

When Ecclesiastical Superiors Are to Be Obeyed

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INTRODUCTION

Extracted from Hus's *De Ecclesia*, the treatise that would see him summoned to Constance and burned in 1415, this chapter takes up the question that consumed the final years of his life: when does a Christian owe obedience to Rome? Leaning on Bernard's letter to the monk Adam, Hus draws the classic threefold distinction between acts absolutely good, absolutely evil, and morally indifferent — the last being the only proper terrain of ecclesiastical command. The argument is scholastic in form but pastoral in stakes, laying groundwork the Reformers would later build upon a century before Luther. Expect careful, citation-driven reasoning that moves patiently toward a conclusion its author knew could cost him his life.

It having been stated what the apostolic seat is, it is now to be stated in what cases obedience is to be rendered to this apostolic seat. And the aforesaid doctors say, that "it is to be obeyed by inferiors in all things— when the absolutely good is not forbidden or the absolutely evil is not " commanded [but the intermediate also]¹ which in place, way, time or person may be either good or bad.

This they prove by four pertinent witnesses, the Saviour, Bernard, Augustine and Jerome. And because the doctors took the distinction from Bernard, Ep. ad Adam monachum [Migne's ed., 182 : 95 sq.], about the absolutely good and the absolutely evil, so it is to be noted that after St. Bernard shows that no one is to be obeyed in that which is evil and concludes, saying: "Therefore, to do evil, even when any one whosoever commands, certainly is not obedience but rather disobedience. This deserves soberly to be said, that some things are absolutely good, some absolutely evil, and in these latter no man owes obedience, just as the former are not to be left undone, even when forbidden. Nor are the latter to be performed, even though they be enjoined. Further, between these two are the things that are intermediate, which may be good or evil according to the place, time, mode or person involved. And in these things the law of obedience is fixed as in the tree of knowledge of good and evil, which was in the midst of Paradise. In these things, certainly, it is not right to prefer our thoughts to the sentence of the teachers. In these things neither the command of prelates nor their prohibition is to be in all cases spurned." And further on, Bernard says: "Faith, hope and love are absolutely good, and other things of this kind; and they may not be either forbidden or not kept. Absolutely evil are sacrilege, adultery, theft, and such like, which certainly may neither be properly enjoined nor done, and they may not be

improperly not 1 forbidden and not done. For no one's prohibition is valid to set aside precepts, and no one's commandments are valid to prejudice in favor of things forbidden.

"Then there are the things intermediate, which indeed of themselves are not known to be either good or evil. They may, however, indifferently be either good or bad; they may be commanded or forbidden, but under no circumstances are they to be obeyed by inferiors, when they are evil. Among these are, by way of example, fasting, vigils, reading and such like. But it should be known that certain things intermediate go beyond the reason of things impure or evil. For since marriage may occur or not occur, but when once entered into it is not permissible to undo it, what, therefore, before marriage was permitted to be, as a thing indifferent, obtains in those already married the force of the absolutely good. Likewise, it is a matter indifferent for a secular man to possess private property, because he has the option of not possessing. But for a monk, because he is not permitted to have possessions, to possess goods is an absolute evil." Thus much Bernard.

Also it is to be noted that, so far as the sense of those speaking about human actions goes, a certain work is called neutral among them which, in its primary intent, cannot be said to be a good of morals or an evil of vice, as, for example, to build or to weave. But works are called good or evil by the standard of their class — *de genere* — which words designate from a moral standpoint the substance or nature of a good work or an evil. Nevertheless, they do not involve the circumstances which of themselves fix the natures of such acts as in the class of virtue or vice, as, for example, giving alms or putting a man to death. For both of these can become good or evil according to the diversity of their causes or the purpose of the doer. For to give alms for vainglory is evil, just as to kill a man by the authority of God, lest he infect the church, is good. But of another kind are collective works, which from a moral standpoint are called purely good or bad, such as committing adultery and thieving, which are of vice, and loving God and our neighbor heartily, which are virtuous. Briefly, as one act is purely good, such as loving God with the heart, so another act is purely evil, as is hating God.

Likewise, a thing is good generically which, as it were, disposes a man to judge and discover that it is good more than to judge that it is evil, as fasting and giving alms. A thing is evil generically which, as it were, disposes a man to judge and discover what may be evil rather than what may be good. Howbeit, the thing may be well done, as the putting a man to death. But a neutral work is such a work which does not dispose a man to judge and discover what is good rather than what is evil, as weaving, eating, ploughing, or running.

Hence, a work absolutely good holds the first rank, a work generically good [that is, judged by its class], as it were, the middle rank, and a neutral work the lowest rank. Examples of these three are loving God, fasting, and weaving. The same applies to their opposites, for a work purely evil, as is hating God; a work generically evil is putting a man to death. But the third or neutral work is not counted as evil, for if it were it would not be neutral. For the name lieve that if the Roman pontiff or a prelate commands anything whatsoever, it is to be done as though it were a mandate of God, and that the prelate cannot err, even as Jesus Christ cannot.

