

# Obedience in Community

## Part 3 of a Lenten Retreat

### Saint Vladimir Seminary

### First Week of Great Lent 2020

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

On several occasions during my pilgrimages to the Holy Mountain, I occasioned to become lost, which is not difficult to do for an American with little experience of the complicated path system of Athos. It becomes important especially towards the evening since the large monasteries will lock their gates at a certain point. On two of those occasions, I relied on some four-legged creatures who are often to be found at each monastery. From my notes on the first such occasion, I recalled that: "A little dog led me up from the sea to the entrance of Saint Paul's Monastery and then continued along another path." On another occasion, I was walking towards the Great Lavra when suddenly I heard a loud crash of branches and leave coming from around the bend. When I turned the corner, I came upon a dog, who seemed to appear out of nowhere. I wondered from the sound of crashing whether perhaps he had fallen from heaven. In any case, my athonite canine companion walked ahead of me for a while and seemed to know the way.

After some time, he disappeared ahead of me and I continued on my own. Later, I came to a fork in the path and was unsure which way to go. There were no sign posts to lead me in the right direction. I looked to the left and to the right. All of a sudden, from the path on the right, my friend returned,

as if to say, “Come this way.” So I obediently followed and was glad to see that this was indeed the correct path to have taken.

One of the most difficult spiritual principles to grasp and implement is that of obedience. Obedience is often relegated in our minds to monasticism and to the concept of a regimented system where the superior directs his subordinates and thereby a strict order and efficient functioning of the system is implemented. But obedience in the Church has a much deeper meaning and is a concept that is, in fact, more far-reaching and more salutary than the narrow understanding we find in the world. It is an ascetical practice that, like my story of the dog, leads us on the right path.

Today, I would like to speak a little about the asceticism of obedience, particularly as it is lived out within the community, first by looking this morning at the concept in the context of the monastic life, but then, this afternoon, at the application of obedience in communal contexts that all of us may be more familiar with, such as our families or the seminary.

The fourth step of the Ladder of Divine Ascent of Saint John Climacus is devoted to *blessed and ever-memorable obedience*. In the third paragraph of this fourth step, Saint John offers the following descriptions of obedience. I say description rather than definition because, once again, we are reminded that the things of the spirit, such as obedience or its sister, humility, are more easily described than they are defined, since very few definitions can present the fullness of understanding of these concepts. As another John, the Golden-Tongued one, reminds us: “The gifts of God are so great that people can scarcely ever believe it. And it is not surprising if

they cannot understand them till they know it by experience.”<sup>1</sup> Saint John of the Ladder adds that anyone trying to describe love, humility, purity, enlightenment, or the fear of God using words alone is like a man who tried to give the idea of the sweetness of honey to people who have never tasted it. With that in mind, he nevertheless uses the following words to attempt to speak concerning obedience:

*Obedience is absolute renunciation of our own life, clearly expressed in our bodily actions.  
Or, conversely, obedience is the mortification of the limbs, while the mind remains alive.  
Obedience is unquestioning movement, voluntary death, a life free of curiosity,  
carefree danger,  
unprepared defense before God,  
fearlessness of death,  
a safe voyage,  
a sleeper's progress.  
Obedience is the tomb of the will and the resurrection of humility.*

But how does one actually experience the tomb of the will and the resurrection of humility? How does one receive these gloriously poetic benefits of obedience?

Just as humility does not mean simply allowing other people to walk all over me, so obedience is not as simple as taking orders from my superior, whether this be an Abbot or Abbess, a bishop, a parent, or a seminary administrator. Obedience is the work of all Christians but it requires an exercise of the heart, the development of a certain attitude of the heart, one that crucifies the will in order to find the will of God which brings life.

---

<sup>1</sup> On I Timothy, *Homily 4*.

