Recovering Obedience in the Spiritual Path

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Abstract

In the Christian tradition ‘obedience’ is understood as attentive inner listening to God’s loving call and an outcome of the movement of grace. In all major religions including in the early Christian tradition and now more particularly in eastern Christianity, obedience to God is named as a foundational element of the spiritual path and, for Christians, essential to the attainment of the goal of deification. By contrast, in western societies in general, the concept and practice of obedience is regarded with suspicion and confused with subservience. It is seen as contributing to abuse and has been devalued as a quality leading to becoming fully human. Instead the pursuit of individual autonomy and self-fulfilment are the dominant western narratives in relation to the self. In contrast to early Christians, for whom obedience was the fruit of the experience of the Spirit, many laypersons today are alienated and confused by notions of obedience.

In this thesis, I point to some of the reasons for the negative perception of obedience in the Catholic West. I then outline an approach to obedience where it is understood as a pathway to human flourishing, which in the Christian understanding reaches its apogee in union with a God who is love. In this context, obedience is experienced as a dynamic process of becoming, as a way of being in love, in which we are called to become the person we are created to be. Essential to this for western Christianity is the recovery of a contemplative praxis and ‘embodied obedience’ such as in the eastern Christian tradition of the spiritual mother or father. Drawing on a contemporary Christian anthropology located in the lay life, obedience leads to the fullness of human flourishing which is characterised by both autonomy and vulnerability in the mystery of God.
Declaratio
n of Originality

I affirm that this thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other institution. To the best of my knowledge, this thesis contains no other material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

Ruth A Fowler
Dated:
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# Contents

**ABSTRACT** ........................................................................................................... I

**DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY** ..................................................................... II

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS** ................................................................................... III

**CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION** ......................................................................... 1

- **What Does Obedience in the Spiritual Journey Mean?** ........................................ 3
- **In the Image and Likeness of God** ...................................................................... 4
- **Tensions in the Catholic Experience of Obedience** .......................................... 6
  - *Impact on the Development of Spiritual Maturity* .............................................. 8
  - *Implications for Women* .................................................................................... 9
- **Lack of Contemplative Insight** .......................................................................... 11
- **My Approach** .................................................................................................... 11
- **Chapter Outline of Thesis** ................................................................................. 12

**CHAPTER 2 – OBEDIENCE WITHIN CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURE** ................. 14

- **Obedience in the Old Testament** .................................................................... 15
- **Obedience in the New Testament** ................................................................... 16
  - *An Obedient Son* ............................................................................................. 17
  - *The Obedience of Mary* .................................................................................... 18
  - *Paul and Obedience* ......................................................................................... 19
- **Conclusion** ........................................................................................................ 20

**CHAPTER 3 – THE CHANGING FACE OF OBEDIENCE** ............................. 22

- **Obedience in the Spirit** ..................................................................................... 22
- **Obedience and the Household** ........................................................................... 24
  - *‘A New Creation’ in Conflict* ............................................................................ 24
  - *New Testament Household Codes* ................................................................ 26
- **Obedience and Community in Transition** ..................................................... 27
Chapter 1 – Introduction

My interest in obedience is unusual in twenty-first century western Christianity and very unusual in twenty-first century western society in general. It was sparked by several incidents that raised important questions for me about obedience in Christianity today. In separate incidents, two young Orthodox adults were reprimanded in small but public settings by an authority figure. The response of each was an immediate acknowledgement and acceptance of the correction. In one, although I observed a sense of inner embarrassment, she thanked the nun immediately and ceased her distracting prostrations; the other displayed an almost childlike humility before his supervisor and returned to being on message. There are many levels on which these incidents could be interrogated, but at the first level of observable behaviour, I sensed these responses might be quite different in a western Catholic setting.

I decided to question some western friends regarding obedience. This drew a very different set of reactions. One was from a friend in her eighties, who has been deeply engaged in following a Christian spiritual path all her life, drawn by mystical intuition and her Aunt Sarah’s knowing wisdom. Her response to my question revealed the depths of the shadow that ‘obedience’ stirs in many committed western Christians. Initially, she responded with a competent theological statement about obedience. But it was the next day, after the word had ploughed up her subconscious, that she called and through her tears cried out her anger at the injustice she had felt as a child at the hands of ‘obedience’. It had been a standard against which her actions were judged and she was castigated, at home and at school, even though she hadn’t realised she had been ‘disobedient’.

I asked the same question of other friends whom I knew were on an intentional Christian spiritual path. Their responses ranged from a blank look to bemusement, negativity and, in one case, immediate anger. The one male answered thoughtfully, exhibiting neither negativity nor anger. Another two female friends, when told of my thesis topic said, after a silent pause, ‘of course you will be deconstructing obedience from a feminist perspective!’

These responses from the ‘different lungs’ of Christianity – eastern and western – were in stark contrast. Obedience has always been a foundation of the spiritual path in Christian (and other religious) traditions. Yet it was clear from these incidents that something different was happening regarding obedience in these two modes of being Christian.¹

The mixed and dark freight carried by the experience of obedience, evident in the western anecdotes, is a long way from the joyful response in love given by the early Christians to the actions of the Spirit. The responses from the Orthodox adults suggest a recognition of the need for obedience and correction, while those of my friends almost point to its opposite.

For many western lay Catholics, their historical experience in a clerical church has resulted in a negative attitude towards the practice of obedience wherever it is found. But this rejection of obedience as a virtue is also true within western culture generally where obedience to authority figures is frequently regarded as antithetical to a person’s growth into full maturity. The cultural hegemony of notions of the autonomous self prevail. Charles

¹ The term ‘Christian’ covers a range of denominations. Although much of what I speak of may apply to western Christianity as a whole, I will generally be speaking from a Catholic perspective since that is the tradition with which I am most familiar.
Taylor, the Templeton Prize-winning philosopher and Christian, suggests that we are living now in the culture of ‘authenticity’ where one’s ‘self’ is the authority. Taylor suggests that, since the Second World War, the general population is responsive to ‘doing your own thing’, previously a pursuit of only the cultural elites.2

While being true to one’s self – wherein each Christian becomes their uniquely authentic self in union with God – is the goal of the Christian spiritual path, it differs fundamentally from western-style self-realisation. Both the Divine Mystery and the church are perceived as external to one’s self. As Charles Taylor notes:

> For many people today, to set aside their own path in order to conform to some external authority just doesn’t seem comprehensible as a form of spiritual life.3

Thus, for most westerners, self-realisation is inconceivable within a God context. Such attitudes are an indescribably long way from the attitudes of the earliest Christian communities, which recognised that obedience and its sister, humility, are the foundations of the spiritual path.

In the fourth century, the Christian monastics living in the Egyptian desert prized the virtue of obedience to one’s spiritual guide. Amma Syncletica even privileged obedience over asceticism saying, ‘as long as we are in the monastery, obedience is preferable to asceticism. The one teaches pride, the other, humility.’4 The ascetic tradition was exemplified in the seventh-century The Ladder of Divine Ascent, written by St John Climacus (d. 649 CE), a hermit and later abbot of a Mt Sinai monastery. For Climacus, obedience is not to a rule but to a ‘deeply intimate relationship with a chosen person, namely one’s spiritual father, in which one is no longer engulfed by one’s self.’5 St Vincent Ferrer, a fifteenth-century French Dominican preacher and author of A Treatise on the Spiritual Life, described obedience as: ‘the royal road which leads most securely to the top of the ladder, the symbol of perfection, on which, as Jacob saw in his vision, God was leaning.’6 Albeit reflecting different perspectives, these comments reflect the concern which is at the core of the Christian path: to renounce one’s self-will, in imitation of the words of Jesus, ‘not my will but yours be done’ (Luke 22:42).7 Here obedience is the necessary way to freedom and living in the fullness of God. Today such sentiments are interpreted as subjugation and a hindrance to becoming fully human.

Such current western attitudes affect both believers and non-believers and are part of the reason for the collapse in the claiming of a Christian religious identity in many western countries today. Callum Brown notes that for Britain (and perhaps elsewhere) this collapse has occurred at both a personal and societal level:

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3 Taylor, A Secular Age, 489.
What is taking place is not merely the continuing decline of organised Christianity, but the death of the culture which formerly conferred Christian identity upon the British people as a whole. Whereas previously, men and women were able to draw upon a Christian-centred culture to find guidance about how they should behave, and how they should think about their lives, from the 1960s a suspicion of creeds arose that quickly took the form of a rejection of Christian tradition and all formulaic constructions of the individual.\(^8\)

Traditional understandings of commitment to religious faith, let alone to spiritual practice, have been comprehensively challenged. The effect of these changes in religious and cultural attitudes calls into question the spiritual path and the relevance of obedience to it today. Since the human and spiritual journeys are one and the same, is the ascesis of obedience still necessary for the spiritual and the human journey into fullness? Furthermore, what do we mean by obedience? Does obedience have any part to play in the fulfilment of the promise of Jesus, ‘I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly’ (John 10:10)? Can obedience support the fully human flourishing of the individual? These are the questions at the core of this thesis.

What Does Obedience in the Spiritual Journey Mean?

In the Patristic and earlier Christian tradition obedience has been understood as an attentive listening to the voice of God within oneself and one’s life. The Hebrew, Greek and Latin words for the English ‘obedience’ contribute different aspects to the sense of the activity implicit in the word. The Hebrew word for obedience – *shamâ’* – implies not only a listening but a heeding, that is, an action because of that listening. The Greek term – *hypakouô* – suggests deep listening, since ‘hydr’ means under and ‘akouo’ means listening, indeed ‘I listen’. This suggests a listening in the depths of our being to God, whom we are under in a vertical relationship.\(^9\)

Obedience is thus both relational and active, occurring in relationship with God, where one listens to the voice of God and then, hopefully, puts the words into action. This has less to do with the following of rules than it has to a surrender of one’s will to God and the resulting interior transformative freedom from the compulsions and dependencies that hold us back from being fully human.\(^10\) The development of an obedient heart and mind are viewed as arising from the equally important virtue of humility and both are seen as essential to attaining union with God.

The Old Testament requirement of obedience to the law and the Covenant, was the very identity and foundation of Israel (Exod 19:5; Deut 11:1; 28:1). All Jews knew that their first responsibility was to obey God as revealed by their law and prophets. It was well understood that obedience led to blessing, while disobedience led to hardship and the withdrawal of God’s help (Josh 5:6).

Obedience in the New Testament is pre-eminently seen in the obedience of Jesus to the will of his Father. His radical obedience, grounded in his experience of a relationship first and

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foremost, serves as the prototype for the faithful disciple. This relationship, sustained by his contemplative prayer, led to his intimate experience of the one he named as ‘Abba’ (Mark 14:36). From this love ‘he drew his own identity.’\(^{11}\) St Paul exhorts Christians to emulate the self-giving obedience of Jesus, even to the point of death (Phil 2:8). Obedience and salvation are inextricably linked. Based on the complete love and trust of the Father, the obedience of Jesus ‘became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him’ (Heb 5:9).

Mary also reveals trust and faith in God, when she assents to the mystery of the Annunciation (Luke 1:38). She has been used throughout Christian history as a powerful symbol, alongside her son, of freely choosing God’s will, as discussed in Chapter Four below. However, western reading of her symbolism has frequently diminished the strength of her autonomous ‘yes’.\(^{12}\)

Throughout the New Testament, there are many examples of the inner experiences of the apostles and disciples which seem to be triggers for obedience and change. As Luke Timothy Johnson, a present day New Testament biblical scholar and historian argues, ‘it is literally impossible to read the New Testament at any length without encountering claims that something is happening to these people, and it is happening now.’\(^{13}\) The writings of Paul and the Acts of the Apostles are rich sources of the disciples’ awareness of the Spirit working in them and of their use of the power of the Spirit in healing (Acts 1:8, 2:4, 3:1–10; 1 Pet 1:8.). They sought and were exhorted to be attentive (obedient) to the Spirit within their individual experience and in their communities, since in the Spirit they were one with Christ. The obedience that was at the core of the life of Jesus became a defining characteristic of the early Christian community.

Similarly, the Christian ascetical examples of the late first and second century which focussed on the renunciation of wealth and the body through disciplines of dress, food and sex, were framed within a context of obedience to a religious ideal, albeit as one for a minority of Christians. This asceticism, often lived out in domestic contexts and on the fringe of urban centres, preceded the monasticism that commenced around 320 CE.\(^{14}\) Obedience was implicit in the charismatic and fiercely lay hermit life of desert monasticism and a function of the perceived spiritual power of the male and female elders called Abba or ‘Amma’. Cenobitic monasticism, Pachomian, Basilian and Benedictine, all enshrined obedience for the monks. From its beginning, monastic understanding of obedience also informed the instructions given to the broader lay community who were not seeking a monastic life, but who also chose to follow Christ.

**In the Image and Likeness of God**

At the core of theological anthropology and biblical revelation is the understanding of the Creator’s intent to, ‘make humankind in our image, according to our likeness’ (Gen 1:26). Because of this, the human person is fundamentally oriented towards God and obedience is

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\(^{11}\) Sandra M. Schneiders, *Buying The Field: Catholic Religious Life In Mission To The World*, vol. 3, *Religious Life In a New Millenium* (New York: Paulist Press, 2013), Ch. 8, IV, A.


the natural response of the soul to the divine echo within each one. From the moment of creation, and in the particularity of birth, humankind is drawn towards the image of the imago within which is that of God. In the dynamos of love, we are:

...configured and transfigured in the imago Christi by the power of the Holy Spirit, we return to the Father, and come to enjoy to the communion of the Trinitarian life which is the essence of beatitude.\textsuperscript{15}

The church fathers, scholastic theologians and Vatican II, all affirm that the human person was created for communion in the trinitarian God and to share in the ongoing care of creation. How our obedience to this orientation is worked out is called the spiritual journey.

Not only was the human person created as an icon of God but was, because of the divine image, to become ‘like unto God’ – utterly dependent on God in all things and drawn to communion with God and others, in a process towards theosis. Many Patristic writers distinguished between the image and likeness.\textsuperscript{16} While the image was present within all people, only those who gave their life to seeking perfection, who were obedient to the indwelling image, arrived at the likeness to God. As Maximus the Confessor stated, ‘every intelligent nature is in the image of God, but only the good and the wise are in God’s likeness’.\textsuperscript{17} While the understanding of how the image was reflected in the human person varied, coming to likeness was understood in the context of the Divine Word made flesh. Athanasius of Alexandria did not use the distinction between image and likeness, but expressed the intent of theosis in his dictum: ‘God became human that we might be made divine.’\textsuperscript{18} Maximus the Confessor emphasised the participatory nature of becoming like unto God.

If we are made, as we are, in the image of God (cf. Gen 1:2–7), let us become the image both of ourselves and of God; or rather let us all become the image of the one whole God, bearing nothing earthly in ourselves, so that we may consort with God and become gods, receiving from God our existence as gods. For in this way the Divine gifts and the presence of Divine peace are honoured.\textsuperscript{19}

The early teachers held that through grace we are transformed in Christ and realise ever more deeply the imago dei within us, while awaiting its full glory in the eschaton. Thus, seekers of God are not passive recipients of grace, but active participants in the process of coming to the likeness of Christ. Christos Yannaras, the Orthodox theologian, equates obedience with coming to the likeness of God.


This is obedience, not simply in the sense of submission to an external law, but in the sense of faithfulness to the ‘image’ of God which is Christ - of conforming to the Trinitarian prototype of life which Christ made incarnate in human nature.\textsuperscript{20}

Through obedience, those on the spiritual path seek to grow in virtue, and in so doing open to the grace of transfiguration. This linkage between one’s own efforts and the fullness of union with God in the eschaton, was the standard understanding until approximately the twelfth century in western Christianity.\textsuperscript{21}

**Tensions in the Catholic Experience of Obedience**

Tension exists in the understanding of obedience today within Catholicism. This impacts on lay and religious alike and the growth of spiritual maturity, especially in women.

In this thesis, I am concerned with obedience within the spiritual path. However, responding to the universal call to holiness is intimately connected with moral theology (discerning the good in daily living). ‘There is no moral life, separate from the spiritual life.’\textsuperscript{22} While the unity of the two was evident up to and including the writing of Thomas Aquinas, from the sixteenth century moral theology gradually became a separate discipline from dogmatic theology, increasingly specialised and focussed on avoiding sin. The moral and spiritual dimensions of the discipline also diverged and while all Christians were called to obey the rules, only the spiritual elites (i.e. priests and religious) were seen as called to the heights of holiness.\textsuperscript{23} The impact of these developments on Catholic spirituality was profound.

Centuries of maintaining a functional relationship between moral theology and the sacrament of penance has instilled a legal model of the moral life in Catholic consciousness.\textsuperscript{24}

This overflows into the spiritual life such that God becomes the supreme law-giver, ‘obedience to authority is our principal virtue, loyalty is measured by obedience, and we live in order to receive a reward (heaven) or avoid punishment (hell).’\textsuperscript{25} Although the great mystics maintained the necessity of both the moral and spiritual life for all, it is not surprising that Catholic laity perceived obedience as compliance with the rules.

And yet the primacy of conscience ‘is deeply embedded in our western moral tradition.’\textsuperscript{26}

Since the thirteenth century, obedience to one’s informed conscience and not the teaching magisterium is the final arbiter in discerning how one lives. Thomas Aquinas stated: ‘every conscience, true or false, is binding, in the sense that to act against conscience is always

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{23} O’Keefe, ‘Past, Present, Future’, Part 1: A Historical Overview.
  \item \textsuperscript{25} Gula, *Spirituality and Morality*, Morality.
\end{itemize}
wrong.’ In the nineteenth century, Cardinal Newman famously stated: ‘I shall drink, – to the Pope, if you please, still to Conscience first and to the Pope afterwards.’ He aligned following one’s conscience with living a life of holiness. ‘Obedience to the voice of conscience is indispensable for a holy life.’ More recently Pope Paul VI wrote in *Dignitatis Humanae*:

> In all … activity a [person] is bound to follow his [or her] conscience in order that he [or she] may come to God, the end and purpose of life.\(^{30}\)

The Irish ethicist Linda Hogan argues that because Catholicism lacks (or has forgotten) a developed and consistent theology of conscience, there is often ambiguity within the teaching and practice of the Catholic church.\(^{31}\) She points to the Vatican documents themselves as expressions of this ambiguity. While some documents argue for the primacy of conscience, for example, *Gaudium et Spes,*\(^{32}\) Hogan argues *Veritatis Splendor* implies ‘that if a person arrives at a different conclusion from the one held by the magisterium, then it is the person’s decision that is not in accordance with the objective moral order.’\(^{33}\) In Australia, Cardinal Pell and Archbishop Fisher have publicly affirmed the priority of the magisterium over conscience.\(^{34}\)

With this historical background, the discomfort regarding obedience exhibited by many of the Catholics I referred to in the beginning of this thesis is, I suggest, more widespread. A longer study than this thesis allows should include such qualitative evidence. However, a recently published survey of the way in which American Catholics form their conscience, undertaken in 2017, suggests they have opted to follow their own conscience in relation to important life decisions, without regard for official church teaching. It concludes that only

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31 Hogan, *Confronting the Truth*, 4.


6% always talk to their local priest or read the catechism while 3% either consult papal statements or their diocesan or the US bishops' website.35

The recent, highly unusual, public censure by some theologians of the 2016 Apostolic Exhortation on the family entitled Amoris Laetitia, reflects an ongoing tension in attitudes to authority, conscience and hence obedience in the Catholic church today.36 While this disagreement is amongst the hierarchy and academics, many of the laity are nonetheless swept up in its wash.

Impact on the Development of Spiritual Maturity

The polarisation between the legalist and personalist approaches can distort obedience and inhibit growth in the spiritual path. Treading solely one way may lead to an individualist approach without regard to one’s neighbour or the teaching and place of the ecclesial community in the faith journey. Equally, following the other path can thwart growth into mature discipleship, by abandoning responsibility for decisions in a blind following of church teaching.

The sexual abuse scandal within Catholicism has shone a light on the way in which the formation of priests and religious has fostered spiritual immaturity with tragic consequences. A culture of obedience in priests’ training and its consequences for mature personal development in all its aspects has been highlighted. Former priest and later judge in New South Wales, Chris Geraghty underlines its impact on intellectual development:

An accepting faith was demanded – not an inquiring mind ... There was no need for discussion, or argument, or search. Truth had already been revealed and was clearly codified. We were expected to accept the formulae and to hand them on uncorrupted.37

Cahill and Wilkinson summarise the effect of the thoroughgoing obedience required of seminarians: ‘God was on the side of the superiors. There was never any questioning on the way power was to be exercised.’38 They describe this climate as profoundly distorting of moral and human development and leading to ecclesiastical corruption.

The internalisation of affable submissiveness in the seminary diminished (seminarians) sense of personal authority and autonomy as well as their moral judgement. Ecclesiastical power and powerlessness corrupted ecclesiastically.39

While obedience was one of the three evangelical vows (along with poverty and chastity) taken in religious life and was paramount in the seeking of holiness, it could easily mask a mechanism for control. When obedience was coupled with the prevailing belief in the doctrine of ontological change of priesthood, it was a potent mix.

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37 Chris Geraghty, Cassocks in the Wilderness: Remembering the Seminary at Springwood (Melbourne, Australia: Spectrum Publications, 2001), cited in Desmond Cahill and Peter Wilkinson, Child Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church: An Interpretive Review of the Literature and Public Inquiry Reports (Melbourne: RMIT University, 2017), 137.
38 Cahill and Wilkinson, Child Sexual Abuse, 225.
39 Cahill and Wilkinson, Child Sexual Abuse, 225.
This was transmitted to the laity. The testimonies of sexual abuse victims tragically demonstrate how obedience, authority and theology can be fused into a dominant narrative covering criminal abuse.\(^{40}\) One victim’s testimony noted in the Forde Report (1999) in Queensland exemplified the situation for many others. ‘I was told by him that I was to say nothing to anyone because God would be very angry with me for revealing his secret ways.’\(^{41}\) The authority placed in priests and religious, along with the obedience to the hierarchy ‘required’ of the laity to be a ‘good Catholic’, became the perfect environment in which criminal abuse could flourish and growth in spiritual maturity was inhibited.

Implications for Women

Since church leadership and most of the authority figures in Catholicism are male, Catholic life and an emphasis on following the magisterium has serious implications for Catholic women’s growth into authentic freedom in Christ. In saying this I am not suggesting that there is no place for following church teaching and law or that men are never dependent but that, in such circumstances, authority becomes identified with maleness and following with femaleness. This has effects on the self-image and the experience of both.\(^{42}\) By contrast, the authentic Christian life is of a heart freely given in full intentionality. Maggie Ross, Anglican solitary and writer, highlights the lethal combination for mature development in the spiritual life when obedience and dependence coalesce. She states:

In fact, obedience can be licit only when it is freely chosen and freely given, and if people are dependent, they are not free. Dependence is a hindrance to obedience and a stumbling block in spiritual growth. ... The goal of Christian maturity is autonomy for the sake of community; a person who is growing into this maturity can give freely, can obey joyfully and completely, but can never be coerced.\(^ {43}\)

Despite this, there is a long history where obedience and dependence have worked together and impacted women. While being promoted as spiritually life-giving, obedience has also been used to limit Christian women’s agency since the time of the adoption of the Roman household codes in very early Christianity. Here, the command of the paterfamilias as the head of the house ‘was given the weight of the voice of God.’\(^ {44}\) Christian wives must obey their husbands, children their parents, and slaves their masters (Eph 5:23–24, 6:1–5). Fifteen centuries later, St Francis de Sales instructing a woman in her spiritual life, advised her to be obedient to every (male) level of authority above her – husband, confessor, priest, bishop, pope.\(^ {45}\) Papal teaching, for example by Pius XI in the Encyclical Casti Connubi in 1931, invoked St Augustine’s ‘order of love’ and demanded ‘both the primacy of the husband with regard to the wife and children, the ready subjection of the wife and her

\(^{40}\) This is one of the contributing factors in the sexual abuse cases within the Catholic church with testimony before the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse demonstrating its importance.

\(^{41}\) Cahill and Wilkinson, Child Sexual Abuse, 213.


willing obedience.’\textsuperscript{46} This was written into the marriage act without reciprocation. As a result, in some marriages women learned dependence, in others suffering beyond telling was inflicted on many Catholic women who obediently remained in abusive, violent or loveless marriages. In the ecclesial environment children also, especially girls, learned that to be obedient was to be good. Without a recognition of agency within the private or the public sphere, women and girls bore the brunt of a narrowly defined concept of obedience to ecclesiastical laws.

