

Obedience and Love in Community

Part 4 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.

We come to the final talk of this Lenten retreat for the First Week of Great Lent. I thank you for your patience as I have taken you on a somewhat circuitous journey through some topics that I have found to be instructive in my own life and which I have illustrated in sometimes curious ways with stories from my own pilgrimages, both physical and literary. I am afraid that I will not leave you with any clearer conclusion for this session.

However, I hope that I will leave with a word of encouragement and comfort in knowing that your own journey -- with all its ups and downs, all its successes and failures, its times of closeness to God and times of distance from God, its moments of peace and of strife within your own families -- is not unique in its essence, even if it is different in its details. It is, in fact, our common journey towards God which we all must accomplish to the best of our ability in this short time we have on this earth.

This morning, I shared the story of Saint Theodore from the life of Saint Pachomius. It was a long story with a short conclusion, that is, that obedience is an attitude of the heart which crucifies the fallen mind in its search for the will of God. In obedience, we become wise by becoming foolish, as Saint Paul says: *If anyone among you seem to be wise in this*

*world, let him become a fool that he may become wise.*¹ Archimandrite Sophrony writes:

“In the vast sea which is the life of the Church the true tradition of the Spirit flows like a thin pure stream, and he who would be in this stream must renounce argument. When anything of self is introduced the waters no longer run clear, for God’s supreme wisdom and truth are the opposite of human wisdom and truth. Such renunciation appears intolerable, insane even, to the self-willed, but the man who is not afraid to ‘become a fool’ has found true life and true wisdom.”

Saint John of the Ladder further writes:

“Those who wish to learn the will of the Lord must first mortify their own will. Then, having prayed to God with faith and guileless simplicity, and having asked the fathers or even the brothers with humility of heart and no thought of doubt, they should accept their advice as from the mouth of God, even if their advice is contrary to their own view, and even if those consulted are not very spiritual. For God is not unjust, and will not lead astray souls who with faith and innocence humbly submit to the advice and judgment of their neighbour. Even if those who were asked were brute beasts, yet he who speaks is the Immaterial and Invisible One.” (26:111)

Our life of obedience is a sometimes surprising one: one can choose one of two paths on an Athonite road by following the guidance of a brute beast or one can be lead back to the monastery of their repentance by observing the struggles of elderly monastics in a foreign land. In this understanding, there is a great difference between discipline and obedience. Discipline is a human thing (one human will submitting to another human will in order to organize life) but obedience is a mystery of the Church. And it is our choice

¹ I Corinthians 3:18

to approach our brother or sister with an attitude of rebellion to authority to another human will, or in humble obedience to the will of God.

If we trust our own fallen will, this brings division and estrangement from God. Rather, we look for the will of God which unites all things. And this can be discerned not only through obedience to those who are above us, but also to those who are the least among us. In a paradoxical way, the will of God can also be found by, in fact, exercising our own will. On one of my visits to the Holy Mountain, I wanted to ask the elders what I should say to someone who wants to discern the will of God in their life, for example, whether they should become a monastic or get married. One elder's answer was very helpful to me. He said:

“Sometimes it's not a matter of us doing God's will, but of God doing our will. If we are presented with a choice in life, for example, to become a monk or to be married, it is better to make a choice, that is, to exercise our will, but then to persevere in the choice that we have made. That perseverance then becomes the will of God.”

All of this: discerning the will of God, being obedient, is not an easy task. And we might rightly ask: how does all this apply to those of us who are not living in the monastery?

