Ignatius on Obedience (1553)

After the Spiritual Exercises, perhaps until the publication and translation of his “autobiography,” the writings of Ignatius were perhaps best known for this letter, commonly known as the “Letter on Obedience” to the province of Portugal. Generations of Jesuits heard it read at table once a month in their refectories. Ignatius writes here during a split in the Portuguese province, pitting the supporters and the opponents of the former provincial, Simão Rodrigues, against one another. There was also rising tension at the appointment of his successor, Diego Miró, a good but rigid individual. Even an official visitor sent by Ignatius, Miguel de Torres, could not reestablish peace and unity. About thirty men left the Society during this restless period. At one point Ignatius even asked Gonçalves da Câmara, “Who is provincial?” This letter is the fullest of Ignatius’s several treatments of the subject of obedience. It urges the crucial importance of obedience for Jesuits (paragraph 2), centers obedience upon the person of Christ (3), insists that it must extend beyond mere execution to conformity of the will and understanding with those of the superior (4–19), suggests ways of acquiring and practicing the virtue (one being “blind obedience”) (20–24), approves representing to one’s superior difficulties against a command (25), and shows how the Society’s welfare depends upon obedience being observed at every level (26–29). It concludes with a ringing final exhortation (30). The ascetical perspective that underlies the development of the letter is different from the apostolic perspective in which obedience is developed in the Constitutions. The ideals in the letter are certainly those of Ignatius, who signed it personally. In its development, Juan Alfonso de Polanco surely had a hand, as evidenced by the breadth and variety of quotations from the scriptures, the Church Fathers, and other ecclesiastical writers.

Jhus.

May the sovereign grace and eternal love of Christ our Lord greet and visit you with his most holy gifts and spiritual graces.

1. It gives me great consolation, my dear brothers in our Lord Jesus Christ, to learn of the lively and efficacious desires for your own perfection and his divine service and glory bestowed on you by him who in his mercy has called you to this institute, preserves you in it, and directs you to the blessed end at which his chosen ones arrive.

2. And although I wish you all perfection in every virtue and spiritual grace, it is true (as you will have heard from me on other occasions) that it is more particularly in obedience than in any other virtue that God our Lord gives me the desire to see you distinguish yourselves. This is not only because of its own extraordinary worth, so emphasized by word and example in Sacred Scripture, both Old and New Testaments, but because, as St. Gregory says, obedience is a virtue which alone implants all the other virtues in the mind and preserves them once implanted. To the extent that
this virtue flourishes, all the other virtues will be seen to flourish and produce in your souls the
fruits which I desire and which are demanded by him who through his own obedience redeemed
the world which had been lost through lack of it, “becoming obedient unto death, death on a
cross.”

We may let other religious orders outdo us in fasting, night-watches, and other austerities which
each one, following its own institute, holily observes. But in the purity and perfection of
obedience, with genuine resignation of our wills and abnegation of our judgment, I am very
desirous, dear brothers, that those who serve God in this Society should distinguish themselves,
and that its true sons may be recognized by this—never looking to the person whom they obey,
but in that person, to Christ our Lord, for whose sake they obey.

3. For the superior is not to be obeyed because he is highly prudent, very good, or qualified by any
other gift of God our Lord, but rather because he holds his place and authority—as eternal Truth
has said, “He who hears you hears me, and he who despises you despises me.” Nor, on the other
hand, should he be any less obeyed in his capacity as superior if he is less prudent, for he
represents the person of him who is infallible wisdom and who will make up for any
shortcomings in his minister; nor if he is lacking in goodness or other excellent qualities, since
Christ our Lord, after saying, “The scribes and Pharisees have sat on the chair of Moses,” expressly
adds, “Do all that they tell you, but do not act according to their works.”

Therefore I would like all of you to practice recognizing Christ our Lord in any superior,
reverencing and obeying his Divine Majesty in him with all devotion. This will appear less strange
to you if you recall how in writing to the Ephesians St. Paul enjoins obeying even temporal and
pagan superiors as Christ, from whom all well-ordered authority derives: “Be obedient to your
masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in the simplicity of your heart, as to Christ;
not serving to the eye, as if pleasing men, but as servants of Christ doing the will of God,
rendering service from the heart and with a good will, as to the Lord and not to men.”

4. From this you can infer, when a religious takes someone not only as his superior but expressly in
the place of Christ our Lord to direct and guide him in his divine service, to what degree he ought
to hold that person in his soul, and whether he should look upon him as a man, and not as the
vicar of Christ our Lord instead.

