

OBEDIENCE

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From: "Means of Grace, Hope of Glory"

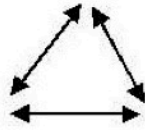
<https://www.orderoftheascension.org/means-of-grace-hope-of-glory/2021/3/10/obedience.html>



We had a conversation yesterday with the novices in the Order of the Ascension about the ways the elements of the Benedictine Promise (Stability, Obedience, and Conversion of Life) work together, influencing and shaping the whole. It was particularly helpful in this time where our normal sense of stability is shaken to recall the ways in which our parishes do offer stability, including through the Daily Office, Sunday worship in whatever form that takes, and opportunities to stay connected with one another.

A key point we covered is that faithful Conversion of Life is grounded in our Stability and our Obedience. We don't change for the sake of change: we enter fully into this life as it is now, with these people, in this place, and we listen carefully for where the Holy Spirit is calling us to go. That listening includes taking seriously – being obedient to – our sources of authority, including scripture, tradition, priests and bishops, and our own conscience, as well as one another. We talked about how all of these elements of Benedictine spiritually exist on a spectrum. Rigid adherence to one way of Stability – for example, insisting that masculine images of God must be excised or insisting they must be used exclusively – is a distortion of Stability. So is claiming the Spirit requires us to change when mostly we're drawn to change because we like it or maybe we're bored or maybe we're anxious about what we'll find out if we stick with things that are uncomfortable.

CONVERSION OF LIFE As a parish we find God on our journey together and in the new places we will go as a parish; in losing life to find life; in our openness to transformation.



STABILITY As a parish we find God here and now in the relationships and pattern of our life together.

OBEDIENCE As a parish we find God as we listen deeply to the world; to Scriptures; to the church, now and through the ages; to each other; to the creation; and to the deepest longings and prayer of our heart.

As happens, the conversation turned to the often-visceral negative response many of us have to that word "obedience." Many find it helpful to learn the word comes from the Latin verb "to listen," and it is common to see writers on Benedictine spirituality talk about "obedience, holy listening" in a single phrase. And in the Order of the Ascension we spend a lot of time helping members develop and use listening processes in the parish, explicitly connected to deepening the expression of Benedictine spirituality. Of course, we've all been in places where they listen so much they never make a decision! That, too, is a distortion.

It's critical to remember that obedience isn't *only* deep listening or *only* doing what we're supposed to, but it requires elements of both. Obedience exists on a spectrum where we have to hold a number of things in tension, something we Anglicans have a lot of practice with.



I think that's all great. We need ways to talk about spiritual life that both make it easy for people to learn and ways to encourage deeper engagement for those ready to do that. My concern is that sometimes when we talk about listening, what that really means is listening to the stuff we like and ignoring what we don't. One example of the challenge of Episcopal Church culture is that we value the BCP and our liturgy so much - an obvious product of external authority - but have such a tough time with the concept of submitting to authority generally.

Our ethos has a built-in comprehensiveness, a capacity for holding seemingly contradictory things in tension. I submit that while there are exceptions, our fault as a church is *not* pushing folks to blindly surrender their conscience. But I also see a fair amount of angst over the idea that we don't get to be in charge of everything.

In my work I get to I hear a number of parish conversations and there's sometimes a sense that whatever way "we" do things in this parish is the "right" way, even if that conflicts with Prayer Book rubrics, or the teachings of bishops. One priest was joking

about not following the rules concerning celebrations of the Eucharist in this weird virtual time, and she seemed pretty pleased, in a light-hearted way, about breaking the rules. My own view was that the particular issue wasn't that significant and there were solid pastoral reasons for doing what she was doing in these particular circumstances. What struck me, though, was that the parishioners who spoke up clearly thought the bishop was being unreasonably dictatorial in even trying to control this issue. I heard no curiosity about why he might be doing that or any concern that perhaps there were issues in this beyond the immediate preference of the priest or the parish. It may be that true obedience leads to breaking rules in some cases, but when we do that reflexively or dismissively, we're not really listening and we're not practicing meaningful obedience.

As a denomination, we can be a pretty free-wheeling bunch. At the same time, there are things that should and actually do transcend our personal preferences and inclinations. While I find the "listening" approach very helpful (and believe it's critical to development of healthy parishes), I also find myself thinking that leaders would do well to spend more time contemplating their own aversion to straight-up "obedience" and spend just slightly less time making it more palatable by calling it "listening." The ability to engage our own difficulty with healthy obedience is the first step in helping our parishioners do so. And I can't help but think that healthy obedience is something we could all use a lot more of, both in the nation and in the church.

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