

Staying faithful through dissent: questions of obedience

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Remaining a committed member of the Catholic Church while, as national convener of Ordination of Catholic Women (OCW), leading a public campaign for the ordination of women, forces me to consider what being catholic means, and what is church. My concern is sharpened by magisterial decisions about the ordination of women. And I shall come to that. But first, there's little point in my trying to change church unless being Christian and belonging to church is important. Therefore I want to look briefly at what christianity and catholic church mean to me, at what concerns me about the authoritarian official Catholic Church, at a theology of obedience which I believe supports the present structures, and consider a few hopes for the future.

I'm christian because that's the tradition into which I was born and raised. It's part of the fabric of my being. At times I struggle with any or all of the basic tenets, at times I seem to move outside; but then again there are times when I feel it is central. I find traditional beliefs some say are 'core' such as virgin births and immaculate conceptions irrelevant; and yet I continue to learn that my faith centres on a triune God illuminated by Jesus Christ. Incarnation tells me that the divine is mediated in and through the human; and the sacramental christianity of the Catholic church illuminates how others mediate God for me.

I need church because I can't believe apart from a community. On an introvert/extrovert scale of being human, I'm an introvert; yet I believe that to try to enter into relationship with God in some private, individualistic fashion guarantees I'll be talking to myself. The basic Christian insight is that God is in some way communal. And I'm not. I can only go to God in community, and the Catholic church is the community to which I seem to belong in an unbreakable way; with all its faults and failings; but also with all its richness of tradition, theology and insight. Time and again throughout history it becomes autocratic, rigid; I think this is one of those times. Hence I wish to join with all seeking to make it a more open, loving community. In a world of starvation, wars, violence, the question of who is ordained may seem a pretty trivial one; but I believe that more than who has 'orders' is at stake. Arguing for women's ordination challenges church structure and church theology.

Present authoritarian church structures and questions of obedience

In its current writings against women's ordination the Vatican is upholding a reductionist image of women and denying they can be sacramental images of Christ. So the largest Christian denomination in the world is teaching a distorted and limited understanding of what it is to be human. And this must not go unchallenged. Further by insisting that the ordination question is settled for all time the Vatican is blocking freedom of discussion, and acting in an authoritarian fashion demanding passive obedience from the people. Thus the question of women's ordination in the

catholic church acts as a focus for issues of theology, ecclesiology and anthropology; of justice, ministry and God. Moreover, the very passion with which the Vatican argues the case against women's ordination indicates that it understands the repercussions of women's ordination very well.

The present magisterium believes that it has privileged insights and the right to rule. The Vatican insists that it alone knows the mind of God on questions that many committed Catholics see as outside the central credal deposit of faith; insists too that it has the God-given authority to make rulings on these questions, without open discussion, for all people and for all time. Women, men with coeliac disease, men recovering from alcoholism, have all recently been barred from ordination. Divorced and remarried are barred from Eucharist. The emphasis is on excluding, on controlling. Such emphasis on power and control, on who can and who can't celebrate the Eucharist, on who can and who can't receive the Eucharist, hardly seems compatible with the open Jesus of the Gospels, who calls all to himself, who tells us to have no fear, and who came to set us free.

Time and again the official Church has had to realise that what it was teaching as absolute truth and the will of God comes out of limited human understanding and was often erroneous. At different times the official church has insisted on the God-giveness of teachings such as an earth-centred universe, Friday abstinence, anti-semitism, and slavery. Its teachings justifying slavery provide an historical parallel to its current teachings on women. Women are familiar with the same justifying myth that servitude is ennobled by Christian love and reciprocal obligation. Moreover, just as Scripture is now used to prohibit women's ordination, from at least the twelfth to the nineteenth century moral theologians, church officials and popes used Scripture (eg Lk 12:42-48; Lk 17:7-10; 1 Tim 6:1; 1 Pet 2:18, 1 Cor 7:20-24, Col 3:22-25) to proclaim the propriety of slave ownership and slave trading and to defend the practices. Tragically, the Vatican did not outrightly condemn slavery until Pope Leo XIII's encyclicals, *In plurimis* of 1888 and *Rerum Novarum* of 1891, well after it had ceased to be a political question.

With such misguided papal authority, it is hardly surprising that many find it difficult to accept the Vatican's pronouncement on the ordination of women. Hardly surprising, too, that the Vatican's refusal to enter into discussion with any who question its rulings raises questions of authority and questions of obedience.

Sometimes it seems that the most striking characteristic of both church structure and christian theology is the emphasis on obedience. Too often, I suggest, obedience is held up as the primary christian virtue and the most critical element of faith. I'm concentrating on the catholic church and the magisterium (pope plus or minus bishops), but I don't believe that it is only here that the question arises. Anglican priests being ordained profess obedience to their bishop. I'm suggesting (though I certainly can't prove it here) that hierarchal structures depend on a theology promoting obedience. Feminists have analysed the effects of 'Father-God' language and imagery on the people of God; I believe that we need to consider in addition the Christology of the obedient son.

