

CHAPTER VIII

AUTHORITY AND OBEDIENCE IN THE CHURCH

36. The Crisis in Authority; the True Notion of Authority.

Concerned to guard and spread the divine truth and law under present-day conditions, this Holy Synod is grievously afflicted to see that there is a certain crisis of authority in the world that arises both from erroneous doctrines and lack of discipline and also at times from misunderstanding and incorrect exercise of power. This crisis is even threatening to affect some of the Church's children.¹ In accord with its duty to teach, the Council, to correct all this, wishes that the following principles, derived from the evangelical law and the Catholic tradition, be maintained and be put into practice by all the faithful, in accordance with their respective conditions.

All legitimate power comes from God (see Rm 13:1); and it has the power in God's name to bind in conscience, not because of the knowledge, prudence, or any other quality in superiors that is required in the exercise of authority, but because of God's will.² Therefore, anyone who resists a legitimate power legitimately exercising its authority resists "God's ordinance" (Rm 13:2).

37. The Origin and Nature of Authority in the Church.

All legitimate power in the Church comes from Christ, and it represents his royal power, and is ordered towards the supernatural purpose that he entrusted to his Church, namely, to extend to all the benefits of his universal redemption.

By this supernatural prerogative, authority and obedience in the Church are both elevated to a higher excellence and dignity. The exercise of authority is a human cooperation, commanded and ruled by Christ's will as the humble service rendered to brothers in order to achieve the supernatural goal of redemption willed by him. Obedience, in turn, itself pursues the same goal, both personal and social; and it has a supernatural principle, namely, the mystery of Christ the Redeemer, by whose obedience men have been made just (see Rm 5:19). The exercise of authority and of obedience, moreover, is assisted by the grace of the Holy Spirit so that it may reach its intended goal, the true freedom of the children of God, and so that the exercise of both authority and obedience may succeed in imitating the example of Christ. To all Christians of all times and of all conditions, Christ the Lord is proposed for imitation,³ whether as the Good Shepherd who came "not to be served but to serve and to give his life for the redemption of the many" (see Mt 20:28), or as the one who was "made obedient unto death" that he might save all (see Ph 2:8) and was subject to Mary and Joseph that in their authority he might acknowledge the authority of God the Father.

They are mistaken, therefore, who say that there is no power of Christ in the Church except Christ himself and his divine law; they are mistaken who teach that Christian obedience cannot be reconciled with human dignity and the rights of a free person or with the freedom of the children of God; they are mistaken who teach that certain Christians, because of special charisms or missions which they claim to have received from God, are not required to obey the ecclesiastical hierarchy which Christ instituted; they are mistaken who maintain that legitimate

authority has no right to command unless superiors have first discussed an issue with their subjects and some agreement has been reached,⁴ or that no command is legitimate unless it seems to be the best course;⁵ they are mistaken who maintain that subjects are the ones to make the final judgement on the necessity or opportuneness of things commanded for the goals and common good of the Church.

38. The Relationship between Superiors and Subjects; the Right of Free Criticism.

These principles of faith and right reason throw light on the duties and rights of both superiors and subjects in the Church of Christ.

All superiors are appointed for the good of the community and of souls, and they have no legitimate authority which does not have its origin in Christ and is not exercised according to what he has established. In exercising their power, therefore, they are required exactly to know and to follow the divine law, both natural and positive; they must faithfully observe the laws and constitutions of the Church, both general and particular, and not exceed the limits of their power; they must give their subjects the example of their own faithful obedience to their superiors; by using means appropriate to the seriousness of the matter, they must form a prudent judgement on what they intend to command, making use especially of counselors well qualified either by office or by the nature of the matter; indeed, should it appear appropriate in the Lord in forming their judgement, they should not refuse to listen to the views of their subjects or deny room for undertakings either suggested or even spontaneously initiated by their subjects. Endowed with Christ's authority, they should also know that they must put on the image of the Good Shepherd; they should love their subjects with genuine affection and seek to be loved more than feared,⁶ always remembering that both subjects and superiors have one Lord in heaven, who is no respecter of persons (see Eph 6:9).

With the eyes of faith, subjects, in turn, must always see Christ in their superiors, especially in those whose authority was instituted by Christ the Lord. They should obey them "in simplicity of heart, as they would Christ; not merely outwardly, currying favor with men, but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart" (Eph 6:5-6). Nor should they forget to commend their superiors to God in their prayers, that they, who will one day render an account of the souls of their subjects, may be able to fulfil their responsibility with joy and not with grief (see Hb 13:17). If all this is done with joy, subjects will also experience how obedience, which excludes all servile fear, can co-exist with the true freedom of the children of God.

