tend to think of obedience and freedom as two enemies fighting to direct our actions: if freedom holds sway, it seems that obedience is annulled; if obedience prevails, it seems that freedom recedes. But this is a fallacy. We love our freedom and don’t want to give it up in any way; we want to be fully masters of our actions so we can do, because we truly want to, what we know God wants from us. And it is there, in loving his will, where obedience finds its rightful place and reason for being.

Authentic Christian obedience is always obedience to God, and divine filiation is its foundation, its reason for being. This is clear from the statement of Saint Josemaría just quoted, which continues as follows: “We should all realize that we are children of God, and want to fulfil the will of our Father. We should do things as God wants them done, because we feel like it, which is the most supernatural of reasons.”^[8] — We are eager to be about the concerns of our Father God, because we truly want to. The criterion of human authority helps us discover what God wants for us, that is, what it means here and now to do what we ourselves deeply want. And even if at times we don’t see clearly the advisability of the suggested course of action, we should trust in the desire to help us that inspires it. And thus we remain fully free. This open attitude, this availability grounded in our freedom as children of God,

reinforces the openness of our reason, the invaluable readiness to let ourselves be guided, to see with the eyes of others and adopt a different point of view from our own: a capacity we greatly want to strengthen.

Obedience, then, helps us to do what we ourselves truly want. But if following Christ and furthering the concerns of his Father – of our Father – is not our deepest desire, the one that explains all that we long for, obedience loses its meaning and is seen as an enemy of freedom, as an obstacle to doing what we want.^[9]

In daily life, obedience usually means carrying out the decisions or guidelines of someone in authority. But we are not interested in obedience only as a specific act, but as a virtue, since we want to resemble Christ ever more fully. It is not enough to answer affirmatively

to the question “Have I done what I was told or advised to do?” We could answer yes and still not be entirely obedient. Whoever simply accepts an indication without making it their own, without employing their freedom, obeys only materially. But that is not the obedience of Christ. Those who act like this may well be doing something good, but they cannot be satisfied with that, since the goal is much higher. Renouncing this goal would mean giving up being free, with the freedom for which Jesus has set us free (cf. *Gal 5:1*).

Deep down, I am fully obedient when I do what is asked of me because I want to do it. And I want to do it because I am convinced that God is relying on my docility. I have come to that conviction because I have confidence in Him, who assists with his grace the person who is asking this of me, and I also trust in that person’s prudence and experience. I

see the person with authority as someone who is telling me what it is worthwhile doing, what God wants. I am free not when I obey “if I want to,” but when I obey “because I want to.”

Our Lady's attentive listening

Let us now return to Jesus' surprising response to his parents, who were relieved after those days of anguished worry, but perplexed by his unusual behavior: “*Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be about my Father's business?*” (Lk 2:49). We can easily imagine our own reaction to such a response: Why were we looking for you? What else could we do? Should we have remained completely calm, unconcerned about what had happened to you? Is this what you expected of us? Mary, although she didn't understand, kept all these

things calmly in her heart (cf. *Lk* 2:50-51).

It is only natural that sometimes we don't understand an indication or advice that is given us. As Saint Josemaría said: “[God] often speaks to us through other people. But when we see their defects or doubt whether they are well informed – whether they have grasped all the aspects of the problem – we feel inclined to disobey.” At this point, the reader perhaps is expecting to be warned of the danger such thoughts present. But Saint Josemaría continued: “All this may have a divine meaning, for God does not impose a blind obedience on us. He wants us to obey intelligently.”^[10] —

A divine meaning: through these doubts, God is telling us that He wants us to obey intelligently, without shirking our own responsibility. It is good that we

express our point of view, our convictions. “But let us be sincere with ourselves: let us examine, in every case, whether it is love for the truth that moves us or selfishness and attachment to our own judgment.”^[11] Sometimes, in fact, “we seek advice that will favor our own selfishness, and suppress with its apparent authority the voice of our inner convictions. Then we even go from adviser to adviser until we find the most ‘benevolent’ one.”^[12] If we are not determined to give the truth priority over our own judgment (in short, if we are not obedient), it will be easy to deceive ourselves, now or in the future. Anger or confusion will prevent us from discovering what our Lord wants to tell us through what, at that moment, seems incomprehensible to us.

Mary didn't understand either. But she didn't rebel. Mary loved God's will above all else and realized there

are things we only come to understand over time. *His mother kept all these things in her heart* (Lk 2:51).^[13] Our Lady didn't live only superficially, but rather reflected over and over again on the events in her life, to discover God's action in them. Mary *listened*, which is what being obedient means in the end: *ob-audiens* – paying attention, listening attentively. Time works in favor of those who listen, who trust and calmly persevere in serene prayer. By remaining open to God's voice, they will discover, like Mary did, the *divine meaning* in everything that happens to us, and end up being grateful even for the darkness of those difficult moments.

Mary persevered in prayer. Twenty years went by and her "Child" once again was missing. And again for three days, in Jerusalem. But she knew by then that she didn't have to worry and go looking for Him,

because He was *about his Father's business*. And perhaps Mary was grateful for those disconcerting words spoken by her Son so many years ago now. They enabled her to hang onto hope in the midst of a pain that would otherwise have crushed her.

We go trustingly to our Lady's intercession, asking that God will grant us a big heart, capable of ordering everything in our lives to doing God's will. A free and open heart, capable of rising above its own narrow vision. A heart capable of discovering God's action in our own life, also through imperfect human instruments. A heart capable of listening and waiting patiently for the fruit of his action in our souls.

[1] Cf. Saint Josemaría, *Holy Rosary*, Fifth Joyful Mystery.

[2] Cf. also, for example, *Heb* 10:5-7 and many other passages.

[3] Cf. for example *Is* 49:15: *Can a woman forget her nursing child? . . . Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.*

[4] Saint Josemaría, *Conversations*, no. 93.

[5] Cf. Saint Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 17.

[6] Cf. *Ibid.*

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] Perhaps the only value it would retain would be to facilitate the effectiveness of an organization. But the obedience of Christ is much greater than simply that.

[10] *Christ is Passing By*, no. 17.

[11] *Ibid.*, no. 17.

[12] *Conversations*, no. 93.

^[13] Cf. also *Lk* 2:19.

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