A very strong emphasis on obedience is evident in a whole series of documents issued during the present papacy. Its teachings are to be received with silent obedient acquiescence by the faithful; all public

disagreements are equated with open defiance and subversion of the church's teaching mission.¹ Obedience to the teachings of the Church is what matters.

If Catholics today dissent both publicly and privately from many Vatican pronouncements, it is curious that this is being done without questioning the primacy of obedience. But why do the Christian churches stress obedience? To what extent does our christology demand us to be obedient; or, to turn the question over, to what extent has a christology which holds obedience as the primary characteristic of Jesus of Nazareth, been used to create hierarchical churches in which some have power over the many?

A brief look at a Theology of obedience

Obedience is 'the action or practice of dutiful or submissive compliance' (Macquarie Dictionary 1981) or 'being submissive to the will of a superior, doing what one is bidden' (Shorter Oxford Dictionary 1970). Hebrew religion and the religions that stem from it are religions of the word of God, which must be heard and obeyed.² Deuteronomy 28 spells out the consequences clearly: obedience brings blessings and disobedience brings curses.

Two stories sum it up. The 'origin story' of the Hebrew people's relationship with their God begins with a tale of disobedience. Adam and Eve disobeyed and were cursed. This is balanced by a tale of obedience, the story of Abraham. The Israelites were the chosen people because Abraham, their fore-father, was a man of obedience, who obeyed God — and Sarah. When Sarah said to Abraham 'Cast out this slave woman with her son' (Gen 21:10), Abraham put bread, water and their son Ishmael on Hagar's shoulders 'and sent her away' (Gen 21:14). It doesn't seem to matter to Abraham whether Hagar and their son survived the ordeal; what mattered was his obedience.³ The suffering of others never seems important in obedience stories.

Then came the great test of this obedience, the order from God to kill his 'beloved son', Isaac. Abraham set out to obey. As Levenson has cogently argued,⁴ the text of this harsh story makes it clear that Yahweh demanded obedience, even to the extent of requiring Abraham to be prepared to kill 'the beloved son', and Yahweh would reward obedience with his covenant. (Gen 22:15-18; Gen 26:1-5)

New Testament writers such as Paul turned to these Hebraic stories of disobedience and obedience (whatever the word meant then) when they tried to make sense of Jesus' life and death. The stories of the disobedience of Adam (and Eve) and the obedience of Abraham and Isaac become central to Paul's developing Christology and hence to later Christology and liturgy. Moreover Paul gives the Abraham-Isaac story a new twist, as Abraham becomes an icon of God who offers up his only son; and Jesus becomes a willing Isaac, freely offering himself at this Father's bidding: the obedience of Jesus overcame the disobedience of Adam (Rom 5:18-20). Jesus found favour with God because he took the 'form of a slave ... and became

obedient unto death' (Phil 2:7,8). In the slave culture in which this was written, the chief virtue, essential characteristic and primary ethical requirement of the slave, was obedience. Sheila Briggs has asked what such language might have meant to the slaves - who were not freed.⁵

Paul writes of Christian obedience to Christ (2 Cor 10:5-6), to Paul, to the gospel (Rom 10:16; Gal 2:14; Gal 5:7), to authorities; of 'the obedience of faith' (Rom 1:5; 16:26). For Paul, if God required perfect obedience of his Son then for Christians to be Christ-like, they must be obedient — to God and to all in authority over them. If authority comes from God, power of authority is sacred power and must be obeyed. Early Christianity blessed the Graeco-Roman household codes with its own concept of obedience. Now the voice of household authority carries the weight of the voice of God. Christian wives must obey their husbands, Christian children must obey their parents (and others in authority over them), and Christian slaves must obey their masters (Eph 6:1-5; Col 3:20-22; 1 Pet 3:6) as they would obey God.

The consequences have been catastrophic for wives, children, slaves, and all under authority. Based on such texts preached as the unchanging and unchangeable word of God, slavery was accepted as right and just for nearly two thousand years; women have lived under so-called 'divine' authority to obey their husbands in all things; and children have been abused. Yet texts such as Ephesians 5:21-32 and Colossians 3:12-21 requiring submission of women and children are still prayed and preached liturgically as 'the word of God', and the magisterium shows no sign of regretting this.

Ensuing theologians built on Pauline and Johannine beginnings so that pre-Nicene Christologies stress the subordination of Jesus to the Father. In spite of the Cappadocians' attempts to overcome theologies of subordination⁶ and to stress the equality of persons, the idea of the monarchy of God prevailed. One Father-God ruled in heaven and one bishop ruled on earth.⁷ It was the triumph of a patriarchal god.