Saint John of the Ladder addresses the question of how to live the principles of the monastic life in the world:

Some people living carelessly in the world have asked me: ‘We have wives and are beset with social cares, and how can we lead the solitary life?’ I replied to them: ‘Do all the good you can; do not speak evil of anyone; do not steal from anyone; do not lie to anyone; do not be arrogant towards anyone; do not hate anyone; do not be absent from the divine services; be compassionate to the needy; do not offend anyone; do not wreck another man’s domestic happiness, and be content with what your own wives can give you. If you behave in this way, you will not be far from the Kingdom of Heaven. (Step 1:21)

All of these things speak of obedience: obedience that leads to Christ and to the love of God. Archimandrite Zacharias offers some perhaps more contemporary word about this:

“Almost all the principles of monasticism are also valid in family life. In monasticism, we speak of the ‘first love,’ the ‘first grace’. It is the same also in marriage. In the first period there is a lot of love and happiness. However, when the accounts billow and our children deprive us from sleep, when generally life becomes more demanding, let us remember that we must continue with the same faithfulness and love which God gave us when we began our life together. ‘Remember thy first love.’ If we continue to apply the lessons that we learned in the beginning, the ending will be blessed.”

For parents, he offers the following practical advice:

“Each spouse must learn not to accept a negative thought for the other, but to compete as we do in the monastery in the mystery of obedience, considering the other as always more important. So whatever the Abbot says, we answer “Yes, your blessing!” I accept the will of the other, because the other is more important than myself. Therefore, finally, I learn to accept the will of the ultimate Other, the will of the Saviour Christ. If couples compete as we do in a monastery, each striving to do the will of the other more perfectly, then their life will be enriched and established in the antechamber of paradise. In the monastery, everyone who has learned this competition, to humble oneself more before the other, is spiritually reborn. The same occurs also in a family. We don’t accept an evil thought for another member,

but compete to do the will of the others and to humble ourselves before them.”

This sacred competition is something that we can begin to practice during these days of the Great and Holy Fast. To the competition of fasting, praying, and repenting, must be added the competition of striving to outdo the other in humility and obedience. This means, conversely, that we must also strive to avoid the temptation of dominating others, whether it is our spouse, our children, or our fellow seminarian. Lust for power is always a temptation, as we continually remind ourselves in the prayer of St Ephrem.

And that lust for power is a temptation not only to those who have positions of authority, but for us in our families. If I don't humble myself before my spouse, then it is more likely that I will then begin to exert my will over him or her. If I don't give an example of obedience to my own children, then I will deprive them of the ability to learn the life-giving obedience to God that I hope to instill in them. This is a long struggle and one that takes our entire lifetime. Fr Zacharias provides the example of his own parents as encouragement:

“I observed this even within my own family. For the first eighteen years the married life of my parents was difficult. With time they became more patient with each other; they found a way and made a new beginning, and they lived another thirty years with great peace and love. They died in the fullness of days. This does not mean that they just had many days but that the days they had were full. When, in the biographies of the saints, it is said that they died ‘in the fullness of days’ it means that every day brought the fullness of grace and the peace of God.”

“It is worthwhile, therefore, to live patiently for eighteen years, in order to live another thirty years full of joy, completely fulfilled and to arrive at a wondrous end

Perfect love and perfect humility are beyond our reach. As Archimandrite Sophrony writes: In order to hear the word of God speaking in his heart, a man must have a still heart that is filled with constant prayer. “But [further] in order to hear the Divine voice more surely in himself, man must cast off his own will and be prepared for every sacrifice, like Abraham – even like Christ Himself, Who, in the words of Saint Paul ‘became obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross.’ (Phil. 2:8)²

So obedience is necessary, not as a requirement for the proper functioning of an institution, but as a sacrifice which allows us to enter into the Tradition of the Church in a real and profound way, that is, to imitate our Lord Himself, and thereby enter into the love of God more fully.