Feminist biblical scholar Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza highlights the position of Catholic women when she states:

Patriarchal teaching authority in the church is established at the price of women’s silence and oppression. Women are not only the ‘silenced majority’ of the faithful but have also been excluded from the teaching authority of the magisterium ...\textsuperscript{47}

Arising from a patriarchal anthropology, this attitude attributes to women a ‘greater aptness’ for sin and a lesser spirituality, and has permeated classical Christian theology from Augustine, Aquinas, Luther and Barth.\textsuperscript{48}

This denial of the legitimacy of self for women which such attitudes and oppression foster, and which is at the heart of much obedience talk, does not nurture human flourishing. Many women, therefore, fear a spiritual path which promotes ‘becoming God through undifferentiated union and annihilation of self’.\textsuperscript{49} Mary Potter Engel explained her long-standing pushback against such views, ‘I had worked too hard to become a visible, powerful self against my culture’s, church’s and mother’s attempts to nullify my existence.’\textsuperscript{50} Thus, the self-forgetting or obedience of love at the heart of trinitarian relational mysticism, such as I will propose in Chapter Five, is received with suspicion by many women. The post-Christian feminist Daphne Hampson, for whom female autonomy is central, describes this mutual trinitarian kenosis as ‘far from helpful’.\textsuperscript{51} Likewise, Carol Christ, the feminist historian, theologian, writer and foremother of the Goddess movement said: ‘I am not persuaded by (Mary Potter Engel’s) attempt to reclaim the language of annihilation, surrender or sacrifice, for feminist understandings of the self or God.’\textsuperscript{52}

Without denying that ‘domination has been a woeful part of the Christian tradition, with heinous effects for women and other subordinates,’\textsuperscript{53} Sarah Coakley, Anglican priest and


\textsuperscript{50} Engel, "No Self," 148.

\textsuperscript{51} Daphne Hampson, \textit{Theology and Feminism} (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1990), 155.


theologian, takes an avowedly unfashionable but nuanced view in relation to power and submission. She challenges women (and men) to seek an interior stance enabling discernment and transformation through contemplative prayer.\textsuperscript{54} I will argue that this ancient Christian ascetical prayer practice is one of the keys leading to a recovery of obedience for the human flourishing of women.

Lack of Contemplative Insight

Contemplation was the commonly accepted goal of prayer and Christian living until around the twelfth century. It was described by Gregory the Great in the sixth century as the knowledge of God impregnated with love. As a ‘resting in God’ or encounter with God, it described a state wherein the seeker ceases all activity and is enfolded in love. This description drew on the Hebrew da’ath, which signified a knowledge involving the whole person of which the Greek ‘gnosis’ was the translation, and was used by St Paul in Ephesians 3:14–21 where he prays that the disciples would experience this intimate relationship with God.

However, this work of silence gradually decreased in importance and practice for ordinary Christians, such that by the fifteenth century it became the preserve of a religious elite.\textsuperscript{55} The diminishment of contemplative experience, Ross argues, has impacted on centuries of Christians’ spirituality, textual understanding and application. Religious concepts such as obedience, deprived of their contemplative depth and essential ‘otherness’ of meaning became interpreted narrowly and juridically.\textsuperscript{56}

I will argue that it is the kairos time for Catholicism to recover a sense of the obedience informed from contemplation that characterised the first Christians. Their obedience was grounded in the Spirit. In the tradition, the seeker through self-forgetfulness is led by the Spirit into contemplation of the Divine Mystery. Obedience, therefore, does not require the denial of the God-given faculties of each person’s heart and mind and life experience. It manifests in a relationship of love, allowing ‘the prayer of Christ, God’s own relation to God, to come alive in me.’\textsuperscript{57}

My Approach

With these issues in mind, in this thesis I suggest that there is a need to step aside from the binary of primacy of conscience or following the magisterium as the mode by which one arrives at obedience before God. Such a focus I believe diverts the seeker’s attention away from the goal of deification – and the primary discernment of ‘who am I called to be?’

\textsuperscript{54} Coakley, Powers and Submissions, xviii.
\textsuperscript{56} André Louf, In The School of Contemplation. (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2015), Ch. 5, Kindle.
Instead attention may be focused on a rule, or perhaps an ideology or whatever acts or circumstances are the ‘hot’ spiritual or moral topics of the time.

Rather, I assert the primacy of encounter as the first order response in the discernment of obedience in a person’s spiritual life. In short, it is the interior journey of depth-contemplation. It is to take seriously the words in Gaudium et Spes:

[We] plunge into the depths of reality whenever [we] enter into [our] own heart; God, Who probes the heart, awaits [us] there; there [we] discern [our] proper destiny beneath the eyes of God.\(^{58}\)

Such openness to the Spirit dwelling in the depths of the human heart reclaims obedience, from the narrow strictures of the law or conscience. Instead, it emerges from the silent heart of relationship with the one we name as God.

I suggest that the recovery of the contemplative dimension in the life of the individual Christian is essential to a recovery of an authentic approach to obedience. It is only in this ‘space of self-forgetfulness’ and attentive listening that one is freed from the addictions and distortions of human freedom thus enabling one, with grace, to encounter the Mystery. Only then does obedience become clear as a path towards authentic human freedom, autonomy and vulnerability, leading to the fullness of Christian becoming. As Rowan Williams noted:

Contemplation is an intrinsic element in this transforming process. To learn to look to God without regard to my own instant satisfaction, to learn to scrutinise and to relativise the cravings and fantasies that arise in me – this is to allow God to be God, ... to come alive in me ... And as this process unfolds, I become more free ... \(^{59}\)

In this spaciousness, the attentive listening of obedience leads to the long view of one’s life, in its particularity and limitation, into the eschaton. It is a growth into love and human freedom within a cosmos and universe saturated with the immanent and transcendent Mystery. Such an orientation towards the Mystery, of becoming the person we are created to be, draws its energy from the imago dei within each one. It resonates with the desire for human flourishing that is advocated by Christian and secular alike.

I also suggest that linked to the recovery of the contemplative dimension is the need within western Catholicism (western Christianity generally), to recover the context of relationship in which to learn obedience. For the first disciples, obedience was learned in relationship with Jesus and the Spirit. Later, monks and laypeople became obedient through the charismatically inspired Abbas or Ammas of desert Christianity. Benedict chose this model for the abbatial office in his monasteries. This lived tradition of spiritual mother or father takes obedience out of an impersonal legalistic adherence to ‘teachings and authority’ and situates it in the context of a relationship of love for lay and monastic alike.

**Chapter Outline of Thesis**

In this introductory chapter, I have outlined briefly what obedience meant in the Christian spiritual tradition and the difficulty perceived today by many Catholic Christians and

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\(^{58}\) Paul VI, "Gaudium et Spes", accessed 21 June 2018, #14.

\(^{59}\) Williams, "Address to the Synod" #10.
western Christianity generally in seeing obedience as a necessary ascesis and way of love in the spiritual path.

In the second chapter, I look at the scriptural basis for obedience in the New Testament. I demonstrate that the obedience of Jesus arose from his sense of loving intimacy and union with the one he named as Father, and that the obedience of the first disciples arose because of an experience of inner power in their relationship with Jesus. These profound encounters experienced by the early Jewish followers of Jesus, including St. Paul, transformed human experience and freedom and could only call forth obedience.

In Chapter Three, I show that the early Christian communities saw obedience as a response to their experience of the Spirit in their person and gatherings. As the Christian communities grew, the application of obedience broadened. The prophetic ground for obedience was supplemented by obedience to those appointed as bishops and priests. Monasticism established obedience as central and maintained awareness of obedience in the charismatic sense to a spiritual mother or father. While its emphasis on obedience influenced Christian spirituality down to Vatican II, obedience to church rules and hierarchs became the dominant narrative for the ‘ordinary Christian’ as the gap between the educated ordained and the (often uneducated) non-ordained widened.

In Chapter Four, drawing on the vignettes of Orthodox responses to correction at the beginning of Chapter One, I suggest that the recovery of the eastern Christian tradition of the spiritual father or mother, which I have termed ‘embodied obedience’, could provide a way into a renewed experience of obedience for western Christians.

In Chapter Five I propose a way of viewing obedience today for the layperson, situating attentive listening within the context of the work of becoming the person we are created to be. I outline an approach to obedience which leads to human flourishing, drawing on the ascetical Christian tradition within contemplative practice.

Finally, in the concluding chapter, I address some remaining questions regarding the reintegration of obedience as a positive and necessary element on the spiritual journey to becoming the person we are created to be.
Chapter 2 – Obedience Within Christian Scripture

Obedience in the New Testament arises in and is sustained by an experience of relationship. Both words – ‘experience’ and ‘relationship’ – are important. The term ‘experience’ used in the religious sense eludes definition and is often ambiguous. But to ignore the category is to suppress a body of human knowing – perhaps the most important. So dangers abound in its use which must be considered. Contrary to much religious thought today, ‘religious experience’ and its traces cannot be controlled by the one who experiences. Indeed, its truthfulness lies in that it cannot be hidden. Furthermore, as Maggie Ross points out, the very self-forgetfulness necessary to enter authentically into an experience means that, like the white jet trails in the sky that bear witness to a plane having passed, one can only know of a religious experience through the signs left behind. ‘The difficulty is that this impression is impossible to articulate except from its traces, owing to the self-forgetfulness involved in the liminal character of an authentic I-You engagement.’

Self-forgetfulness defines contemplative or mystical experience. Words can only ever evoke a sense of the content, for the experience itself goes beyond subjective comparisons.

Likewise, the term ‘relationship’ in the religious sense suggests something that cannot be concretely defined or pointed to, controlled or summoned up. Rather the term evokes a connection with that ‘which is beyond oneself’ and yet lies at the very core and centre of one’s being and world. In the best of cases, one’s life gives witness to its presence. Thus ‘experience’ and ‘relationship’ evoke a knowing that cannot be grasped and yet is known.

The Jewish Bible abounds with examples of prophets and holy people who spoke of experiences of the sacred – a noetic knowing (Exod 34:29–35; Deut 34:10–12; 2 Kgs 2:11; Ezek 11:5).

The obedience of Jesus did not arise because he followed the law which had been given to Moses, although that was also part of his life, but because as a Jewish man he had an experience of a relationship so intimate that he named God as Abba – a loving Father. In this, he is revealed as the obedient son.

For the followers of Jesus, their obedience also came about through their experience of relationship. But in their case, it was the experience of their relationship in the Spirit of Christ which led them to freely and joyfully give obedience.

In this chapter, I shall refer briefly to the way in which obedience was understood in the Old Testament and then show how Jesus and Paul both talked about obedience – Jesus to the Father and Paul to Christ. For the followers of Jesus, it was an obedience to the experience of loving relationship in the Spirit. The profound encounters in the Spirit experienced by the early Jewish followers of Jesus, including St Paul, were seen by them as revelations of God which they could not do other than obey. Their experience of the power of the Spirit, both in Jesus and themselves or others, was not only present in ‘signs and wonders’ but in the transformation of their human freedom. As Paul indicates in 2 Cor 3: 18, this experience was

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60 Johnson, Religious Experience, 54-55.
61 Johnson, Religious Experience, 59.
62 Maggie Ross, Silence, 21.
63 Johnson, Religious Experience, 58.
not a mere surface feeling but suggests an experience of deep inwardness and knowing, as perceived by the subject.

While any discussion of religious experience places a primacy on the individual as the experiencing subject, I do not follow the Jamesian view which defines religion in terms of ‘the feelings, acts and experiences of individual (people) in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the Divine.’ This Jamesian perspective ignores the scriptural accounts of the early disciples which showed that their unmediated encounters led them to proclaim their faith within community (Acts 2:14–42, 3:1–10, 12–16).

Looking at the obedience of Christianity’s chief figures, Mary, Paul and Peter, through the lens of Baron von Hugel’s way of understanding early Christianity, we can see the diversity of sources or expressions of obedience that are still present today. Von Hugel identified three streams in Christianity, namely the intellectual/prophetic, the institutional and the mystical. While the New Testament characters are no doubt much less bald than these divisions tend to suggest, for example the theologising of Paul was fed by his mystical knowing (Acts 9:1–19), there is a certain sense of truth to these ascriptions. From the perspective of obedience, Mary’s ‘yes’ arose from her inner knowing of the presence of God; Paul, drawing on his own mystical experience of Christ, elaborated theologically as to why obedience to Christ was required of him and therefore of us; and Peter reflected the ‘institutional’ call to obedience by stressing the importance of being true to the Jewish traditions.

Obedience in the Old Testament

The biblical ground for obedience is clear in Old Testament scriptures. In Hebrew, the word šamâ‘ refers to the physical act of hearing and, in certain contexts, the combination of hearing with the intention to obey (Exod 19:5, 8; Deut 28:1; 30:11–14). Thus, to the Israelites, if one truly hears the word of God, there is an implied expectation of obedience (Gen 3:17; 23:15; Exod 24:7). Where people fail to obey, the prophets often accuse the Israelites of being deaf (Isa 6:9–10). Obedience is expected in one’s relationship to God (Jer 3:13, 25) and a son’s relationship to his father (Prov 4:1–2).

Throughout the Hebrew bible obedience to God brings blessings while disobedience leads to curses. The narrative of failure in obedience in the Old Testament begins hard upon the heels of the creation of humankind. For the ordinary Jew, life was a gift from God and therefore one practised obedience to the law which had been given to the Hebrews by God. Such faithfulness leads to immortality of the soul, to becoming ‘friends of God’ (Wis 7:27).

At the heart of the relationship, which was initiated between Moses and God, was the law as enunciated in the Ten Commandments and further explicated in the Deuteronomic law

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66 Scholars are mostly in agreement that the Ten Commandments as identified in Deuteronomy 5:6–21 are the earliest literary inclusion while the commandments as outlined in Exodus 20 are a later insertion,
codes. Israel’s very existence was predicated upon its obedience to the commandments and the law given by God through Moses. However, it is important to note that this obedience to the law was not merely adherence to rules, but a sign of covenant and membership of the People of God. With the Ten Commandments, all life is sanctified, coming under the realm of God and deemed by God to be holy. The encounter of Moses on Mt Horeb signalled the birth of a new nation under God. There was now to be, ‘one God, one land, one people, one rule’\textsuperscript{67}. That the Commandments were presented as being spoken in direct speech by God only added to their authority for all Israel. As W. H. Davies noted: ‘the actuality of obedience to the Torah and not theological interpretation of it, has been the hallmark of Judaism.’\textsuperscript{68} Obedience to God was put ahead of all other considerations as the story of Abraham and Isaac so harshly suggests.\textsuperscript{69}

This Old Testament practice of obedience to the law is predicated upon the prophets and holy people’s experience of God. That these experiences are central to the Jewish understanding of God is without question. The life of Moses is a case in point. His leadership of the Israelites is built on his experience of God and his acting on it – the encounter with God in the burning bush (Exod 3:1–17), God’s ‘self-disclosure’ (Exod 3:6) such that Moses ‘hid his face’ and the commissioning of Moses by God to lead the Israelites from Egypt. Time and again Moses returns to the place of encounter in order to place before God his difficulties with the Israelites and to intercede on their behalf to God (Exod 33:12–17). In one such experience, Moses is given the law that was to guide the Israelites henceforth. Despite his protestations of inadequacy, Moses ultimately overcomes his fears and obeys God’s requests. The narrative makes clear that he was changed in these encounters for his face shone and the Israelites ‘were afraid to come near him’ (Exod 34:30). The Deuteronomic text records that Moses knew God ‘face to face’ (Exod 34:10–12). Such experience of God underlies all the obedience apparent in his leadership and relations with the Israelites.

Obedience in the New Testament

As in the Old Testament, there is also an expectation in the New Testament that obedience follows ‘hearing’ a message from God or experiencing God’s presence in some way. The Gospels and the Pauline epistles make it very clear to the followers of Jesus that they were expected to emulate the obedience of Jesus.

In the New Testament, two words are most frequently used in relation to obedience. One is ‘thelma’ (θέλημα), which usually refers to the will of God or what God wishes for humankind and occurs 63 times. Importantly the Greek carries the meaning of ‘longing, desire, love, joy … being in love and the sexual desire a man feels for a woman.’\textsuperscript{70} God’s will for humankind is thus an expression of love or longing and not the desire to break a person as it has often been understood. The other is the noun ‘hupakoe’ (ὑπακοή) which occurs 14
\textsuperscript{67} Clements, “Deuteronomy,” 323.
\textsuperscript{69} Gen 22: 1–19.
\textsuperscript{70} André Louf, Teach Us to Pray: Learning a Little About God (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1974; repr., 1982), 29.
times (all in Pauline writing) or the verb form ‘hupakouo’ which occurs 21 times indicating that obedience is to be given to God through attentive listening. In both cases, the right relation of humankind to the divine is one of listening in love.

An Obedient Son

The New Testament scriptural model for obedience is of course Jesus. His adult life began with an experience of God (Mark 1:10) and his whole life was centred in God (Mark 12:30; Matt 6:33; Luke 12:31). But his obedience differed from the Hebrew tradition of obedience to the law. It arose in his experience of loving intimacy and union with the one he named as Father. Such an assumption of unity with God was scandalous to many Jewish people at this time. In becoming who He was – at one with the Godhead – Jesus embodied obedience as a way of being, arising in love and leading to its fruit in union with the Father. His obedience to the transcendent Father could not be other since it was a response in love to the one who loved him. ‘I will make (your name) known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them’ (John 17:26). Jesus ‘named the power that flowed through him as the power of God’ (Matt 12:28; Luke 11:20).

The human will of Jesus was entirely given over to carrying out the will of his Father as he states time and again. The Gospel of John does not use the words ‘obey’, ‘obedience’ or ‘obedient’, but states approximately 37 times that Jesus was sent by the Father to do His will. Jesus says, ‘My food is to do the will of the one who sent me, and to complete his work’ (John 4:34). In John 6:38, he states, ‘I have come from heaven, not to do my own will, but to do the will of him who sent me’. Jesus not only does the Father’s will, but he also reveals it. ‘For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day’ (John 6:40). In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus affirms his own obedience to the Father as the pattern for all discipleship. ‘Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord”, shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father in heaven’ (Matt 7:21–23). When he teaches the disciples how to pray, he emphasises that it is God’s will that is paramount. ‘Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven’ (Matt 6:10). All three synoptic Gospels (Mk 14:35–36; Mt 26:39) record Jesus’ interior struggle in the Garden of Gethsemane, where he again affirms his desire to do the will of his Father. ‘Father,’ he said, ‘if you are willing, take this cup away from me. Nevertheless, let your will be done, not mine’ (Luke 22:42) And in his final words on the cross, Jesus submits his spirit, ‘After Jesus had taken the wine he said, “It is fulfilled”; and bowing his head he gave up his spirit’ (John 19:30).

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus summarises his entire message with the parable of the two builders (Matt 7:21–27). The one who hears the words of the sermon and then translates that hearing into action (i.e. obeys) is like the one who builds a house upon a rock — he or she is on solid foundation. Not only is obedience the expected response to the ethical injunctions of Christ, but it is also the expected response to the Gospel (Gal 3:2).

However, even while proclaiming the reign of God in his teachings and hoping for obedience to it, Jesus did not demand obedience but left people free to choose their response to the

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call to love, freedom and growth. This can be clearly seen in the story of the rich young man (Matt 19:16–22). In response to the question, ‘Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?’ (Matt 19:16), Jesus says to this Jewish man that he needs to keep the commandments, ‘if you wish to enter into life’ (Matt 19:17). A further invitation is issued upon the young man replying that he already does this. Mark alone notes that ‘Jesus looking at him loved him’ (Mark 10:21). This time Jesus invites him to become a disciple, ‘come follow me’ (Matt 19:21). But that was not possible for the rich young man and he leaves saddened. What follows then is a discourse by Jesus on detachment and wealth, not an angry exhortation or demand. The freedom of the rich young man to respond positively or negatively, that is, to obey or disobey, is clear. He exemplifies human fragility. Even though he desired to ‘go deeper’, and even as he received the gaze of love from Jesus, he could not say yes. The cost of obedience was greater than he was able, at that point, to assent to.

Likewise, in the story of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:3-11). Jesus asks the offended Pharisees and scribes to examine their own consciences for sin. In so doing they hear ‘the voice of justice: “let the sinner be punished but not by sinners.”’ Jesus does not cast judgment per se on them or the woman, nor does he demand a course of action, rather Jesus lays out the guidelines against which judgment, such as the Pharisees proposed, be made. Sandra Schneiders describes it thus: ‘Jesus does not say that the woman is sinless. He just points out that no one is, and thereby Jesus stops the scapegoating process.’ The Pharisees and scribes were left free by Jesus to determine their own response. Fortunately for the woman in question, the Pharisees and scribes realised that their obedience to the law was superseded by the context of a broader justice to which they needed to submit.

The power of Jesus lived on in the disciples following his death and resurrection, drawing forth an obedience to the Spirit. Luke Timothy Johnson states: ‘The key to early Christianity’s success lies not in its teaching but in its experience of power.’ The disciples knew it was the power of the Spirit of Christ working in them, changing them and leading them to obedience in love because, as Paul said, ‘if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation’ (2 Cor 5:17). They also knew that this transforming power was not controlled by them but was of another order – ‘for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit’ (2 Cor 3:18). It was a ‘power not in their control but rather controlling them, a power that derived from the crucified and raised Messiah Jesus’.

**The Obedience of Mary**

Mary also in the Annunciation scene is free to exercise choice. She is often referred to as the archetypal female symbol of obedience within Christianity. Scripturally this rests on her *fiat:* ‘let it be with me according to your word’ (Luke 1:38), which made possible the Incarnation wherein, ‘the Word became flesh and lived among us’ (John 1:14). Her words reflect

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listening in faith and acting.\textsuperscript{77} Down the centuries the Annunciation scene has been memorialised in music and art of extraordinary beauty and evocative of mystery. Mary became a symbol of faith and idealised womanhood, living the paradox of virgin and mother.\textsuperscript{78} Her obedience was enjoined upon all women.

However, while there are many ways of viewing Mary, official Catholic depictions of Mary have been ambiguous for many women. They have tended to stress her:

- obedience, virginity and primary importance as a mother, [this has] shaped a religious symbol that satisfied the needs of a monastic or ecclesiastical male psyche more adequately than it served women’s spiritual search or social capabilities.\textsuperscript{79}

Arguably her mystical ‘yes’ has been co-opted by the official church, ‘to legitimise women’s subordinate place in the church’.\textsuperscript{80} Such has been the depth of the co-option, her real and symbolic obedience, her freely given ‘yes’, is difficult for many to locate beneath the centuries of accretions of meekness and docility. Indeed, these accretions have contributed to the negativity with which many Catholic women view obedience. For Mary to be a symbol of obedience which suggests human flourishing today, she requires the long, slow work of recovery of a real woman, grasped by God.\textsuperscript{81} In qualifying Mary as a symbol of obedience, I am not rejecting the humility or obedience that she displayed. Rather I am rejecting the way in which these qualities of holiness, essential for deification, have been packaged by a male clerical church for believers, especially women.

**Paul and Obedience**

The Pauline Letters reiterate the importance of attentive listening and openness to the Spirit for the will of God. Believers are exhorted to follow the son’s obedience. As a deeply observant Jew at the time of his Damascus road conversion, Paul knew that the first response to the word of God is to obey. Josephus writing shortly after Paul’s death reflects the currency of the view that obedience is virtue and disobedience is sin.\textsuperscript{82}

But following his conversion experience, Paul never speaks of obedience to the will of God or of obedience to a law. He speaks only of obedience to Christ\textsuperscript{83} or to the Gospel.\textsuperscript{84} In the Epistles, Paul’s Christology is that of a son who is obedient to the Father. He reminds the readers of the Philippians letter that Jesus Christ’s death on the cross is the ultimate example of obedience (hypékkoos) (Phil 2:8). Indeed, Jesus behaved as a slave to his Father: ‘he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave ... even to accepting death, death on a cross’ (Phil 2:7-8). This pre-Pauline hymn that Paul incorporated into his letter to the Philippians 2:6–10, uses the metaphor of a slave to describe the obedience of Jesus. In the context of a slave culture, ‘this emphasis on obedience as the primary ethical requirement of the slave’

\textsuperscript{77} Bishop Kallistos Ware, “Mary Theotokos in the Orthodox Tradition,” \textit{Epiphany Journal} 9, no. 2 (Winter 1989), 56.
\textsuperscript{78} Ruether, \textit{Sexism and God Talk}, 246.
\textsuperscript{79} Elizabeth A. Johnson, \textit{Truly Our Sister}, 7.
\textsuperscript{80} Elizabeth A. Johnson, \textit{Truly Our Sister}, xiv.
\textsuperscript{81} This is the aim behind the scholarly work of Elizabeth Johnson in \textit{Truly our Sister}.
was well understood and was ‘the content of New Testament moral exhortation to Christian slaves’. But not only to slaves: Paul exhorted the followers of Jesus to imitate Christ as he did (1 Cor 4:15-16) and to imitate Christ in a moral sense through the forgiveness of those who had wronged them (Eph 5:1).

From his own experience of conversion, Paul understood that his transfiguration was brought about by the Spirit of Christ. His obedience arose from the personal intensity of this experience of Jesus, enabling his ongoing transfiguration. As it was also for others, ‘for now, we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face.’ (1 Cor 13:12a).

All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another, for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

Such was his conviction and experience of the Spirit dwelling within him (Rom 8:9, 11; 2 Cor 3:15; 2 Tim 1:14) that before Christ nothing else mattered. ‘I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord’ (Phil 3:8a). It enabled a radical following of Christ. His identification with Christ was his goal (Gal 6:14), underpinning his daily life, his preaching and healing and igniting his desire for total union with God (1 Thess 5:22–23; 2 Thess 2:13; 2 Cor 7:1). Paul acknowledges the reality of the gift of the Spirit when he questions the Galatians (Gal 3:2) and their baptism in Christ as having a transforming reality (Gal 3:27).

