

Reflections on the Spirituality of Our Capuchin Constitutions  
Chapter X: *Our Life in Obedience*

Introduction

The English word obedience, as most of us know, has its roots in the Latin *obidere* [*ob* (“to”) + *audire* (“listen”)], or “to listen to.” At its most basic level, then, obedience is a *considered response* to a call or command to do or refrain from doing something. Obedience in our Capuchin Constitutions is rooted in our Scriptures, the experiences and reflections of St. Francis, and the teachings of the Church, especially re: religious life. In the brief time that we have available, I would like to do the following:

- (a) Provide an overview of some spiritual foundations for obedience.
- (b) Discuss some of the elements of the spirituality of obedience in our Capuchin Constitutions, particularly Chapter X.
- (c) Share a brief personal reflection on my own experience of our vow of obedience.
- (d) Invite some small group about how we can deepen our understanding and our living of this vow.

Some Biblical Perspectives and Lessons on Obedience

Any study of obedience in the Christian and Franciscan traditions needs to start with the Bible. It's safe to say that with Adam and Eve the human race doesn't seem to get off to a very good start in obeying God (see Gen 3:1-24). God allows them to eat from every tree in the garden *except one*. The serpent tries to confuse the issue by making it an all-or-none choice. Eve rationalizes her disobedience; Adam joins in; and when God confronts them, Adam tries to throw Eve “under the bus.” So our first biblical lesson is that *obedience doesn't come to us easily*.

Abraham, called by name by God to move from what is familiar and comfortable to the unknown, goes forth in faith, trusting in God's promises (see Gen 12:1-9). He reminds us that *obedience demands faith and trust*. When he is tested by God and first called and then stopped from offering his son as a holocaust (see Gen 22:1-19), we learn that *obedience involves sacrifice*.

Later in the Pentateuch (Ex 3:1-22), God calls Moses by name from a burning bush, proclaiming that God has heard the cry of his people and will Moses to lead them from

slavery to freedom. To Moses' protests of his inadequacy, "Who am I?" God replies, "I will be with you." Thus we learn that *God stands and works with us in our obedience.*

When God gives the Passover as a memorial of their liberation (see Ex 12:1-36), we not only recall the importance of ritual and symbol; but we also learn that *obedience is a communal as well as an individual call.*

After 40 years of wandering in the desert, Moses finally leads the people to their Promised Land. In his final sermon to them, he lays before them that *obedience and disobedience to God are choices, and each of those choices have consequences: obedience means life and prosperity while disobedience will lead to death and doom* (see Dt 30:15-20).

Jeremiah, like so many of the prophets, reminds us that *obedience can be painful* (see Jer 1:4-10; 20:7-13; 29:10-15). In receiving his ministry, he must overcome his feelings of weakness and inadequacy ("I know not how to speak; am too young"). He's given a tough task: rooting up and tearing down, destroying and demolishing, building and planting. At one point he feels "duped" and overwhelmed, abandoned by friends, and denounced by his enemies. He even wishes that he had never been born; yet he also feels his calling like a fire in his bones.

Confronted with the mystery of his suffering, Job must accept the limits of his human understanding and yield to God's unhindered purpose (see Job 42:1-6). We learn from him that *obedience requires humility.*

As the poor and humble Christ (see Phil 2:1-11) who though in the form of God "emptied himself and took the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of men" and "humbled himself, obediently accepting even...death on a cross," Jesus is ultimately exalted by God. As his followers, then, *our obedience is modeled on Christ's obedience.*

It is also helpful to recall that Jesus was *formed in obedience* by the examples of his parents, Mary and Joseph, who in being obedient to God's call for them to play their roles in salvation history had to *work through their fears and uncertainties* (see Lk 1:26-38 and Mt 1:18-25; 2:13-15). They carried out God's will.

Just prior to beginning his public ministry, Jesus is led by the Spirit to be tested in the desert (see, e.g. Mt 4:1-11). Provoked by the devil to rely not on God but on his own power to turn stone into bread, behave recklessly, and seek worldly power; he resists each temptation. Here we discover that *obedience means freely surrendering our own power to the power of God.*

Early in Jesus' ministry, we also see that *obedience is intimately related to authority, both internal and external*. Confronted by a demon-possessed man in the synagogue, Jesus amazes those around him with his demonstration of an inner rather than externally-bestowed or derivative authority to preach and heal, like the scribes (see Mark 1:21-39). Jesus' authority comes from within, and he is obedient to the One who has given him that power, one that holds sway over evil spirits as well as illness.