5. I also desire it to be firmly fixed in your souls that the first degree of obedience, which consists in
the execution of what is commanded, is quite low. It does not deserve the name of obedience or
attain the worth of this virtue unless it rises to the second degree, which consists in making the
superior’s will one’s own, in such a way that there is not just effective execution but a conformity
of wish, an identical willing and not willing. This is why Scripture says, “Obedience is better than
sacrifices;” for as St. Gregory explains, “In sacrifices the flesh of another is slaughtered, in
obedience our own will.” And as this will possesses so high a value in a human being, so also does
the oblation by which it is offered to one’s Creator and Lord through obedience. What a great and
dangerous deception it is for persons to think they may lawfully deviate from their superiors’
will—not only in matters pertaining to flesh and blood but even in those which are of themselves
quite spiritual and holy, such as fasts, prayers, and other religious works. Such persons should
listen to what Cassian well says in the “Conference of Abba Daniel.” “It is one and the same sort of disobedience whether one ignores the elder’s command out of eagerness for labor or longing for ease; as harmful to violate the rules of the monastery in order to stay awake as to sleep; as bad to neglect the abbot’s command in order to read as to disregard it in order to sleep.” Holy was Martha’s activity, holy was Magdalene’s contemplation, holy the penitence and tears with which she bathed the feet of Christ our Lord; but all this had to be done in Bethany, which is interpreted as “house of obedience.” As St. Bernard remarks, Christ our Lord apparently wanted to show us that “neither the effort to perform good works nor the leisure of holy contemplation nor the tears of penitence would have been pleasing to him outside of Bethany.”

6. And so, my dear brothers, try to make the surrender of your wills complete. Through his ministers, freely offer to your Creator and Lord the freedom he has bestowed on you. Think it no small fruit of your free will that you are able to restore it totally in obedience to the one who gave it to you. In this you do not lose it; instead, you perfect it, wholly conforming your own to the most certain rule of all rectitude, God’s own will—the interpreter of which is the superior who governs you in his place. Thus, you should never attempt to draw the superior’s will (which you should consider the will of God) to your own; for this would not be making God’s will the rule of yours but yours the rule of God’s, subverting the order of his wisdom. It is a great delusion and a mark of persons whose understanding is darkened by self-love, to think that obedience is preserved when the subject tries to draw the superior to what he himself wishes. Listen to St. Bernard, who had much experience in this matter: “Anyone who makes efforts, openly or covertly, to get his spiritual father to command him what he himself desires is self-deluded and flatters himself as a follower of obedience. He is not obeying his superior; instead, the superior is obeying him.” And so I conclude that anyone who wants to rise to the virtue of obedience will have to ascend to this second degree, which, over and above the execution, consists in making the superior’s will one’s own—or rather in stripping off one’s own will and clothing oneself in God’s will as interpreted by the superior.

7. But whoever aims at making a complete and perfect oblation of himself must, in addition to his will, offer his understanding. This is a further and the highest degree of obedience. He must not only have the same will as the superior but also be of the same mind as he, submitting his own judgment to the superior’s to the extent that a devoted will is able to influence the understanding.

8. For while the understanding does not enjoy the same freedom as the will and by nature gives its assent to whatever is presented to it as true, nevertheless, in many matters where the evidence of the known truth is not compelling, it can, by the will’s intervention, incline to one side rather than the other; and in such matters every truly obedient person should incline himself to think the same as his superior.

9. It is certain that since obedience is a holocaust in which the entire person offers himself without the slightest reserve in the fire of charity to his Creator and Lord through the hands of his ministers, and a complete surrender of himself in which one renounces possession of his entire self so as to be possessed and governed by divine Providence through his superiors, it cannot be held that obedience includes only effective execution and the will’s acquiescence; it must also include
the judgment’s thinking the same as the superior commands—to the extent, as I have said, that by dint of the will it can incline itself thereto.

10. Would to God our Lord that this obedience of the understanding were as fully grasped and practiced as it is necessary to anyone living in religious life and highly pleasing to God our Lord. I call it necessary; for, just as in celestial bodies, if the lower is to receive movement and influence from the higher, it must be subject and subordinate to it, the one being adjusted and ordered to the other, in the same way, when one rational creature is moved by another, as takes place in obedience, it is necessary that the one moved be subject and subordinated to the one moving if it is to receive influence and power from him; and this subjection and subordination cannot be had without conformity of the inferior’s understanding and will to the superior’s.