It is suggested that in the years between the death of Jesus and Paul’s letters, devotion to Jesus, linked with God, was so established that Paul assumed it in his letters.

What indications we have are that from the earliest years of the Christian movement, individuals experienced what they took to be revelations sent by God that conveyed to them the sense that a right response and obedience to God demanded of them the cultic reverence of Christ.

Such is the experience of the power of the Spirit by the apostles generally and the early followers of Jesus, that it is argued they completely step outside their previous Jewish tradition of worship of the one God, to also worship Christ as a cultic figure.

Conclusion

The identity of Moses and the Jewish people was founded on obedience to their experience of the one God. Likewise, it is clear from the words of Jesus that he saw his raison d’etre as being to carry out the will of the one he named as Father and in so doing to teach the ‘Good News of God’s Kingdom’. His self-identity as son was grounded in his intimate relationship with God. Therefore, the obedience of Jesus sprang from his experience of being loved by God and loving the Father in return. Mary and Paul, transformed by their own mystical encounters, in their different ways modelled the self-gift of obedience in love.

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86 2 Cor 3:18.
The disciples of Jesus recognised in him an authority which, after his death and resurrection, they experienced as the Spirit of Christ present to them and acting through them. The immediacy of the experience of the Spirit’s presence to them meant they could not do other than offer their obedience to Christ and God. That they failed at times in obedience (Rom 7:15–20) does not obviate the way in which they viewed its importance.

The ‘constant jostling between the intellectual/prophetic, institutional and the mystical strands’ in the history of Christianity throws light on the way obedience was understood and promoted in the later Christian community. In the next chapter, we can see these differing emphases emerging, sometimes with tension, in the early church.

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Chapter 3 – The Changing Face of Obedience

The obedience of Jesus to his Father’s will and the subsequent obedience of the first disciples and early Christians to their experience of the power of the Spirit in Jesus reflected a new and transforming revelation of the one God. The Spirit was the revelatory ground of the Jesus communities. The death and resurrection of Jesus and the sending of the Spirit, the gradual growth of the early Christian communities, the rise of monasticism and the later collapse of the western Roman Empire, all had implications for the application of obedience for the early Christians. Elders, overseers (episkopoi), prophets and teachers and later the holy men or women and bishops and clergy, succeeded Jesus and the first apostles as the authority figures in the communities.

In this chapter, I show how obedience changed as the small Christian communities grew in numbers and interacted with the also changing imperial landscape. Ecclesiastical orders were established which distinguished the ordained and educated clergy from the non-ordained and usually uneducated laity. As the bishops and clergy sought to preserve unity, the content of faith and hence heresy became defined. It has been common for scholars to understand authority (therefore obedience) in the Christian communities in the period to late Antiquity and beyond, in binary terms. It was either charismatic in origin (i.e. derived from the holiness of the individual gifted by the Spirit) or more institutional and increasingly secular in character as the church exercised civil as well as religious leadership, particularly in some areas. Historian Claudia Rapp describes this view as ‘charisma versus institution, mysticism versus politics and prayer versus power.’ However, as she and others suggest, a more nuanced view is necessary.

A variety of influences impacted upon the individual Christian’s perception of obedience in a world perceived as suffused with the divine, whether in the private or public spheres. However, I will suggest that, with respect to obedience, the rise of monasticism beginning in the third century and especially from the time of Benedict of Nursia, was decisive in contributing an asceticism of obedience to Christian spirituality in general. The emphasis on obedience to the Spirit and increasingly to the will of God as revealed through the bishop, complemented a need by the ecclesia for unity and control. This latter became the predominant understanding of obedience in western Christianity in general and Catholicism in particular, until Vatican II. The corresponding gradual diminution of the awareness of charismatic authority within the western church context has had a decisive impact on the way in which obedience has been perceived by Christians to this day.

Obedience in the Spirit

The first Christians experienced the power within them as the Spirit of Christ. Faith in this experience was at the heart of early Christian discipleship. As Luke Timothy Johnson states:

The experience was that of transforming, transcendent, personal power, a power that altered not only the consciousness but the very status of those experiencing it. The symbol for this experience was ‘The Holy Spirit’. The term ‘spirit’ denoted the character

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91 Rapp, *Holy Bishops*, 16.
of the power: it was not political, military or economic, but rather personal and transformative of human freedom.\textsuperscript{92}

In such a context obedience to the source behind the power was beyond question.

Pseudo-Barnabas, writing in the latter part of the first century CE, emphasises the importance of the Spirit when he says, ‘Let us be pneumatics, let us be the perfect Temple of God.’\textsuperscript{93} Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, a biblical scholar and feminist theologian, whose groundbreaking work employing the hermeneutic of suspicion for biblical and other sources has recovered a more accurate portrayal of the place and work of women in the early Christian communities, suggests that Pseudo-Barnabas encapsulates ‘the theological self-understanding of the pre-Pauline missionary movement.’\textsuperscript{94} In this heady environment of personal transformation, the early Christians experienced themselves as a new creation, freed inwardly from their bonds, knowing an indwelling mystery in joy and freedom.\textsuperscript{95} Such experience generated obedience to the Spirit as an expression of love and in the recognition of growth in freedom.

By receiving the remission of our sins and hoping on the Name, we became new, created afresh from the beginning. ... He Himself dwelling in us, opening for us who had been in bondage unto death the door of the temple ... \textsuperscript{96}

Gathering in the house-churches for meals, the early followers of Jesus, whether it be through teaching, healing or baptising, perceived themselves to be channels of the Holy Spirit in their communities. For example, when Philip met the Ethiopian eunuch on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza, he ran to obey the Spirit spoken to him. His teaching led to the eunuch’s baptism and then, we are told, Philip is ‘transported’ by the Spirit to Azo’tus where he continued preaching’ (Acts 8:26–40).

Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza imagines and invites her readers into this enthusiastic dependence on the Spirit of the first Christians.

In baptism, Christians enter the force field of the Spirit, share in ecstatic experiences and are ‘sent’ to proclaim the gospel in the power of the Spirit. They have become ‘a new creation’, the Spirit-filled people, those who have been purified, sanctified and justified. They all are equal, because they all share in the Spirit ... \textsuperscript{97}

It is this understanding of the Spirit working in all and leading to the discipleship of equals, that is later captured in the words of Paul to the Galatians. ‘There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus’ (Gal 3:28). This clarion call for a renewed vision reveals a God concerned with everyone; not just the good and pious, but also the poor and those marginalised or deemed sinful by their work or status. ‘For he makes his sun rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous’ (Matt 5:45b).

\textsuperscript{95} Schussler Fiorenza, \textit{In Memory}, 198.
\textsuperscript{96} \textit{Epistle of Barnabas}, 16.9.
\textsuperscript{97} Schussler Fiorenza, \textit{In Memory}, 199.
In this new vision, obedience was reframed. The *basilea* of God now took precedence over the household unit. As Brendan Byrne notes, the new family is the kingdom of God.

Old Israel may be fragmenting and dividing, but anyone prepared to do the will of the Father in heaven, practicing righteousness in the sense of ‘what God wants’ ... belongs to a renewed Israel that here and now enjoys a familial relationship with God. 98

However, a teaching such as this was bound to run into conflict sooner or later with the broader pagan Greco-Roman culture into which it was delivered. Despite being a ‘new creation’, the early Christian communities ‘faced numerous crises that challenged them to discern the shape of authentic discipleship in situations they had not anticipated.’ 99 The history of obedience is intrinsic to the responses to these challenges.

**Obedience and the Household**

In both the Jewish and the Greco-Roman culture, the social order and religion were intertwined. As Philip Esler states, it is ‘anachronistic to speak of “religion” as having an existence separate from politics or the family, in the context of the ancient Mediterranean world.’ 100 Obedience to authority whether at home or in society was the lynchpin on which order and harmony were maintained privately and publicly. Submission to power was patriarchal and long established. 101 The nexus between the household and the ruling power had important implications for the application of obedience within the early Christian communities.

This meant that Jesus and Paul spoke, and Christianity grew, in contexts where there were defined and intertwined principles of obedience that bound all members of the household. Any threat to these principles became a threat to the stability of the state. The Roman Empire to some degree tolerated the different religions of its captive subjects, but order was expected to be maintained. 102 The writings of Philo of Alexandria (25 BC–50 CE), a Hellenistic Jewish philosopher, and Roman Jewish historian Josephus (37–100 CE) reveal awareness of the need for obedience to the Roman authorities and the paterfamilias household structure. 103

‘A New Creation’ in Conflict

However, the understandings of the Jesus missionary movement cut across the prevailing domestic and communal dynamics. The transforming energy of the discipleship of equals offered another vision of the earthly kingdom of God which was at odds with the

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102 Allen Brent, *Ignatius of Antioch: A Martyr Bishop and the Origin of Episcopacy* (London: T. & T. International, 2007), 14–43. Allen Brent suggests that the disorder in the Antiochian community over the divisions within the Antiochian Christians, and that generated by Ignatius’ desire to introduce appointed Bishops whom the laity must obey, was a reason for the move by authorities against Ignatius of Antioch and his ultimate martyrdom in Rome.

paterfamilias structure of the household and the existing order based on a slave culture. The message tugged at the founding threads of the household and hence the state. Because its gatherings were conducted in ‘house-churches,’ this new Jesus community was located at the very power centre of the social, political and religious order. Women and slaves particularly were attracted to a vision of the kingdom of a God who loves all equally. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza calls attention to the radical vision of Jesus, especially for women and the powerless.

Jesus and his movement offered an alternative interpretation of the Torah that opened up access to God for everyone who was a member of the elect people of Israel, and especially for those who, because of their societal situation, had little chance to experience God’s power in the Temple and Torah. 104

The tensions arising from this can be seen in the writings of Paul and Peter. In a Roman house which was a centre of daily worship, wives, children and slaves were expected to worship the gods of the master. In the early Christian period where the male head of a family converted to following Jesus, the entire family would then become Christians and Christian worship ensued in the house. However, tensions arose in a house where the women and slaves became followers of Jesus but not the husband. For a woman to worship a different god to that of her husband was to repudiate the male authority of the household. Nonetheless, the words of Jesus were clear in their redefinition of obedience as owed first and foremost to God. ‘For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.’ (Matt 12:50).

The tension created by ‘mixed marriages’ of believers and unbelievers was an issue for some Christian leaders. This can be seen in the writings of Paul to the Corinthians and in 1 Peter 3: 1–2. In 1 Corinthians 7:12–16 Paul addresses himself to the question of whose authority takes precedence in households of mixed belief and its implications. Should the wife capitulate, leave or offer secret Christian worship? Paul’s counsel to wives living with unbelieving husbands was to stay in the marriage, since by some form of ‘contagious holiness’ 105 they may bring about the conversion of their unbelieving spouse. Similarly, in 1 Peter 3:1–2, wives are counselled to be ‘mute, obedient, evangelists’ 106. ‘Christian wives (are) to submit themselves to their husbands, even when the latter are pagans and actively engaged against the Christian community by being disobedient to the word.’ 107 The tension between the discipleship of equals and obedience to the paterfamilias was an early communal reality. The comments by Paul and Peter are early signals of the adaptations made with the introduction of the household codes.

The attitudes and practices of the Jesus communities also offered a challenge to the accepted slave culture within the empire. 108 Slaves who converted to Christianity became a ‘new creation’ whilst still enslaved. However, Paul’s Letter to Philemon, entreating on Onesimus’ behalf, indicates the fragile limits of ‘a new creation in Christ’ amidst a culture accepting of slavery and its framework of obedience. Scholars generally agree that

104 Schussler Fiorenza, In Memory, 141.
106 Johnson Hodge, "Married to an Unbeliever."
107 Schussler Fiorenza, In Memory, 260.
108 Schussler Fiorenza, In Memory, 263.
Onesimus was a male slave who converted to Christianity and became a co-worker to the imprisoned Paul. There is disagreement however, as to why Onesimus may have left Philemon’s household. Now Paul seeks Onesimus’ reception and acceptance back into Philemon’s house, in the same way as Paul would be accepted. In so doing, Paul appeals to Philemon’s sense of duty, to his love and to their friendship. He offers to pay for anything Onesimus may owe Philemon and even reminds Philemon of his indebtedness to Paul (Phlm 1:21). There is also a hint from Paul in verse 21 of the hope that Philemon will release Onesimus from slavery, but his letter is not making the case against slavery per se. Paul saw himself as a ‘slave to Christ’, invoking culturally accepted language to describe his radical inner obedience.

New Testament Household Codes

The adoption of outward protocols of obedience known as the household codes in the latter half of the first century CE, signified the re-establishment of the paterfamilias rule within Christian homes and communities. That there were criticisms of the early Christians can be seen in 1 Peter 2:15. However, Christians could not assert their bona fides by observing the ‘ancestral laws’ since their adoption of Christianity precluded it. Some scholars argue that the introduction of the New Testament household codes or haustafel in German, in Colossians (3:18–4:1), Peter (1 Pet 2:11–3:12) and Ephesians (5:22–6:9), was a response to this criticism. They are generally agreed that these codes were Christian adaptations of an existing Greco-Roman or Jewish-Hellenistic philosophical-theological code. Women and children were required to obey the male household head, and slaves to obey everyone. The introduction of the Colossian haustafel reflects a threat to the social order. ... It is one thing for a Christian slave to act equal in the gathering of the church. It is quite another situation, however, when the same slave asserts his equality in society.

As Schussler Fiorenza notes:

Whatever the motivation, the result was that in taking over the Greco-Roman ethic of the patriarchal household code, Colossians not only ‘spiritualizes’ and moralizes the baptismal community understanding expressed in Gal 3:28, but also makes this Greco-Roman household ethic a part of ‘Christian’ social ethic.

The reference to the revised baptismal formula in 1 Peter 2:11–3:12 emphasises a ‘new people’ but it is an interior obedience rather than a realised social reality. ‘Now that you have purified your souls by obedience to the truth ... you have been born anew’ (1 Pet 1:22–23) leading to them now being the elect, ‘a chosen race, a royal priesthood’ (1 Pet 2:9). Schussler Fiorenza notes that its detail (3:11–16) suggests that the ‘Christian communities of

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109 Dennis Hamm, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 49.
111 Hamm, “Philippians, Colossians, Philemon”, 73.
114 Crouch, Colossians’s Haustafel, 150.
115 Schussler Fiorenza, In Memory, 253.
Asia Minor were a small and alienated minority group" and suggests its intention is to nurture communal harmony.

The patriarchal pattern of submission, therefore, does not so much seek to put wives back into their proper patriarchal roles and place but seeks to lessen the tension between the Christian community and the pagan patriarchal household.

Scholars debate the seeming contradiction between Gal 3:28 and the household codes, with some views suggesting the household codes are genuinely Christian, others that the push for equality was an enthusiastic excess. Schussler Fiorenza, however, thinks the opposite is true. Rather, she notes, it demonstrates the capacity for contradiction on the part of the Christian community.

Colossians shows how a so-called ‘enthusiastic’ realised eschatological perspective can produce an insistence on patriarchal behaviour as well as an acceptance of the established political-social status quo of inequality and exploitation in the name of Jesus Christ.

The emphasis on the equality of all in the Spirit as central in the good news of Jesus is clear. However, the introduction of the household codes gave scriptural authority to a mode of submission to domestic and civil authority figures that was at odds with Jesus’ own obedience as relational, experiential and chosen.

Obedience and Community in Transition

Shortly after the introduction of the household codes, the Jesus communities from approximately 200 CE became predominantly gentile communities. They became more diverse with the humble and oppressed first followers of Jesus being added to by converts from the lower middle classes and respectable artisans from the cities. They experienced an expansion that was ‘impressive because it had been totally unexpected’, necessitating an even greater need for organisation in the communities. This had implications for the practice of obedience. Noted historian of Late Antiquity, Peter Brown, attributes the later expansion of Christianity to its offering of a sense of belonging in a time when citizens of the Empire were feeling increasingly anxious as to their place in the world. While Brown identifies the stability and pastoral nature of the Christian community in a world in flux, his ‘this-worldly’ interpretation of the growth in numbers gives insufficient weight to the awareness of the early Christians of themselves as the ‘new temple’ and individually sanctified because ‘the Spirit of God dwells in you’. This self-understanding of the

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116 Schussler Fiorenza, In Memory, 261.
117 Schussler Fiorenza, In Memory, 264.
118 Schussler Fiorenza, In Memory, 255.
119 Schussler Fiorenza, In Memory, 254.
122 Brown, The World of Late Antiquity, 65.
123 Brown, The World of Late Antiquity, 67.
124 Brown, The World of Late Antiquity, 65.
125 1 Cor 3:16–17
interiority of Christianity experienced as transforming power was the motivation for obedience and should not be traded away in socio-historical reasoning.

Significantly, the community’s organisational roles at this time lacked any sort of theological legitimisation but were regarded as ‘straightforward functions in service of the community’s activities.’ It was Ignatius who first suggested when writing to the community in Tralles in 110 CE, that ‘ecclesial rank should be respected for its own sake’. This comment suggests a community where the location of spiritual power was in transition. Theologian and historian, Mark Edwards, notes that it is Ignatius’ charismatic status as a soon-to-be martyr and not his ecclesiastical status as a bishop, that ‘allowed’ him to write and expect to be listened to by a community that was not his own.

However, by the end of the second century, the previous communication and cooperation between Christian communities had developed into a governance structure with a ‘uniform and theologically justified authority structure with bishops exercising joint authority through synods’. By the fourth century, the Christian church communities boasted bishops in the three major cities of Alexandria, Rome and Antioch. These leaders were responsible for the local churches in their regions as well as an elaborate system of internal governance.

This expansion and the increasing needs of the Christian community, along with varying spiritual allegiances and practices, exposed tensions within the early communities and made obedience a more complex asceticism. Conflict arose between giving obedience to a charismatic elder endowed by God with spiritual gifts and obedience to a person holding an office in the developing institutional church. The troubles at Antioch at the beginning of the second century, which Allen Brent suggests led to the martyrdom of Ignatius of Antioch, is a case in point. Likewise, the relationship of Athanasius of Alexandria (d. 373 CE) with the ascetical monks displays both a recognition and endorsement of the spiritual power of the elders as well as a desire to bring the monks under ecclesiastical control. The seeming simplicity of obedience to the Spirit of the time of Jesus and the later disciples became broadened to include obedience to the emerging ecclesia – local elders, deacons and bishops. There was often a mixed view as to whether all such leaders were inspired by the Spirit or whether such roles ‘got in the way of’ the free flow of the Spirit in the early community.

In distinguishing between the offices of the early church (e.g. bishops) and the role exercised by those whose authority arose from their charismatic gifts, I do not wish to suggest that there is a neat division between the two groups. Mark Edwards suggests that:

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126 Johnson, Among The Gentiles, 173.
129 Johnson, Among The Gentiles, 173.
130 Johnson, Among The Gentiles, 173.
132 Brent, Ignatius of Antioch, 14–43.
133 David Brakke, Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), Ch.2.
134 Brent, Ignatius of Antioch, 41–42.
The truth appears to be that the restraint of charismatic gifts began with the Apostles, that the exercise of them never implied a negation of authority, and that some at least were indulged, or even encouraged, by the emerging magisterium.135

Indeed, in the embryonic church charismatic gifts, a ‘primary sacrament of the Spirit’, were expected also in those appointed to ministerial roles in the Christian communities. This is the nature of the Spirit’s ‘involvement’ in the emerging church.136 As Kallistos Ware writing in our own time notes, the one Spirit is the source of all charisms.

...if that word (charismatic) indicates (as properly it should) someone who has received the gifts or charismata of the Holy Spirit, then the ministerial priest, ordained through the episcopal laying on of hands is as genuinely charismatic as the one who speaks with tongues.137

Whatever the early Christians assessment of the presence or otherwise of charismatic gifts in some leaders, as far as the emerging church was concerned their appointments were also the fruits of the Spirit, to whom obedience needed to be given.

As the gap widened between the priests and hierarchy who were educated (often in monasteries138) and the lay Christians (usually uneducated), obedience was expected. Personal experience of the Spirit and the authority of the Gospel, while still paramount, was interpreted by the institutional leaders of the Christian community for the lay people.

Do you therefore esteem the bishop as the mouth of God? [ii. 29] For if Aaron, ... was called a prophet, ... why then should not you also reckon them (the bishops) as prophets who are for you the mediators of the word, and worship them as God?139

Ramsay MacMullen notes that while the evidence of Dura-Europos in the late second century points to little physical separation between the laity and the clergy, one hundred years later there is a clear distinction being made.

The bishop had become a high and mighty figure, lodged in his own palace, commanding all sorts of benefits and powers and the clergy beneath him were also set apart, invisibly through the general respect for their condition ... everyone awaited the bishop. He would be the last to arrive, the first to enter the church and with him in his train, all his inferiors. They swept past the laity, who next might then enter, everyone in an assigned place, everyone in due order ... 140

Such a gap was not just a function of education but also of wealth, however perhaps the laity were less obedient than this suggests. MacMullen notes that the Jeradé priesthood in Syria, although not fluent in Greek (the language of liturgy in the East), were honoured by the locals since they were the community’s most substantial landowners.141 It was natural for such local elites to assume a hierarchical stance and expect obedience. However,

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136 Lennan, Risking The Church, 112.
137 Kallistos Ware, The Inner Kingdom, vol. 1 of the Collected Works (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), 129, FN 6.
138 Johnson, Among The Gentiles, 266.
141 MacMullen, Second Church, 20.
MacMullen also suggests there is ‘a large worshipful population “doing their own thing” at one remove from the gaze of bishops and priests’. From ‘reading’ architectural remains he estimates that 95% of Christians in the 200–400 CE period adhered to a more popular Christianity which included worshipping in cemeteries. If his assumptions are valid, obedience was a variable asceticism.

The way in which obedience was sought by the episcopacy reveals a gendered face. Athanasius is a case in point. David Brakke documents the dealings of Athanasius with the male monks and the equivalent female virgins. They reveal a different approach to obedience which goes unremarked upon by Brakke. As bishop, Athanasius understood his responsibility was to ensure the unity of the church and the obedience of all Christians including the recently increased numbers of mostly male, ascetical monks. He advised ‘monks on proper ascetic practices and denounced monks who differed as heretics’, but Athanasius also recognised the spiritual authority of ‘advanced monks’ to lead those less experienced in the spiritual life. In gaining their obedience and support Athanasius related to monks like a politician: writing letters of advice, admonition or consultation, making strategic appointments and articulating a vision of a church made up of Bishops, monks and ordinary Christians.

Athanasius felt he needed to win the monk’s support for his position. However, in addressing the female virgins who lived together and practised asceticism in urban confines, Athanasius saw no need to exercise such strategic diplomacy, issuing instead ‘commands and regulations’ to them. Obedience and support from the women for the bishop was expected rather than sought, as in the case of the male ascetics.

Monasticism and Obedience

The centrality of obedience in Christian spirituality to this day was learned from the ascetical and monastic traditions. Groups of Christian women dedicated to ascetical living began in New Testament times. Men known as ‘renouncers’ did not adopt similar group forms until the late third century. In the practice of asceticism and monasticism, obedience was recognised as the discipline that transformed self-will and nurtured the much sought-after humility in the soul of the monk. As Amma Syncletica said, ‘obedience has the promise of humility’.

Obedience took slightly different forms across the varied monastic contexts of eremitical, semi-eremitical or cenobitic living, which Susanna Elm argues were reforms of existing diverse ascetical styles. In the case of the eremitical monks in Egypt, popularised by Athanasius’ Life of St Anthony the Great, obedience was given directly to the Spirit as

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142 MacMullen, Second Church, 111.
143 Brakke, Athanasius, 109.
144 Brakke, Athanasius, 110.
145 Brakke, Athanasius, 82.
146 Brakke, Athanasius, 100.
147 Brakke, Athanasius, 81.
148 Brakke, Athanasius, 80.
encountered through the monk’s prayer. St Anthony in his Letters, clearly drawing on his own experience when speaking of those who desire God with all their heart, emphasises reliance on the Spirit.

Then the Spirit that is his guide begins to open the eyes of his soul, to give to it also repentance, that it may be purified. The mind also starts to discriminate between the body and the soul, as it begins to learn from the Spirit how to purify both by repentance. 151

Those living the semi-eremitical life were grouped around an Abba or Amma and gave obedience to their spiritual father or mother. The sayings of the Desert Fathers contain numerous references to the need for obedience to teach the monk to overcome his or her desire for their own will. ‘The old men used to say: “If you see a young monk climbing up to heaven by his own will, grasp him by the feet and throw him down, for this is to his profit.”’ 152

Cenobitic monks owed obedience to the Abbot or Abbess who was usually chosen by the community and seen as taking the place of Christ. Pachomius, the founder of Christian cenobitic monasticism in the Thebaid area of upper Egypt in the period from 297–346 CE, found it an initially difficult task to teach eremitical obedience to the monks who gathered around him.