When after a long and fruitless night fishing, those who would become his disciples are exhorted by Jesus to put out into deeper water and lower their nets, Peter protests but eventually heeds what Jesus says and is amply rewarded with a huge catch. Peter acknowledges his sinfulness and tries to keep his distance, but Jesus tells him: "Do not be afraid" (Lk 5:1-11). Here we observe that *obedience sometimes means trying things that we doubt will work*. In following the one who has nowhere to lay his head and challenges his disciples to reorder their allegiances and other relationships (see (Mt 8:18-22; 10:37-42) we also discover that *obedience sometimes requires itinerancy*.

We follow the one who knew that in order for a grain of wheat to bear fruit it had to fall to the earth and die (see Jn 12:20-36) and who struggled with obedience as a bitter cup that he would rather have pass from him but was ultimately willing to accept it as his Father's will (see Lk 22:39-46). Jesus shows us that *obedience means dying to ourselves for the sake of the mission God has given us, even when it requires suffering and doing things we would rather avoid*.

### Obedience in the *Testament* and the *Rule*

St. Francis of Assisi, who sought to pattern his life closely on that of Jesus, viewed obedience through an evangelical and Christological lens. In his *Testament*, he wrote that "the Most High himself revealed to me that I should live according to the pattern of the Holy Gospel" (14). His insistence on showing "reverence, love and honor" to priests and to look past their sins was rooted in their unique role in the Eucharist and administering the Body and Blood of Christ (6-10). In obedience to poverty, he insisted that the friars seek no special favors from the Roman Curia (25).

Francis' obedience to his superiors was similarly simple and direct: "I am determined to obey the Minister General of the Order and the guardian whom he sees fit to give me. I want to be captive in his hands so that I cannot travel about or do anything against his command or desire, because he is my superior" (27-28). He insisted that his brothers obey his *Testament* and their *Rule* without gloss (34-39).

The *Rule* of 1223 begins by noting that evangelical counsels, including obedience, are the way in which we live our first rule, i.e. “the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ” (I:1). Every friar owes obedience to the Pope and to Francis and his successors as General Minister (I:2). The friars are exhorted to strictly observe a variety of norms (praying the Office, working, not to receive money or coins, seeking alms, etc.) (II-VII).

Francis’ own views in the *Testament* regarding obedience to religious superiors are echoed in the *Rule*, which admonish: “Let all the brothers be bound to have always one of the brothers of this Order as minister general and servant of the whole fraternity and let them be strictly bound to obey him” (VIII:1). Brothers may not publicly preach without the necessary examination and approval of the General Minister as well as the permission of the local bishop (IX).

At the same time, the *Rule* is also clear that those who are chosen ministers are servants and are to visit the brothers and “humbly and charitably” correct them, “not commanding them anything that is against their soul or our Rule” (X:1). However, it also urges that the friars also remember that “for God’s sake, they have renounced their own wills” and are strictly commanded to “obey their ministers in everything they have promised the Lord to observe and which is not against their soul or our Rule” (X:2). Just as our life of obedience is rooted in humility of Christ, we should heed his exhortations to have patience in difficulty and infirmity and to love our enemies, pray for our persecutors, persevere in fidelity, etc. (X:9-11).

### Obedience in the Era of Vatican II

While it is essential to root our life in obedience as expressed in our *Capuchin Constitutions* in the scriptures and our Franciscan traditions, it is also important to do so in the life of the Church. In the Second Vatican Council’s 1965 Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life (*Perfectae Caritatis*), religious life is fundamentally understood as an expression of a Christian’s desire to follow the poor, chaste and obedient Christ more freely and closely through the observance of the evangelical counsels (1).

According to *Perfectae Caritatis*, the adaptation and renewal of religious life rests on several important principles (2):

- (a) The highest rule is to follow Christ as set forth in the gospels.
- (b) The Church benefits from the “particular characteristics and work” of each religious institute.

- (c) "All institutes should share in the life of the Church."
- (d) All members of institutes should be aware of the social conditions of their times and the needs of the Church.
- (e) Following Christ through the evangelical counsels requires conversion and renewal, and these must take priority over even ministry.