Secondly, let him hold in regard to the commands in God's law, how some are commanded us in a mixed way and others distinctly. In a mixed way the commands are commanded which we ought to

do every day and meritoriously, after the manner of which Augustine says, that all truth is contained in the Scriptures. But a work that is commanded, for which there is no reason or utility to the church of Christ, is not contained explicitly or implicitly in the Scriptures. And if such be commanded by pope or other prelate, the inferior is not bound to perform it, lest, in so doing, he offend against the liberty of the Lord's law. For we ought to receive as of faith that God commands us to do nothing except what is meritorious for us and reasonable, and consequently profitable to salvation.

The conclusion should be this: Subjects are bound to obey willingly and cheerfully virtuous, yea, and hard superiors, when they command us to do the mandates of the Lord Jesus Christ. This conclusion is evident, for Christ says, "The scribes and Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. All things, therefore, whatsoever they bid you, these do," Matt. 23 : 1, that is, all my commandments. Here Augustine, Com. on John, 20 [Nic. Fathers, 7 : 443], says: "In sitting in Moses' seat, they teach God's law. Therefore God teaches through them. But, if they wish to teach their own things, do not hear them, do not do them." And on this subject Christ also said, "He that heareth you, heareth me, and he that despiseth you," etc, Luke 10 : 16, consequently, also, God the Father; because such persons are not obeyed as men, but as ministers of God, who is to be obeyed above all.

Therefore, no one should obey man in anything, even the least thing, that opposes itself to the divine commands, which St. Bernard calls divine counsels. For Peter says: "We must obey God rather than men," Acts 5 : 29. Hence, as we are commanded to obey our superiors in things lawful and honorable, with the circumstances taken into consideration, so we are commanded to resist them to the face when they walk contrary to the divine counsels or commandments. For Paul, teaching that we should be his imitators, I Cor. 4 : 16, withstood Peter to the face for a light offence, Gal. 2 : 11. But much more are we bound to obey Paul and every writer of divine Scripture rather than the Roman pontiff, when it comes to matters indifferent or neutral. And as we are not bound to follow any apostle, except in so far as he follows Jesus Christ, so it is evident by the limitation laid down by the apostle that we are bound to obey no prelate who has lived since the apostles, except as he commands or counsels Christ's counsels or commands. And so the holy apostle, I Cor. 4, 11, when he counsels that they be his imitators immediately announces the manner of such imitation, when he says, "even as I also am a follower of Christ." Therefore, the wise inferior ought to examine into the commands of a superior when he seems to deviate from Christ's law, or his rule. For no superior is above correction. Hence, Christ often commanded us to be watchful in our works: "I say unto you all, watch," Mark 13 : 36. And the apostle said: "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but prove the spirits whether they be of God, for many false prophets are gone out into the world," I John 4:1. The Saviour also said: "Many false prophets shall arise and lead many astray," Matt. 24 : 5.

And in this connection, St. Bernard speaks very finely in his Letter to Adam the Monk [Migne, 182 : 100 sq.],² when he rebukes him because he had unwisely obeyed his abbot contrary to the rule of his vow. Hence, he exclaims, but in a playful mood: "O most obedient of monks, whom of all the words of the elders not a single iota escapes, he does not heed of what nature the command is which is commanded, satisfied if he only obeys, and this obedience is without delay! If this ought to be so, let it now be *scratched out from the book of the Gospel, where it is written, 'Be ye wise as serpents'; and let that be sufficient which follows: 'simple as doves.'* And I do not say that the commandments of superiors

are to be examined and judged by inferiors when nothing is found to be commanded at variance with the divine appointments, but I assert prudence to be necessary, by which it may be determined whether anything is at variance; and also liberty to be necessary, with which we may honestly spurn commands." Further, he says: "I have nothing to enquire. Let him see to it, who has commanded. Say, I ask, whether, if the sword were put in thy hands, he would order thee to be struck in the neck, wouldst thou consent? Would it not be reputed to others as homicide, since thou couldst have prevented it? Come, therefore, see to it lest, perhaps, under the pretext of obedience, thou fall into something more grave." Thus much Bernard, who adduces many testimonies from Scripture and concludes: "Thou, therefore, in the face of all these things and other numberless testimonies of the truth to this same purport, dost thou think any one whosoever ought to be obeyed ? Hateful perversity, this virtue of obedience, which always wars against the truth, and is girded about against the truth!" Thus much Bernard.

Therefore, this same Bernard in his sermon on the Lord's advent lays down five conditions of right obedience; the first, when the work is a holy work, for it is not permissible to obey contrary to God; the second, when the work is voluntary; the third, when it is pure from the standpoint of a holy purpose, in accordance with the Saviour's teaching, when he said: "If thine eye is single, thy whole body shall be full of light," Matt. 6 : 22. The fourth condition is when the work is judicious, because neither defect nor excess infects it, and the fifth, when it is permanently persevered in, as an obligation, even to the end. From this it is clear that an inferior, recognizing a superior's injudicious command, that it is known or should be known as fitted to hurt the church, by drawing away from the worship of God and the profit of souls unto salvation, — he ought to resist that superior. For such resistance is true obedience done not only to God in view of the law of fraternal correction but also to the superior himself, for no superior has the right to command anything except what is good. Since, therefore, an inferior is obligated, for obedience's sake, to do that which is generically good and commanded by the superior, it follows that he is obeying in so resisting him, as he ought; for he thereby does what is good, and turns away from what is evil. Hence, it is clear that a subject, in obeying his prelate in that which is evil, is not excused from sin, for the Saviour says: "If the blind guide the blind, both fall into the pit," Matt. 15 : 14.