……after four or five years of patience, Pachomius, having passed the night in prayer, decided on a radical change in his methods. He would compel his companions henceforth either to accept a set rule, the first point being obedience to his authority, or else they would go away. 153

Possessed of the gifts of spiritual fatherhood himself, Pachomius however ‘displayed no contempt for or opposition to the episcopal hierarchy, but rather urged obedience to ‘our fathers the bishops’ in ecclesiastical matters, although he resisted ‘episcopal intrusion’ into what became the Pachomian federation. 154

Living almost two thousand kilometres to the north, St Basil of Caesarea in Cappadocia, under the influence of his elder sister Macrina, established the spiritual principles of a monastic community independently of St Pachomius. He saw his principles as a guide for Christian living rather than merely for monks. 155 Basil was the first to introduce a formal novitiate and solemn profession and ‘to insist on obedience as a means of restraining the excess, the competitiveness, and the ostentation of histrionic individuals who were bringing

152 Kallistos Ware, The Inner Kingdom, vol. 1 of the Collected Works (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), 128.
154 Brakke, Athanasius, 116.
the monastic movement into disrepute. Obedience to the superior was clearly identified, especially as one who possessed charismatic authority to heal the soul’s ills.

John Cassian

Western cenobitism did not emerge from flourishing ascetic communities under cover of the local churches, as cenobitic monasticism had in the East. While several western Christian leaders were very open to the monastic ideal it was John Cassian in the early fifth century who effected the profound movement of the aspirations and practices of Egyptian monasticism (including its emphasis on obedience) to the Latin church.

Cassian spent a very formative ten-year period living the life of the desert monks of Egypt. Almost twenty years after fleeing the desert in 399 CE and ordained as a priest, he was invited to establish a monastery for men and women based on Egyptian monasticism in southern Gaul. In his Institutes and Conferences, Cassian outlined the key teachings of desert monasticism for the monastic men and women of southern Gaul as they sought, ‘the kingdom of heaven’ and ‘a clean heart’. ‘Therefore we must follow completely, anything that can bring us to this objective, to this purity of heart.’ In so doing he brought to the west the teachings of Evagrius of eremitical fame and the cenobite Pachomius, including the eastern notion that monasticism is Christianity’s most perfect expression, emanating as it does from the apostles themselves.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to explore the reasons as to why laypeople fled to the desert to undertake not the martyrdom of their physical self, but an inner martyrdom. But, in so doing, their practice of obedience became the pivot on which this interior martyrdom turned.

In the Egyptian desert monasticism of the fourth century, those aspiring to live the apostolic life as monastics were ‘apprenticed’ to elders who had already, through their asceticism and obedience, undertaken an inner martyrdom and attained a holiness and purity of heart. As Cassian notes in the Institutes:

|Therefore no one is chosen to rule over a community of brothers unless, before he himself exercises authority, he has learned by obedience how he should command|

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157 E. F. Morison, St Basil and His Rule: A Study in Early Monasticism (London: Oxford University Press, 1912), 54.
159 Ambrose of Milan and Martin of Tours, both of whom died in 397 CE and Augustine of Hippo who died in 430 CE.
161 Cassian, Conferences, 40.
163 Throughout this thesis I use the term “elders” more usually as an inclusive language synonym for spiritual mothers and fathers rather than in Protestant sense of parish leadership.
those who will be subject to him and has understood from the institutes of the elders what he should pass on to the young.\textsuperscript{164}

For Cassian obedience is to be preferred ‘even to all other virtues’.\textsuperscript{165} ‘He frequently (Institutes 4. 10, 24, 27; 12.32) speaks of the command of the Superior as the voice of God.’\textsuperscript{166} Failure to obey an instruction from an elder, was a refusal to forgo one’s will and tantamount to disobeying God. It could incur banishment from the community. In Cassian’s understanding, the elder’s instruction did not need to make rational sense and may have required heroic acts of obedience.\textsuperscript{167} It was enough that an Abba or Amma had asked it. Handing over one’s will to an elder was for Cassian the essential ground in which the monastic emptied herself/himself in emulation of the kenosis of Christ. Abba Pambo chose the obedient monk as the most virtuous.

Abba Pambo said to them, ‘I tell you, the virtue of this last one is the greatest. Each of the others had obtained the virtue he wished to acquire; but the last one restraining his own will, does the will of another. Now it is of such men that the martyrs are made, if they persevere to the end.’\textsuperscript{168}

From the time of entry, the aspiring monastics were tested to ascertain the strength of their desire for God alone. The ability to withstand humiliation is linked with learning the asceticism of obedience.

Whoever seeks to be received into the discipline of the cenobium is never admitted until, by lying outside for ten days or more, he has given an indication of his perseverance and desire ...\textsuperscript{169}

The strictness with which obedience was practised, however, must also be seen in the context of the emphasis that was placed on charity and non-judgment towards one’s neighbour. The virtues were intertwined and upheld in love. It is said of Macarius the Great that when he saw the sins of his fellow monastics, he ‘would “cover” them, just as God casts protection over the world.’\textsuperscript{170} St Anthony of the Desert linked coming close to God and kindness to one’s neighbour. Rowan Williams describes it thus, ‘Insofar as you open such doors for another, you gain God in the sense that you become a place where God happens for somebody else.’\textsuperscript{171}

The loving devotion in the elder-disciple relationship and the care for the neighbour in desert monasticism arises from being emptied out through ongoing obedience and self-forgetfulness to reveal an inner spaciousness in Christ. The desert monks’ lives exemplify how in loving kenosis obedience can lead to union with God.

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{165} Cassian, \textit{The Institutes}, 84, Book 4: XII.
  \item \textsuperscript{166} Terence G. Kardong, \textit{Benedict’s Rule: A Translation and Commentary} (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 105.
  \item \textsuperscript{167} Cassian, \textit{The Institutes}, 190, Book 4: XXIV.
  \item \textsuperscript{168} Ward, \textit{The Sayings}, 196.
  \item \textsuperscript{169} Cassian, \textit{The Institutes}, 79, Book 4: III.
  \item \textsuperscript{170} Rowan Williams, \textit{Where God Happens: Discovering Christ In One Another} (Boston: New Seeds, 2005), 17.
  \item \textsuperscript{171} Williams, \textit{Where God Happens}, 24.
\end{itemize}
St Benedict and Obedience

More than three hundred years later St Benedict put together a Rule for monastic living for those who had gathered about him at Monte Cassino. It reflected some Eastern monastic sources — the Apophthegms and Lives of the Desert Fathers, the Conferences of St John Cassian, the Rule of St Basil and the elusive Rule of the Master. As in Cassian, the Rule of St Benedict made obedience a central virtue for monastics, closely linked with listening and designed to lead to humility. The theological basis for Benedictine obedience lies in the understanding that monastics already participate in Christ through the indwelling Spirit ‘in whom we live and move and have our being’ (Acts 17:28) and that the superior takes the place of Christ in the monastery.

In the opening verses of the Prologue, Benedict places the attentive heart and obedience within touching distance, thus emphasising the role of the heart in obedience.

Listen carefully my son (and daughter) to the master’s instructions.... with the ear of your heart...this is advice from a father who loves you ... the labour of obedience will bring you back from the sloth of disobedience.172

From the beginning, the monastic is asked by Benedict to listen to the teaching that comes from a superior who embodies the wisdom charism of a Master and is also a loving father or mother. So, obedience, as envisaged by St Benedict, arises in a relationship of love and spiritual authority.173

As with the Rule of the Master and Cassian before him, Benedict sees obedience as essential for the diminishment of self-will without which there could be no spiritual progress.

If you are ready to give up your own will, once and for all, and armed with the strong and noble weapons of obedience to do battle for the true King, Christ the Lord.174

This entails surrendering the ‘power to dispose either over oneself or over the place’.175 RB 3.8 states, ‘In the monastery no one is to follow [their] own heart’s desire.’176 RB 5 emphasises the importance of unquestioning obedience. Steps two through to five in RB 7 on Humility all relate to obedience. It is at the heart of humility. When St Benedict says, ‘we are forbidden to do our own will’ he is striking at the heart of the will to individual autonomy. While a difficult teaching in Benedict’s time, it is confronting for today’s western Christian’s understanding of obedience. But, as Christina Fox notes, the surrender of one’s will through obedience, practised as envisaged by Benedict, makes way in the monk’s being for the infilling of divine desire and will and to know it as one’s own.

173 Christina Fox, Obedience, Spiritual Direction Formation Program 2008–2011 (Living Well Centre, Melbourne 2010).
176 Benedict of Nursia, RB 1980, Ch. 3.8, 181.
Giving it up creates a liminal space that can then be filled, pressed down and running over with the will of God. ... God’s will, the divine desire, is always for our good. In fact, as Louf says, it coincides with the most intimate secret depths of our being.\textsuperscript{177}

RB 58.2 reinforces that ‘ownership’ of even one’s body ‘can obstruct obedience towards God and the community’.\textsuperscript{178} In what is seen by some scholars as evidence of Benedict’s growing confidence, RB 71 exhorts monastics to practise mutual obedience to all in the community, not just the superior and elders.\textsuperscript{179} ‘Obedience is a blessing to be shown by all, not only to the abbot but also to one another as brothers ...’\textsuperscript{180}

In RB 72, Benedict, seeing obedience as a form of love, calls monastics to vie with each other in obedience, showing patience and respect, in recognition of one’s own and others’ frailty. Aquinata Böckmann sees this chapter, and hence obedience, as epitomising the whole spirit of Benedict.

Here we find the ardent and radical love of Christ and the brothers, the importance and community of fraternity, Christ as the centre, the dynamism of our way to God, the interdependence of grace and human cooperation, the importance of prayer, the inter-connectedness of the horizontal and vertical dimensions.\textsuperscript{181}

Perhaps, as Aquinata Böckmann notes, the influence of Benedictine monasticism on the understanding of obedience is best seen in the relationship between obedience and love. Benedict emphasises both the horizontal love for one’s sisters or brothers in the community and the vertical love for Christ, as a motive and fruit of obedience. ‘Benedict sees obedience as a form of love ... for the Lord ... together with selfless fraternal love.’\textsuperscript{182} In so doing he reinforces the theme of the Prologue, ‘to listen with the ear of your heart’ and offers a perspective on obedience that takes it to the heart of human freedom and wholeness.

**Abbatial Leadership and Obedience**

Although he would have been familiar with both the Pachomian or Basilian leadership model Benedict chose the disciple-master relationship of the eastern anchorites as the model of abbatial leadership in the Rule.\textsuperscript{183} Their differing emphases suggest different nuances concerning the practice of obedience. The ‘vertical, hierarchical model, premised on the intrinsic superiority of the Master, who by God’s grace is possessed of special gifts to be imparted to the disciple,’\textsuperscript{184} implied a one-on-one relationship of obedience due to the God-given charisma of the Abbot/Abbess. Interestingly, the contemporary Benedictine scholar Terence Kardong states that in western cenobitic monasticism the authority of the abbot does not depend on ‘the spiritual charisma of the master’. Maybe Benedict in using the anchoritic model for his Rule had hoped or anticipated that it would, with all that implies for obedience. In any case, he softens the ‘superior’ Master status of the Abbot, counselling the

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\textsuperscript{177} Cited in Fox, "Obedience."
\textsuperscript{178} Böckmann, *Perspectives*, 147.
\textsuperscript{179} Foulcher, *Reclaiming Humility*, 107.
\textsuperscript{180} Benedict of Nursia, *RB 1980*, Ch 71:1, 293.
\textsuperscript{181} Böckmann, *Perspectives*, 73.
\textsuperscript{182} Böckmann, *Perspectives*, 62.
\textsuperscript{183} Kardong, *Benedict’s Rule*, 65.
\textsuperscript{184} Kardong, *Benedict’s Rule*, 64–5.
monastic to, ‘obey the abbot’s commands in everything, even if he himself, which God forbid, should act otherwise...’

By contrast, in the more horizontal Pachomian/Basilian model of leadership, ‘the role of the superior is highly esteemed, but it is situated within this brotherhood and on the level of communion of life rather than on the level of hierarchical authority.’ However, obedience to the charism of the elder was retained in both Pachomian and Basilian monasticism. ‘Even in the Pachomian federation there remained the real, if undefined, authority of “the elders”’. And eastern (Basilian) monasticism retained, alongside the monastic superior, the gifts of the elders – ό πρεσβύτεροι, a geronta or staretz – monastic or lay, charismatically gifted by the Spirit, to assist seekers in their journey to God.

Most startsi have possessed no exalted status in the formal hierarchy of the church; yet the influence of the simple priest-monk such as Seraphim of Sarov exceeded that of any patriarch or bishop in nineteenth-century Orthodoxy.

Thus, the monastic understanding of the centrality of obedience to the superior who took the place of Christ in the monastery became the model for all Christians. However, after the twelfth century, the decline in the experience and understanding of contemplation gradually eroded the notion of obedience as a form of love, replacing it with a sense of moral duty in obedience to church rules and hierarchy.

The Continuing Monastic Influence on Obedience

The influence of monasticism as the ideal in the development of a Christian life for a layperson was profound from the fourth century to the medieval period. Indeed, it can be argued that this continued until the impact of the reforms of Vatican II. Although Jesus did not instruct the faithful to withdraw from the world, the monastic and ascetical path on which withdrawal was grounded became the ‘gold standard’ against which all other spiritual efforts, including obedience, were measured.

What we call monastic spirituality strongly imbued life with an ascetic ideal which became a determining feature in how it should be lived and a dominant factor in judgements of value and behaviour.

Along with the ascetic ideal as the basis of Christian spirituality, the Christian community was divided between the rulers and the ruled. By the time of Gregory the Great (d. 604 CE), who was a monk before he reluctantly became pope, this division was entrenched in Christianity. There were ‘the children of the Church’ (the ruled) and the clergy who were ‘shepherds, preachers, teachers, rulers, prelates’ (the rulers). Nevertheless, Gregory, who valued the contemplative life, believed that the ‘the children of the church’ (my emphasis) were able to attain the grace of contemplation, although not as often as monks. His

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185 Benedict of Nursia, RB 1980, Ch. 4:61, 185.
186 Veilleux, "The Abbatial Office."
187 Brakke, Athanasius, 85.
188 Brakke, Athanasius, 85.
189 Ware, Inner Kingdom, 130–31.
190 In eastern Christianity, it remains to this day the prevailing spiritual ground from which Orthodox spirituality is nurtured.
teaching for all Christians drew heavily on his monastic background. In the sixth century, ‘the stark command of obedience had become the essence of monasticism’. Following Luke 14:26, Gregory taught Christians to hate their relations. This was the obedience of the Desert Fathers and Mothers and Cassian and was to be found in the Rule of the Master and the Rule of St Benedict.

For true obedience does not inquire into the intention of superiors nor does it examine their commands ... For whoever has learned perfect obedience does not know how to judge, since he considers obedience to orders the only good.

Only total self-abnegation through obedience could lead one to union with God. ‘Such sacrificial obedience is the hallmark of the holy man, who stands as an example to the rest of the church.’

A late eighth-century mirror for lay people (specifically rich noblemen) by Paulinus in *Liber exhortationis* reflects what has been described as ‘an interiorised monasticism: a radical conversion to imitating monastic spirituality while still remaining in secular life.’ Paulinus’ lay mirror also suggests that the household head has a role to instruct his household on proper behaviour presumably with an expectation of compliance from the other family members and servants.

Another mirror for lay noblemen, *De virtutibus et vitii* written by Alcuin, possibly within a decade of *Liber exhortationis*, while more accommodating of the noble lifestyle, suggests that the *populus* (who were not the nobility) should listen humbly to the priest and obey him. In the eleventh century, another Pope Gregory (d. 1085 CE) instituted ‘reforms’ which included lay spirituality. ‘Teachings for the laity moved from spirituality to morality: from Jesus’ call to his commands, from spiritual growth to the avoidance of sin.’ Thus obedience to the rules laid down by the church hierarchy was entrenched. Gregory VII, convinced of the God-given primacy of the pope, insisted that the ecclesiastical hierarchy and even secular leaders gave obedience to the Pontiff. Thus, the concept of the Papal monarchy was born.

Gregory’s chancery revived and strengthened an oath of obedience that was required of all archbishops and bishops. Outranking every local authority, his legates intervened freely in internal diocesan affairs throughout Latin Christendom.

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193 Straw, *Gregory the Great*, 84.
195 Straw, *Gregory the Great*, 86.
197 Rachel Stone, "Laicus: Jonas of Orléans and Carolingian Knowledge About Laymen."
198 Doohan, *The Lay-Centred Church*, 97.
199 Doohan, *The Lay-Centred Church*, 97.
Obedience by the laity was assumed as the gap between the clergy and laity widened.\textsuperscript{200} Although Jean Gerson – the influential fifteenth-century University of Paris Chancellor, theologian and writer on the spiritual life – regarded (some) laypeople as more capable of reaching contemplative heights compared with many schoolmen, he was ambivalent with respect to educating the laity in spiritual matters. In his view the contemplative experience of the divine by the \textit{simple gens} needed to be held within limits. Gerson was concerned that those following the spiritual life attended to the institutional church and its obligations.\textsuperscript{201} Without education, they would always need to be ‘ruled’ by the priests and hierarchs and therefore obedient.\textsuperscript{202} He is critical of Ruusbroec and other mystical writers of the time for writing of spiritual things that can lead ‘\textit{simple gens}’ astray. ‘Many false or poorly explained things are found in their teachings that lead the simple into error, even though they contain many high and noble spiritual truths.’\textsuperscript{203} Gerson (and others through treatises on the discernment of spirits) promoted an obedience to the hierarchy and the male university as the arbiter of all that was authentically spiritual. It is argued by some scholars that his desire to ensure ‘his claim regarding the extensive contemplative authority of university-trained theologians’\textsuperscript{204} in part led him to dismiss or deny the charismatic experiences of women. Feminist scholarship criticises Jean Gerson, describing his words as misogynist polemics and using his authority to diminish women’s spiritual voice.

Gerson contributed to a discourse that thoroughly discredited the very notion of uneducated ascetic women’s ability to commune with the divine or their capacity to speak with any authority on contemporary intellectual or political matters.\textsuperscript{205}

The ascetic women’s visions and experiences were attributed to, ‘mental illness, pride and diabolical illusion’. In this McLoughlin suggests that obedience was weaponised to ensure the silence of the voices of ascetic women.

By establishing hierarchical obedience, ordered physical comportment and gender-appropriate humility as signs of orthodoxy, sanity and good will, these authors robbed ascetic women visionaries of the charismatic basis of their authority.\textsuperscript{206}

A century later a spiritual treatise for laypeople written by St Francis de Sales, which was widely accepted then and since, encouraged obedience to the teachings of the church as a primary virtue for the faithful Christian. In his letter to Philothea, a woman, very little wriggle room for independent thought or action was envisaged, as all authority was deemed to be from God and must, therefore, be obeyed.

We must obey all our Superiors, each one, however, in that only wherein he has authority over us: as, for example, in whatever concerns our civil government and


\textsuperscript{203} Hobbins, “A Rediscovered Work of Jean Gerson on a Spiritual Classic,” 249.


\textsuperscript{205} McLoughlin, \textit{Jean Gerson and Gender}, 129.

\textsuperscript{206} McLoughlin, \textit{Jean Gerson and Gender}, 129, 202.
public affairs we must obey our princes; in ecclesiastical we must obey our prelates; in domestic matters, our father, our master our husband; in the individual direction of our soul, our own director and confessor.207

Indeed, especially for women, whose limited agency was in the private sphere of the family, this meant a lifetime of being obedient in every aspect of their lives. Obedience was a tool of control.

By the seventeenth century, the contemplative or mystical life, so important for interior obedience, was in serious decline and was regarded with suspicion by church authorities. It had little impact on lay life. ‘Mystics were left to their spiritual directors and the study of their experiences to a restricted circle of specialist theologians.’208 This attitude did not begin to change until the beginning of the twentieth century.209

By the late nineteenth century, blind obedience by the laity was articulated by some church hierarchy. Cardinal Gasquet (1846–1929) stated: "The lay person kneels before the altar, sits below the pulpit — and puts his hand in his purse."210 Almost 1800 years after Irenaeus called lay people ‘simple-minded,’211 a somewhat softer but similarly patronising sentiment, with its implication for lay obedience to church teaching, was echoed by Pope Benedict XVI: ‘A Christian believer is a simple person: bishops should protect the faith of these little people against the power of intellectuals.’212

The hegemony of the spirituality of the great religious orders – Benedictine, Carmelite, Franciscan and Jesuit – on the development of spirituality for all Christians is clear. The monastic ascetic ideal embedded obedience as a primary virtue in the spiritual path for lay people. Ignatian prayer which was popular from the sixteenth century, but where access to contemplative praxis became limited, was influential in Catholic spirituality until Vatican II. Obedience by the laity was to be given to the will of God as mediated by the priests, bishops and pope.

Conclusion

The withdrawal of Christians to lead lives dedicated to the seeking of God alone heralded the start of a movement within Christianity which was to have a profound influence on the development of Christianity and on the understanding of obedience in Christian spirituality. This obedience to charismatically gifted holy men and women flourished through to the Middle Ages within monasticism especially. However, the church as an institution in the

207 Francis de Sales,'Introduction to the Devout Life. ', Ch XI, 143.
west became increasingly insistent that for the ‘ordinary Christian’, obedience to the bishop and clergy was primary. This became a mechanism for maintaining the control of the simple gens by the clergy and bishops, albeit they believed it to be for their spiritual growth.

In eastern Christianity, however, the location of spiritual power and hence obedience was quite different. Here, Peter Brown states, the emphasis on the charismatic holy person remained more influential.

In Byzantium there was a proliferation of little centres of power that competed with the vested hierarchy of Church and State ... the bishops might wield the mysterium tremendum of the Eucharistic sacrifice ... but it was the holy man, who through his unassessible παρρησία with God, kept his grip on the keys of heaven.

The charismatic experience of the Spirit so dominant in the joy of the first Christians and then in the deep asceticism of the great elders of the desert monks, to whom disciples gave or strove to give such obedience, did not die. In the east, it was still evident in the holy man of late Antiquity through to the Middle Ages and beyond in the spiritual mother or father tradition to this day. It is to this tradition I shall now turn.

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215 Brown’s classification of the “holy person” as always male must surely be viewed with a hermeneutic of suspicion. In a time when women preceded men (by many years) in living ascetical intentional lives (if Brakke is correct), it beggars belief that there were only “holy men” who were the athletes of the soul.
Chapter 4 - Eastern Orthodox Christian Insights into Obedience

The vignettes of Orthodox responses to correction that I briefly referred to in Chapter One do not arise in a vacuum. In this chapter, I outline the nature of obedience as it is understood in Orthodoxy and the manifestation of ‘embodied obedience’ in the spiritual mother or father tradition within Eastern Orthodox Christianity. This represents the most significant difference between eastern and western Christian understandings and practices of obedience. The relationship between a spiritual mother or father and a disciple is grounded in obedience, as Christ was obedient to the one he named as Father. It is a Christian example of a universal faith tradition.

They are seen as those who know the way to spiritual freedom and enlightenment, and whose gift and calling is to teach that way to others. They are masters, those who have to a significant degree mastered the art of arts, and so know how to guide others in the spiritual path, and those to whom others, often less advanced, therefore apprentice themselves.216

All the major faith traditions, except western Christianity, offer spiritual guidance to seekers from one in their tradition recognised as a spiritual master. Such a relationship is considered necessary if the goal of enlightenment or deification or salvation is to be attained. This tradition originating with the desert monks of Egypt and Syria is prominent still within the eastern Christian Orthodox churches.

In western Catholicism, there are some whose spiritual children call them spiritual fathers, but they are few and are mostly in monasteries. Holy people do exist within western Christianity; good spiritual directors do exist for the small numbers who seek such guidance and some people have been helped by the priest-confessor model of Catholicism.217 But by and large, they are not the same thing. Recovering a deep sense of obedience in western Catholicism, or Christianity in general, would be greatly assisted by recovering a western form of the relationship of the spiritual elder to a seeker. In such a relationship human flourishing and deification could become the clear goals of the Christian. This, of course, implies the recovery of deep contemplative prayer which is by no means generally understood or practiced within mainstream western Christianity. I appreciate that what I propose may well raise alarm bells, and not just to a feminist consciousness, since surrendering one’s will to another has in the past often not worked for human flourishing. However, I hope by outlining the way in which obedience in relationship functions in eastern Orthodoxy, it can inform a proposal for the recovery of obedience leading to human flourishing in Christ in western Catholicism. But first I shall outline an Orthodox understanding of obedience.

216 Christina Fox, "Dangerous Friends and Breathing Icons: The Spiritual Guide in Vajrayana Buddhism and Christianity" (paper presented at the Tibetan Buddhist Summer School, Melbourne, 2005).

217 A recent USA survey on how Catholics form their conscience on significant life decisions showed that 75% of all Catholics never consult a priest. Dillon, "What Do We Know About How Catholics Inform Their Consciences?"
Annunciation as Prototype of Obedience

The Matins Liturgy for the Annunciation of Our Most Holy Lady the Theotokos and Ever-virgin Mary, composed by John the Monk, exemplifies the Orthodox understanding of obedience. This may seem a strange starting place for western feminists. But this mythic dialogue witnesses an independent grappling with the invitation before assent is freely given.