The lifestyle (community, prayer, work) and governance of religious communities should be "suitably adapted everywhere" according to the circumstances of the members, the nature of the institute, the demands of the apostolate, and social and economic conditions (3). All of the members of an institute must cooperate for renewal and adaptation to be effective (4).

Consecrated life is rooted in baptism and calls one to a singular commitment to God in Christ, and this requires that we develop a spirit of contemplation to focus on him and the demands of the Gospel (5). It is a response in love to a call from God and is nourished by prayer, particularly in the Church's liturgical life and the Eucharist (6). Our apostolic life is rooted in our relationship with Christ and must be adapted to our times and circumstances.

"In professing obedience," *Perfectae Caritatis* insists:

[R]eligious offer the full surrender of their own will as a sacrifice of themselves to God and are so united permanently and securely to God's salvific will....Religious, therefore, in the spirit of faith and love for the divine will should humbly obey their superiors according to their rules and constitutions. Realizing that they are contributing to building up the body of Christ according to God's plan, they should use both the forces of their intellect and will and the gifts of nature and grace to execute the commands and fulfill the duties entrusted to them. In this way religious obedience, far from lessening the dignity of the human person, by extending the freedom of the sons of God, leads it to maturity (14).

Religious superiors should exercise their ministry as a trust from God and should fulfill their offices in loving service in response to God's will. Consequently, they should respect their [brothers'] human dignity, including the right to conscience, so that they may be brought into "an active and responsible obedience" (Id.). Further, they "should gladly listen to their subjects and foster harmony among them for the good of the

community and the Church, provided that thereby their own authority to decide and command what has to be done is not harmed” (Id.).

Obedience, according to *Perfectae Caritatis*, is not only something that religious communities observe internally but also externally in their relationships with the wider Church. This has particular resonance today, as many are engaged in pastoral planning or otherwise assessing their apostolates:

Religious communities should continue to maintain and fulfill the ministries proper to them. In addition, after considering the needs of the Universal Church and individual dioceses, they should adapt them to the requirements of time and place, employing appropriate and even new programs and abandoning those works which today are less relevant to the spirit and authentic nature of the community. The missionary spirit must under all circumstances be preserved in religious communities...adapted, accordingly, as the nature of the each community permits, to modern conditions so that the preaching of the Gospel may be carried out more effectively (20).

More recently, the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL) issued an instruction in 2008 entitled, *The Service of Authority and Obedience* (2008). It defines a religious community as “a communion of consecrated persons who profess to seek together and carry out God’s will” (1). It was written to balance the value of the individual and the dignity of the human person with a spirituality of communion and the needs for self-realization and personal well-being with the needs and mission of the community (3).

According to the instruction, obedience flows from a humble listening to God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit), self and others (5), as well as the experiences of our lives, the charisms of our founders, the signs of the times, etc. (9). Christian obedience is modeled and founded on the obedience of Jesus to the Father (8) and something that we learn day-by-day (10).

As is noted in the *Rule* and *Perfectae Caritatis*, religious superiors are first of all servants, guides and fellow pilgrims in the communal search for God’s will (12). Consequently, theirs is first of all a *spiritual* task that is rooted in prayer and respectful of human dignity (13). They inspire hope and courage, even in the face of difficulties; are dedicated to preserving and enlivening their communities’ respective charisms; encourage the *sensus fidei* of their members along with *sentire cum Ecclesia*, “thinking

with the Church;” and are committed to their own ongoing formation and conversion (Id.).

Further, those chosen to serve as leaders are to model obedience for the rest of the community (14) and the call for religious to fulfill their mission to witness to the freedom of placing our will and lives in the hands of God and in service to God and others (15). “Superiors, in union with the persons entrusted to them,” the instruction reminds us, “are called to build a fraternal community in Christ in which God is sought and loved above things, in order to fulfill God's redemptive plan” (17). Listening, dialog, collaboration, patient discernment and the willingness to make decisions (even difficult ones) are all necessary (18-20).

Mission, authority, service and obedience are interrelated, the instruction notes; and thus those in authority are able to respect autonomy in the service of communion; promote diversity in a spirit of communion; devote themselves to both the internal and external lives of the communities they serve; balance the need for mercy and forgiveness with the demands of justice; and promote collaboration with the laity (23-26).