Such a subordinationist doctrine of the Trinity has been used for centuries to justify the subordination of women, by insisting, as written in 1984, that 'the husband stands in relation to wife as God the Father does to God the Son, coequal in dignity, but as Initiator to Responder. The wife, holding the position analogous to the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, thus is characterised by response, submission, obedience'.⁸

The great tool for teaching the centrality of obedience/disobedience in Christianity has been the liturgy. Catholic liturgy has featured the stories of the disobedient Adam (and Eve) and of the obedient Abraham and willing Isaac, and has emphasised Christ as the obedient son. Especially at the solemn liturgical feasts of the Passion and Death of Christ the 'obedience' texts of Philippians, Genesis and Hebrews are used again and again. Preface VII of Ordinary times has obedience as central to salvation: we praise God because 'Your gifts of grace, lost by disobedience, are now restored by the obedience of your Son'.

Theology inevitably influences the development of social structures and human relationships. A theology of obedience ensured that obedience was central to the way of life of the growing monastic orders. Benedict

stressed the obedient Christ as the model of Christian life and therefore he taught that to obey others, regardless of what is required, is the Christ-like behaviour. And the spirituality of the Religious became the model of spirituality for all.

I suggest that this authoritarian insistence on obedience is based not only on a Christology of obedience but also on an anthropology in which human beings are seen principally as individuals with a will-to-power which has to be controlled (?broken), so that pride is the besetting sin, and obedience the way to virtue. Obedience, self-abnegation and an ethic of self-sacrifice become the centre of personal worth. A more humanitarian religion 'would make self-realization a virtue and resistance to growth a cardinal sin'.⁹

Surely it is impossible in the late twentieth century to be oblivious of the evil that has been wrought by those simply obeying instructions from authorities, including authorities ruling in the name of God. Rather, in a post-Inquisition, post-Holocaust world, it must be asked if it is possible to regard obedience as a virtue, no matter who commands.¹⁰ Nonetheless, late twentieth century male theologians still place great value on obedience in their christology and spirituality, as can be seen from such comments as Kasper's: 'In his obedience Jesus is the setting forth of God's nature'.¹¹ And Moloney who describes obedience as being at 'the very heart of a Christian life'.¹²

Perhaps it is only from those who have been affected by theologies of obedience that a critical examination of such theologies can come. So that it is women such as Dorothee Soelle who have been the ones to challenge traditional christology and its use of Scripture.¹³ For *other* analyses of Scripture and *other* texts exist.

Another look at Scripture

In the Hebrew Scriptures, side by side with the stories of public heroes such as the obedient Abraham, we find a few small stories of disobedient women, such as the midwives Shiphrah and Puah (Exod 1 & 2), and Queen Vashti (Esther 1:12).

Moreover, Israel's prophets, such as Micah, Hosea, Amos and Jeremiah (eg Micah 6:2-8; Hosea 6:6; Amos 4:1-5; Jer 23:1) spoke out again and again against Royal misuse of its monopoly of power and against priestly misuse of its monopoly of the sacred. Under Solomon, the temple became the site of God's holiness and priests became 'the guardian, custodian and eventually gatekeeper of holiness', and determined who had access to the Temple. Today the magisterium decides who has access to the priesthood.¹⁴ Neither monarchy nor temple turned out to be disinterested wielders of power. Is the magisterium? Dare I suggest that groups round the world such as OCW, who again and again are accused of being disobedient, are being prophetic voices challenging today's ruling church authorities?

These christian groups look to Jesus as the great dissenting prophet, the great challenger of ruling authority. After all, he broke sexual and

purity taboos about women (Mt 9:18-22; Mk 5:25-34; Lk 8:43-48); discussed theology with them (Jn 4:1-42); dined with outcasts (Mt 9:10); caused offence and scandal by his attitudes to the ruling regulations about cleanness, fasting and the Sabbath; and was a radical critic of much traditional religious practice. During his life, he did not found a group of disciples to control God's kingdom, but called them to follow him and to call others to the same journey.¹⁵ And in the final post-resurrection commissioning given to us at the end of Matthew's gospel, the disciples are sent to teach what they have been taught. The response to teaching is not to obey: it is, one hopes, to learn.

Consequences of challenging the theology of obedience

If we refused to place obedience as first of all the virtues, we could then re-claim a triune God, re-emphasise the Spirit-filled Christ of the Synoptics, and re-awaken a Spirit-filled Church.

The God of Jesus Christ who challenges all power structures gets lost in the presence of powerful authority structures demanding submission and obedience. A renewed emphasis on Trinitarian theology with God recognised as equal persons in loving relationship would acclaim God as love, and model a community free of domination in which all both give and receive. Christian communities based on this God could not create churches and societies of inequality, of domination and control; could not create stratified churches, enforced by hierarchies silencing prophetic critique.

