

Obedience Religious, Christological, and Trinitarian

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THE OBEDIENCE OF CHRIST unto death to which St. Paul refers in his letter to the Philippians (2:8), an obedience promised in the garden of Gethsemane (Mk 14:32–36) and subsequently enacted at Calvary, is for all Christians the model of faithful hearkening to the word of God both in general and in particular as directing each Christian's share in the mission of Christ. It has received special attention, moreover, in the traditions of monks and other vowed religious.¹ Christ in his obedience unto death is the model of monastic obedience according to the *Rule* of St. Benedict as, say, of the obedience of the members of the Society of Jesus.² In the twentieth century, this same obedience of Christ is thought to tell us something of the relations within the Trinity of the Son to the Father. For theologians like Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar, the obedience of the incarnate Son is an economic rendering of an eternal obedience to his Father before the foundation of the world.³ To be sure, there are analogical differences to point out, but

¹ See for example John Cassian, Conference 19 of Abbot John on the end of monastic life, where in chapter six the excellence of the cenobitic life is grounded in the obedience the monk gives to his abbot, since in this way he imitates the obedience of Christ according to Philippians 2:8, in *John Cassian: The Conferences*, vol. 57, *Ancient Christian Writers*, trans. and annotated Boniface Ramsey, O.P. (New York: Newman Press, 1997).

² See section II of this essay, below.

³ For an intra-divine or immanent humility and obedience of the Son, see preeminently Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/1 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956), sec-

they are only analogical, and if these theologians are right, then to say of a monk that he is obedient to his abbot, of Christ the man that he is obedient in the garden, and of the eternal Son that he is obedient to his Father is not to trade on equivocal meanings for “obedience.” On this view, the obedience of religious life is not only an *imitatio Christi*, but just as directly an imitation of the filial relation of the Son to the Father. This view seems both to increase our wonder at the unfathomable riches of intra-Trinitarian life, as well as to enhance the dignity with which we should behold religious obedience, as indeed the obedience of all the baptized to whatever master, worldly or Christian, is placed over us (Col 3:22–23; Lk 10:16). But there are difficulties.

In what follows, I first examine a *prima facie* case for saying that the obedience of Christ has an eternal exemplar in the Trinity. There follows an examination of a very small part of the rich material on religious obedience, its nature and conditions. Last, I come back to Christ’s own obedience, considered economically and theologically.

I. The Obedience of Christ and the Receptivity of the Word

Michael Waldstein has recently argued for a divine obedience within the Trinity, an obedience to be recognized in John’s Gospel and to which he leads us by proceeding just one step further than St. Thomas takes us in his commentary on John.⁴

tion 59, esp. 192–3, 200–4, 209–10. For Hans Urs von Balthasar’s appropriation of Barth on this point, see *Mysterium Paschale* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990), 79–83, and *Theodrama*, vol. 5 (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1998), 236–9. For his appropriation of Adrienne von Speyr’s very lively if not tritheistic Trinitarian speculations, see *Theodrama*, vol. 5, 506–21. Places asserting intra-Trinitarian obedience include *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 7 (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989), 211–18 (with Barth again), 231, 247–8, and *Theo-Logic*, vol. 3 (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2005), 177–84.

Among the many others beholden to Barth for this teaching, see also Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 202–7, 240–7. For contemporary discussion of Barth on this issue, see Bruce McCormack, “Divine Impassibility or Simply Divine Constancy? Implications of Karl Barth’s Later Christology for Debates over Impassibility,” in *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering*, ed. James F. Keating and Thomas Joseph White, O.P. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 150–86, and Thomas Joseph White, O.P., “Intra-Trinitarian Obedience and Nicene-Chalcedonian Christology,” *Nova et Vetera* (English) 6 (2008): 377–402.

⁴ Michael Waldstein, “The Analogy of Mission and Obedience: A Central Point in the Relation between *Theologia* and *Oikonomia* in St. Thomas Aquinas’s Commentary

Waldstein admirably highlights the importance of the obedience of Christ in John. There are not only the passages where Jesus speaks expressly of the command he has received from his Father (12:49, 14:31, 15:10), but the passages about not doing his own will but the Father's (5:30, 6:38), of doing only what he sees the Father doing (5:19), of speaking what he hears from the Father (15:15), of being sent by the Father (8:18, 42; 17:8)—all this moves in the orbit of "obedience."⁵

St. Thomas, however, expressly confines the imputation of obedience in Christ to his humanity: in his human will, Jesus "does as the Father has commanded him" (14:31); he "keeps his Father's commandments" (15:10). In other words, as a man, through his humanity and human will, he obeys his Father.

