

# CROSS *and* CROWN

*Edited by the Dominican Fathers of the  
Province of St. Albert the Great*

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## Catherine of Siena on Religious Obedience

The greatest of the vows, they tell us. But obedience is not merely another vow; it is an entire way of life. The author, mistress of novices of the Sinsinawa Dominican sisters of the Most Holy Rosary, studied in Rome and wrote her thesis on the topic of this article.

*Sister Marie Walter, O.P.*

THE distinction between religious obedience and that obedience to which all men are obliged is based by St. Catherine on the respective characteristics of each: religious obedience is of counsel and the obedience obliging all is of precept. Religious obedience is not conceived as a new kind of obedience, intrinsically different from the ordinary supernatural obedience required of all Christians. To be sure, there is a difference in degree; an accidental perfection is added. "Obedience may be kept in two ways, of which one is more perfect than the other; not that they are on that account separated. . . . The one way is most perfect, the other is also good and perfect; for no one at all can reach eternal life if he be not obedient, for the door was unlocked by the key of obedience, which had been fastened by the disobedience of Adam." <sup>1</sup>

Consonant with orthodox theological teaching, St. Catherine points out that every soul must be clothed in the nuptial garment of grace and perfect charity in order to enter the wedding feast

of eternal life. All have been invited to the feast by Jesus Christ, who has given men the wedding garment in baptism, voluntarily adding to those obligations which bind all Christians, the observance of the evangelical counsels.

The religious life is distinguished from the lay state and from the priesthood in that its members have publicly undertaken the obligation of devoting themselves perpetually to Christian perfection. The Church recognizes as religious those who publicly take the three vows of the evangelical counsels, which are essential to the religious state. Precisely these means distinguish the religious from the layman: the three vows of religion—poverty, chastity, and obedience, by which the religious gives up the right to use, or to own and use, property; the right to otherwise legitimate sexual pleasure; and the right to the free use of his will in external matters.

The Eternal Father introduces Catherine to his explanation of religious obedience by telling her that it is not essentially different from general obedience; it is more perfect, of a higher degree, but always basically the same virtue.<sup>2</sup> By religious obedience is meant not only those acts of a religious which come under his vow of obedience by formal precept, which would be very few, but also all acts of the supernatural virtue of obedience by which a religious obeys a precept of his superior. These latter are acts of "religious obedience" in that by his vow of obedience a religious offers to God his own will by which he makes use of all the powers and habits of the soul.

To obey one's superior in matters that are essential to virtue is not a work of supererogation, but is common to all: whereas to obey in matters pertaining to the practice of perfection belongs properly to religious. This latter obedience is compared to the former as the universal to the particular. For those who live in the world keep something for themselves and offer something to God; and in the latter respect they are under obedience to their superiors: whereas those who live in religion give themselves wholly and their possessions to God. . . . Hence their obedience is universal.<sup>3</sup>

Whether a soul remains in general obedience to the precepts all his life or advances to embrace the higher and more perfect religious obedience depends in the last instance on the will of God in regard to each individual soul. God does not wish all to

embrace the religious life, but he does call all to a life of ever-increasing perfection. In St. Catherine's idiom, all men are pilgrims traveling on the road of the doctrine of Christ crucified. Some go by means of the commandments in common charity, others go by means of the counsels in perfect charity, not however overlooking the commandments. No one can go on this road without the light of faith. A profound spirit of faith which pierces the darkness of doubt and uncertainty will aid in discerning God's plan in each individual case.

This light of faith, the Saint explains, can be twofold: there is a general light which every creature with the use of reason possesses; he needs it to see and to recognize what he ought to love, whom he ought to obey. The general light has a double ray, the light of reason and the light of faith, by which man sees that he is bound to serve and love his Creator, loving him with all his heart and with all his affections without intermediary, and to obey the commandments of loving God above all things and his neighbor as himself. These principal commandments to which all others are related are of obligation to all by this general light; otherwise man would be dead spiritually, deprived of grace. The second light, inseparable and flowing from the first, is that which illumines those who observe the commandments, and, wishing to ascend to a higher perfection, rise from their imperfect state and come to perfection by observing the commandments and the counsels in thought and in deed.