A de-emphasizing of Jesus as the obedient Christ could allow a resurgence of a Spirit-Christology celebrating Jesus as one fully alive, divine because, as human, he was filled with the Spirit of God. When Jesus is seen as the Christ whose Spirit empowers all people not to dominate others but to enliven them, our church would be a real community, and not a hierarchical church in which a few have power over the many.

Karl Rahner called for those who feel they need to challenge the official church to be of courage and accept that the Spirit might be entrusting them with gifts and responsibilities for the whole church.¹⁶ Therefore, despite current papal teaching, OCW believes it must refuse to be silent; it must disobey; it must continue to work for the inclusion of women into a non-hierarchical ministry of women and men, to create a church in which all are equally able to express their various spiritual gifts. I believe that now is the time for women to give prophetic witness to a renewed church. The hour has come for Catholics to challenge Vatican rulings and pronouncements. It is the time to speak: the time for a Hannah speaking boldly in the Temple; the time for an Esther, determined to go to the king and speak 'even if it kills me'; the time for the Syro-Phoenician woman, refusing to be silenced by the male disciples trying to protect Jesus from the troublesome woman. It is not a time for Nicodemus, coming by night, for being disciples in secret; it is not the time 'for the silent, the stealthy, the safe'.¹⁷

We must take strength from the actions of our biblical foremothers; like the woman anointing Jesus before his death, going into the house

where he was surrounded by those trying to drive her away, to carry out the political and priestly action of anointing him as king; like the woman who spoke with Jesus at the well and then proclaimed him to the whole village. We have to take the debate to the streets. We act, we hope, in witness to a vision of an inclusive church. We act, we hope, to be sacramental presence of the God who gathers the outcast.

This may be acting in disobedience to the present magisterium. But our hope is to act in faithfulness to the Spirit of God in our midst, calling us to be fully ourselves. To achieve this, we need to listen to a great deal more in life than magisterial authorities. We have to listen to the Spirit, we have to listen to life. We have to listen to one another.

¹ William C Spohn SJ 'Current Theology. Notes on Moral Theology 1992. The Magisterium and morality', *Theological Studies* 54 (1993) 105.

² Gerhard Kittel, "ακουω, ακοη, ειζ-, επ-, παρακουω, παρακοη, υπακουω, υπακοη, υπηκοοζ" in Kittel G W.B. ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament Vol 1* (Grand Rapids Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1965) 216-225; p218

³ Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son. The transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993) 105.

⁴ Jon Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son* 125-142.

⁵ Sheila Briggs, 'Can an Enslaved God Liberate? Hermeneutical Reflections on Philippians 2:6-11', *Semeia* 47 (1989) 137-153.

⁶ even if their emanation scheme, with everything coming from the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit, could still be seen as maintaining a pattern of subordination. See Catherine Mowry La Cugna, *God For Us. The Trinity and Christian Life*, (Harper: San Francisco, 1991).

⁷ See for instance Leo, Sermon LXXXII.1-3 in which he speaks of being 'head of the world'. Printed in *Creeds, Councils and controversies. Documents illustrating the history of the Church AD 337-461* ed. J Stevenson, revised with additional documents by W.H.C. Frend (London: SPCK 1991) 327.

⁸ quoted in LaCugna *God For Us* 268-9, from a forward by R. Rice to *Christian Feminism* by N Cross (Front Royal, VA: Christendom Publications 1984).

⁹ Dorothee Soelle *The Strength of the Weak Towards a Christian Feminist Identity* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), 110.

¹⁰ For a thorough-going analysis of this whole question, it would be necessary to consider the Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries with its emphasis on liberty and equality and the rise of individualism, the hermeneutics of the 'masters of suspicion' Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, the advent of modern psychoanalytic theory, questions raised by post-modernism etc, all of which have made the whole concept of obedience a very difficult one for many people. Only a limited analysis of questions raised about the concept of obedience is possible here.

¹¹ Walter Kasper, *Jesus The Christ* (London: Burns and Oates, 1976) 166.

¹² Francis J Moloney SBD, *A Life of Promise, Poverty Chastity Obedience* (Homebush: St Paul Publications, 1985) 119.

¹³ Dorothee Soelle, *Beyond mere obedience. Reflections on a Christian Ethic for the future* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1970), and *The strength of the Weak*

¹⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation and Obedience: From faithful reading to faithful living*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 187.

¹⁵ Moloney, *A Life of Promise* 160.

¹⁶ Karl Rahner in *Karl Rahner, Theologian of the graced search for meaning* ed Geoffrey B Kelly (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1992)

¹⁷ Joan Chittister, *Winds of Change: Women Challenge the Church*, (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1986) 61.