Mary (the Theotokos) vigorously questions the Archangel Gabriel, a messenger of God, as to the veracity of the Archangel’s words. ‘How shall I conceive who am a virgin-maiden?’, and again, ‘but make clear to me how I being a virgin, shall give birth unto Him’. She expresses fear lest she take the wrong path as did her foremother Eve, then ups the theological stakes in the questioning, demanding to know how God could be contained in any corporeal nature, let alone in her own unpurified state. Twice more in this composition, she states the obvious – ‘never hath a virgin given birth without knowing a man’ and again returns to the improbability of the infinite God being conceived in human form. ‘How shall I conceive God the Word, Who with the Father and the Spirit is without beginning?’ Once again, she is assured by the Archangel that she is the chosen dwelling place. Then Mary, seemingly recognising the ‘Divine gladness’ within her, responds with joy that she will take up the invitation to annul the work of Eve and cries out a blessing on the fruit of her womb. She acknowledges again her fear as she says yes and restates her confusion as to a virgin birth before speaking the myth’s timeless fiat of trust, ‘be it unto me according to thy word’.

In this passage, obedience and the human qualities of fear of the unknown are acknowledged. Trust is dwarfed by courage. But most importantly, Mary recognising the presence of God in her interior joy upon this request from God blesses it in return. This recognition – her experience of Divine Mystery – releases her then clear-eyed ‘yes’, which sets in train the potential for an infinity of ‘yeses’ into eternity. Here, obedience is born in the intimacy of a relationship grounded in divine love and arising from the deepest level of being; her ‘yes’ becomes an experience of transformation and freedom. In this liturgy, Mary is clearly revealed as actively engaged in coming to her response. She gives voluntary assent from a heart which desires openness to discerning God’s plan. The outcome is a negation of Mary’s fear and disbelief as she courageously gives herself into unknowing on the strength of faith and her ‘divine gladness’.

Obedience Within Orthodox Spirituality

The Annunciation liturgy points to three fundamentals regarding the understanding of obedience with in eastern Christianity. It is voluntary, actively entered into and occurs in a relationship of love, be it with God or one’s spiritual elder. Being obedient is regarded as part and parcel of being human. Christian anthropology, both eastern and western, identifies the human person as by nature obedient. Created in the image and likeness of God, obedience is part of a person’s divine ‘DNA’, since Christ who is ‘the image of God in (humankind) and the pattern for its transformation,’ was obedient unto death. So too then is humankind called to obedience since we are called ‘to the spiritual life, to

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participation in the divine.’ 219 The question of course is, what does obedience actually mean?

Obedience in Orthodoxy is described as a psycho-spiritual trait since ‘the spiritual practice of obedience begins with an act of will’.220 As the human person is a unity of body and soul in union with the one Holy Spirit,221 the spiritual condition and the psychology of the person are intertwined. Eastern and western Christian anthropology agree that the process involved in obedience is primarily conscious, voluntary and psychological. However, in the specific realm of psychology, western psychology rarely acknowledges the role of the Spirit in human behaviour. Some scholars suggest that the discipline of psychology has been almost completely secularised in the West.222 Others point to the ‘the meaning gap’ in western psychology to explain the rise of positive psychology and its ‘shift towards a meaning-oriented conception of human wellbeing, as well as scientific findings about meaning and its role in a flourishing life’. 223 Orthodox psychology on the other hand always acknowledges the dependence of the human on the divine. It is not possible to separate a person’s actions from the spiritual self since, as a creature of God, ‘the condition of communion in God’s Spirit is intrinsic to the created state of the human creature’.224 Thus obedience within Orthodoxy makes demands on the whole person.

Obedience and Monasticism

Orthodox understanding is that all are called to Christian perfection. However, while this call is to both monastic and lay, Orthodox spirituality is deeply grounded in monastic spirituality. As the oft-quoted St Theodore the Studite said, ‘Monks are the sinews and foundations of the church’ and, within monasticism, the hermits and solitaries are regarded ‘as expressing par excellence the fullness of the monastic ideal.’225 With this comes a spirituality redolent with contemplative riches and beauty. St Nilus frequently counselled his non-monastic spiritual children to visit monks and monasteries. ‘You positively will enter the kingdom of heaven together with the monks because you have made yourself their attendant and helper...’226 Irénée Hausherr comments, ‘it was taken for granted that the monks have chosen the surest path to salvation’.227 Obedience was central to that path with its

220 Chrysostomos, Obedience, 15.
221 Some Patristic authors speak of the human person in a bi-partite sense (body and soul) and some in a tri-partite sense (body, soul and spirit). M. C. Steenberg, “Humanity,” in The Encyclopaedia of Eastern Orthodox Christianity I and II Online, edited by John Anthony McGuckin (Chichester, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2011), https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444392555.ch8, 318, summarises it thus: “In fact, the variation between the two serves to emphasize the very points revealed through the incarnation: that the human person is of material as well as immaterial dimensions (body and soul) and fashioned for union with the Father’s Spirit.”
222 Alvin Dueck and Kevin Reimer, A Peaceable Psychology: Christian Therapy in a World of Many Cultures (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2009), 93.
224 Steenberg, "Humanity," The Encyclopaedia of Eastern Orthodox Christianity, 319.
227 Hausherr, Spiritual Direction, 317.
conception and practice for both the monk and the layperson, being framed by monastic example.

*The Ladder of Divine Ascent* by John Climacus, abbot and non-ordained spiritual father, is perhaps the most often quoted authority for the practice and integration of obedience into the Christian life in general and the monastic life in particular. The book has been copied, studied or translated more than any other book in Eastern Christianity, except for the Bible and the service books.\(^{228}\) The two longest chapters in the *Ladder* relate to Obedience and Discernment. In Step 4 on Obedience, Climacus describes obedience as a fundamental virtue, which enables the monk to overcome all the other passions and to attain union with God. This union is always seen as love, the fruit of the experience of the active and the contemplative life united in God.\(^{229}\) He notes meeting some holy fathers at a monastery who had lived in total obedience for fifty years. In reply to his question as to the consolations they had received from this practice, they answered

> that having arrived thereby at the lowest depths of abasement they could repel every onslaught, while others declared that they had attained complete freedom from the senses and had obtained serenity amid every calumny and insult.\(^{230}\)

This reported experience of the old monks illustrates the positive fruit of obedience as freedom, and an inner harmony arising out of what is an initial abasement. By renouncing their own will and freely submitting to obedience, the monks attained the condition of *apatheia* and ultimately union. In this, they demonstrated, as Climacus said, that ‘obedience is the burial place of the will.’\(^{231}\) Relying on one’s own will is the road to spiritual disaster. ‘You have undertaken to travel by a short and rough road, along which there is only one false turning, that which they call self-direction.’\(^{232}\) To ensure that the monk is able to avoid self-direction, they must freely entrust themselves to a spiritual elder, to ‘another in the Lord’.\(^{233}\) In this way, the monk can arrive at true freedom in God, ‘liberation from the senses and freedom from pain,’ emulating Christ’s obedience.\(^{234}\) And the monk receives the rewards of transfiguration. ‘The truly obedient monk often becomes suddenly radiant and exultant during ... prayers.’\(^{235}\)

In speaking of obedience Climacus is extremely pragmatic. He lists many examples of obedience and how to encourage it. As with the old monks I referred to earlier, obedience oftentimes involved forms of humiliation. The story of Isidore is an example in point. From the ruling class, Isidore sought to join a monastery but on admittance he was found to be a source of trouble and cruelty. The ‘most holy shepherd’, as Climacus refers to the Abbot, instructed Isidore to:

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\(^{229}\) Climacus, *Ladder*, 12.

\(^{230}\) Climacus, *Ladder*, 97.

\(^{231}\) Climacus, *Ladder*, 92.

\(^{232}\) Climacus, *Ladder*, 92.

\(^{233}\) Climacus, *Ladder*, 92.

\(^{234}\) Climacus, *Ladder*, 92.

stand at the gate of the monastery and before everyone passing in or out you are to
bend the knee and say, ‘Pray for me Father because I am an epileptic.’ And Isidore
obeys like an angel obeying the Lord.\footnote{Climacus, \textit{Ladder}, 97–98.}

In a conversation with Climacus years later, a changed Isidore tracks his transfiguration in
the seven years he spent at the gate. Undertaking the obedience initially was hard and filled
Isidore with bitterness. However, after some time as he was emptied of his grief at his loss,
Isidore began to feel a righteous sense that God might reward his efforts. Then, as he
continued further in obedience, a dawning of true self-knowledge broke through and he
realised his unworthiness to live in a monastery with the holiness of the Fathers. Now, in
humility, he sincerely sought the prayers of those passing in and out of the gate.

In the tradition there exists an inextricable link between the experience of self-renunciation
and a degree of humiliation, be it public (as with Isidore) or privately experienced. André
Louf in \textit{The Way of Humility} speaks of the necessity for the ‘concrete experience’ of
obedience and abasement in some form, in order to really understand the lived reality of
the spiritual path from humiliation to humility.\footnote{André Louf, \textit{The Way of Humility} [L’umilita], trans. Lawrence S. Cunningham, Monastic Wisdom Series: No. 11 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2007), 10.} Isidore’s concrete experience of obedience
is linked with humiliation and humility in the path of self-knowledge. It is evident also that
the ‘most holy shepherd’ expects actual transfiguration in Isidore, through what seems to
westerners harsh practices of humiliation. As Jane Foulcher points out, the desert accepted
the seemingly perverse logic of humiliation because in it was, ‘a sign of a total change in
allegiance from the world ... to God ... it revealed the monk’s utter dependence on God.’\footnote{Foulcher, \textit{Reclaiming Humility}, 55.} To the Orthodox, only the spiritual father of the monastery, ‘the most holy shepherd’, could have given Isidore the hard task. Isidore acknowledged his acceptance of this authority by
his willingness to obey.

Climacus attests to the place of criticism in the formation of novices and reports himself
‘astonished by the faith and patience of the novices’ who with ‘unshakeable courage ... accepted the criticisms of the superior and indeed of those far below him in rank.’\footnote{Climacus, \textit{Ladder}, 100.} The
monastic tradition, western and eastern, acknowledges the experience of abasement as
essential in acquiring obedience and the renunciation of one’s will.\footnote{St Bernard – \textit{sine humiliation, nulla humilitas}. In a letter to his son, attributed to St Macarius the
Great, the monk suffers a series of humiliating temptations in order that he may come to know that “it is God
who gives him strength”. Cited in Louf, \textit{The Way of Humility}, 10, 14.} It is a question for later
consideration to see if this nexus between obedience, humiliation and humility can translate
from the seventh to the twenty-first century.

A Monastic Virtue?

Several writers have described obedience as a \textit{monastic virtue} and one which distinguishes

\begin{quote}
We have known some admirable lay(people) who have exceeded most monks in their
ascetic labours – in fasting, chastity, poverty and acts of charity. Yet they do not reach
the level of the monk who may not have these virtues but is obedient in all things: for
\end{quote}
the lay(person) wishes to do good works and performs them following his (or her) will, whereas the monk cuts off his (or her) will at all points and does nothing without the knowledge of (the) superior.  

In Ambrosios’ view, the critical difference lies in the more thoroughgoing renunciation of self (i.e. obedience) inherent in the monk’s relationship with the spiritual mother or father, compared to that possible by the layperson. For the monk, this relationship is one of absolute trust in the elder’s saving prayer and hence their direction of their spiritual life.

A similar view is expressed by the Russian émigré, spiritual Father and founder of the Tolleshunt Knights Orthodox monastery, Fr Sophrony Sakharov (d. 1993 CE). Influenced by the Athonite monasticism of his own spiritual Father (St Silouan), Sophrony saw obedience as a particularly monastic gift not available to other paths.

Many think the main distinction between monastic and common ways of life is celibacy, but I, following the ancient fathers and modern ascetics, attribute greater significance to obedience.

Consistent with the Patristic fathers, Sophrony elevates obedience to the level of sacrament. ‘Obedience is a spiritual sacrament in the Church and therefore the relationship between the elder and the novice has a sacred character.’ He regarded obedience to one’s spiritual elder as the highest ascetical virtue and one which a monk needed to attain to divine life. Undistracted by earthly cares obedience provided a framework which could lead a monk into pure prayer, since a monk could give his or her mind entirely to prayer and meditation. He stated, obedience is ‘a dynamic praxis (which) assists the novice in entering the current of the eternal divine will and thus becoming a partaker of the divine life’. In order to provide optimal conditions for this purification and transformation to occur, it was Sophrony’s view that the novice monk should consult the spiritual elder about every kind of issue.

The description of obedience as a specifically monastic virtue raises questions as to what obedience means for the layperson and whether there is a two-tiered system of obedience in Orthodoxy.

Certainly, the Orthodox tradition is very clear that all are invited to and can attain to Christian perfection. One of the earliest Desert Fathers, the great St Anthony, spoke of being told (we do not know how) of one layperson in the city who was his equal. John Chrysostom said, ‘each gender, each class and way of life is called to this noble contest’. Theodore the Studite concurred, saying ‘there is perfect equality among all Christians, monks or not, with respect to the laws of the inward spiritual life.’ Hieromonk Ambrosios acknowledges that a pious layperson who is utterly obedient to a spiritual mother or father

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244 Archimandrite Sophrony, I Love Therefore I Am, Ch. 8: Eldership as a Sacrament.
245 Archimandrite Sophrony, I Love Therefore I Am, Ch. 8: Fr. Sophrony on Obedience.
246 Archimandrite Sophrony, I Love Therefore I Am, Ch. 8: Obedience and Persona.
250 Hausherr, Spiritual Direction, 308.
may practice the depths of renunciation of will that monks do and attain to deification, but he suggests this is a rare occurrence.251

Father Alexey Young writing on Obedience and the Layman seems deeply pessimistic about the potential for the Orthodox layperson to aspire to the spiritual heights that were commonplace expectations in past eras of the church.252 Young argues that there is not so much a different expectation of obedience for the layperson compared to the monk, but that the spiritual environment is now so depleted as to make it not possible. Young suggests that laypeople should observe the requirements of attending divine services, receiving ‘the Mysteries’, fasting, almsgiving and growing in charity towards all. Such asceticism could lead to holiness, but it seems minimalistic compared with the obedience expected of monks. However, in being able to commit to a relationship with a spiritual father, Young is much less sanguine. Influenced by the Russian spiritual guide, Ignaty Bryanchaninov, Young regards the prospect of finding a suitable spiritual father very low.253 He states: ‘there are virtually no true elders left on the face of the earth today.’254 The suggested lack of suitable elders for laypeople is highly significant since it is this relationship in eastern monasticism which is the ground in which obedience grows as an existentially transfiguring praxis. Young’s views would suggest a differential expectation in relation to obedience for laypersons compared with that required of monks.

Hausherr notes that in spiritual direction for monastic and laypersons there is no difference in either the doctrine or of the professed goal, ‘but in the means used to reach it’.255 But he also notes that the monastic spirit has exercised the predominant influence in the East. Looking from without, it is hard not to think that there are different expectations of obedience between the monk and the layperson, especially if the latter has little possibility of a relationship with a spiritual elder.256

It is evident that for some Orthodox laypeople the predominance of monasticism as the basis of Orthodox spirituality has been confusing. One layperson writes:

The traditional teaching of the Orthodox Church that monasticism is a ‘higher’ or the ‘highest’ spiritual calling is received by many converts as an oppression and a confusion. If monasticism is a higher calling, so they tend to reason, and I am called to married life in the world, it seems I am required to live according to a ‘lower’ calling ...

253 In view of distortions that had crept into the Russian practice of spiritual elders, Bryanchaninov “advised abandoning the principle of eldership as a necessary element of the ascetic life.” Cited in Sakharov, I Love Therefore I Am, Ch. 8: Eldership in Russia and Its Crisis.
254 Young, “Obedience and the Layman,” 44.
255 Hausherr, Spiritual Direction, 309.
256 In the major work devoted to the topic of Obedience within Orthodoxy by Archimandrite Chrysostomos and others, the weighting is revealing of the point. Twenty-eight pages are devoted to the chapter on Obedience in Monastic Practice, 20 pages on the sayings of the Desert Fathers, while only six pages are allocated to Obedience and the Layperson and 11 pages to Obedience and the Orthodox Christian in the Secular Realm.
Rossi suggests that asceticism (including obedience) may be able to serve as a bridge between the two modes of living in which Christian perfection must be won. Distinguishing between asceticism and monasticism, Rossi suggests that the ascetical life is simply the Christian life applicable to lay and monastic callings. ‘There is no other way to follow Christ.’258 Likewise, invoking the binary understanding of ‘monasticism’ as having both an outer and inner dimension, he suggests that a layperson, while not called to live the external life of the monk, is called to an inner monasticism of the heart to conquer the passions and arrive ‘before the face of God in a pure and immaculate state.’259

I agree with the general direction of Rossi’s thought. However, two points need to be made. Firstly, there is a more nuanced understanding of obedience in the tradition which, for the lay westerner particularly, offers a ‘way in’ to the asceticism of obedience which accommodates without capitulating to western self-will.

The fourth century desert monk Abba Poemen, when questioned by another monk who was being importuned to oversee some disciple monks, stated: ‘Be their example, not their legislator.’260 Barsanuphius, the sixth century Abba in Palestine wrote to a disciple: ‘I have not bound you, brother, nor have I given you a command. I have simply offered you an opinion. Go then and do as you will.’261 Here the words are laid down as a gift, the disciple retains his or her autonomy in deciding a response. In favouring consultation over compulsion as Barsanuphius and John of Palestine did, Chryssavgis suggests they were completely in continuity with fourth- and fifth-century desert teaching.262

This distinction between command and opinion which Chryssavgis draws attention to is an important nuance for westerners. The latter perspective is closer to understandings of obedience for western Catholic religious communities post Vatican II. However, some Western monastic settings, while having integrated psychological insights, do retain a sense of the charismatic nature of obedience.263

Secondly, asceticism can be a bridge, but more is needed for obedience to be really integrated into daily praxis as an asceticism and virtue for the layperson today. This ‘more’ rests in using the lay life itself – married or single – as the site in which obedience is won and from which examples of obedience are taken. This includes identifying in depth the practice of mutual spousal obedience as an ascesis for the renunciation of self-will. It could also include the development of a marital ‘environment’ wherein a form of the manifestation of thoughts – of authentic dialogue and discernment – may be practiced, so that the divine will may be revealed and followed. Personal prayer and communal participation in the Mysteries is also needed. But it is also necessary to radically rethink the way in which eros and desire function as the ground in which obedience is won such that the couple or single may become transparent to the love of God and the other. I will explore this further through the work of Christos Yannaras in the next section.

258 Rossi, “Asceticism.”
259 Theophan the Recluse speaking of monasticism cited in Rossi, “Asceticism.”
261 Chryssavgis, Soul Mending, 95.
262 Chryssavgis, Soul Mending, 95.
263 Louf, In The School of Contemplation, 53–61.
Obedience and Love

The Patristic tradition hints at the connection between obedience and love. Gregory of Sinai in cataloguing the results of obedience says that ‘love which is God’ is the highest level of obedience and Barsanuphius, a sixth-century spiritual father in Gaza, states: ‘if you do not obey it means you do not love’.  

Sophrony centuries later also sought to explain the relationship between obedience and love. He employs the perichoretic nature of trinitarian life to understand the obedience of Christ and its implication for the ascetical path of believers. In so doing Sophrony brings together obedience and love. ‘In such a kenotic trinitarian perspective, obedience is the expression of divine love.’ This, he relates not just to Christ’s obedience but to the level of human relationships.

Sophrony views the relationship of the spiritual elder and disciple as one in which the full potential of the disciple (and the elder) can be realised. Through opening one’s will to another, that is in emptying oneself to ‘receive’ the other, a person becomes free from self-will and assimilates within themselves the other’s will. When a novice monk enters a relationship with a spiritual elder, he or she is engaged in ‘a subjection of one’s will to the spiritual father (or mother), for the sake of a better knowledge of the will of God’.

Ultimately, the monk so accustomed to letting go of self-will, gradually assumes to oneself the commandments of Christ and thus the divine will and enters into the divine mode of being. Obedience has become a way of being in love. Sophrony believes that the inability to open and ‘receive’ another means that ‘a person inevitably will remain a self-enclosed circuit’.

While Sophrony is speaking largely for a monastic audience, the contemporary Greek theologian Christos Yannaras in Variations on the Song of Songs offers insights as to the way forward for laypersons. Turning to trinitarian mysticism, as did Sophrony, Yannaras seeks to awaken non-monastics from the death of self-love. By extending Patristic insights (for example Maximus the Confessor), Yannaras uses the concrete realities of relationship including in physical love, to show how self-emptying can lead to theosis. This obedience in love he names as the erotic fullness of love in the reciprocity of relation. He utilises the divine self-emptying as the model of obedience in love.

The model of the mode of life is a self-emptying, an erotic self-offering – a model incarnate in the person of Christ and ‘become (s) through ‘self-emptying’ an erotic existence, just as God is a ‘self-emptying’ mutual co-inherence of a Trinity of Persons.

Yannaras shows how the total gift of self in relationship, of obedience to the other/Other – marital or otherwise – is the path to freedom, joy and the apophatic unknowing of God. In doing so he draws on the same understanding of eros as self-offering to the other, as used

264 Sakharov, I Love Therefore I Am, Ch. 8: Obedience and Trinity.
265 Sakharov, I Love Therefore I Am, Ch. 8: Obedience and Trinity.
266 Sakharov, I Love Therefore I Am, Ch. 8: Obedience and Trinity.
267 Sophrony, Birth Into the Kingdom Which Cannot Be Moved, 172, cited in Sakharov, I Love Therefore I Am, Ch. 8: Freedom and Obedience.
269 Yannaras, Variations, 46.
by Dionysius the Areopagite and Maximus the Confessor. His theology of the person and of love reflects the mutual reciprocity (aka obedience) at the heart of Patristic and trinitarian mysticism.

The trinitarian way of being then serves as a model for what it means to follow Christ — to become obedient unto the other/Other in generous, self-emptying, kenotic love. As John Chryssavgis stated, ‘ultimately to obey is to love.’ So, through obedience, we learn to love and in so doing enter the divine milieu of self-emptying. But it is not unfraught territory since the human will to power can readily distort the expression of and desire for love at the heart of obedience. In the Orthodox vision, it is the will, stabilised by obedience in the context of a relationship of love with one’s spiritual elder, that provides the environment for kenotic return.

Obedience and Humility

While humility is seen as the trigger for obedience by some Orthodox writers (Archimandrite Chrysostomos), others suggest the reverse, that it is obedience which leads to humility (Hieromonk Ambrosios). In the view of Chrysostomos, only when an individual is sufficiently clothed in humility will there be a desire for obedience. Humility enables the individual seeker to realise just how far s/he is from where one ought to be if the goal of union with God is to be attained.

Only through humility can an individual truly see the limitations of [a] self-centred life and the pristine image of godliness, in union with all [people], to which [s/he] is inwardly drawn. Without admitting and acknowledging that [s/he] is far distant from what [s/he] should be … it is only through a conscious act of will that one can develop and sustain a diligent obedience to the guidance of the Fathers along the spiritual path by which union with Christ and [humankind’s] redeemed nature are realized.

Perhaps the truth is that obedience and humility are so interconnected that neat causations are difficult to maintain. Jane Foulcher expresses this intricate relationship when speaking of the Rule of St Benedict: ‘obedience becomes the irreducible core of humility in community. Obedience means precisely giving way to the other, placing oneself below another; it means relinquishing power.’ Like flour in a cake, it is an essential ingredient but unable to be differentiated or singled out in the finished product.

‘Embodied Obedience’ – The Spiritual Mother or Father

In Orthodoxy, this understanding of obedience is incarnated in the relationship with one’s spiritual mother or father. Perhaps the first reference to this role can be seen in an instruction by Clement of Alexandria suggesting that wealthy and haughty Christians ought

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271 Chryssavgis, Soul Mending, 106.

272 Chrysostomos, Obedience, 7.

273 Ambrosios, "Obedience in Monastic Practice," 37.

274 Chrysostomos, Obedience, 7.

275 Chrysostomos, Obedience, 7–8.

276 Foulcher, Reclaiming Humility, 156.
to submit themselves to a ‘man of God’ who could train and guide them.\textsuperscript{277} Irénée Hausherr notes that the inspiration for the practice of spiritual direction in the Christian East arises from Anthony’s instruction for a disciple to seek out an elder to assist in regulating his life, and the sayings of the \textit{Apophthegmata}.\textsuperscript{278} Then as now, ‘the virtue of obedience occurs within the context of loving trust and personal relationship between two people in Christ, which \textit{in itself} reveals the presence of Christ.’\textsuperscript{279} The whole point of the relations between the spiritual elder and child (disciple) is therapeutic, a healing of the ills of the soul so that salvation may be gained, and fullness of life attained.