St. Catherine assumed that this passage from general obedience to particular religious obedience was not for all souls; she is here referring to those who have been called by God to this higher perfection. Usually, the vocation to the more perfect life implies at least some preparation on the part of the recipient, particularly in so far as he observes the general obedience of the commandments with greater love. These are the souls to whom the Eternal Father refers in his colloquy with Catherine:

There are some, my dearest daughter, in whom the sweet and amorous fire of love towards obedience burns so high (which fire of love cannot exist with hatred of self-love, so that when the fire increases so does this self-hatred), that they are not content to observe the precepts of the law with a general obedience as you are all obliged to do if you will have life and not death, but take upon themselves a particular obedience,

following the greatest perfection, so that they become observers of the counsels both in deed and in thought. Such as these wish to bind themselves more tightly through self-hatred, and in order to restrain in everything their own will. They either place themselves under the yoke of obedience in holy religion, or without entering religion, they bind themselves to some creature, submitting their will to his, so as more expeditiously to unlock the door of heaven. These are they, as I have told thee, who have chosen the most perfect obedience.<sup>4</sup>

Changing the metaphor elsewhere, St. Catherine assures her correspondents that those in religion sail bravely in spite of storms; the wind of obedience is so strong that it directs the soul in the ship of the religious order, and no contrary wind can impede its progress.<sup>5</sup>

The prime importance of obedience in the religious life is thus brought into focus by her vivid imagery. The wind of pride can have no effect because the soul is humble, a fact evident from his obedience. Nor can impatience impede him, because he loves, and through love he has submitted himself to the Order and the superior; in fact not only is he submissive to his superior, but to every creature for the love of God. And patience—whose role in Catherinian doctrine is one of its most original features—is the marrow of charity. The wind of infidelity or injustice cannot cause any harm, since the man safe in the ship of religion renders in justice each one his due. To himself he offers hatred and displeasure at his own sensuality which, if he did not restrain it, would resist obedience; to God he renders glory and praise, and to his neighbor the love of benevolence, putting up with his defects. With lively faith he looks forward to the end of life, that eternal existence which his superior has promised him if indeed he did observe the three principal vows—all of which the truly obedient religious does observe. By the wind of obedience the ship is so directed toward the port of eternal life that it will never be shipwrecked on any rock.

The simplicity of St. Catherine's lofty teaching may present a deceiving appearance. One might conclude that all that is necessary is to board the ship of religious life and then allow the wind of obedience to drive it into the port of eternal life. The actual living of religious life is not as untroubled as a first reading of the Saint's teaching would intimate. nor is it such a passive experi-

ence. Necessary also are good works which are principally manifested in observing the commandments and the vows. To fulfill this obligation one must undergo a difficult and painful asceticism whereby the will is put to death and the body mortified. To reach the port of eternal life the religious must flee anything that may incline to vice, and in fact must avoid any purely human pleasure, finding his glory only in the shame and suffering of Christ crucified. There is nothing passive about such a life. Once one has arrived at the ability to keep oneself in the path of the wind of obedience, a safe port is practically assured.

#### EXCELLENCE OF OBEDIENCE

Although St. Catherine herself would not be considered a religious in the strict, modern, juridical sense of the term,<sup>6</sup> she always esteemed very highly the vocation to the religious state and had a keen perception of its sublimity as a means to eternal life. Her colloquy with the Eternal Father had taught her the excellence of religious obedience as well as its greater burdens and responsibilities.

It is indeed true that in many other ways, both by the vow which is made to the superior, and also because a religious has more to endure, obedience is better proved in religion than in the world, because in religion every action of the body is bound to this yoke, from which a man cannot free himself when he wishes without mortal sin, because of his vow and the sanction of the holy Church. But these others are not in the same condition. They are bound voluntarily by the love they have for obedience, but not with a solemn vow. . . . The religious gives himself and draws up the agreement of his profession, abandoning himself to the hands of his superior and promising to observe obedience, continence, and voluntary poverty, and the superior on his side promises him eternal life if he observe his vow until death. In observance, place, and manner, religion is more perfect, and obedience in the world less perfect. In the former a man is safer, and if he fall is more likely to rise, because he has more help; and the latter is more doubtful and less secure, and a man is more likely if he fall to turn his face backwards, because he does not feel himself bound by a vow, like a religious before he is professed; for until profession he can leave the Order, though afterwards he cannot.<sup>7</sup>

With such an understanding of the lofty position of religious obedience, it is not surprising to read the Saint's words to Gio-

vanni Perotti of Lucca: "I rejoice and exult at the glorious news I have heard about you: that . . . you have undertaken the yoke of holy obedience. You could not do better, having renounced the world, its delights and pleasures, and your self-will."<sup>8</sup> To some youths in Florence she writes: "The soul who wishes to deny and put to death his self-will wishes to observe the obedience of the counsels of Christ, undertaking in an approved order the yoke of holy obedience. There is no doubt, my sons, that this is a most secure and praiseworthy thing."<sup>9</sup> Even though there is abundant evidence of evil-living religious, this fact need never deter one from entering religion. Thus she concludes:

If you feel that God is calling you to obedience, answer him. And if it should come into your mind not to be satisfied with the orders which have thus fallen from their pristine fervor, and in this way will present you with many obstacles to perfection, I answer this thought of yours, that evil monks may come out of nearly any monastery; but if you have the desire to devote yourself to religious life, it would be good and to the honor of God for you to go, provided there is a good superior.<sup>10</sup>

St. Catherine never tires of using the metaphor of the ship to indicate the religious life, a comparison which the Eternal Father develops at length in the *Dialogue*.

This ship of religion is rich, so that there is no need for the subject to think about his necessities either temporal or spiritual, for if he is truly obedient, and observes his Order, he will be provided for by his master, who is the Holy Spirit, as I told thee when I spoke to thee of my providence, saying that though my servants might be poor, they were never beggars. No more are these, for they find everything they need, and those who observe this Order find this to be indeed true. Wherefore see that in the days when the religious orders lived virtuously, blossoming with true poverty and fraternal charity, their temporal substance never failed them, but they had more than their needs demanded.<sup>11</sup>

The captain of the ship is the infallible Spirit of God who unfalteringly pilots the ship toward eternal life. The steersman may in some instances allow the ship to wander off its course. "The captain of this ship is the Holy Spirit, who never fails in himself through the defects of any of his religious subjects who may transgress the rule of the Order. The ship itself cannot be damaged, but only the offender. It is true that the mistake of the steersman may send her down into the billows, and these are wicked pastors

and prelates appointed by the master of the ship."<sup>12</sup> Superiors have a position of responsibility on this ship of religion wherein obedience dwells.

Now that places suitable for obedience have been found, namely these ships commanded by the Holy Spirit through the medium of their superiors, for, as I told thee, the Holy Spirit is the true master of these ships, which are built in the light of the most holy faith by those who have the light to know that my clemency, the Holy Spirit, will steer them, and having thus shown thee the place of obedience and its perfection, I will speak to thee of the obedience and of the disobedience of those who travel in such a ship, speaking of all together and not of one ship—that is, one Order—in particular, showing thee the sin of the disobedience and the virtue of the obedient, so that a man may know better the one by contrast with the other, and how he should walk if he would enter the ship of a religious order.<sup>13</sup>

The religious who possesses true obedience has a secure place on the ship, and no matter how rough the waters, will arrive at the port of eternal life. "Reposing with obedience in the ship, allowing himself to be guided by his superior, he has navigated the tempestuous sea of this life, with calm and serene mind and tranquility of heart, because obedience and faith have taken all darkness from him; he remains strong and firm, having lost all weakness and fear, having destroyed his own will, from which comes all feebleness and inordinate fear."<sup>14</sup>

It is true that there are many huge boulders in the sea of this tempestuous life which would be likely to dash the ship to bits, if it were not for the favorable wind of obedience. These obstructions are the work of the devil who wishes to impede the progress of the soul precisely at the moment when it is endeavoring to be guided by the wind of obedience. But there is no danger of being shipwrecked on any rock provided the ship continues to be driven by the wind of true obedience. There is always a favorable breeze which continues blowing until death so that without any danger those in the ship of holy religion arrive at the end, eternal life. Provided self-will is dead, uprisings cannot harm or interfere with the progress of the ship; in fact they give impetus to the wind which will then more swiftly drive the ship towards its goal.

Although in many places in her works St. Catherine mercilessly

attacks the evil life of religious, the source of which she invariably traces to a lack of obedience, she always carefully distinguishes between the individual orders and their members. "I do not say that the Order itself is in this condition, for it still possesses every delight, but in the beginning its subjects were not as they are now, but blooming flowers and men of great perfection."<sup>15</sup> The ultimate reason for the unchangeable status of the Order itself is that the Holy Spirit is the true master and pilot at the helm of these ships which have been constructed by their founders in the light of holy faith.

#### RELATION OF OBEDIENCE TO POVERTY AND CHASTITY

In her efforts to restore religious life to its former fervor, St. Catherine reminds the religious to whom she writes that by their profession they have undertaken binding obligations. "You know that in your profession you promised to observe obedience, continence, and voluntary poverty. And if you do not observe them, the source of piety will dry up in you."<sup>16</sup> Obedience, the chief of these vows, is a safeguard for the other two.