When St. Thomas treats the virtue of obedience in the *Summa*, its specifying object is delimited as the command of a superior.⁶ To command is to move another by one's own reason and will.⁷ Correlatively, to obey is to be moved through one's own reason and will by the reason and will of a superior. The situation of obedience evidently supposes two wills for St. Thomas. Christ can be obedient only in virtue of his second, assumed, human will, and the commentary on John moves within this understanding of things.

The *Summa* recognizes the key role of Christ's human obedience in effecting our salvation,⁸ and this, too, is to be found in the commentary on John. So, at 14:31:

"And just as the Father has given me a commandment, so do I act": which is according as the Father moves him to bear death by obedience, which arises from love. However, the Father gave this commandment not to the Son of God, who, since he is the Word, is also the commandment of the Father, but he gave it to the Son of man, insofar as he inspired his soul with what is nec-

on John," in *Reading John with St. Thomas: Theological Exegesis and Speculative Theology*, ed. Michael Dauphinais and Matthew Levering (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 92–112.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 99–100.

⁶ *Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 104, a. 2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, a. 1.

⁸ *ST* III, q. 47, a. 2.

essary for human salvation. . . . And that the world might know this, he says “Arise . . . and let us go” to the place where I will be handed over, so that you may see that it is not from necessity, but from charity and obedience that I die.⁹

This obedience of Christ is a created, human obedience, just as the charity that moves it is a created participation in the love of God.

In the above citation, Christ’s human soul (and will) is given a commandment as from another will. As divine, however, Christ *is* the commandment of God. This is important for Waldstein’s case. Even as divine, Christ can be said to receive commandments, all of which are contained in the divine Word as proceeding from the Father. So at 12:49, “The Father who sent me has himself given me commandment what to say and what to speak”:

All the divine commandments are in the mind of the Father, since these commandments are nothing but the reasons of things to be done. Therefore, just as the reasons of all creatures that proceed from God are in the mind of the Father, reasons that we call ideas, so also the reasons of all the things we are to do are also there. Therefore, just as the reasons of all things come from the Father into the Son, who is the wisdom of the Father, so also do the reasons of all things to be done. Thus therefore the Son says, “But the Father who sent me, he gave me, insofar as I am God, a ‘commandment,’ which is to say that the Father has communicated it by an eternal generation, both ‘what to say’ interiorly and ‘what to speak’ exteriorly.”¹⁰

At St. Thomas’s commentary at 5:30, moreover, we come very close indeed to imputing a divine obedience to the pre-existent Son. “As I hear, I judge,” the Lord says, “and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will, but the will of him who sent me.” “But does not the same will belong to Father and Son?” St. Thomas asks. He answers:

⁹ St. Thomas, *Super Evangelium S. Ioannis Lectura*, 5th ed., revised, ed. Raphael Cai, O.P. (Rome: Marietti, 1952), no. 1976, my translation.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, no. 1723; my translation.

It must be said that indeed the same will belongs to both; but still, the Father does not have his will from another, while the Son does have it from another, namely from the Father. Thus therefore the Son fulfills his will as the will of another, that is as having it from another; but the Father fulfills it as his own, that is, as not having it from another: and therefore he says, "I do not seek my own will," which would belong to me originally from myself, but what is mine is from another, namely from the Father.¹¹

This is close, but not on the money. St. Thomas says the Son fulfills his own will *as* the will of another, not that he fulfills the Father's will as *another* will. Thus, there is no intra-divine obedience asserted here, although for Waldstein it seems to hover in the wings.

Waldstein's one further step beyond the text of St. Thomas is to bring it on stage and say that, since the Son loves the Father even as the Father loves him, this return of love, relative to the commandments received in his generation, enables us to speak of an obedience of the Son to the Father before the creation of the world.¹² For if there is but one will in God, it is nonetheless possessed according to the personal modes of Father, Son, and Spirit.¹³ The Father possesses it originatively, and is it; but this same will is and is possessed by the Son only as something received. If the personal ratification of a received will counts as obedience, then the Son is obedient not only in his human nature but also in his divine nature, as well.

This position would moreover seem to be supported by the recognition that the persons of the Trinity exercise a kind of piety, honor, and reverence with regard to each other, a position that stretches from the middle ages through Cardinal Bérulle to Matthias Scheeben, and which Jared Staudt has recently brought to light.¹⁴ Thomas himself

¹¹ Ibid., no. 798.

¹² Waldstein, "Analogy of Mission and Obedience," 105–6.