As an illustration, I will share the following story from the life of Abba Pachomius the Great, who was the founder of cenobitic monasticism. It came about towards the end of his life that he needed to choose a successor and he appointed Saint Dositheos, who was a wonderworker, but he didn't have the gift of the word. In those days it was very important to have the gift of the word because they did not have any books. So the monks received a portion of the word of teaching in the meetings, the synaxis, they held. So even though Saint Dositheos was a wonderworker, he did not have the gift of the word, so Pachomius dismissed him and appointed Saint Theodore in his place. This is where our story begins:

As we have already said, Theodore was appointed to be, after Pachomius, a comforter of souls for the brothers. After seven years he was subjected to a great trial by the Lord [who wanted] to test him. As Abba Pachomius was ill, some ancient fathers and heads of the monasteries gathered around him and said, 'Perhaps the Lord will visit our father suddenly and we will become wretched. Since none of us knows his whole manner of life as you do, be persuaded and promise us that should this happen, you will not refuse to become his successor, so that the brothers will not be scattered.' After much asking to be excused from this and not getting their agreement, he gave them his word.

So already we see that Theodore is being obedient to the brothers who want him to take over as Abbot should Pachomius the Great suddenly die.

Later, when Abba Pachomius heard this, it did not please him. He called all the leaders of the monasteries, Sourous, Psentaesi, Paphnouti, Cornelios, and Theodore Himself. And he said to them, 'Let each of you tell his shortcomings. I will tell mine first: I neglect to visit and console the brothers because I am away working the fields

on the island during the day to feed the brothers (for their was a famine at that time). And you, Theodore, tell yours!’ And he said, ‘For seven years now I have been sent by you to visit the monasteries and to settle everything as you do. And never did it come up to my heart that “after him, I will be in charge”. But now I am plagued by this thought and I have not been able to conquer it yet.’ Abba Pachomius told him: ‘Very well! You no longer have authority over anything. Withdraw to yourself somewhere and pray that the Lord will forgive you.’

Here we notice here that this is quite a severe punishment on poor Theodore. However, note that Pachomius imposed this by first confessing his own faults to all the brothers who had gathered. In this way, he was giving the example himself. One monk on the Holy Mountain told me concerning spiritual fatherhood: “You have to have humility and realize that you are limited in how you can help people. People can grow spiritually through their own experience of sin and repentance. The spiritual father must be like the prodigal son, and continually repent himself. He cannot be like the older brother, that is, feel that he has reached a stage where he can judge or correct others. This is the mistake of a lot of priests.”

And Theodore, for his part, although it was a difficult thing to take on, voluntary accepted the word of his father, whom he loved. As we read further:

So [Theodore] rose up in very great grief and went to a quiet cell to mourn with weeping and great sorrow. He was afraid that God had turned away his face from him because he had grieved his servant. Indeed, he held [Pachomius] to be perfect and invincible.

He spent two years in that punishment. The great brothers encouraged him often, because in their eyes what had occurred was

not a sin but only the thought, 'after him it will be me'. Pachomius had punished him because he wanted to make him perfect and completely free of ambition for power. And before withdrawing, Theodore said to him, 'I have some business to wind up in Thmousons; send me and I will come back quickly'. And [Pachomius] sent him alone. And [Theodore] wept as he went, saying, 'Lord, do I still have repentance?'

And when he reached the ferry at Chenoboskion, he boarded it. There were two old men in the boat. One of them started praising Theodore, saying to the other, 'Blessed is this monk'. The other replied, 'Why do you call the wretched man blessed? He has by no means reached the measure of the basket.' The first one said, 'What is its measure?' He began to say, 'There was a certain farmer who was so difficult that it was rare for anyone to be able to spend a whole year with him. But someone got up, came to him, and said, "I will work with you." He said to him, "Very well!" On watering day he said, "Let us draw water by night to irrigate the field, and not by day." The man replied, "This is wisdom. This way no one, either beast or man or any other creature, will drink from our ditch." And when he was going to plough, he said to him, "Let us sow our field in this fashion: one furrow of wheat, another of barley, another of lentils, another of chick-peas, and so on in this fashion." He replied, "This is intelligence greater than the first. For our sowing will be found lovely because of the variety of flowers." And when the green crop was come, yet without seed, [the farmer] said to him, "Let us go and reap!" The other replied, "Let us go. The profit from the chaff is great, for it is both green and good." And after threshing, he told him to bring the basket, "Let us transfer the chaff within with the measure." The other replied, "This shows more sense than the first decisions, because even the chaff is preserved." And after the farmer had tested the man in all these and found him obedient without questioning, he told him, "You shall no longer be my hired servant, but my son and heir." Well then, if this one has also measured with the basket, he can deserve to be called blessed.'