11. For if we look to the purpose of obedience, it is just as possible for our understanding to be mistaken about what is good as it is for our will. Hence, if we think it right to conform our will to the superior’s to prevent it from going wrong, we should also conform our understanding to his to keep it from going wrong. “Do not rely upon your own prudence,” says Scripture.

12. Thus, even in other human affairs wise persons commonly consider that it is true prudence to distrust one’s own prudence particularly in matters of personal interest, where, because of bias, people are usually not good judges.

13. If, then, in his own affairs a person ought to follow the judgment of another—even someone not his superior—rather than his own, how much more the judgment of his superior, whom he has taken to govern him in God’s place as interpreter of the divine will.

14. There is no doubt that this guidance is even more necessary in spiritual persons and matters because of the great dangers in the spiritual life when a person races forward in it without the bridle of discretion. Hence Cassian says in the “Conference of Abba Moses:” “By no other fault does the devil so draw a monk headlong to his death as by persuading him to ignore the advice of his elders and trust to his own conclusions and judgment."

15. On the other hand, without obedience of judgment it is impossible for the obedience of the will or execution to be what they should. For our soul’s appetitive powers naturally follow the apprehensive, so that it will be an act of violence for the will to obey over the long term against one’s judgment. And if someone obeyed for a time under the general apprehension that one ought to obey even when commanded amiss, this cannot, at the very least, be long-lasting; and thus perseverance is lost, or at least the perfection of obedience, which consists in obeying with love and cheerfulness; for no one who acts against what he thinks can obey with love and cheerfulness as long as such opposition remains. Enthusiasm and alacrity are lost; without full conviction these will be missing, and instead there will be doubts about the rightness of doing what is commanded. The much-extolled simplicity of blind obedience is lost when one debates whether the command was good or bad perhaps even condemning the superior because what he commands is not to the person’s liking. Humility is lost when on the one hand we submit, but on the other place ourselves above the superior. Fortitude in difficult tasks is lost and, in a word, all the perfections of this virtue.
16. On the contrary, obedience without submission of the judgment is marked by dissatisfaction, pain, reluctance, slackness, criticism, excuses, and other imperfections and obstacles of no small moment which deprive obedience of its value and merit. For, as St. Bernard rightly says of those who are distressed when the superior commands something not to their liking, “If you begin to be upset at this, to judge your superior, to criticize in your heart, even while outwardly fulfilling the command, this is not the virtue of patience but a veil over your wickedness.”

17. For if we look to the peace and quiet of mind of the person obeying, it is certain that no one will ever possess it if he has in his own soul the cause of his disquiet and unrest, namely, a judgment of his own opposed to what obedience enjoins on him.

18. For this reason, and for the sake of the unity which is what sustains the existence of any society, St. Paul earnestly exhorts all to think and say the same thing, so that by unity of judgment and will they might be preserved. Now if head and members must think the same, it is not hard to see whether it is right for the head to agree with the members or the members with the head. And so, from what has been said, we can see how necessary is obedience of the understanding.

19. But if anyone wishes to see how perfect it is in itself and how pleasing to God our Lord, he can do so by consideration of how valuable is the noble oblation which is made of so worthy a part of man; how one makes his entire being a living sacrifice pleasing to his Divine Majesty, holding back nothing of himself; and also how difficult it is for a person to overcome himself out of love for him and to resist the natural bent which people have for following their own judgment. Thus, while obedience is properly a perfection of the will that renders it eager to fulfill the will of the superior, yet it must also, as we have said, extend to the understanding, inclining it to think what the superior thinks, so that in this way one can proceed with the full strength of the soul—will and understanding—to a prompt and perfect execution.

20. I think I hear you say, dear brothers, that you see the importance of this virtue but would like to know how you can acquire it perfectly. I answer with Pope St. Leo, “Nothing is hard for the humble, nothing rough for the meek.” Be humble and meek, and God our Lord will give you the grace always to maintain sweetly and lovingly the offering you have made to him. Apart from these, I will suggest three specific means that will be very helpful for you in reaching the perfection of obedience of the understanding.