¹³ See Gilles Emery, O.P., "The Personal Mode of Trinitarian Action in St. Thomas Aquinas," *The Thomist* 69 (2005): 31–77.

¹⁴ Jared Staudt, "Did Christ Worship the Trinity?" *The Thomist* 76 (2012): 233–72, at 263–66.

knew of the imputation of filial piety to the Son within the Godhead, as Waldstein is aware.¹⁵ To be sure, it is typical of sons to obey their fathers.

So it is perhaps easier that we would think to line St. Thomas up with Barth and Balthasar. Still, there is an important objection. Must not “obedience” be merely metaphorically said here, in that obedience properly speaking supposes two wills, as St. Thomas seems to suppose in his comment on John 5:30? Every time we speak of the obedience of angels or men, we envision two wills belonging to two suppositis, two hypostases of an intellectual or rational nature, two persons.¹⁶ Waldstein counters with the familial model of the Trinity employed by Pope John Paul II, according to which obedience will find a place in the Trinity even as in the family.¹⁷ Further, he urges the preeminence of the *littera* of John over Thomas’s psychological account of the Trinity. According to the latter, the Word hears the commandments in his very procession from the Father. But according to the former, John imputes obedience to Christ without difference or discrimination of natures.¹⁸

Directly to the objection that obedience supposes two wills, Waldstein answers simply and abruptly that it does not. “It is not true that what is needed for obedience is two wills. . . . What is needed for obedience is a distinction of persons, and, on the one hand, a command, and on the other consent.”¹⁹ Command and consent so distinguished seem to imply two wills and not just one. But I let that pass. What is more foundational in thinking clearly about intra-Trinitarian obedience is to think about the nature of obedience itself.

II. Perfect Obedience in the Ignatian Tradition

For St. Thomas, obedience pertains to those virtues directed to other persons,²⁰ and in this way Waldstein’s notion of intra-divine obedience is upheld. But further, obedience is a part of observance (*observantia*),²¹ and observance a potential part of justice. Observance falls short

¹⁵ Waldstein, “Analogy of Mission and Obedience,” 104; see *ST* I, q. 42, a. 4, ad 1.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 106.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 107–8.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 108.

²⁰ *ST* II-II, q. 80, a. 1.

²¹ *ST* II-II, q. 103, intro.

of the perfection of justice and is in that way a potential part because it does not fully return what is due the other person in question.²² On this account, Thomas's understanding would remove observance and obedience from intra-Trinitarian relations, where the Son's return to the Father is, presumably, perfect. As we have noted, obedience bears on the command of the superior.²³ It proceeds from reverence for one's parents and so pertains to piety; also, it proceeds from reverence for God, and so pertains to religion, too.²⁴ It is better than sacrifice because it renders to God what is most precious, our will.²⁵ In both cases of piety and religion, it is easy to see why obedience is treated of in the potential parts of justice: we never and cannot repay to our parents, or to God, what is their due in strict justice, but the least we owe them is to be moved by their reason and will. As noted, this argues the impossibility of verifying an intra-divine obedience. But there is yet another way to illumine things.

It is when we consider obedience as a religious act that its incommensurability with divine realities becomes most apparent. Obedience to abbot or religious superior is, of course, something vowed by the religious, and St. Thomas notes the appropriateness of this promise, in that those entering religion must follow the directives of the superior in order to attain to the end of the religious state.²⁶ In the first place, the end of religious life is the imitation of Christ, who, Thomas notes, was obedient unto death (in the *sed contra*, significantly). But also, the supposition is that the novice does not know, and the superior *does* know, how to attain this end.

Those who are being instructed or exercised in order to attain a certain end must needs follow the directions of someone under whose control they are instructed or exercised.²⁷

The disproportion of knowledge is a clue here to the inability of pred-

²² *ST* II-II, q. 80, a. 1.

²³ *ST* II-II, q. 104, a. 2.

²⁴ *ST* II-II, q. 104, a. 3, ad 1.

²⁵ *Ibid.* This is worth saying, since for Balthasar and Speyr, there are lots of intra-Trinitarian "sacrifices," too.

²⁶ *ST* II-II, q. 186, a. 5.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

icating obedience of the pre-existent Son. This clue is taken up by St. Ignatius Loyola, and provides an essential element in what he calls “perfect obedience.”