When men such as Antony, Macarius and their disciples repeated their eternal request:

Speak a word to me: How may I be saved? ... what they wanted was ... a radical healing of every disease of the soul together with fullness of life for the soul in God. Their spiritual fathers understood their request precisely in this way, and in reply offered them prescriptions embodying the great laws of sanctity and the most effective methods of attaining it.\textsuperscript{280}

In this, the spiritual elder is seen as an icon of Christ, or as a mediator between Christ and the disciple. ‘The elder is a prophetic and intercessory mediator between God and the disciple.’\textsuperscript{281} He or she enters into relationship with a disciple, because of their personal charism or gift from God. As Kallistos Ware states, the spiritual elder ‘is ordained, not by the hand of (a person) but by the hand of God.’\textsuperscript{282} Although it is a charismatic office within the Eastern church it is connected to the ecclesial offices, especially to that of the priest-confessor role. Because \textit{diakrisis}, the gift of discernment, is bestowed by the Spirit, it may be exercised by men or women, ordained or non-ordained, the married or single. The gift is called forth by the disciple and not the elder. In some cases, an existing elder may nominate a successor which may lead to a kind of lineage succession of spiritual elders as occurred in nineteenth-century Russia at the Optina Monastery.

Thus, obedience is practised within the context of a personal relationship – ‘as a deeply intimate relationship with a chosen person, namely one’s spiritual father (or mother), in which one is no longer engulfed by one’s self.’\textsuperscript{283} Such a renunciation of one’s will was not sought as a negative practice, but as the path to the freedom of salvation which is nothing other than union with God. ‘For Climacus and the Orthodox tradition in general, “the tomb of the will” referred to earlier and the “tomb of the resurrection” are closely linked.’\textsuperscript{284} Death and resurrection track together wherein ultimately one’s will is increasingly aligned on God and, through the Spirit’s leading of love, one’s being becomes love.

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{278} Hausherr, \textit{Spiritual Direction}, x.
\textsuperscript{279} Chryssavgis, \textit{Soul Mending}, 102.
\textsuperscript{280} Irénée Hausherr cited in Turner, \textit{St Symeon and Spiritual Fatherhood}, 72.
\textsuperscript{281} Sakharov, \textit{I Love Therefore I Am}, Ch. 8: The Practice of Eldership.
\textsuperscript{283} Chryssavgis, \textit{Soul Mending}, 59–60.
\textsuperscript{284} Chryssavgis, \textit{Soul Mending}, 61.
\end{footnotes}
Preparation of the Spiritual Elder

Before being able to speak to others of obedience or any other virtue necessary to make progress in the spiritual life, the elders had to have first integrated these within their own being. Amma Theodora reflects this fourth- and fifth-century tradition in saying:

...that a teacher ought to be a stranger to the desire for domination, vain-glory, and pride; one should not be able to fool him by flattery, nor blind him by gifts, nor conquer him by the stomach, nor dominate him by anger; but he should be patient, gentle and humble as far as possible; he must be tested and without partisanship, full of concern and a lover of souls.285

Given the charismatic nature of the calling to elderhood, there is no official formation. Rather, preparation for such a role, Kallistos Ware suggests, is a spiritual ‘apprenticeship’ learned from living in proximity to another elder even more than following their words of guidance. ‘(The elder) guides and forms others, not primarily by words of advice, but by ... companionship, by the living and specific example which (the elder) sets.’286 In their own being and lives, the spiritual elders witness to the possibility and the truth that they speak. Symeon the New Theologian was deeply influenced by his spiritual father, Symeon the Studite. It is suggested that he came not only to be present, but also to share in some of the Studite’s mystical experiences.287 Sophrony of Essex learned and quotes frequently from his spiritual father, Silouan the Athonite (1866–1938), stating that ‘one of the most important events of my life was my encounter, by God’s good providence for me, with St Silouan’.288

However, for all its osmosis-like, ad hoc nature, there is an observable pattern of inner learning amongst many spiritual elders. This involves lengthy time often spent in solitude, asceticism and prayer. Whatever the context, the underlying ascesis is the renunciation of self-will. Then, eventually, through a range of life circumstances, the charismatic elder returns to ‘the marketplace’ and is sought out by people who recognise the gift. Anthony of Egypt was called out of solitude after twenty years, when disciples broke down the entrance of the disused fort where he was living and demanded he be their spiritual father. St Seraphim of Sarov lived an ordinary monastic life for fifteen years, then withdrew to a forest for thirty years of solitude, prayer and ascesis. He was recalled to the monastery by the Abbot where he continued a strict solitude until the last eight years of his life, when he saw all who came.

Research suggests that there are observable differences in the nature of preparation between men and women who became blessed by God as spiritual elders. Brenda Meehan, in her book Holy Women of Russia, suggests that:

Gender realities revealed themselves in the greater emphasis for women than for men on family responsibilities, including the care of parents, and the greater admonition to them to wait on God.289

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286 Ware, "The Spiritual Father," 24–25.
287 Turner, St Symeon and Spiritual Fatherhood, 74. Hymn XXXVII, 29–32
288 Archimandrite Sophrony, We Shall See Him As He Is, trans. Rosemary Edmonds (Platina, CA: St Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2012), 105.
Meehan’s research suggests resonances with that by Caroline Bynum on western women saints. Since women lacked control over their wealth and marital status, they ‘used their ordinary experiences – of powerlessness, of service, of nurturing and of sickness – as “symbols into which they poured ever deeper and more paradoxical meanings”’. Obedience was practised in the circumstances in which the women found themselves. Given the differing roles and expectations of women and men, it would be surprising if their spiritual paths did not reflect this.

For many Orthodox women, the ordinary circumstances of their lives rather than monastic living became the sites in which obedience was ‘won’, preparing them, albeit inadvertently, for the later charismatic gift of spiritual motherhood. Anastasiia Logacheva (1809–75), hermit and staritsa, in obedience to Seraphim of Sarov, waited seventeen years until after her parents died to realise her vocation as a hermit in Khurika. Mother Angelina (1809–80) of the Tvorozhkovo Community realised her deepest wish from young adulthood to build a church and lead a contemplative life on the death of her husband, when she came into control of her life and property.

The preparation of yet another group of spiritual elders referred to within Orthodoxy as the ‘holy fools’ is even less predictable. The holy fool may be highly individual (as distinct from egocentric), probably appearing eccentric and without urbane edges.

The Orthodox Church holds that the holy fool voluntarily takes upon himself [or herself] the mask of insanity in order that [s/he] may thereby conceal his [or her] own perfection from the world and hence avoid the vanity of worldly praise. A further stimulus to such behaviour, in the Orthodox view, may be as a comical, paradoxical form of spiritual instruction.

Holy fools generally demonstrate an obedience to an ascetical regime amidst their often paradoxical and confronting behaviour designed to make a spiritual point.

Recognising and Obeying a Spiritual Elder

From all that has been said of the charismatic nature of the vocation of being a spiritual father or mother, it is clear that no monk can set out to become one. The very nature of the charism prevents it. Instead, the men and women who were identified by their disciples as spiritual mothers and fathers sought, as did all monks, to ‘conquer the passions’. In this obedience was core, as described below by Abba Moses.

‘Come, my child, and taste of the blessed life of obedience,’ Abba Moses said to a young man who was readying himself to follow the monastic life. ‘In obedience you will find humility, strength, joy, patience and forbearance. From it contrition is born and love blossoms. It aids the good disciple in keeping all the divine commandments the whole of his life.’

In doing as Abba Moses suggests they became the living embodiment of the Spirit of Christ. Indeed spiritual elders were often called ‘Spirit-bearers’ since it is ‘the Holy Spirit that

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293 Chrysostomos, *Obedience*, 66.
legitimises the authority of the elder, or rather reveals his or her authenticity as love’. Their openness to the Spirit was revealed in the words spoken to their spiritual children, and because of its authenticity in the Spirit, it generated in the disciples a deeper transparency to the Spirit.

The writings of Climacus and Symeon the New Theologian, while not specifically identifying ‘qualifications’ according to Hausherr, suggest five qualities which the charismatic elder should possess. The qualities identified by Hausherr are implicit in the traits which Abba Moses describes. These are the fruit of a life of prayer, ascetical endeavour and obedience. They include that of a physician of the soul, counsellor and teacher, intercessor and mediator (which Hausherr identifies as separate gifts) and that of a sponsor, rather like being a guarantor of the soul, ‘standing surety for the person’s obligations’. Symeon covers three of them in this extract from Epistle 1, On Confession.

If God permits, listen: search for a mediator, physician, and good counsellor, so that he may as a good counsellor suggest to you, conformably with good counsel, ways of repentance; that as physician he may give you appropriate medicine for each wound; and that as mediator, by means of prayer and petitioning God, as he stands face to face in his very presence, he may propitiate the Deity on your behalf.

These Hausherr categorisations differ from those proposed more recently by Kallistos Ware who identifies three gifts possessed by a spiritual father or mother. However, the fruit of obedience is no less evident. Ware identifies the gifts thus – firstly, insight and discernment; secondly, the ability to love others and make the sufferings of their spiritual children their own; and thirdly, the power to transform the material environment. Ware links diakrisis to the way in which the spiritual elder is able to counsel and heal the disciple through words and teachings. Ware’s second gift category can be seen to include Hausherr’s compilation from Climacus and Symeon of the gifts of intercession, mediation and, to some extent, sponsor. While love is not identified as a discrete category in Hausherr’s compilation, he notes that sympatheia (compassion) is essential in its broad understanding of ‘suffering with and for others’. Through sympatheia the spiritual (elder) can make his own the joys and sufferings of others...

To be a healer of souls was a familiar metaphor for a spiritual elder across the eastern Christian tradition from the fourth century onwards. Thus the relationship placed between the spiritual elder and disciple, not in a juridical (rule bound) light but in the context of healing and growth. Symeon advises one who has sinned to ‘seek out a compassionate and merciful doctor’ and receive the remedies for the poison affecting the soul.

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294 Chryssavgis, Soul Mending, 51.
295 Hausherr, Spiritual Direction, xii.
296 Hausherr, Spiritual Direction, xxiii.
298 Ware, “The Spiritual Father,” 26–31.
299 Significantly Hausherr does not refer to diakrisis in his summary at all. This is puzzling given that he says, “the most precious asset of the spiritual person, with respect to direction, is the virtue or gift of God called, in Greek, diakrisis.” Hausherr, Spiritual Direction, 77
300 Hausherr, Spiritual Direction, xxv.
301 Hausherr, Spiritual Direction, xxvi.
302 Hausherr, Spiritual Direction, xii.
Let us run immediately to our spiritual physician and vomit out the poison of sin by means of confession. Having spat out its venom, let us be eager to receive, as an antidote, the penances (the spiritual physician) prescribes...303

These penances are not a punishment but an antidote.

Hausherr notes that that ‘neither Climacus nor Symeon – nor indeed the eastern Christian tradition in general – envisages the confessor or spiritual (elder) primarily as a judge ... (the elder) is a spiritual healer.

304 In contrast to the more narrowly defined western Catholic confessional practice, what is revealed are more thoughts before they have manifested as sins. Because of this, Hausherr suggests the relationship with the spiritual elder is ‘prophylactic rather than retrospective.

305 Perhaps it is more accurate to say that it is both.

With the guidance of the interior light of the Spirit, the spiritual elder has the capacity to ‘see’ into the real conditions affecting the soul (exagoreusis) and guide the disciple. The familiar disciple request to his or her elder, ‘give me a word’, depended on the elder’s discernment of the monk’s interior being. Thus, the spiritual elder’s word arising in the Spirit’s knowing, when well received in the disciple and obeyed, touched the heart of the monk bringing forth new life. Irene, hegumen of the monastery of Chrysobolanton in Constantinople, prayed for and received the gift of exagoreusis. ‘She aroused the conscience by adroitly touching upon movements of the soul and the sister’s inner thoughts.’306 St Seraphim of Sarov (d. 1833 CE), reliant as always on the inward light of the Holy Spirit, was also noted for his capacity to reveal the thoughts of those coming to see him before they spoke.307

The second gift to be possessed by the spiritual elder is that of teaching through his words. Climacus describes the spiritual elder as a ‘teacher’ (didaskalos) who heals through his logos. These words, arising through a discernment of the soul’s ills and their lived experience, are seen as words which have the power to save and restore to health. Because of this Abba Isaiah of Scetis advises: ‘Neither add anything, nor take away anything (from whatever he tells you).’ To hear the Father, to obey the Father, was to obey God. Stories abound of the obedience given to the word of the spiritual elders, some of which stretch western credulity.308 This seemingly blind obedience is generally regarded today in the West as detrimental to the growth of spiritual maturity. Religious and biblical scholar Sandra Schneiders states:

...blind obedience cannot be proposed or defended today, no matter how it is explained or qualified. ... To obey blindly, no matter who is commanding, is to abdicate one’s moral responsibility.309

However, it has retained its place within eastern Orthodox monasticism without the pejorative overtones of being called ‘blind’.310 Hieromonk Ambrosios refers to obedience for

304 Hausherr, Spiritual Direction, xii–xiii.
305 Hausherr, Spiritual Direction, xiii.
306 Hausherr, Spiritual Direction, 282.
307 Ware, "The Spiritual Father," 28.
308 Chrysostomos, Obedience, 73.
309 Schneiders,'Buying The Field' Part Three, Ch 7.
310 While acknowledging the necessary place of the psychological with the spiritual in the determination of one’s will, it does not appear that Orthodox spirituality has to date integrated the insights arising from depth psychology.
monks as absolute, reflecting both an exterior and interior submission. He acknowledges that ‘it may sometimes demand things which to the ordinary logic seem mad,’ calling the life of the monk a ‘voluntary martyrdom in which the fallen human will undergoes a violent death in order to recover again the paradiisical state of integrity and unity with God.’ It is seen as life-giving, salvation itself for a disciple/monk to place his or her total trust in the spiritual elder, ‘who is illuminated by God’s grace to guide his (or her) disciples in all things.’

It is also important to note that transmission of the teaching and practice by a spiritual elder could occur without words. As Symeon said of his spiritual father, ‘he helped many of them simply by his appearance’. It is this reality that makes living with the elder, even in this present day, a life-giving, Spirit-filled, transforming experience.

Healing of the soul’s ills also occurs through intercession on behalf of his spiritual children by the elder. When healing has occurred the disciples attribute it to the prayers of their spiritual elder. Related to their prayer for the spiritual children, but going beyond intercession, the elders act as intermediaries like Moses, reconciling their spiritual children to God.

While the spiritual elder is an intermediary between God and the disciple, this is not to usurp the place of Christ, who is the only mediator between God and humankind. The Western Classics translation of The Divine Ladder in Step 1 (633D-636A) omits the important phrase by Climacus, ‘yet below God’, however it is included in the translation (Archimandrite Lazarus Moore) used by Hausherr. As the latter states, the mediation of ‘the spiritual father is secondary to that of Christ and dependent upon it’. The mediation of the elder before God works in both directions. The elder holds his or her spiritual children before God and also represents God to the disciples. This underlines the importance of the spiritual elder having their own direct experience of the Holy Spirit and is emphasised by countless elders. As Barsanuphius prays before responding to a disciple: ‘Lord whatever you wish for the salvation of this person’s soul, entrust it to me so that I may speak it to him...’

The final gift suggested in Hausherr’s categorisations refers to the elder being prepared to be responsible for the sins of the spiritual child. The elder is prepared to carry the burden of the child’s temptations and guilt. Employing the image of Christ as the Good Shepherd, the elder personifies love, laying down his or her life for their spiritual child, so that the child may be healed before God.

Finally, I would like to return to Ware’s enunciation of the third gift as ‘the power to transform the human environment, both the material and the non-material.’ Perhaps it is Ware’s understanding of western Christianity which leads him to name this gift thus. I believe it is this quality in spiritual eldership which challenges many a western Christian’s

311 Ambrosios, "Obedience in Monastic Practice," 33.
312 Ambrosios, "Obedience in Monastic Practice," 33.
315 Hausherr, Spiritual Direction, xiv.
316 Climacus, Ladder, Step 1, 75.
317 Climacus, Ladder, 75.
318 Hausherr, Spiritual Direction, xv.
319 Hausherr, Spiritual Direction, xvii.
320 Ware, "The Spiritual Father," 30.
conception and experience of spiritual power and betrays their lack of contemplative depth. It is this gift which attracts the seeker after the exotic, the ‘visitor from Babylon’ as the desert monks called the merely curious spiritual tourists to the deserts of Egypt in the fourth century. It also witnesses to the profound immersion of the divine in matter and the consequent gift to intervene in the laws of nature. It includes the gift of healing, instances of which by spiritual elders are too numerous to mention. As the icon of Christ, radiant with the glory of God, the spiritual elder streams the transfiguring, uncreated light, revealing what already is, if only we had the eyes and heart to see. As Ware says, ‘the true starets is one who discerns this universal presence of the Creator throughout creation and assists others to discern it also.’  

The love and generosity at the heart of the relationship between elder and disciple is summarised by Chryssavgis thus:

> It is a gift to be obedient: the openness of heart is a gift; the insight of an elder is a gift; the possibility of community is a gift. It is a gift also to be free. The paradox lies in the reality that the first gift generates the last: we grow in the spiritual way when we give in acts of sharing; we begin to live even as we are … prepared to die … and we attain genuine freedom only through total obedience and surrender.

In Orthodox understanding, to align one’s will on God is the ultimate freedom. It is to respond to the deepest reality and yearning of the human heart, to give oneself away in love, which is to enter trinitarian being. While the elder/disciple relationship fosters an environment of obedience, its attainment is always grace.

### A Western Transmission

The crucible of love and *diakrisis* that is the intimate relationship between the spiritual elder and the spiritual child is one in which the child is received by the elder and through obedience grows in love and desire for the will of God. Transfigured in the divine gaze, through the elder, s/he becomes the fullness of the Christ-likeness, known to the one who said ‘before I formed you in the womb I knew you’. (Jer 1:5). Love and obedience are indissoluble.

As stated earlier, obedience for many Catholics today is mostly understood as something that is given to the ‘Church’ as a proxy for obedience to God. Practically speaking, it means obeying (or not, as the case may be) the teachings and rules laid down by the pope, bishops and priests. I suggest that there are many Catholics ‘who work things out for themselves’ with varying degrees of the so-called ‘informed conscience’. The USA survey referred to earlier confirms this. This may not be regarded as obedience, or ‘being a good Catholic’, since the theological validity of ‘personal solutions’ via faith, prayer and individual conscience is not promoted. As the survey indicates, a few seek out priests to clarify issues of faith and life, while many see psychologists to discuss all matters human without a

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321 Ware, "The Spiritual Father," 30.
322 Ware, "The Spiritual Father," 31.
323 Chryssavgis, *Soul Mending*, 89–90.
324 Dillon, "What Do We Know?"
spiritual dimension. Some serious about a faith journey seek out spiritual direction. However, here access to deep spiritual wisdom may be variable.

The most common form of spiritual direction offered in western Christianity, not just Catholicism, is that of the spiritual companion. This is an essentially horizontal relationship between the spiritual companion/director and the directee. They sit together as more or less equals. There is no misunderstanding on the directee’s part that the chosen companion is significantly further down the spiritual path than s/he. There can be no assumption in the horizontal relationship that the directee’s ego, self and will are up for re-arrangement.

Unlike the spiritual father, the companion offers us a more or less valuable private opinion, and offers it with absolutely minimal authority. ... no assumption that God will speak in and through the director in a distinctive and privileged way. It is implicitly and sometimes explicitly egalitarian, ... It sounds wise and moderate and mature.325

This type of relationship offers some protection against the spiritual companion/director’s ego and affirms the wisdom in the directee. However, it downplays the role of the Holy Spirit in the relationship and does not suggest at all that obedience is a consideration. In this interaction, there is no human face with the mind of Christ and a heart of love before which a person learns the path of obedience.

It was not always thus in western Christianity; pockets still exist which reflect a more classical model of spiritual direction which derives from principles underlying the fathers and mothers of the deserts of Egypt, Palestine and Syria. Kenneth Leech joins this tradition in seeing a spiritual director as a person who is ‘possessed by the Spirit’. One who has learned through their own struggles, pain and conflict, the nature of the spiritual battle; a person of discernment, able to read souls and hearts and one who has sought to learn from the wisdom of the spiritual mothers and fathers who have gone before.326 Others perceive their evident holiness and love for God and seek their guidance. And in some cases, as of old, and in response to the Spirit, the directee calls forth from the director their latent charism of spiritual mother or father. Here the director provides a human face to the depths of the love and mercy of God. ‘The spiritual director is called to be an incarnation of God’s love. Here, believe it or not, is God incarnate.’327

Conclusion

In contrast to the spiritual companion, the spiritual mother or father tradition of eastern Christianity at its best is a vertical relationship. As we have seen, they are a transparent vehicle through which Christ is made manifest to the disciple or spiritual child. The disciple calls forth the charism in the spiritual mother or father and is then asked to place a radical trust in the one to whom they have been led.

The unconditional love of the spiritual father/mother gives birth to an unconditional trust in the disciple. The disciples come to feel that the spiritual elder can be trusted.

325 Fox, "Dangerous Friends and Breathing Icons," Session 1, 19.
327 Rev. John Stewart cited in Fox, "Dangerous Friends and Breathing Icons."
with their inmost secret self. And so begins the hesitant and hopeful self-stripping and self-gift known as the manifestation of thoughts.\textsuperscript{328}

There are some spiritual mothers and father in the west today who are named as such by their spiritual children, which I detail more fully in the next chapter. What characterises them is that their charism of spiritual mother and fatherhood has grown out of their vocation and commitment to the practice and teaching of contemplative prayer. This is no doubt a necessary feature given the lack of contemplative depth and the hunger for it in western Catholicism and Christianity more broadly. Their own ‘apprenticeship’ has been served within a monastic or religious vocation. But as Basil Pennington noted:

\begin{quote}
We have so few spiritual fathers to respond to so many. I don’t think it is because God is not willing to give us many more – all we need – but few of us are willing to pay the price necessary for such paternity.\textsuperscript{329}
\end{quote}

Given that the spiritual elder tradition has arisen in the monastic context of Orthodoxy and given the less central place which monasticism holds in the western Catholic/Christian life compared to eastern Christianity, it may seem a futile hope to imagine that the West can ‘grow’ such a fruit that demands such a price. But all things are possible in God. Kallistos Ware stated that he ‘feels that the renewal of this role (the spiritual elder) is the great need of Christianity today.’\textsuperscript{330} It seems to me entirely possible that the Holy Spirit can raise up contemplatives from other contexts, souls who seek God as an enduring hunger, to become the spiritual mothers and fathers of the future, so that the human face of the God of love and mercy may be known.

Pope Paul VI said, regarding the modern woman or man, that they ‘listen more willingly to witnesses than to teachers and if (she or) he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses’.\textsuperscript{331} That is, someone whose bearing and life witnesses to love. Obedience that has become a way of love, begets love. For as Gregory of Nyssa rightly stated, ‘one who lives with a (person) who is holy and clean and elect, will become such (themselves)’.\textsuperscript{332}

In the next chapter I bring together the three elements of which I have been speaking – obedience, contemplation and the tradition of the spiritual elder – and show how, by taking one step further from Paul VI’s statement, they can mesh together to provide a womb from which can emerge new insight into obedience and see it as nought but love.

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\textsuperscript{328} Fox, "Dangerous Friends and Breathing Icons," 57.
\textsuperscript{330} Pennington, \textit{The Monks of Mt Athos}, 45.
\textsuperscript{332} Gregory of Nyssa cited in Pennington, \textit{The Monks of Mt Athos}, 35.
Chapter 5 – Recovering Obedience in the Spiritual Path

Before considering how obedience may be re-envisioned for modern day Christians through a contemplative lens and the spiritual elder tradition of eastern Christianity, I would like to briefly recap. The major argument in this thesis pivots around the following three points. Firstly, that any serious seeking of the spiritual path in Christianity needs to include the recovery of a deeply integrated practice of obedience, such that it becomes a ‘way of being’ and is recognised as love. Obedience here is understood as an interior listening for the will of God in order that one may become one’s truest self in God. It is not seen as compliance with a set of external rules. This may occur, but it is not its deepest expression. Secondly, that the recovery of the spiritual elder/disciple tradition in western Christianity would greatly assist seekers serious about the spiritual journey to attain the fullness of flourishing in Christ. In this relationship of love, the seeker becomes increasingly transparent to the reality of Christ’s love and mercy streaming through the elder’s being. And thirdly, that the recovery of the practice of contemplative prayer and spirit is essential to both above. While these three elements are interdependent, the recovery of a contemplative praxis is the foundation on which the other two rest.

In this chapter, I propose a way of viewing and living obedience such that it may resonate with modern day western Christians. By placing the emphasis on becoming one’s truest self in the Divine Mystery (theosis), as the front and centre goal of the Christian and human life, I shall seek to restore obedience to its rightful place as a way of listening in which we are being called into who we are in the Divine Mystery. As Catherine LaCugna argued in her work to revitalise Western understanding of the Trinity:

Theosis or becoming God is the proper telos of the human person. Theosis is eschatological because it points toward the proper end of the human being which is perfection in the image and likeness of God.333

To say we have become ‘perfection in the image and likeness of God’ is to say we have become the person we were created to be. It is best learned in a relationship of love. I shall show how humankind is called to emulate trinitarian self-emptying love – in an obedience of love or eros – to become who we are created to be in union with the Divine Mystery.