I will end this final talk with another extended passage from one of the fathers whom I had the blessing to meet on the Holy Mountain, Archimandrite Vasileios. Here, he speaks of the falling asleep of one of the monks in his monastery:

“I remember the repose of Father Hesychios, some six years ago. I saw him before he died. I saw him as he was dying, wasting away from cancer and becoming bare bones, yet having no complaint about it, nor about anything else in his life. He was able to look at everything peacefully, to laugh and have a sense of humour, to accept death joyfully as it approached. I saw him thanking everyone for the care they had given him; he beseeched us at on point to cease our

² Archimandrite Sophrony, *Saint Silouan the Athonite*, page 78.

efforts for there was no longer a need. Others had come to take him – they were already in the room. His face shone. He spoke in silence. He had begun to speak the language and live the life of the age to come. We wanted him to say something to us and he spoke in his own way:

‘Now leave me be. I thank you for what you have done for me; I don’t need anything anymore. I am still with you but in another way; speak to me no more. The hour has come. The Master of the house has arrived; life has begun. The life which exists as a seed in this temporary life is now blossoming into uncreated light.’

“Saint Isaac the Syrian wrote that ‘everything that has humility is, by its nature, beautiful.’ Father Hesychios then departed but yet remained. He died and was lost to us. He disappeared into the other life, the true life, into the abundance of glory which unites us all. The room was filled with unseen light: the place was flooded with indescribable fragrance. The hearts and souls of the people gathered around could sense it. Father Hesychios could not adulterate nor betray the truth because he had no pretense when it came to himself. And he told us everything with a silence which could speak and by the resplendent joy on his face.

“Now that he has departed his silence is explained: his grace and his witness are palpable. He speaks to us continually. He did not prepare himself for it; in that difficult moment, it was someone else who spoke, just as the Lord had promised. He filled us all with the joy on his face, like the beauty of the rising and setting sun, a joy granted to him by the Panagia. He had a smile which was completely pure, and which shone all the more brightly as the end drew near. He displayed an expressive movement in his eyebrows and eyes which perhaps hearkened back to his earliest infancy when his mother had cared for him. Now at his departure another mother, the Theotokos, cared for him. He was not at all alone. He wasn’t dead or cut off from life, from consolation or from exultation. The only thing that happened was a noiseless departure, a passage on to a better and more pleasing existence. For us, his departure became an occasion for the descent of grace and comfort. It was an unexpected and inexpressible blessing, given by God through His saints.

“What the departure of Father Hesychios says to us is the same message with the Holy Mountain has given perpetually with all its existence: ‘A Beauty exists which abolishes death; a Stillness (hesychia) exists which abounds with eternal blessedness and splendour for all of us.’³

To me, this passage speaks of one thing above all; It speaks to me most directly about all the various topics I have rambled on about during these few days of retreat; it speaks to me of the goal of all our ascetical labors: our fasting, our offering of hospitality, our obedience, and our prayer; it speaks to me of what Archimandrite Zacharias calls “the one thing worth living for,” and “the one thing that can give meaning to our life.”

This one thing is love.

But the love we speak about, the love that we seek, the love that we are journeying towards in this Lenten struggle leading us to the feast of Holy Pascha is not the human and imperfect love that we all attempt to express in our own ways, as it were in a shadow. That imperfect human love is a shadow of the true and eternal love of God, which abolishes darkness, which abolishes loneliness, and which abolishes death. All of this is beautifully conveyed in the above description of the repose of Father Hesychios and it should bring comfort to all of us who must prepare ourselves for that moment as well.

I leave you with the words of Archimandrite Zacharias who writes:

³ Archimandrite Vasileios, pages 15-17.

For us, paradise is Christ. Saint Silouan says, 'If all men would repent and keep God's commandments, there would be paradise on earth, for the Kingdom of Heaven is within us. The Kingdom of Heaven is the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is the same in heaven and on earth.' Paradise begins on earth through love for God and love for our fellows. In this lies the entire wealth of eternal life, for man has been created to give eternal glory to God.

His delight is to return this glory to His image, man, who then returns greater glory to His Creator. And so we enter into this endless cycle of glorification and love, the 'divine increase' of which is man's true fulfillment, as his calling is to become the very likeness of God.⁴

⁴ Archimandrite Zacharias, *The Engraving of Christ in Man's Heart*, page 19.