In his Letter on Obedience of 1553, Ignatius sums up much of the collective wisdom on religious obedience in the Latin Church.²⁸ By it we imitate Christ, who was obedient unto death (2, 21). It makes a holocaust of the religious to God (9, 14), and Ignatius tells his sons that they thereby vanquish “the loftiest and most difficult part of yourselves, your will and intellect” (21). Religious obedience is founded both on the authority of the superiors, the right to teach that Christ bequeathed to the Church in the apostles, since “he who hears you hears me” (Luke 10:16), and on the vow of obedience the religious makes, whereby he undertakes to obey the superiors of his order.²⁹ The obedient religious obeys not the superior as a man, or according as he is thought to be wise and prudent, but only as the representative of Christ, discerning Christ in the superior by faith (4, 16).

St. Ignatius distinguishes three degrees of obedience: obedience of execution, obedience of will, and obedience of intellect.³⁰ Obedience of execution fulfills the commandment, accomplishing the exterior work. Just in itself, it is of little worth (5). Obedience of will joins one’s will to that of the superior, and through that of the superior, to God’s will. The merit of obedience increases in proportion to the sacrifice of our will in conforming our desire to the superior’s.³¹ Obedience of the understanding, in turn, conforms our mind to the mind of the one who

²⁸ The text of the letter in English can be conveniently found in Manuel María Espinosa Pólit, S.J., *Perfect Obedience: Commentary on the Letter on Obedience of Saint Ignatius of Loyola* (Westminster, MD: The Newman Bookshop, 1947), 20–30. I cite internally by paragraph numbers. See also the parallel exposition in the *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, trans., with an introduction and commentary, by George E. Ganss, S.J. (St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Resources, 1970), part VI, chapter 1.

²⁹ Espinosa Pólit, *Perfect Obedience*, 69, observes that the jurisdiction of the superior comes through the Church from Christ, as Luke 10:16 warrants, but the “dominative power” according to which the superior has the right in religion to command this individual arises from the will of him who vows obedience.

³⁰ Francisco Suárez, *De religione societatis Iesu*, Liber IV, *De votis*, chapter 13, in *Opera Omnia* (Paris: Vivès, 1860), vol. 16, finds the elements of this threefold grade of obedience in St. Thomas, *ST I-II*, q. 90, a. 9.

³¹ Espinosa Pólit, *Perfect Obedience*, 81.

commands.³² It is not just that the subject happens spontaneously to approve the practical judgment of the superior, but that he thinks what is commanded is good because the superior commands it.³³ Thus there is sacrifice not only of will but of intellect. Espinosa Pólit states:

Even though the total renunciation of the will constitutes a most excellent sacrifice, there yet remains to man something which can be offered in sacrifice, of much greater value, which marks him out specifically as man—his reason and judgment.³⁴

In this last degree, one surrenders one's judgment to that of the superior.

There are two aspects to this surrender of judgment. First, it is surrendered to God through the superior, to a God whom by faith we believe (1) speaks through the superior and (2) speaks to us practically from an infinite wisdom and who can by his infinite power arrange our obedient service to work to the world's, the Church's and our own good.³⁵ But second, even though we do not see the exact motives of the superior's command, we ordinarily impute to him a greater knowledge of the common good and what is to be done in pursuit of it.³⁶ The goal is "to think the same thing with the Superior in those numerous instances where the known evidence of the truth does not force it."³⁷

Ignatius commends humility and meekness in order to render the religious apt to surrender his judgment (15). But there are three more particular means conducive to this surrender. First, the knowledge of faith that the superior is an instrument of God (16).³⁸ There is no religious merit in obedience if it is not offered "to God in the person of those who represent him," and who may in fact not be wise.³⁹ Second, one can "be quick to look for reasons to defend what the Superior com-

³² *Ibid.*, 101.

³³ *Ibid.*, 102.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 108.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 111.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 117–18, following Blessed Humbert of Romans, O.P., who died in 1277 and was the fifth Master General of the Dominicans.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 127.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 133–4.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 141–2.

mands" (17).⁴⁰ And the third means, quite opposite to marshaling as good an argument for the superior's judgment as one is capable of, is that of "blind" obedience (18).

By blind obedience, Ignatius means obeying according as one knows that it is God's will that one obey what the superior commands.⁴¹ It is blind, not as suspending our intellectual operation or obliterating it, but, in Pedro de Ribadeneira's words, in that the religious chooses to see "with the eyes of another and not by himself."⁴²

Blind obedience is like faith (18). In faith, we do not have any intrinsic reasons that convince us of the truth of what is proposed to our belief, and in obedience, we have no intrinsic reasons confirming the practical wisdom of the superior. Espinosa-Pólit states:

And as in neither of these two cases [faith and obedience] the understanding is forced to yield assent by the evidence of the known truths, the will must intervene in order to direct the free acquiescence of the understanding to the object proposed to it.⁴³

It is precisely the disproportion of knowledge in obedience, between the subject and God and between the subject and his superior's knowledge, that makes of obedience something meritorious and pleasing to God. Blind obedience rests on a higher prudence, that of God working through the superior (who may himself be prudent or not) and knowing only that God has commanded what the superior enjoins.⁴⁴

Before leaving this section, I want first to report the argument of

⁴⁰ Ibid., 142–3.