21. The first is that, as I said at the beginning, you look not to the person of your superior as a human being subject to errors and miseries, but instead to the one whom you obey in him, Christ—who is supreme wisdom, measureless goodness, infinite charity; who you know cannot be deceived and will not deceive you; and whose utterly faithful charity since you are certain that you have placed yourself under obedience for love of him and have submitted yourself to the superior’s will, in order to be more conformed to God’s will—you know will never fail to guide you by the means which he has given you. So do not consider the voice of the superior, insofar as he gives you a command, as anything but the voice of Christ—as St. Paul said to the Colossians, exhorting subjects to obey their superiors, “Whatever you do, do it from the heart, as to the Lord and not to men .... Give your service to Christ;” and as St. Bernard said, “Whether God, or man his substitute, commands anything, we must obey with exactly the same care and submit with exactly the same
reverence (so long, of course, as man commands nothing contrary to God).” Thus, if you look, not upon the human being with your outward eyes, but upon God with your inward eyes, you will find no difficulty in conforming your will and judgment to the rule of action which you have chosen.

22. The second means is that you always be quick to seek out reasons to defend what the superior commands or is inclined towards, rather than reasons to disapprove of it. A help for this will be to have a love for whatever is enjoined by obedience. This will beget an obedience which is cheerful and free from any unpleasantness. As St. Leo says, “We do not serve under harsh necessity when we love what is commanded.”

23. A third means for subjecting the understanding is even easier and surer, and employed by the holy fathers. It is this: taking for granted and believing—very much as we do in matters of faith—that whatever the superior enjoins is the command of God our Lord and his holy will, one proceeds blindly to the execution of the command, without any inquiry and with the force and promptitude of a will eager to obey. This is how we are to believe Abraham obeyed when commanded to sacrifice his son Isaac. Similarly, in the new covenant with some of those holy fathers mentioned by Cassian, like Abba John, who did not examine whether what he was commanded was worthwhile or not, as when he laboriously watered a dry stick for a whole year; or whether it was possible or not, as when he strove so earnestly, when so commanded, to move a rock which a large number of persons could not have moved.

24. To confirm this kind of obedience, we see that God our Lord sometimes seconded it with miracles, as when St. Benedict’s disciple Maurus, entering the water at his superior’s command, did not sink; or when another, being commanded to bring back a lioness, seized and dragged her to his superior; and other cases with which you are familiar. My point is that this manner of subjecting one’s own judgment without further inquiry, taking for granted that the command is holy and in conformity with God’s will, is in use among the saints and ought to be imitated by anyone who wishes to obey perfectly in all things where no manifest sin is evident.

25. However, this does not mean that where something occurs to you different from the superior’s opinion, and you have prayed and come to the conclusion in the presence of God that you ought to represent the matter to the superior, you may not do so. But if you want to proceed in this matter without suspicion of self-love or attachment to your own judgment, you must maintain, before and after making this representation, not only an indifference towards actually undertaking or relinquishing the matter in question, but one such that you are even more pleased with, and consider as better, whatever the superior may ordain.

26. What I have said about obedience applies to individuals with reference to their immediate superiors, to rectors and local superiors with reference to provincials, to these with reference to the general, and to the general with reference to the one God our Lord has given to him as superior, his vicar on earth. In this way subordination will be fully preserved and, as a result, unity and charity as well, without which the welfare and governance of the Society, or of any other congregation, cannot be preserved.
27. This is the way divine Providence gently disposes all things, bringing to their ends the lowest by the intermediate and the intermediate by the highest. Thus, among the angels there is subordination of one hierarchy to another; and also in the heavens and in all bodily motions, subordination of the lower to the higher, and of the higher in turn to a supreme movement.

28. And we see the same on earth in well-ordered states, and also in the hierarchy of the Church, brought under the one universal vicar of Christ our Lord. The better this subordination is kept, the better the governance. It is for lack of this subordination that we see such notorious defects in any society.

29. That is why in this society, over which our Lord has given me some charge, I want the perfection of this virtue to be pursued as if the Society’s entire well-being depended on it.

30. I would like to end this topic without digression just as I began it, imploring all of you for the love of Christ our Lord—who not only gave us the command but went before us with the example of obedience—to make every effort to attain it through a glorious victory over yourselves, overcoming yourselves in the highest and most difficult part of yourselves, your will and understanding, so that in this way true knowledge and love of God our Lord may wholly possess and guide your souls throughout this pilgrimage until he brings you, and many others by means of you, to the final and most happy end of his own everlasting bliss.

I commend myself earnestly to your prayers.

Rome, March 26, 1553

Yours in our Lord,

YGNATIO