In so arguing I shall once again draw on the desert tradition of early Christianity. Throughout history, whenever Christianity or its monastic expression has been in crisis or in need of renewal, it has returned to the desert mothers and fathers for inspiration and guidance.334 The crisis in western Catholicism today is such a time. The desert monks, in choosing to be radically focused on God alone, became who they were created to be, in idiosyncratic glory to God. In so doing they offered a way out of the cul de sac of self obsession for today’s Christian. The desert monks used the language of salvation; in the words of Anthony, ‘Lord I want to be saved... How can I be saved?’335 In practice, they eschewed self so as to find their true self in God. Central to that was obedience. Trinitarian kenotic love such as is described by Catherine LaCugna provides a way of understanding obedience as a path to salvation. For

335 Ward, The Sayings, 2.
LaCugna, drawing on the thought of Orthodox theologian Zizioulas, the Trinity is the model leading the individual to be, ‘free in love, to be a genuine event in communion.’

In the final chapter I shall address some of the difficulties posed by scholars, especially feminists, regarding the way in which the call to self-forgetfulness and obedience – voluntary or otherwise – has been used as a weapon of oppression towards many people. As Mark McIntosh asks, ‘does talk of the radically ecstatic self, abandoned for the other, function to legitimate oppression?’ These questions are not ideological fronts but questions which go to the heart of what it is to be human and the journey into theosis.

Earlier in the thesis I pointed to the obedience of the early disciples of Jesus and the Annunciation scene of Mary and suggested that their responses to Jesus derived from an experience of personal transformation – be it an experience of the power of the Spirit in Jesus and in their lives, or a sense of the ‘Divine gladness’ in Mary enabling her ‘yes’. That, therefore, seems to be the appropriate place to start in suggesting an approach to obedience that may have traction in western Christianity today. For this reason, I shall outline the centrality of contemplative practice as the basis for any deeply integrated and authentic recovery of obedience as a personal lived way of being. I will then seek to show how this mode of being is entirely consonant with our deepest indwelling in the trinitarian God and essential to the recovery of spiritual mother/fatherhood in western Christianity.

Before I begin it is important to understand the way in which the human person is viewed in the Christian tradition.

**Mystical Anthropology**

Christian anthropology understands the human person as engaged in an ever-deepening entry into the mystery of their personhood through obedience. This rests on two aspects. Firstly, that the human person created in the image and likeness of God is continually called into being – the unique image – by that God. The desire for meaning, however buried and inchoate in the human person, is already God’s desire for us. Any prayerful or self-forgetful response to that stirring sets in train the dynamism of the Spirit to bring forth human flourishing. Kallistos Ware illuminates what it means to be made in the image and likeness of God when he says that:

> Christian anthropology must be both Christological and relational in nature. ‘In the image of God’ means firstly ‘in the image of Christ the Creator Logos, and secondly, ‘in the image of God the Holy Trinity.’

Christ as the divine–human bridge provides not only the example of how to live but opens the way for humankind to be received again into the divine milieu. This is a trinitarian milieu

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336 LaCugna, *God For Us*, 263.
338 While this may be in line with the modern turn to the subject in theology and the social sciences today, I am hoping to make clear that this has nothing to do with the canonisation of subjectivism. Instead I wish to direct the gaze to the Divine Mystery as the source, goal and “path” of the human journey.
339 McIntosh, *Mystical Theology*, 222.
inviting and calling the human person into the infinite and transparent cycle of gift and return between the persons of the Trinity, which is theosis.

In addition, the human person responds to that call by taking up an ascetical stance and in so doing edges towards the realisation of their truest self. Mark McIntosh describes this ascetical dynamic as ‘the practices or spiritual stance by which a human person responds to this call and, in some sense, fulfils itself by struggling towards the boundlessness of the other’.\textsuperscript{341} Obedience, understood as listening and acting on the guidance of the indwelling Spirit, is central in this dynamic. For Karl Rahner, the highly influential Catholic theologian of the twentieth century who restored human experience as the theological starting point, the ‘ascetical dynamic’ would constitute the way in which we are obedient to ‘our interior transcendental apprehension of being and drive towards mystery.’\textsuperscript{342} In this more apophatic understanding, human nature containing within it ‘God’s eternal self-disclosure’, when responded to, leads us ever more deeply into the mystery of our unique personhood and God itself.\textsuperscript{343} Hans von Balthasar, another twentieth-century theologian, follows a more cataphatic expression of obedience which nonetheless may arrive in the same place of union. Citing the response of Jesus in his earthly mission to the Father’s will, he states that ‘each obedient act of Jesus carries him deeper into the mystery of himself,’ since each action taken represents acceptance by Jesus of his God-given mission.\textsuperscript{344} In entering more deeply into the mystery of his own self, Jesus enters more deeply into the Divine Mystery.

**Recovering Contemplation**

Another way of describing the fruit of the ‘ascetical dynamic’ as McIntosh calls it, is to name it as the ‘contemplative life.’ The recovery of a contemplative praxis as the ground in which the spiritual journey takes place is essential for a true understanding of obedience.

What is this contemplative life? And why is it important to the understanding of obedience? Broadly speaking it is a life given to the contemplation of God. Thomas Keating states, ‘the essence of contemplation is the trusting and loving faith by which God elevates the human person and purifies the conscious and unconscious obstacles in us,’\textsuperscript{345} so that we may come to union with God.

Laurence Freeman suggests that Jesus himself taught the disciples the qualities that constitute contemplative life and prayer, be it for the layperson or monastic. In Matthew 6, Jesus discourses on prayer, emphasising its interiority; ‘whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret’ (Matt 6:6) and its economy of presence, having earlier told the disciples to use few words in prayer (Matt 6:7). In verse after verse, Jesus outlines the qualities of contemplative prayer, none of which are to do with external forms or rituals, and warns about the dangers of hypocrisy, externalism and the religious ego. Prayer is not concerned with winning ego approval from other people.

\textsuperscript{341} McIntosh, *Mystical Theology*, 222.
\textsuperscript{342} McIntosh, *Mystical Theology*, 92.
\textsuperscript{343} McIntosh, *Mystical Theology*, 92.
\textsuperscript{344} Mark McIntosh, *Christology From Within: Spirituality and Incarnation in Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), 82.
(Matt 6:5) but is rather about trusting in God (Matt 6:8) and requires forgiveness of others before starting (Matt 6:14). Jesus emphasises that the spiritual vision of life is pre-eminently to material concerns (Matt 6:19). Prayer leads to enlightenment (the healthy eye of the soul) (Matt 6: 22-23) and to attain that we must be free of compulsive anxiety (Matt 6:25) and attentive to the present moment (Matt 6:34). ³⁴⁶

Contemplative prayer prepares one for listening. The traditional Christian understanding of contemplation presumed prayerful reflection on Scripture (lectio divina), fasting, penance, Eucharistic worship, times of solitude and silence as well as discursive prayer practices, as a preparation for contemplation wherein the heart is stilled. ³⁴⁷ At the time of silent prayer, the soul called to contemplation is to:

[C]hase away all objects that are not God, that she may be united to [God] alone, knowing most perfectly by ignorance; approaching [God] by resting and forbearing all motion and conversing with [God] most comfortably and profitably by silence. ³⁴⁸

This stepping aside from thought, word and image at the time of prayer characterises much of the mystical tradition. St Bonaventure in the thirteenth century identified contemplation as the whole point of the Christian life, with all spiritual practice being directed towards the attainment of contemplation.

Now just as no one comes to wisdom save through grace, justice, and knowledge, so none comes to contemplation save through penetrating meditation, holy conversation, and devout prayer ... so, first, we must pray; secondly, we must live holily; thirdly, we must strive toward the reflection of truth and, by our striving, mount step by step until we come to the high mountain where we shall see the God of gods in Sion [Ps 83:8]. ³⁴⁹

A more modern expression of contemplation by Thomas Merton describes it as the state in which one is open to the fullness of one's being in God, aware of the sacred quality of all things, alive in the present moment and knowing that all are in and come from the Source.

Contemplation ... is a vivid realization of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent, and infinitely abundant Source. Contemplation is above all, awareness of the reality of that Source. It knows the Source, obscurely, inexplicably, but with a certitude that goes beyond reason and beyond simple faith ... It is a more profound depth of faith, a knowledge too deep to be grasped in images, in words, or even clear concepts... ³⁵⁰

Responding to the inner knowing and prompting calls forth an obedient heart and the capacity to discern a disobedient heart. The ascetical dynamic requires that one be moved by love or desire, however small in its beginning, to undertake and then to remain faithful to the indwelling divine demands. For the Christian, obedience is always to the promptings of the divine within, properly discerned. ³⁵¹ But it is in the depths of one's being where self-

³⁴⁶ Laurence Freeman, "Prayer in the West Today" (paper presented at the La Société Canadienne de Théologie, Université Laval, Québec, 21 October, 2004), 4–5, accessed 21 May 2018.
³⁴⁷ Discursive prayer practices such as prayers of praise, intercession and later the rosary.
³⁵¹ Ross, Silence, vol. 1, 92.
consciousness is elided that the insight into the nature of obedience as love can occur. As Maggie Ross states:

[W]e receive knowledge from a deep mind that seems to have knowledge far beyond the scope of what we think we have learned. This deep mind makes unexpected connections: it knows intuitively when an insight is correct.352

For Ross, the deep mind is the place where humans ‘touch reality directly ... (where) our shared nature with God becomes manifest.’353 In this spaciousness beyond image, words and concept, and with the grace of the Holy Spirit, transfiguration – the fruit of contemplative praxis – occurs. As Philip Sherrard notes:

Only through the contemplative life in all its aspects – ascetic mindfulness, prayer, meditation, the whole uninterrupted practice of the presence of God ... that humans can actualise in themselves the personal love and knowledge of God on which depend not only their own authentic existence as human beings but also their capacity to cooperate with God in fulfilling the innermost purposes of creation.354

Similarly, doing ‘the work of silence’, as Maggie Ross names contemplation, is the ground in which the seeker is healed of the veils of darkness which impede the soul’s journey into the deep mind or in Christian terms, union or theosis.

To do the work of silence – simply to become silent and to receive the gifts silence has to give – transfigures lives ... as attention is shifted away from all noise and artificiality of the surrounding culture, toward the reality and beauty of darkness, unknowing and beholding that enables the person to receive life afresh, newly created in each moment ... there is no place for judgment, anger, avarice ... trusting that in silence the heart will be changed so that compassion and detachment may arise which allows God’s forgiveness ... to flow through.355

At the heart of that indwelling ‘darkness’, as Ross names it, is the Holy Spirit. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the seeker or disciple is opened to transfiguring grace – the same power to which the first disciples bore witness. Rowan Williams describes this purification. ‘With our minds made still and ready to receive, with our self-generated fantasies about God and ourselves reduced to silence, we are at last at the point where we may begin to grow.’356

Unfortunately, while contemplation beginning with Scripture was regarded as centrally important through the Middle Ages, the way in which prayer was conceived became increasingly systematised and atomised such that discursive elements of prayer became detached from the non-discursive goal of contemplation or ‘resting in God’. Tracing in detail why this demise of the centrality of contemplation in the Christian life in the West occurred is not within the focus of this thesis. Suffice to say, the development of scholasticism in the twelfth century led to the gradual split between theology and spirituality and the ensuing predominant focus on analytical approaches in theology and prayer in the centuries

352 Ross, Silence, vol. 1, 58.
353 Ross, Silence, vol. 1, 15.
355 Ross, Silence, vol. 1, 221.
356 Williams, "Address to the Synod of Catholic Bishops."
Following, this trend reached its apogee in the Enlightenment period and was a significant contributor to the ongoing demise of contemplation and the loss of awareness of the importance of silence in the spiritual life. The understanding and experience of prayer as an organic unity, whereby the one prayer contained discursive, affective and contemplative ‘moments’, became increasingly unknown. The institutional church became evermore suspicious of its contemplative or mystical heritage, where even the great Carmelites of the sixteenth century – Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross – taught under the shadow of the Inquisition. The Protestant Reformation, suspicious of all mysticism, despite some of its leaders having rich mystical experience themselves, further embedded this impoverished understanding of prayer. Increasingly, contemplative prayer was regarded as only possible for a very few, while all others were encouraged in mental prayer.

This loss of contemplation as a widespread lived tradition within western Christianity has had profound consequences for the way in which many Christians both perceive God and pray. Maggie Ross, speaking generally, draws attention to the plight of many within the western culture – Christian or otherwise – who have lost the capacity for silence.

We need to acknowledge that it is not our discriminating and reflexive self-consciousness that makes us human, but rather the ability to move beyond this self-consciousness to engagement and beholding, the *irruption* of our core silence into everyday life. ... we need to recover the ability to live at the intersection: in the present moment, energized by the upwelling from deep silence where in Christian terms, our shared nature with God becomes manifest. In Ross’ view, this loss impacts on the way in which we approach the wisdom texts, since we have lost an awareness of the space from which they issued – ‘the loss of an interpretative tool’ – that is ‘the work of silence’. ‘As a result, we turn “putting on the mind of Christ” into imitation of Christ and faith into propositional belief.’ She suggests that literal interpretation of biblical and Patristic texts regarding obedience distort its meaning, missing its usage as ‘expressing a highly metaphorical genre.’ Obedience can them become dependence.

In the journey of contemplation, the seeker gradually freed from self-fixation grows in maturity and only then can make a free choice for obedience. As the will is increasingly governed by love it reflects trinitarian love and kenosis at its source. It is to this aspect that I now wish to turn.

Recovering Obedience

Focusing on the self as the context and starting point for any discussion of obedience has the advantage of already being a Western preoccupation. But the self envisaged here is not the Cartesian-separated individualist self of psychology, but the mystery of the human person realising itself in the Divine Mystery, through obedience. The ‘obedient act’ to the perception of one’s ‘mission’ or in response to an interior sense of the indwelling mystery of God, is a long way from the ‘legalistic’ approach which sees obedience as living in accord

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360 Ross, *Silence*, vol. 1, 91.
with the rules laid down by the ecclesial institution. In the former, the human person follows Jesus, but Jesus as Second Person of the Trinity. Because of the very nature of the Trinity, the human person enters a continual cycle of self-gift and communion in love. The French Dominican priest of the Greek Catholic eparchy in Beirut and former Professor of Liturgy and Ecumenism, Fr Jean Corbon (d. 2001 CE) noted:

In the communion of the Blessed Trinity no person is named for [itself]. There is here neither ‘in itself’ nor ‘for itself’: terms that are among us signs of barrenness and death. In the communion of the living God, the mystery of each person is to be for the other: ‘O! Thou!’... the mysterious river of divine communion is an outpouring of love among the Three, and in it eternal life consists. Each person is gift and acceptance of gift, never varying, yet not motionless; each is an élan but enamoured of the Other, but in pure transparency; each is joy given gratuitously and accepted freely.361

Less poetically, this trinitarian self-gift and communion is the mutual obedience of love. Named in the eighth century by St John Damascene as perichōrēsis, Catherine Mowry LaCugna describes this ‘divine dance’ as being where, ‘each divine person is irresistibly drawn to the other, taking his/her existence from the other, containing the other in him/herself, while at the same time pouring self out into the other’.362 This image conveys the eternal cycle of giving and receiving between the three persons of the Trinity, in a thoroughly personal and interpersonal way. It allays any sense of a solitary or static God. In this LaCugna is influenced by the understanding of trinitarian being proposed by the Cappadocians and the contemporary theologian Metropolitan John Zizioulas.363 This view sees the Trinity as constituted of ‘divine persons’ in contrast to the Latin understanding of a shared divine substance. LaCugna explores the implications of a theology of trinitarian relationship for the living of the Christian life and its goal of theosis.

In contrast to western Christian theology of the Trinity where this ‘dance’ occurs in divina, LaCugna’s understanding of trinitarian relatedness, ‘locates perichōrēsis not in God’s inner life but in the mystery of the one communion of all persons, divine as well as human,’364 In so doing she brings together the mystery of God (theologia) and the way in which humankind lives out a response to that mystery (oikonomia). She suggests, ‘the one perichoresis, the one mystery of communion includes God and humanity as beloved partners in the dance.’365 Another way of speaking of this mystery of self-gift and communion is as the obedience of love. Following LaCugna then, the trinitarian divine image within each human person is thus similarly engaged in drawing the human person into this ever-deepening infinite cycle of loving gift and return, culminating in theosis. As Rowan Williams states:

To be fully human is to be recreated in the image of Christ’s humanity; and that humanity is the perfect human ‘translation’ of the relationship of the eternal Son to the eternal Father, a relationship of loving and adoring self-giving, a pouring out of life towards the Other. Thus, the humanity we are growing into in the Spirit, the humanity

362 LaCugna, God For Us, 271.
364 LaCugna, God For Us, 274.
365 LaCugna, God For Us, 274.
that we seek to share with the world as the fruit of Christ’s redeeming work, is a contemplative humanity.\textsuperscript{366}

In one’s depths, the human person is being called into this mutual obedience of love as his or her natural mode of being. Becoming fully human then is learning to become obedient to the giving and receiving of love, as the ascesis of the spiritual journey and leading to its goal in infinite arriving.

I have already noted in the previous chapter the emphasis which Yannaras places on mutual reciprocity in love of the Trinity and hence for humankind. The trinitarian mystery of gift and receipt is seen by both LaCugna and Yannaras, albeit with different nuances, as deeply significant for the journey of faith. In being obedient to the divine impetus to love and be loved, the human person becomes the person they were created to be.

The obedience of love must be an even-handed experience for both male and female if this understanding of obedience is to lead to human flourishing or theosis. However, Yannaras frequently adopts sexist stereotypes. For example, in opting for a reading of Ephesians 5 which states that wives must be ‘subject to’ their husbands, rather than a reading of mutual reciprocity in line with trinitarian co-inherence, Yannaras’ path of transformation into love, to ‘blessed reciprocity’ is (disappointingly) not an equal experience for male and female. ‘One party renounces itself without stint or measure and the other party makes itself subject to the renouncer with the fear and reverence this special gift generates.’\textsuperscript{367} It is very difficult to see how wives being ‘subject to your husbands mirrors the “self-emptying” of God in the mutual co-inherence of a Trinity of persons’ (which assumes an equality of persons) and which Yannaras states is the model for a person becoming an ‘erotic existence’.\textsuperscript{368} A feminist reading of obedience in relationship in the light of trinitarian obedience requires a mutual, that is equal, self-gift on the part of both.

Recovering obedience in human relations, such as to lead to theosis, must always seek to become free of the veils of a fallen humanity. As the Anglican solitary and writer, Maggie Ross states:

\begin{quote}
The only true obedience, without reference to gender, is given freely, not as a response to coercion. It is elicited unself-consciously and without exploitation; it is an act of love, of eros, the self-emptying of one calling to the self-emptying of the other, deep calling to deep, kenosis calling to kenosis. This is the only legitimate model of obedience and has nothing to do with the oppression that has abused obedience under many euphemisms to perpetuate religious tyranny, slavery and degradation, whether physical, psychological, spiritual or academic.\textsuperscript{369}
\end{quote}

So, obedience properly understood as a listening towards the Divine Mystery in self-gift is a way of being in love, in which by turning aside from self one ‘is found’ and is found in love. Its context is infinitely relational. As Williams said earlier, the trinitarian nature is ‘a relationship of loving and adoring self-giving, a pouring out of life towards the Other.’ Obedience is not just practised in it, is a relationship of love.

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\textsuperscript{366} Williams, "Address to the Synod of Catholic Bishops," #5.  
\textsuperscript{367} Yannaras, Variations, 124.  
\textsuperscript{368} Yannaras, Variations, 46.  
\end{flushright}
This illumines then the nature of the relationship which a seeker may have with a spiritual father or mother. Williams points towards this when he highlights the call of the Christian as being to a *contemplative humanity*. In using this language Williams was emphasising the call of all Christians to realise their identity in Christ, to become one with, to participate in the Mystery of Christ in the Divine Mystery. It is the living out of the words of St Paul, ‘let this mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus’ (Phil 2:5).

Feminist and writer, Mary Potter Engel, describes her conversion from an ‘I’ to an ‘other’ focus which could also be described as becoming obedient to her true self.

> Having spent my life craving opportunities to preach, lecture, give readings, exercise public authority, be recognized, visible and audible, I now cast aside that craving for self and opened myself to a life lived in, toward, and for the One.\(^{370}\)

Here Engel, driven by what she describes as ‘tasting the belonging’ and elsewhere in the article as responding to her calling, recognises that the voluntary relinquishing of self, which she saw as obedience to this calling, led to joy. She awakens to the fact that ‘true humility, poverty of spirit, means letting go of one’s self and taking the hand of another in love.’\(^{371}\)

The whole point of obedience which is love is the realisation of the self in the Mystery of Love. One of its earthly forms in which both obedience and love can be learned is in the relationship with a spiritual elder.

**Recovering the Spiritual Elder Tradition**

Obedience as a more rule-oriented approach, such as often seems to be preferred by the hierarchical western Catholic church and is certainly understood as such by the laity, is very different to the lived practice of obedience as seen in the spiritual mother/father tradition in eastern Christianity and most other major faith traditions. This difference between obeying the rules of an institution or living in obedience to a spiritual elder is based on a profound lived personal wisdom, knowing and love on the part of the spiritual elder.

There are already ‘lights on the western lampstand’. They reveal in western dress the charism of the Spirit as does any spiritual elder. Ruth Burrows, without ever using the term spiritual mother, describes the depth of soul recognition present in a relationship with a spiritual elder, when speaking of Mother Elsa:

> …it is a rare thing, I am sure, for a person to feel utterly understood by another and completely confident that the other is not dependent on what you tell about yourself but rather is given an intuition which embraces the whole of oneself and one’s relation to God.\(^{372}\)

Bede Griffiths (d. 1993 CE) is another such spiritual elder. He was an English Benedictine monk who lived more than half his life as a sannyasin in a Hindu-Christian Ashram in southern India. Shantivanaam became the locus of thousands of international visitors who sought his teaching and guidance. In an interview with Andrew Harvey, late in his life, in discussing the challenges that Christian spirituality faced, Fr Bede revealed that he understood exactly his role as a spiritual father when he replied to Harvey’s question:


What can we do, Father, in these last days? He looked at me, and smiled an indescribably radiant smile, saying, ‘What can we do? We can become a sign. Whatever happens, become a sign of divine joy and a fountain of divine love. Serve the growing Christ’. 373

Other shining lights include Thomas Keating, a Cistercian monk of Snowmass Monastery in the USA who is regarded by many in his community of monks and the Centering Prayer movement as their spiritual father. Sister Ishpriya, an English former psychotherapist and religious sister of the Sacré Coeur order leads a contemplative lay community in Austria and teaches meditation. John Main (d. 1982 CE), an English Benedictine monk, who recovered the teachings of the desert monks for contemporary men and women, known as Christian Meditation, was, without doubt, a spiritual father of the twentieth century. Brother David Steindl-Rast, the venerable Benedictine monk is another. He has for decades divided his year between eremitical living and communal engagement, teaching contemplative living and prayer, alongside Buddhist masters. Jean Vanier, the deeply transparent, single, lay leader of the L’Arche communities for people with disabilities is a spiritual guide to those in the communities and beyond. Padre Pio (d. 1968 CE) whose charism of exagoreusis – for reading hearts and souls – was internationally known. There are others who live and exercise their charism of prayer, guidance and love anonymously.

I suggest that building on this re-emerging tradition of ‘embodied obedience’ is a possible crucible in which the understanding and practice of obedience could be re-visioned within western Catholicism. Its fruit is interior freedom learned in relationship with a living icon of the Mystery of Love. Clearly, there are cultural differences between eastern and western Christianity which would suggest that the spiritual elder tradition within western Catholicism would need to take on different hues, but its work in the transfiguration of self would remain the same.

Pope Paul VI’s words regarding the importance of Christian witness cited earlier, while calling to mind the way in which guidance was offered in the Christian desert tradition, point to, but do not evoke, the potential mystical depths of the iconic Christic presence of the spiritual elder who Merton describes as ‘a special kind of sacrament of the Lord’s presence in the ecclesiastical community.’ 374 Or in the words of John Chryssavgis, ‘through his (or her) relationship with his (or her) disciples, the spiritual elder hands down Christ himself, in His relationship with His disciples.’ 375 Thus in such a relationship with the elder, as with the first disciples of Jesus, the experience of the Holy Spirit who is love is made manifest. In such a relationship, the desire for obedience is indistinguishable from a response of love for God, one’s spiritual elder and oneself.

Placing a primacy on the spiritual journey taking place in a lived relationship represents a deeply human and contemplative understanding of the spiritual path. ‘The basic human need to seek guidance from those who know the mysteries of Spirit is universal.’ 376 The seeker needs to see the human face of God not only in Christ but also embodied in brothers

375 Chryssavgis, Soul Mending, 49.
and sisters. One western disciple of an eastern guru expresses this very human need to know that the path held out to the seeker can, in fact, be attained with grace.