⁴¹ Ibid., 151.

⁴² Ibid., 154. Pedro de Ribadeneira, S.J., died in 1611 and was the first biographer of St. Ignatius.

⁴³ Ibid., 155–6.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 166. This view of obedience is not exclusively Ignatian, as anyone familiar with the spiritualities of the orders will be aware. So Columba Marmion, expounding the *Rule* of St. Benedict in *Christ the Ideal of the Monk*, 5th ed. (St. Louis: Herder, 1926), 269–70, says: "We may theoretically believe that our view is better and more reasonable than what is commanded us. But we must obey perfectly in action, in the execution of what we are told to do; we must besides be intimately persuaded that in the present cases, *in concreto*, no spiritual harm will result from our obedience, either for the Divine glory nor for our own soul, but only good will come from it. It is this intimate persuasion that is necessary to obedience of judgment."

Francisco Suárez for the perfection of blind obedience, both because of its elegance and because of the help it gives in analyzing the human obedience of Christ.⁴⁵ The perfections of obedience insofar as it depends on the intellect, Suárez writes, depend first on beholding Christ in the superior and second on its “blindness.”⁴⁶

He offers a proof from Scripture and Tradition of both these perfections.⁴⁷ He follows with an argument based on the dependence of obedience, itself a perfection of the will, on the intellect. Its first presupposition is as follows:

To the extent the will depends on the intellect in its acts, so also the perfection of obedience depends on the perfection of the intellect. But the will depends on the intellect as directing and illuminating or proposing its object. Whence, to the extent the intellect should have exercised this office in regard to some *bonum honestum* to that extent and speaking *per se*, the action of the will will also be more perfect.⁴⁸

But the perfect direction of the will by the intellect—and this is the second presupposition—requires perfect attention to the good proposed and removal of all thoughts impeding the will’s prosecution of the proposed good.

... the right motion of the will *per se* requires a fitting judgment on the good to be pursued, but *per accidens* on the removal of all thoughts that could impede that striving.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Francisco Suárez, *De religione societatis Iesu*, Liber IV, *De votis*, chapter 15, in *Opera Omnia* (Paris: Vivès, 1860), vol. 16. I cite by the paragraph numbers of chapter 15 and the page numbers.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, no. 1; 777a–b.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, no. 3, for the first, and very comprehensively, nos. 4–11, for the second.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, no. 12; 782b: “eo modo quo pendet voluntas ab intellectu in suis actionibus, ita etiam pendere perfectionem obedientiae a perfectione intellectus. Pendet autem voluntas ab intellectu, tamquam a dirigente et illuminante, seu proponente objectum. Unde quo intellectus hoc munus exercuerit circa bonum honestum, eo, per se loquendo, voluntatis actio erit etiam perfectior.”

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 13; 783a: “recta motio voluntatis per se requirit conveniens iudicium boni prosequendi, per accidens vero remotionem omnium cogitationum, quae possunt affectum illum impedire.”

There will be greater perfection of the intellect in so directing the will, first and *per se* and “most of all, in a higher consideration of the object, proposing it under a more excellent motive and goodness [*honestas*],” and second and *per accidens* according as there obtains the greatest privation of thoughts and factors impeding obedience.⁵⁰

The first requirement is fulfilled according as the subject considers the superior as representing and acting in the person of Christ and in “the apprehension of his precept as if it issued from God.”⁵¹ This does not mean the superior cannot err or be deceived, either from ignorance or malice or negligence, but requires only that the command be not sinful.⁵² The second and *per accidens* perfection of the intellect in directing obedience arises from following the third particular means Ignatius recommends for religious obedience, a kind of “blindness.” The metaphor, Suárez says, does not mean the subject becomes a brute. However,

this blindness ought to exclude human reasons by which we would rather be moved to obey the superior, because he is learned or prudent, or because he orders pleasant things, rather than on account of the will of God alone. Additionally, it excludes human reasoning by which the subject wishes to examine why the Prelate commands this thing, or why he gives the order to oneself rather than to another, and similar things.⁵³

Suárez explains that such obedience does not rely on one’s own pru-

⁵⁰ Ibid., no. 13; 783a: “ex utroque capite potest esse major et minor perfectio. Ex parte quidem iudicii, tum in majori attentione seu intensione actus; tum maxime in altiori consideratione objecti, proponendo illud sub excellentiori motivo et honestate; ex parte autem privationis, seu carentiae iudicii, vel cogitationis impediens, tanto erit major perfectio, quanto privatio illa major fuit.”