While preserving the absolute necessity to obey one's conscience, the instruction insists that religious must discern long and hard and with others (including their superiors) before choosing to disobey what they have been asked or commanded to do by their superiors, lest “conscience” simply be a cover for their own desires and preferences (27). The exercise of authority is not easy, and those called to serve their communities as superiors can easily become frustrated, dispirited and cynical; so it is important for them to pray and be prayed for (28). Our pilgrimage of life is a daily opportunity to grow in the school of obedience (29).

With that substantial foundation, then, let us consider what our *Capuchin Constitutions*, approved at the General Chapter of 2012 and promulgated late last year, have to say about our vow of obedience.

#### Obedience in the *Capuchin Constitutions*

While Chapter X of our *Constitutions* is explicitly dedicated to “Our Life in Obedience,” it is important to note that from the very first chapter, ministers are called to “seek the most suitable ways for the brothers to live their lives and conduct their apostolates, even in a variety of forms, according to different regions and cultures and the needs of times and places;” and that genuine pluriformity “will “always safeguard the unity of the same genuine spirit, and are based on fraternal communion and obedience to superiors” (7). The brothers should “love and obey” the General Minister and show

similar love and “active and responsible obedience” the other ministers given to the fraternity as pastors” (12).

In Chapter II, “The Vocation to Our Life and the Formation of the Brothers,” our *Constitutions* remind us that: “The gospel counsel of obedience, promised in a spirit of faith and love in order to follow Christ, who was obedient even to death, obliges us to submit our will, for God’s sake, to legitimate superiors whenever they command according to our Constitutions ‘anything that is not contrary to conscience and the Rule’” (II: 22).

In Chapter V: “Our Manner of Working”—a particularly important chapter to reflect upon these days as we prepare for PCO VIII—we are exhorted: “Let the work of every brother be an expression of the entire fraternity and manifest communion in pursuit of its goals. Therefore, the brothers should take on and carry out their activities after suitable communal discernment and with the blessings of obedience, so that the work is always done as a mandate from the fraternity” (78).

The brothers should appreciate and, where appropriate, willingly apply themselves to manual work, “both for their own growth and for the common good, especially when fraternal charity or obedience demands it” (82). In assigning ministries and offices, the ministers and guardians should take into account individual brothers’ skills and aptitudes and not too easily remove them from areas of expertise “as long as fraternal life is safeguarded and all are open to obedience” (83). Finally, in Chapter IX: “Our Apostolic Life,” we are reminded that that life is rooted “in obedience to the Spirit of the Lord and His holy activity” (146).

Chapter X of our *Constitutions*, “Our Life in Obedience,” grounds our observance of this evangelical counsel in the examples of Jesus Christ and St. Francis (158). Jesus, “accepting the condition of a servant, became obedient even to death on a cross” (Id.). He revealed to us that “human freedom is a journey of obedience to the Father’s will and that obedience is a journey of progressive attainment of true freedom” (Id.).

The Church herself, listening to Christ and attentive to the action of the Holy Spirit, is obedient to God’s plan and will. For his part, Francis gave himself totally to Christ and saw in obedience the perfect expression of poverty and “the foundation of communion with God and the Church, with the brothers and with all men and women, and with every creature” (Id.). Obedience, then, is a relationship of *mutuality and communion*: the ministers and guardians spending themselves in service to the brothers and the brothers submitting to them in faith.

The ministers, following the examples of Jesus and Francis, should humbly serve the brothers, “remembering that they themselves have to obey God and the brothers” and that the opportunity to serve them is a grace, “especially in times of difficulty or misunderstanding”(159). They should exercise their offices with diligence, relying on *dialog and discernment in decision-making*. *Open-mindedness, adequate information, collaboration and reliance upon the varied gifts of the brothers* are all important; but everyone should also remember that “it is the responsibility of the superiors, in virtue of their office, to make the final decision” (160).

The ministers and guardians should work to ensure that our fraternities cultivate obedience to God and mission by promoting “quality prayer time and...daily fidelity to it; providing “appropriate instruction and religious formation;” and to build up communion with the broader Church (161). Obedience should be *the fruit of discernment and freedom* and should be imposed only when “charity and necessity” demand it (162).

There are many ways, our *Constitutions* note, to foster obedience: admonition, encouragement, correction; but also kindness, honesty, charity and hospitality (163). Visitation can foster obedience through dialog and discussion, action in response to the signs and needs of the times, adaptability, openness and collaboration (164).