At last I had the right to exist. I was neither wicked nor faithless nor mad, for needing in my own time and place to find God in the flesh. I needed to do it because God had planted that need in me, as the very breath of my being. And one day it happened. I saw you in a kind of unveiled radiance. I bathed in it and knew that God loved me, because at last that love for me was incarnated, in someone as human as I am; flawed, fragile, but with a heart as loving as any I’d ever known. In that Godly love I experienced at last that God had not misled or abandoned me.377

There is a human need to be in relationship and a divine ‘need’ to love. Those who were discerned by disciples to be spiritual elders able to guide others practiced obedience, humility, non-judgment and discernment. As a result, these ascetics became ‘not idols of supreme power, but icons of sublime love.’378 It was said of Abba Macarius the Great that he ‘would cover the faults which he saw, as though he did not see them; and those which he heard, as though he did not hear them.’379 In such saturation in love through the spiritual mother or father, the disciple is healed and made whole.

The need for those who can guide others by their lives and faith transcends time. Thomas Merton in the twentieth century observed:

In all contemplative traditions, it has been found necessary that those who have attained to some depth of religious insight should to some extent guide others who seek to attain the same experience of truth in their own lives.380

While I have given examples of western spiritual fathers or mothers, the concept of spiritual eldership as such has no general currency in western Catholicism or western Christianity. As noted already the spiritual guide in the west today is more usually a spiritual companion with less sense of the ‘sacramental presence’ of which Merton spoke. In a culture saturated with individualism, the justification of public and private egocentricity and with little experience of contemplative depth or humility that is life-giving, it would not be surprising if there is a wariness of the notion of the elder who is described as the living, breathing icon of Christ.

So how could this be recovered in the west? The Cistercian monk Basil Pennington, on a visit to Mt Athos, clearly impressed by the contemplative depth he experienced in some of the Athos monks, pondered the question as to how western monks could respond more fully to those who are seeking and searching. The answer from the Orthodox monk to whom he addressed this question is instructive for our purposes. He responded that this was a query he could not imagine being asked by an Orthodox monk.381 Implied in this ‘non-response’ is that whether one is a monk or layperson, the central focus is to seek to become one with God with all one’s heart. The rest lies within the province of the Holy Spirit. Pennington then partially answers his own question:

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377 Cited in Fox, "Dangerous Friends and Breathing Icons," 19.
378 Chryssavgis, Soul Mending, 77.
381 Pennington, The Monks of Mt Athos, 60.
We have so few real Spiritual Fathers (and Mothers) to respond to so many. I don’t think it is because God is not willing to give us many more – all we need – but few of us are willing to pay the price necessary for such paternity (or maternity).\textsuperscript{382}

Perhaps this is so. But it also seems to me that without contemplative depth, to put it simply, we do not know what we do not know. The trinitarian mystery at the heart of all creation continues to call in the hearts of seekers and we need to become silent enough to hear it. The prior task is the embedding of the practice of contemplative prayer again as a mainstream practice for western Christians. Only when there are many more lay men and women who are open to the Spirit from a place of contemplative depth will there be people capable of being open to the Spirit’s call to guidance.

Conclusion

Recovering obedience as a spiritual practice and entering a relationship with a spiritual mother or father raises several questions. These relate to the culturally different expressions of Christianity which have already played a part in the eleventh-century schism between east and west.

That obedience is central is a restatement of an often-unknown aspect of the Christian tradition for centuries. In addition to this, humankind in the Christian and other faith traditions for more than a millennium has found it efficacious for the spiritual journey to be undertaken with a guide, called by God for such a purpose. In this relationship with a spiritual elder, the seeker is led into a deep inner transfiguration leading to union in Christ. ‘In order to receive the healing grace of God, one needs to open to at least one other person.’\textsuperscript{383} In so doing, the seeker recognises in that face the journey already walked more deeply into the heart of mystery.

However, the way in which obedience has manifested in practice in Catholicism, as witnessed recently for example in the sexual abuse scandals, would seem to justify the rejection of obedience by today’s postmodern western consciousness.

I am under no illusion that the Orthodox church down the road from me, or anywhere else in western countries, is peopled with deep contemplatives and dotted with budding Seraphims or Sophronys. Monks within the eastern church have been decrying for centuries the loss of the ‘great spiritual fathers’.\textsuperscript{384} Abba John the Dwarf prophesied thus in the fourth century:

Here is what one of the old men in ecstasy said: ’Three monks were standing at the edge of the sea, and a voice came to them from the other side saying, ’Take wings of fire and come here to me.’ The first two did so and reached the other shore, but the third remained, crying and weeping exceedingly. But later wings were given to him also, not of fire, but weak and without strength, so that with great difficulty he reached the other shore, sometimes under water, sometimes above it. So, it is with the present generation; if they are given wings they are not of fire, but wings that are weak and without power.’\textsuperscript{385}

\textsuperscript{382} Pennington, \textit{The Monks of Mt Athos}, 60.
\textsuperscript{383} Chryssavgis, \textit{Soul Mending}, 10.
\textsuperscript{384} Young, “Obedience and the Layman,” 46–7.
\textsuperscript{385} Ward, \textit{The Sayings}, 88.
But, despite the pessimism of Abba John the Dwarf seventeen hundred years ago, the institution of the spiritual mother or father has stood the test of time as a way of assisting seekers to take their journey into the fullness of their creation. This mode of ‘embodied obedience’ – an icon of Christ – enables the seeker to confront their limitations and failings in an environment of love and prayer and to realise their true self in the Mystery of Divine Love.
Chapter 6 – Concluding Questions

In this thesis, I have pointed out that current western cultural understandings, experience and expectations around obedience, particularly within western Catholicism, militate against it being received by laypeople as a positive or central aspect of the spiritual path as the Christian tradition asserts. I have shown how relationship was central to the obedience of Jesus and to the joyful obedience of the first disciples and early Christians. In the case of Jesus, it arose from his intimate relationship with the one he named as Father. Later Christians held the conviction that the Spirit of Christ was present and had transformed their lives. Obedience was, therefore, both personal and relational in origin. As I have shown, the motivation for their obedience arose in the primacy of encounter, not the primacy of the magisterium or conscience. This is different to the ‘popular’ understanding of obedience by western Catholic laypeople today as due first and foremost to the teachings of the church hierarchy. I have proposed that there is a need to recover a positive way of understanding and practising obedience in spiritual practice today. I have further suggested that the key to the recovery of obedience as a life-giving practice leading to union with God is through two further recoveries within western Catholicism – contemplative prayer and a relationship with a spiritual mother or father. In such a personal and ecclesial context of faithfulness, obedience becomes the expression of being in love, as the seeker emulates the obedience in love at the very heart of trinitarian perichoresis. A heart attuned to the silence of self-forgetfulness is awakened to love and seeks to respond in love as the unique being s/he was created to be.

This linkage between contemplation and becoming one’s true self in the Divine Mystery has been long known by the mystics. Henri Bremond, former French Jesuit priest, literary scholar, writer on mystical spirituality and philosopher said, ‘... it is not possible to ignore the mystics without disowning one’s self.’ Thus the fullness of human flourishing in union with God and contemplative or mystical knowing are inextricably linked. The true self can only be realised in this paradox of self-forgetfulness and grace. The relationship which most facilitates this journey, recognised as such in all religious traditions, is that of a seeker with a spiritual mother or father. In Christianity, by and large, only the eastern lung has maintained this living tradition. This tradition in eastern Orthodoxy can have its abuses and, as noted earlier by Ware, needs renewal. However, it is a tried and tested path. It is one which has for centuries been a womb in which obedience and its fruit, in a transfigured self and love, are born anew in the individual and the ecclesia.

I would like now to address several related questions arising from my proposal. Given western attitudes towards obedience, why would it become a spiritual aspiration now? How does obedience relate to the growth in the insights from depth psychology in such a relationship? Historically obedience has been used as a tool of oppression, especially for women in Christianity. Why would it now be any different? For many women, the recovery of self has been/is the predominant task in growth in human flourishing. How can a practice which has self-forgetfulness at its core be conducive to human flourishing for women? How would western Christianity react to the adoption of a model which is culturally eastern

Christian in character? How could the relationship between obedience and humiliation as evident in the early tradition be received today? What evidence is there that eastern Christians are any more holy in practice than western Christians?

**Western Reactions to Obedience**

After all that I have outlined perhaps the first question to be addressed is why would western Christians be interested in obedience now? Western Christianity has a very different spiritual, psychological and cultural background compared to eastern Christianity. Coming to associate ‘obedience’ with words such as authenticity, love and freedom in Christ seems a long stretch and will not be arrived at through instructions or even acts of will. Past practices have contributed to the negativity that currently exists. It is also apparent that before obedience could be embraced as a way of being in love, some of the stories in Chapter One show there is a need for healing by many Catholics, perhaps especially women.

Fortunately, the healing of inner wounds from a misguided application of obedience can come about, not by focussing on ‘obedience’ per se, but by turning one’s attention to self-forgetfulness in prayer. As Maggie Ross using secular, psychological language states:

> ... if we can move beyond our noisy, circular, manipulative thinking to wait in silence, in attentive receptivity, we open ourselves to insight and to what may appear like behavioural change but is in fact a stripping off of dross that masked the unfolding truth of the self in the deep mind, in the heart.\(^{387}\)

In the course of this healing occurs. Through the practice of meditation, contemplative prayer and living – integrating an interior solitude and silence – in time and with grace, leads to an experience of ‘obedience’ as a way of being in love. In this transfiguration there arises a love for self, others and the Divine Mystery, that leads to a desire for obedience which is freeing rather than binding. Speaking specifically with reference to women but in words that could be applied to all, Beverly Lanzetta states:

> In stillness … Freed from false identities, women (and men) can find a new openness and intimacy. Silence recharges and restores the powerful yet fragile awareness of life’s radical awe. It is the electrical current that ignites the divine spark at the centre of our being.\(^{388}\)

Silence and the turn from self exist at the heart of Christian praxis. As Ross says, the elision of ‘self-consciousness … opens the door to what was once called divinity, or the fulfilment beyond imagining of what it means to be human.’\(^{389}\) The task then becomes not to convince anyone about obedience, but to assist them to fall in love with Divine Mystery through taking up contemplative prayer. Only when one experiences oneself as changed, more loved and loving, as did the early Christians, does *eros* take over and open one to obedience as the way of love. In line with the trinitarian example of obedience as self-gift in love, we are called to become divine self-gift since the image of God within us is likewise trinitarian. Obedience grows out of *eros* and becomes *eros*. Becoming *eros* is the realisation of the mystery of the unique personhood of each one. Obedience, understood as the discerned

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\(^{387}\) Ross, *Silence*, vol. 1, 57.


\(^{389}\) Ross, *Silence*, vol. 1, 57.
response to the indwelling mystery in order that one becomes fully one’s self in the Divine Mystery, is very different to doing as you are told.

**Spiritual Elders - an Alien Tradition for Westerners?**

Another charge that may be raised is that obedience, as practised in the eastern Christian spiritual mother/father tradition, is culturally alien to western Christian sensibilities. Doctrine aside, there are three key spiritual practices which distinguish Orthodoxy from western Christianity – the veneration of icons, the Jesus prayer and the spiritual mother/father tradition. To a certain degree parts of western Christianity have integrated the first two practices although they are not mainstream. The Catechism of the Catholic church references the tradition of the Jesus Prayer. After much initial caution in relation to the veneration of icons, in Catholicism, there is increasing use of icons in prayer. This suggests an openness to some eastern spiritual practices. However, the spiritual mother/father tradition cuts closer to the western notion of the autonomous individual - the separated self existing in a secular, God free environment. The exercise of authority by individuals also arouses in some a fear that it will give rise to rampant egos and have little to do with the authority of Christ. The refrain that ‘Christ is the teacher’ is interpreted literally, usually and oftentimes without contemplative insight.

It was not always so in western Christianity. The early Christian tradition demonstrates the awareness of the need for those who speak with authority. Jesus himself is described as ‘one having authority’ (Matt 7:29). As Leiva-Merikakis notes:

> Everywhere he speaks as one who has been an eyewitness of the inner life of God ... He speaks not only with the authority conferred by delegation but also with the authority conferred by experience.

The human Jesus drawing on this relationship with the Father spoke, as Leiva-Merikakis says, as one who ‘has the right to speak as he does.’ Much later Orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky, reflecting on the words of the second-century bishop, Ignatius of Antioch, emphasises the importance of a ‘margin of silence’ to truly hear the words of Jesus. Thus, speaking with authority in the tradition has been coupled with the power of silence, of self-forgetfulness. It is important not only for the teacher to speak with authority but also for the disciple to hear. ‘Part of the stillness that is needed for us to hear the words of Jesus is a sense of presence, and it is this that tradition conveys.’ Here Louth is referring to the tradition of contemplation giving rise to encounter, hidden or made manifest, with Divine Mystery. Noting the iconic importance of the one who has already walked the path of spiritual discipline, Louth also cites Jerome (d. 420 CE):

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390 Catholic Church, ‘*Catechism of the Catholic Church*’, accessed 20 May 2018, Part 4, Section 1, Ch 2, #2667.
395 Louth, *Discerning the Mystery*, 94.
The living voice of the master, the one who through prayer and self-discipline has come to know, that is, come to communion with the heart of the faith, has immediacy and directness, and incarnates the fundamental experience of encounter with the living Lord. Jerome remarked that ‘the effect of the living voice has some strange and hidden power; it has greater resonance when coming direct from the mouth of the master to the ear of the disciple.’\textsuperscript{396}

This ‘hidden power’ encapsulates the value of presence, the incarnation of the ‘experience of encounter with the Lord’ and is no less powerful in the twenty-first century as it was in the first.

The early Christian church historian Robert Louis Wilken also interprets the church Father Augustine of Hippo as using the term ‘authority’ in a way which calls to mind this view of authority arising from identity and experience. In \textit{Of True Religion}, Wilken’s translation of Augustine states that ‘authority invites trust and prepares human beings for reason.’\textsuperscript{397} Augustine’s use of ‘authority’ is aligned with ‘truth’, as distinct from power and coercion, and points in the direction of personal relationship. Wilken says:

Augustine’s model of authority is the relation of a teacher to a student, a master to a disciple ... the student’s trust is won not simply by words, but also by actions, by the kind of person the teacher is...\textsuperscript{398}

These examples point to the existence of a relationship of ‘master and disciple’ within western awareness and tradition, which can be used as templates.

The key to developing a culture of guides of spiritual depth in western Catholicism can build on this almost forgotten tradition. It is a very human response to be attracted to those who exhibit an inner authority and depth of experience in themselves. Such people draw others to themselves. Research shows that modern day consciousness does not want to be told what to do, but it does hunger to be known – to be in relationship.\textsuperscript{399} Research shows that socially isolated children have significantly poorer health twenty years later.\textsuperscript{400} A relationship that is built on integrity, love and deep discernment in which the seeker senses; knows; experiences themselves as known, loved and becoming transformed; is very different to the superficiality of much relationship today. Coming to self-knowledge is at the very heart of the spiritual journey.

Kallistos Ware, perhaps the chief interpreter of Orthodoxy to the West notes that ‘the spiritual father (and mother) does not impose his (or her) own ideas and devotions but

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\item[396] Louth, Discerning the Mystery, 95.
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(s/he) helps the disciple to find the vocation that is distinctively his (or her) own. These comments by Ware resonate with the general intent of classical spiritual direction as it is understood in western Christianity. Thomas Merton wrote that spiritual direction is:

[A] continuous process of formation and guidance in which a Christian is led and encouraged in his (or her) special vocation, so that by faithful correspondence to the graces of the Holy Spirit (s/he) may attain to the particular end of his (or her) vocation and to union with God.

Ware also notes that obedience by the laity to the spiritual mother or father would be different to that expected between monastic men and women and their spiritual father. For western settings, the difference between command and opinion in the words given by the spiritual mother or father, as noted in Chapter Four, is an important qualifier.

Eastern Christian literature on the spiritual elder/disciple relationship for non-monastics suggests that there are a variety of ways in which it is lived and practised. For example, some may see a guide very regularly, others less so. How often this most important of relationships occurs then is not the criterion by which its efficacy is measured. Rather it lies in the degree to which the disciple, through submission of self in the manifestation of thoughts, is led more deeply into the mystery of God through the spiritual elder. A western transmission, regenerating in a very different ecclesial, spiritual, psychological and cultural soil would, without doubt, produce a fruit with differences.

**Women’s Experience of Obedience**

In the Introduction, I outlined the difficulties many women experienced through the implementation of a narrowly defined ‘obedience’. It is therefore essential that a renewed vision of obedience be one which does not repeat past oppressions. I suggest, as does Sarah Coakley, that the way forward lies in the adoption of a contemplative practice. One of the difficulties in proposing contemplative praxis as a way of understanding is that its validity can only be known by its personal appropriation. Contemplative practice teaches that in obedience to the self-forgetfulness of silence, however imperfectly followed, the ego self is gradually deprived of centre stage and opened in the silence to one’s deepest self. In the dynamos of the Spirit, losing and finding yield simultaneously. As Coakley says, ‘wordless prayer can enable one, paradoxically, to hold vulnerability and personal empowerment together, precisely by creating the space in which non-coercive divine power manifests itself.’ Paradoxically, what is encountered in its effects is not the annihilation of self, but the finding of self and a deepening openness to the ‘otherness’ of silence. What Coakley refers to is not an instant mysticism, but rather a gradual transfiguration by the Spirit as the work of silence (and grace) refines self-knowledge and intent. Prayer and theology are once again united in the pursuit of the divine.

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401 Ware, "The Spiritual Father," 35.
402 Merton, *Spiritual Direction and Meditation*, 5.
403 Ware, *Inner Kingdom*, 142–3.
404 Chryssavgis, *Soul Mending*, 57.
405 Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, 1–68.
Only, I suggest, by facing—and giving new expression to—the paradoxes of ‘losing one’s life in order to save it’ can feminists hope to construct a vision of the Christic ‘self’ that transcends the gender stereotypes we are seeking to upend.407

Contrary to Hampson’s ‘self-abnegation’ referred to in the Introduction, Coakley states, ‘this special self-emptying is not a negation of self, but the place of the self’s transformation and expansion into God.’408 What is gradually opened to, through obedience to the ascesis of silence, is one’s fullest potential in the Divine Mystery.

A second area of seeming contradiction is between the notion of the ‘discipleship of equals’ as a defining characteristic of the message of Jesus and the early Jesus communities (which Christian feminists rightly applaud) compared with the charismatic authority of the spiritual mother or father. In the minds of some, this can become linked with ecclesial hierarchical power which has been used as a mechanism for the control of women (and men). Feminist thought and practice has eschewed such models.

Leadership was associated with hierarchy and hierarchy was seen as inextricably linked with the patriarchal domination of women. To liberate themselves from patriarchy, women were trying to organise without hierarchy, through collectives and networks. ... Australian feminists developed a form of organising that emphasised leadership acts, which could be shared by a number of people, rather than viewing leadership as synonymous with charismatic individuals.409

Gone are the days when feminist contributors to a book did so anonymously to subvert the masculine notion of hierarchy and emphasise rather the equality of ideas.410 Feminist leadership has moved beyond this initial hard line and its other manifestations, emphasising rather the underpinning values of collaboration, consultation and care, in order that women and men individually and collectively may grow.411 The reality that some individuals may be more gifted in particular areas than others is a fact of life recognised also by women. What is important is the way in which all are brought along on a path.

In the spiritual mother/father relationship, while there exists an acknowledgement of the hierarchy of giftedness in the Spirit, the milieu is one in which the underpinning values are love, care, being with and sharing insights, in order that another may grow into the fullness of their being in Christ. They exist in order that another may become who they were created to be. Again, as with contemplation, it is in the experience of the relationship that its veracity will be found.

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407 Coakley, Powers and Submissions, 33.
408 Coakley, Powers and Submissions, 36.
Integration of Psychological Understandings

Related to the need for a nuanced understanding of obedience is the way in which insights from depth psychology can inform its practice. As stated by Sebastian Moore in the Foreword to *No Other Light*:

... to see the psycho-analytic and the ascetical-mystical traditions as dealing respectively with different areas of concern, is to fail to hear the witness of our contemporary culture to the abiding reality of a mysterious ground of consciousness. 412

Depth psychology shows us that ‘true obedience presupposes emotional maturity.’ Only then can there be kenotic love, such as I have proposed. But such maturity cannot develop where there is a lack of autonomy and agency. I have cited earlier the obstacle of over-dependency in attaining human flourishing. This was frequently the lot of women, both women religious and laywomen, for the stereotypical ‘good wife was the submissive wife’ of the Christian past.

For post-Christian feminists (e.g. Hampson) and postmodernism generally, autonomy is the holy grail in the development of the individual, the separate self. This is not universally welcomed in Christian circles with some theological statements still reflecting the lack of integration of insights from depth psychology. For example, Orthodox theologian Panayiotis Nellas stated that ‘Orthodox theology is called ... to judge autonomy on all its levels and in all its forms and to condemn it relentlessly’. Clearly, Nellas is seeking to emphasise the incontrovertible reality of the origin of all in the Divine Mystery. It is true that ultimate obedience is owed to God and not to human consciousness. However, a tension must always exist in this. Part of the suppression of obedience in Christianity in the past has derived from a failure to recognise the importance of self-direction for growth into psychological maturity. Research tells us that learning to exercise autonomy, vis-a-vis one’s parents, for example, is an important phase in a child growing up.

Children struggle to gain autonomy from their parents. They inevitably overdo this at one time or another and—at least temporarily—become self-centred and wilful brats ... This striving from submission to mastery and back to a mature middle ground of willingness is a perfectly natural sequence of human growth. 415

Thus, learning obedience of the heart and the struggle for autonomy are both part of the growth into mature adulthood. They need to be situated within the context of understanding our utter dependence on the Divine Mystery we name as God. The two are not mutually exclusive.

Obedience and Humiliation

One of the more difficult questions in relation to adopting an attitude of obedience for a western mindset, even a western Christian mindset, is its pairing often with humiliation.

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413 Wolff-Salin, *No Other Light*, 131.


Jane Foulcher states, ‘humiliation is regarded positively since it is a signal of a total change in allegiance: from the world ... to God.’\textsuperscript{416} The example of Isidore is a case in point. Isidore learned obedience and humility through the humiliation of being directed to sit at the monastery gate and request prayers of those entering. Today, stories of public humiliation are not unknown in Buddhist or other Asian religious communities as part of the path to enlightenment. Called ‘shock treatment’ or ‘crazy-wisdom’, they arouse varied feelings and in the case of the enigmatic and excessive Chögyam Trungpa, led to a decline in support.\textsuperscript{417} Advances in depth psychology, western sensitivities and the negative effects of some earlier practices in religious life, lead to the view that the deliberate humbling of a person (as with Isidore) is usually counterproductive to healthy psychological development.

Bernard of Clairvaux in the eleventh century preached that, ‘sanctification depends on participating ever more willingly in the foolishness of God and that humiliation is the best means to true humility’.\textsuperscript{418} For Bernard, self-knowledge could not be other than humiliation.

For if you sincerely examine your inward dispositions in the light of truth, and judge them unflatteringly for what they are, you will certainly be humiliated by the baseness that this true knowledge reveals to you, though you perhaps as yet cannot endure that others, too, should see this image.\textsuperscript{419}

Taking Bernard’s cue here, knowing oneself and the manifestation of thoughts to a spiritual mother or father can, of itself, constitute humiliation. Interior (and ‘accidental’ exterior) humiliations occur naturally in a seeker’s life and spiritual journey. Contemplative practice indeed fosters such self-confrontation, since it leads to a deeper self-knowledge and interiority. The deepening desire to love awakens in a receptive heart an increasingly acute awareness of one’s failure in love. Such knowledge cannot but help lead to a growing humility and desire for obedience, without needing to create further specific humiliations for the seeker.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have focused on one small part – recovering a way in which obedience can be embraced fully and openly in the individual’s spiritual path as a way of being in love, so as to become the person each one was created to be. It is part of a much wider recovery canvas that is increasingly attended to in the west – that of bringing together again contemplative spirituality and theology, which diverged over the centuries under the stresses of scholasticism, the Reformation and the Enlightenment.

The behaviours I witnessed and noted at the beginning of the thesis were of two Orthodox young adults. It is not that eastern Christianity is notably holier than western Christianity. We all inhabit a fallen world in which each individual and ecclesial community struggles to love and fails, over and over. But at the same time, each ‘lung’ of Christianity has aspects wherein the Divine Mystery is more fully refracted than in the other. For obedience to become life-giving for the spiritual path again for western Catholics it needs to be born of the Spirit and relationship – as it was for Jesus and the first disciples – a way of being in love.

\textsuperscript{416} Foulcher, Reclaiming Humility, 55.
\textsuperscript{418} Feuerstein, Holy Madness, 18.
\textsuperscript{419} Bernard of Clairvaux cited in Foulcher, Reclaiming Humility, 197.
The primacy on encounter is key. For this, contemplation is the way and, with that, a western adaptation of the eastern relationship of love between a seeker and a spiritual guide who is truly a ‘Spirit-bearer’. In this way obedience can be experienced again as nothing other than love.
Bibliography

Primary Sources


**Secondary Sources**