⁵¹ Ibid., no. 14; 783a: “Primo ergo merito postulatur ad perfectam obedientiam consideratio Dei in Superiore, et apprehensio praecepti ejus, ac si a Deo egrederetur”; and 783b: “qui sic obedit, non iudicat Superiorem esse Deum, sed repraesentare Deum, quatenus vicem ejus gerit.” See the Letter on Obedience, nos. 4, 11, and 16.

⁵² Ibid., no. 15; 783b–784a.

⁵³ Ibid., no. 26; 788b: “[additur] caecitatem hanc debere excludere humanas rationes, quibus moveamur potius ad parendum Superiori, quia doctus est aut prudens, vel quia placentia jubet, quam propter solam Dei voluntatem. Item additur excludere humanos discursus, quibus subditus examinare velit, cur Praelatus hoc praecipiat, vel cur potius sibi quam alteri, et similia.”

dence, especially on “carnal prudence,” but is an exercise in “spiritual and supernatural prudence.”⁵⁴ In obeying blindly, one does not rely on one’s own practical wisdom, “curiously inquiring about the reasons and causes of the command.”⁵⁵ “For just as a blind man is led by another and as it were sees by other eyes, so in his own way the subject should be compared in this way to the superior.”⁵⁶ If a subject had always to understand the reasons and causes of his superior, furthermore, no corporate human action would be possible.⁵⁷ And indeed, we must reckon with the possibility that the subject *cannot* see the superior’s reasons, just as a mason cannot in the instant share the art of the architect directing him.⁵⁸

A sort of nescience, therefore, is integral to the highest and most meritorious degree of obedience.

III. Christ’s Human Obedience

That Christ’s obedience unto death merits our salvation is taught by the Council of Trent in both the Decree on Original Sin (canon 3) and the Decree on Justification (Chapter 7; canons 10, 32, and 33). Merit supposes freedom.⁵⁹ And the freedom of Christ in obeying his Father is emphasized in the garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:32ff. & parallels) and by John: “For this reason the Father loves me because I lay down my life. . . . No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord” (10:17–18). This freedom is evidently, as has been said already, a human freedom: Jesus, the man, is telling us that he lays down his (human) life of his own (human) accord.

However, the merit and freedom of Jesus’ human obedience are the merit and freedom of the Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity. And they cannot be what they are unless the free and obedient acts of

⁵⁴ Ibid., no. 27; 789a: “caecitas haec excludit prudentiam carnis, not vero prudentiam spiritualem et supernaturalem.”

⁵⁵ Ibid., no. 27; 789a: “quae non nititur propriae prudentiae, nec curiose inquirat rationes et causas praecepti.”

⁵⁶ Ibid., no. 27; 789a: “Sicut enim caecus ab alio ducitur et quasi alienis oculis videt, ita suo modo subditus ad Superiorem comparari debet.”

⁵⁷ Ibid., no. 29; 789b.

⁵⁸ Ibid., no. 29; 789b.

⁵⁹ ST I-II, q. 114, a. 1, resp. and ad 1.

the man Jesus proceed from a self-consciousness that includes a knowledge of who he is and what he is doing. Unless Jesus knows who he is and knows the divine plan of salvation, then he can only believe that he is obediently laying down the human life of the Son of God. Such faith would be admirable, in its own way, but it is not proportionate to the dignity of the act of his—the Son of God’s—submission to suffering and death. Thomas Joseph White argues this point eloquently. Without “evidential knowledge” of the divine will,

the human mind of Christ could no longer be moved immediately by the will of his divine person. Instead the man Christ would continually need to make acts of faith in what he believed obscurely to be the divine will he shared (as God) with his Father. He would have to hope (as a man) that he was doing what his own transcendent identity (which he also believed in) willed for him. Christ would not know with certitude, therefore who he was and what he willed (as God) in each instant.⁶⁰

Unless Jesus knows who he is and what the divine will for him is, then we may assert the unity of one agent in two natures, but we will end up in a sort of operational Nestorianism.

