Ignatius on Obedience (1542)

In the following letter, Ignatius offers a reproof to a Jesuit scholastic. Giovanni Battista Viola professed obedience yet sought to impose his own solution to an academic difficulty, which he had created by ignoring directions issued by Ignatius. Ignatius responds here by explaining his two understandings of how obedience can be “blind.” Viola had traveled to Paris with Andrés de Oviedo in October of 1541.

May the sovereign grace and love of Christ our Lord be always for our continual favor and help.

I received a letter from you, and do not understand it. Speaking of obedience in two places in your letter, you say in the first that you are ready to obey my will, and in the second, “Since I would sooner long for death than kick against obedience, I submit to Your Reverence’s judgment.” Now inasmuch as it seems to me that obedience seeks to be blind, I understand blind in two ways: (1) An inferior ought to surrender his own understanding (where there is no question of sin) and do what is commanded him; and (2) an inferior who is or has been given a command by the superior and perceives reasons against what is commanded or drawbacks in it ought humbly to represent to the superior the reasons or drawbacks that occur to him, without attempting to draw him to one side or the other, and afterwards tranquilly to follow the way that is pointed out to him or commanded.

Now, in reply to your own obedience, I cannot manage to understand it. For after giving me what are in your opinion many good arguments to convince me that you ought to change teachers, you tell me elsewhere in your letter, “I decided to write Your Reverence begging you to deign to let me know whether we should change teachers or waste our time.” You yourself can judge whether you are seeking obedience or submitting your own judgment so that I can tell you what to do. If you so abound in your own judgment and are quite clear that you are wasting your time, where is your submission of judgment? Or do you perhaps think I am supposed to tell you that you should waste your time? May God our Lord never let me, where I cannot help, do anything to anyone’s harm!

Elsewhere you say, “I am really sorry to have wasted these last eight months under this teacher, but if you still think we should go on wasting it, we will continue with him.” As I recall, when you left here, I told you that by the time you got to Paris the Summulae course would have been underway for two or three months, and that you ought to study Latin for four or five months to gain confidence and then spend a further three or four months on an introduction to the Summulae, so that you could enroll in the course the following year with some preparation. But since you preferred to follow your opinion rather than mine and to enter a course that was already two or three months advanced, you be the one to decide who is responsible for your wasting your time.
I close, praying God our Lord by his infinite and sovereign goodness to give us his abundant grace so that we may know his most holy will and entirely fulfill it.

Rome