Obedience is ultimately a sacrifice of the will and an offering of the friars for the sake of communion (165). The brothers should treat their ministers with charity, “ready to obey them in a spirit of faith” and offering “their own judgments and initiatives to them for the common good” (166).

While obedience respects the rights and fundamental human dignity of the individual friar, our *Constitutions* also note that it does so with limits: “Whatever good a brother may do with a right intention and by his own choice is also true obedience, when he knows that this is not contrary to the will of the superior or detrimental to fraternal unity” (Id.). In addition, even when after fraternal dialog “a brother sees something better and more useful than what a minister commands,” he is urged to “sacrifice his judgment willingly and strive to follow that of the minister. This, in fact, is the true and loving obedience that satisfies God and neighbor” (Id.).

The *Constitutions* recognize that, in the end, the proverbial buck has to stop somewhere: “It is the responsibility of the superiors to decide and direct what must be done, after willingly considering everything with the brothers” (Id.). Brothers who, “because of personal reasons or external circumstances,” cannot live the Rule should be able to confidently approach the minister for “advice, encouragement, and remedies” and be accepted and helped “with fraternal charity and concern” (167). Finally, we can foster a

spirit of obedience in our fraternity by fostering mutual respect and charity, trusting in God and persevering in our vocations (168).

### A Personal Reflection on Obedience

After six years as Provincial Minister and a previous six as a member of the Provincial Council, I suppose that there is a lot that I could say about how I have observed the vow of obedience being lived (or not) in the Province! However, it would probably be more beneficial to instead reflect on how I most recently experienced it—not as Provincial Minister but from “the other side,” i.e. the side from which we have all dealt with obedience at one time or another as friars.

Following the promulgation of our Pastoral Plan in 2013 and as we entered the final year of the past triennium, fatigue and I suppose a deeper need to plan for my future caused me to start to think about my sabbatical and future ministry. The pastoral planning process and conversations with several friars had identified a number of needs in the Province. I was looking forward to a return to an external ministry with fewer worries about personnel and other administrative work, perhaps even in a mission of the Province that would take me “out of the mainstream” for a while.

It was with some fear and trepidation, then, that over the final six to nine months leading up to Chapter I heard a number of the Provincial Council members suggest that I would be a good person to succeed Mark Joseph Costello as Director of Post-Novitiate and Ministry Formation after his more than two decades of dedicated ministry in Chicago. Wanting to be the good Provincial and practice what I preached, when the topic was first broached I assured the brothers on the PC that I was open to whatever the needs of the Province were.

When I got away from the meetings, however, I struggled a bit with the idea. It did not seem to fit very well with what my own hopes and dreams were; and there were some other areas of ministry that I thought could better utilize my talents. Further, I had no past desire and felt no particular aptitude to work in initial formation. I also had to admit that I still carried some “baggage” from my years in initial formation. (I was rejected the first time I applied to be a postulant!) While I knew our younger brothers a little from visits to Chicago, various events, and reviewing dozens of evaluations over the years, I worried about how I would be able to relate to the next generation and live with them on a daily basis.

I discussed these concerns with my spiritual director and counselor; and they urged me to be open to the Spirit and honest about where I felt I was at this stage of my life. In

the months leading up to Chapter I talked about it some more with the Provincial Council. In the end I relied upon what might be called the “Five D’s” of obedience:

- Prayerful *discernment* in light of the Pastoral Plan, the needs of the Province, and my personal situation and needs;
- Ongoing *dialog* with the Provincial Council.
- Patiently allowing a *decision* by my successor, Michael Sullivan, and the new Provincial Council rather than trying to “punch my own ticket” and create a ministry scenario for myself before leaving office.
- Humbly *deferring* to their judgment and submitting to their decision.
- *Dedicating* myself to carrying out that decision in the faith that it represented God’s will and preparing myself to fulfill the ministry entrusted to me to the best of my ability.

So when Michael Sullivan told me at Chapter shortly after his election that it had been decided that I would move into formation work it did not necessarily take away my insecurities; but it was no problem. I was ready to say yes and do so with some peace of mind. That sense of peace has grown during the time of my fall sabbatical at Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington; and I am ready to serve as best I can in Chicago.

—John Celichowski, OFM Cap.