The actions of Christ as man do not reveal the will of God the Son, but only what Jesus as man hopes is the will he shared eternally with the Father. Such an idea is clearly dualistic since it prohibits the earthly Christ from being epistemologically proportioned so as to know immediately his own identity and will.⁶¹

That Christ as man know who he is and know the divine will requires that his intellect enjoy the immediate vision of God, since no infused or “prophetic” knowledge could produce the required certainty of the knowledge of a divine self-identity.⁶²

It is not the purpose of this essay to defend the traditional teaching

⁶⁰ Thomas Joseph White, O.P., “The Earthly Christ and the Beatific Vision,” *The Thomist* 69 (2005): 497–534, at 520.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 521.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 517–18.

on Christ's immediate vision of God, and it is rather presupposed here.⁶³ But it is worth saying that a Christ who only believes but does not know who he is does not match the portrait of Christ we have either in John or in the other gospels. More than Matthew 11:27, where Jesus, the incarnate Son, knows the Father exactly as the Father knows the Son, the deliverance of such things as the parable of the Vineyard in Mark 12, where Jesus very confidently presents himself as the Son of God, or the description of the last judgment in Matthew 25, gives us to describe him as "more than a prophet," not because he ends prophecy in the way John does (Matthew 11:9), however, but because he surpasses prophecy in the same way as does divine Wisdom, and yet—he knows this as a man (Matthew 12:42).⁶⁴

For our purposes, however, Christ's knowledge as a man both of who he is and of the divine plan, including the divine command to lay down his life for the salvation of the world, raises an important question about his obedience. Recall the two conditions of perfect and the most meritorious obedience according to Suárez. The subject apprehends the one who commands as representing God. Second, the subject blindly refuses any inquiry of his own as to the practical wisdom of the command.

If we impute the vision of God to the man Christ, then he does not believe the one who commands represents God his Father; he rather knows that it is indeed his Father who commands. This is to have the highest assurance of the good of obeying the command; it is to have a knowledge of the good of obeying than which no greater could be conceived, if we may borrow a line of thinking dear to St. Anselm. As to the second condition, however, we seem to have withdrawn the obedience of Christ from the possibility of enjoying the highest perfection thereof. For knowing the divine will by vision, he knows that the divine wisdom has ordained this very command he is to fulfill by his human obedience, and he knows its *convenientiae*, the intelligibilities that make it fitting, both in itself and in relation to the Old Testament. Above, however, we insisted that the perfection of obedience contained as an essential com-

⁶³ See the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 473–74.

⁶⁴ For Jesus in relation to prophecy, see Ben Witherington III, *Jesus the Seer: The Progress of Prophecy* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), esp. chapter 8. And for Jesus and Wisdom, see again Ben Witherington III, *Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), especially chapter 4.

ponent a certain nescience—a not knowing of the reasons and causes of the superior's order.

Bernard Lonergan dealt with this objection to the perfection of the obedience of Christ fifty years ago in his *De Verbo incarnato*. In establishing that the efficacy of Christ's redemption is an efficacy of meritorious obedience, he introduces an objection.

someone will say that . . . because Christ was endowed with the highest knowledge, there was necessarily lacking in Christ the third and highest degree of obedience, which consists in the subordination of one's own intellect to the judgment of a superior.⁶⁵

Lonergan grants that "Christ knew God by God's essence," and so has knowledge that the actual order of salvation proceeds from the infinite wisdom of God. But he then recalls the teaching of St. Thomas that, although the mind of Christ beheld the essence of God, it did not enjoy comprehensive knowledge of the divine essence, since such is impossible for any creature.⁶⁶ It therefore follows that he does not know all that is in the power of God, what the divine agency could have, but has not, done.⁶⁷ Therefore, Lonergan concludes:

he was not able to compare the actual order of things with all other possible orders; and this comparison failing, he was not able to judge from his own knowledge that this order of things, in which he was destined to be the "man of sorrows," was better.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Bernard Lonergan, S.J., *De Verbo incarnato*, 3rd ed. (Rome: 1964), 477: "Dixerit tamen quispiam Christum obedisse quidem inquantum praeceptum opus perfecit et inquantum tota voluntate illud opus perficere interius voluit; at necessario defuisse Christo, summa scientia ornato, tertium et supremum obedientiae gradum qui in subordinatione proprii intellectu ad iudicium superioris consistit."

⁶⁶ *ST* III, q. 10, a. 2.

⁶⁷ *ST* III, q. 10, a. 3.