This means that if a "blind man," that is, an ignorant or bad prelate, guides "a blind man," that is, an ignorant or bad subject, by commanding him to do something, they both fall into the pit of error. Hence, Christ aptly says to his disciples in regard to the scribes and Pharisees — who taught that it is a sin to eat bread with unwashed hands, when it is nevertheless not a sin: — "Let them alone, they are blind leaders of the blind." What does "let them alone" mean? The Gloss says, "Leave them to their own will; they are blind," that is, they are obscured by traditions.

And this rule of Christ the very brute animals observe, for the horse or the ass, discerning the hole in front of them and urged on by spurs, avoid the ditch so far as they can, as is clear from the case of the ass, which discerned the angel forbidding, lest it go the way Balaam wanted to go [Num. 22 : 22], and, with a man's voice, admonished the prophet's unwisdom. Hence, Bernard says ironically in his letter to the monk Adam: "Thou, that most obedient son, thou, that most devoted disciple — as for that thy father and teacher, whom neither by an instant of time nor a turn of the foot, as they say, thou didst suffer to be removed from thee as long as he lived — after him not with blind eyes, but after the manner of Balaam, with open eyes, thou didst not hesitate to fall down into the pit!" So much Bernard.

From these truths, however, it follows further that clerical inferiors, and much more laics, may sit in judgment on the works of their superiors. From this it follows that the judgment by discreet and hidden arbitrament in the court of conscience is one thing, and the judgment in virtue of the empowered jurisdiction in the court of the church is another. By the first way the inferior ought chiefly to examine and judge himself, as it is written: "If we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged," I Cor. 11 : 31. And again, in the same way, he ought to judge all things pertaining to his salvation as it is written: "He that is spiritual judgeth all things," I Cor. 2 : 15. The laic also ought to examine and judge the works of his superior, as the apostle judged the works of Peter, when he corrected him and said: "When I saw that they walked not uprightly according to the truth of the Gospel, I said unto Cephas before them all, If thou, who art a Jew, livest as do the Gentiles and not as do the Jews, how compellest thou the Gentiles to walk as do the Jews?" Gal. 2 : 14. Secondly, the laic ought to examine and judge his superior for the

purpose of fleeing, for Christ said: "Beware of false prophets which come unto you in sheep's fore, O ye who love Christ's law from the heart, first note their works and see if they [the superiors] incline to the world, second give heed to their commands, whether they savor of avarice or the gain of this world, and third consult holy Scripture whether they command in accordance with Christ's counsel. And in the light of this counsel believe them; or disbelieve them, if they command contrary to this counsel. But let not curates say to laics, 'What concern is it of yours to take note of our life or works,' for did not our Saviour say: "Do not according to their works"? Matt. 23. And afterwards he exposed the works of the prelates to the multitude that they might know them and to their advantage avoid them. Yea, much more to the prelates, who say, 'What concern is it of yours to take note of our life and works?' it is pertinent for laics to reply: 'What concern is it of yours that ye should receive our alms?' for the apostle says: "We command you in the name of Jesus Christ that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly and not after the tradition which they received of us, for ye yourselves know how ye ought to imitate us, for we behaved not ourselves disorderly among you, neither did we eat bread for naught at any man's hands, but in labor and travail, for even when we were with you, this we commanded you, If any man will not work, neither let him eat." II Thess. 3 : 6, 10.

It is clear how inferiors ought to examine and judge intelligently and reasonably in respect to the commands and works of superiors, for otherwise they would be in peril of eternal death, if they did not judge wisely about these things, how far they ought to believe their superiors, how far follow them, and in what things they ought intelligently to obey them according to the Lord's law. For that best of masters, the Lord, admonished us in advance to "beware of false prophets and the leaven of the Pharisees," Matt. 7 : 15; 16 : 11. He also said: "Believe not, go not forth and do not do their works," Matt. 24 : 26. For he himself exhorted the priests and the multitude to examine and judge in respect to his works, saying, "Which of you convicteth me of sin?" John 8 : 46, and, "Though ye believe not me, believe the works," John 10 : 38. And what an evil it is of Christ's church that our superiors make a larger demand that belief be given to all their approving and condemning judgments, than that belief be given to the faith of holy Scripture, which is the catholic faith. And they punish more severely for departure from their traditions than they do those who blaspheme against that most excellent faith of Christ. And so to them the words of the Psalm [41 : 9] may be applied: "He that ate of my bread hath lifted up his heel against me." For as they affirm, they themselves eat up Christ's patrimony and nevertheless they put a higher value on their commandments than on the commandments of our Lord Jesus Christ himself.

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