In proportion to their learning, competence in the matter, and whatever authority they possess, subjects themselves have the possibility and indeed at times also the duty to make known their views on matters pertaining to the good of the Church or of their community. To be done in a Christian manner, however, this activity must be undertaken above all through the prescribed institutions of the Church, if there be any such; and it must always be done with Christian prudence, truthfulness, humility, courage, and love, and with due reverence towards those who represent Christ the Shepherd, even if they are not imitating him perfectly.⁷ But when a legitimate authority has commanded something, those who are led by a Christian spirit, instead of opening the door to free criticism, should strive rather to submit their own judgement about what is to be done to the superior's judgement and carry out the command in ready obedience.⁸

Public denouncing of evils that occur in the Church, especially in writings, cannot be allowed unless it follows the order recommended by Christ the Lord (see Mt 18:15-17), avoids scandal as much as possible, and retains respect for authority, so that it will not destroy but build up faith and discipline. No public denunciation of evils in the Church can be admitted which takes the form of calling into question the essential indefectibility of the Bride of Christ in carrying out her saving mission.

39. Public Opinion in the Church.

Lest the nature and purpose of the Church be mistakenly confused with those of civil society, the following must be maintained with regard to the value and rights of public opinion in the Church.

As is well known, there exists in the Church a certain supernatural sense of the faith on the part of the whole Christian people. This is always good and constitutes an indefectible and unique mark of the Catholic Church. It comes from above and is nothing other than the agreement of faithful and pastors in matters of faith and morals, an agreement governed by the authoritative teaching office. Ultimately, it is aroused by the Holy Spirit, who, while present to the same official teachers when they present Catholic doctrine, is also at work in the faithful so that they may obediently accept the doctrine presented, rightly understand it, and investigate it more deeply. The divine and saving mission of the Church is greatly assisted by this sense of the faith.⁹

Public opinion, which is concerned with practical matters, is something different. It is the spontaneous and vital reaction of the faithful to all that is happening either in individual communities or in the universal Church.¹⁰

Particular manifestations of this public opinion will be circumspect or imprudent or even mistaken and evil insofar as they do or do not arise from a true knowledge of the matter and from a truly Catholic spirit. For that reason, just as healthy public opinion can promote the good of the Church and ought to be highly regarded and not merely tolerated by the pastors of the Church as they exercise their governing authority, so also, when it does not have the required knowledge of the matter or the spirit of thinking and feeling with the Church, it is destructive of the Mystical Body of Christ and must be corrected by suitable means. When on practical matters there are various opinions, each having its own probability, and the competent authority has not yet made its decision, no competent person should be prevented from freely saying what he thinks. But in discussing controversial issues, charity should reign so that each person seeks only what is better and not simply to impose his own view.

The pastors of the Church should strive to pass fair judgements on all matters brought before them, especially those raised by experts in the matters. But the opinion of those who maintain that superiors in the Church must always and necessarily consult public opinion or judge and decide all issues on the basis of majority opinion among the faithful is absolutely to be rejected. The Holy Synod, finally, rejects the view that in the Church one may inconsiderately and without the most serious reasons appeal to public opinion in order to effect some change in the decrees of the Sacred Hierarchy.

NOTES

¹ See Pius XII, *Si diligis... pasce* (AAS 46 [1954], p. 314); *Magnificate Dominum mecum* (AAS 46 [1954] pp. 673-74). More on this may be found in the Gregorian University thesis by R. Torrella Cascante, *Lo humano y lo divino en la Iglesia. Aspectos del reformismo catolico contemporaneo* (Rome, 1958).

² See 1 Pt 2:13-17 and the theological explanation of obedience given by St. Thomas in *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 104.

³ See Leo XIII, Epistle *Testem benevolentiae* (ASS 31 [1898-99], p. 476): "Christ is the teacher and model of all holiness, and all those who wish to be joined with the saints must be conformed to his norm." Pius XI, Enc. *Casti connubii*, (AAS 22 [1930] p. 548).

⁴ See Pius XII, *Address to the General Congregation of the Society of Jesus (Discorsi e Radiomessaggi di S.S. Pio XII, XIX, pp. 384-85.*

⁵ See Pius XII, *Magnificate Dominum mecum*, l.c., p. 672.

⁶ See *The Rule of the Holy Father Benedict*, ch. 64; St. Augustine, *Rule for the Servants of God*, 11 (PL 32, 1384); Pius XII, *Magnificate Dominum mecum*, l.c., pp. 675-76.

⁷ See Leo XIII, *Sapientiae Christianae* (ASS 22 [1889-90], pp. 400-401.

⁸ See Leo XIII, Epistle *Epistula tua* (ASS 18 [1895], pp. 3-8; Pius XII, *Magnificate Dominum mecum*, l.c., pp. 673-75.

⁹ See Pius XII, *Munificentissimus Deus* (AAS 42 [1950], p. 756). The paragraph is not intended to present everything that could be presented on the nature of the Christian people's sense of faith, but only what is needed in order to distinguish it clearly from so-called "public opinion", which is concerned with practical matters.

¹⁰ See Pius XII, *Address L'importance de la presse* (AAS 42 [1950], p. 256).