⁶⁸ Lonergan, *De Verbo incarnato*, 478: "cum Christus homo non cognoverit omnia quae sunt in potentia creatoris. . . , comparare non potuit actualem rerum ordinem cum omnibus aliis ordinibus possibilis; qua comparatione deficiente, iudicare non potuit ex propria scientia meliorem esse hunc rerum ordinem in quo ipse 'vir dolorum' fore destinabatur."

Therefore Christ does obey with the highest degree of obedience, since “he does not know from his own knowledge the entire excellence” of what his Father commands. The nescience required for the “third and highest degree of obedience” is verified.

IV. The Impossibility of Divine Filial Obedience

As we have seen, the objection that obedience evidently supposes two wills is flatly denied or simply ignored by theologians who, like Waldstein, maintain that intra-Trinitarian obedience requires only a duality of persons.

In its highest form, however, as witness St. Ignatius, obedience supposes discrete, different acts of understanding in the subject and his superior. Furthermore, a thing is what it is most of all in its highest, perfect form. It is a thing in its excellence, in its best shape, that most manifestly tells us its nature. If the best obedience, obedience in its highest form, is to be verified in the Trinity, then there must be a disproportion between the knowledge of the Father and the knowledge of the Son, and this independently of the incarnation and the assumption of humanity by the Son. Father and Son must in themselves be different precisely in the scope of what they know.

To the contrary, for St. Thomas Father and Son and Spirit are one single act of infinite understanding.⁶⁹ Therefore, the perfection of obedience cannot be verified in the Son’s relation to the Father. It seems, indeed, we must equivocate on the nature of obedience, reserving a special and unique form for the Trinity, and think something quite other for the ordinary obedience that informs human societies and organizations.

Do we want so to equivocate? Speaking of change and suffering and obedience in the Trinity, Balthasar says, “We cannot postulate any alteration as this is found in creatures, nor any suffering and obeying in the manner proper to creatures.”⁷⁰ But is there anything left of an obedience that is not “in the manner proper to creatures”? It is hard to find any continuity of sense. The very point of imputing obedience to the Son seems to be lost. We gain nothing in our understanding of the Son’s

⁶⁹ ST I, q. 14, a. 4, “Whether the Act of God’s Intellect Is His Substance?”

⁷⁰ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, vol. 7, 213.

relation to the Father, and we gain nothing in our appreciation of the obedience we ourselves are called upon to exercise.

Moreover, that the act of divine understanding is one and the same for each Person of the Trinity is not some teaching unique to St. Thomas. The unity of operation of the Trinitarian Persons is the teaching of Gregory of Nyssa, Hilary of Poitiers, and St. Augustine.⁷¹ Only so did the great architects of Trinitarian doctrine in the fourth and fifth centuries find a way to express Trinitarian reality without risk of tritheism. The imputation of obedience to the Son in his divine nature, therefore, seems to wreck the foundations of Trinitarian theology common to East and West.

V. Conclusion: The Distinction of Created Things from Their Creator

Hans Urs von Balthasar was given to lament the divorce of ascetic-mystical from systematic theology, and he was right to do so. If we reunite them, however, then we cannot predicate a divine obedience of the Son within the Trinity. Obedience remains a created perfection, not a divine exchange between the Persons.

Why do we want it, anyway? It seems to be suggested by the idea that the *tropos* or personal identity of the Son finds expression in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. It does find expression there, but not with such one-to-one correspondence between earthly and heavenly realities as some modern theologians desire.⁷² We should tell a simpler, less theosophical story. The Son of God became man in order to teach us to do what he in his divine nature does not and cannot do, which is to say: to repent, to be humble before the divine majesty, to offer worthy sacrifice, and also, to obey God. We do not probe further into the di-

⁷¹ See e.g. Gregory of Nyssa, *An Answer to Ablabius: That We Should Not Think of Saying there Are Three Gods*, trans. Cyril Richardson, in *Christology of the Later Fathers*, ed. Edward R. Hardy (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), 261–2. For an analysis of the *Ad Ablabium*, see Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 244–363, and Giulio Maspero, *Trinity and Man: Gregory of Nyssa's Ad Ablabium* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), esp. 53–60. Ayres, *Nicaea*, chapter 15, gives the versions of Hilary, Ambrose, and Augustine.

⁷² See White, “Earthly Christ,” and Bruce Marshall, “The Unity of the Triune God: Reviving an Ancient Question,” *The Thomist* 74 (2010): 1–32.

vine mystery by finding these realities somehow already in God in some super-exemplary Trinitarian form. When we try to do this, we rather ignore the difference between really distinct natures, divine and human, the persons of one of which cannot share formally in all the personal acts of the other.

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