The other old man said to the first man, 'Since you told the parable, tell also its interpretation.' He said, 'The farmer is God; he is difficult since he commands us to carry the cross and not to indulge the will of our heart. Now, Pachomius, this man's father, by obeying God in all

things became well pleasing in his sigh. And if this man too is steadfast after his likeness, then he will be his heir.’

Hearing this, Theodore was strengthened, marvelling at what was said and at those who said it. And stepping off the boat, he saw them no more, for they were angels from God who had appeared to him this way to correct and console him, as Abba Pachomius testified later. After he had come to the monastery and returned to Phbow, Theodore pondered by himself what he had heard and was comforted.

He was grieved, not because he had been punished, but because he had ever received such a thought; especially when he had heard Abba Pachomius saying, ‘Just as a corpse does not say to other corpses, “I am your head”, so too I never considered that I am the father of the brethren. God himself alone is their father.’”

So there are several things to highlight in this story:

- Theodore is not blindly obedient but goes through a process of crucifying his own will.
- Pachomius himself understands that he must be obedient as well.
- Obedience is not just the cutting off of our will but is rather the revelation of a great gift from God, who shows us the most excellent way of humility through his very obedience.

Christ came into the world, not in His own name, but in the Name of the Father (John 15:20). He voluntarily accepted to fulfill in the most perfect way of the Father, even unto the death upon the Cross. And by His humble obedience unto death, by His voluntary descent into Hell, He was raised up and exalted above every principality and power, and gave the gift of eternal life to all of mankind.

This is the path of obedience, which is a journey of descent and ascent. As saint Paul writes in the fourth chapter of his letter to the Ephesians:

When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men<sup>9</sup> (Now that he ascended, what is it but that he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth)<sup>10</sup> He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens, that he might fill all things.)

And this path of descent and ascent is the one we are all called to take: our will is cut off (descent) and replaced with humility (resurrection and ascent), not to do the bidding of another human being, but to find the will of God. Archimandrite Sophrony writes that “the quest to know God’s will is the most important in man’s life, since when he happens on the path of the will of God he becomes incorporate with divine, eternal life.”<sup>2</sup> So the discerning of God’s will is truly a lofty goal.

The Commandments are the most basic way of finding God’s will. Saint Philotheos of Sinai reminds us: “As Satan, desiring to prevent God’s will, that is, the commandments from being done, opposes God and through us fights against Him by trying to hinder their fulfillment, so too God, desiring that we fulfill His holy will, that is, as I have said, the Divine life-giving commandments, through us defeats by a movement of His hand the pernicious intent of the evil one...”<sup>3</sup>

But obedience to the commandments is also discerned within a community. is one of the most difficult ascetical practices to follow, because if you do

---

<sup>2</sup> Archimandrite Sophrony, *Saint Silouan the Athonite*, page 77.

<sup>3</sup> Forty Texts on Sobriety, 16, page 329 Writings from the Philokalia on Prayer of the Heart.



not have a disposition of obedience in your heart, you will never be able to fulfill any of the other ascetical disciplines that the Church offers. When I was at the monastery of Iveron, the Abbot there said to me concerning obedience, that a monk is obedient to one person, that is, the Abbot. But he added that the Abbot is obedient to 40 people, that is, all the monks of his brotherhood.

The patristic literature is full of examples of good spiritual fathers, and usually they are the ones who, rather than insisting on their own will, give in to the pride of those who fail to listen. In the life of Saint Silouan, we are told of Igumen Missail who, if someone objected to a request he made or an obedience he imposed, would say, “all right, do as you will”. And Staretz Silouan, if he encountered resistance, would fall silent.

Father Sophrony explains: “Why is this so? On the one hand because the Spirit of God suffers neither violence nor argument. On the other, because the will of God is too great a matter to be contained or receive perfect expression in the words of a spiritual father. Only the man who accepts these words of his spiritual father with faith as being pleasing to God, who does not submit them to his own judgment, or argue about them, has found the true path, because he genuinely believes that ‘with God all things are possible’ (Matthew 19:26).<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Archimandrite Sophrony, *Saint Silouan the Athonite*, page 81.