Therefore, the obedient have done well, who have chosen to observe their vow of poverty, so that they have nothing to spend, and therefore are not led away from the sweet table of the refectory, where obedience nourishes both body and soul in peace and quiet. The obedient religious does not think of laying a table, or of providing food for himself like this wretched man, to whose taste it is painful to eat in the refectory, wherefore he avoids its.<sup>17</sup>

This offense against the common life must have been widespread, as Catherine makes frequent reference to it in her letters to various religious; and the Eternal Father lays special emphasis on it in his colloquy with Catherine. "The obedient man does not leave the refectory, but delights at being at the table with the poor."<sup>18</sup>

The cell of a religious can be an indication of his observance of both poverty and chastity, not to mention obedience which includes the other two vows. The obedient man's cell is "full of the odor of poverty, and not of clothes; he has no fear that thieves will come to rob him, or that rust or moth will corrupt his garments; and if anything is given to him, he does not think of laying

it by for his own use, but freely shares it with his brethren."<sup>19</sup> The religious desirous of observing perfectly his vow of chastity delights to dwell in his cell as much as possible, engaged in holy and humble prayer.

#### CHARACTERISTICS OF THE OBEDIENT RELIGIOUS

One of the necessary duties of a religious, and one that is an almost infallible aid to growth in virtue is that of prayer.

The obedient man wishes to be the first to enter choir and the last to leave it, and when he sees a brother more obedient than himself, he regards him in his eagerness with a holy envy, stealing from him the virtue in which he excels, not wishing, however, that his brother should have less thereof, for if he wished this he would be separated from brotherly love.<sup>20</sup>

For the obedient man the choir becomes a garden, the Office sweet and pleasant fruits; his cell a heaven; he delights in solitude in order to approach nearer his creator, and he puts no intermediary between God and himself; his heart becomes a temple of God.<sup>21</sup>

Not only does the obedient religious find his delight in prayer both in and out of choir; but prayer in its turn engenders obedience. In addressing some novices in a convent in Perugia, St. Catherine asks, "Now that you have found obedience, how do you acquire it?" She answers: "By means of prayer which is a mother who conceives and gives birth to the virtues in the soul."<sup>22</sup> In another place the Saint calls prayer the "breast where the children of the virtues are nourished."<sup>23</sup> It is not surprising that the devil makes every effort to make prayer tedious and thus weaken obedience. In this way he succeeds in convincing the soul that it is impossible to persevere in the religious life. To guard against such a tragedy St. Catherine warns that only obedience or charity excuses from the duty of prayer. "We ought in no way abandon them [prayers] if not for obedience or charity; but for no other reason, neither for battle nor for sluggishness of mind or body."<sup>24</sup>

St. Catherine summarizes her teaching in the following advice to a young religious:

Therefore I wish, dearest and sweetest son, in order that you may be able to fulfill your vow of holy obedience, to which you have recently bound yourself, that you always remain in the house of self-knowledge.

. . . This is the cell that I wish you to carry with you wherever you are; and never abandon the choir or the refectory, community life, or your spiritual exercises; . . . and I wish you to go to your cell every time that obedience will permit it, and that you will prefer to delight there in war than to be outside of it in peace.<sup>25</sup>

Catherine speaks here of a "moral cloister" which each individual ought to have in order to enter there at will, even though obedience obliges one to be outside one's actual cell. "His cell becomes heaven because he does not leave the cell of self-knowledge, but on the table of the cross in union with the obedient Lamb, he eats the honor of God and the salvation of souls."<sup>26</sup>

#### RELATION OF OBEDIENCE TO OTHER VIRTUES

Religious obedience, like general obedience, is a key; but it opens a narrower door, provided it is accompanied by the observance of the other vows and the practice of the virtues.

Faith has a role of prime importance in the religious life, one that is closely connected with obedience. Too many religious are easily overcome with fear that they will be unable to bear the trials, persecutions, and commands that will be imposed. But he who has the light of faith burning brightly will be able to say: "I shall be able to bear anything for Christ crucified; because I know truly that he will not place on me a weight heavier than I can bear. . . . I know . . . that what he permits and gives to me, he does for my good that I may be sanctified in him."<sup>27</sup> It is faith which enables the religious to answer the devil when he instills this fear into his mind, and says to him: "You will not be able to bear the battles and hardships of the Order, nor the yoke of obedience; it is better for you to leave and live in common charity. Or go into another order which is more active than this and you will be better able to save your soul." Do not believe him, Catherine tells three monks of Monte Oliveto. "In the light of faith persevere in your state until death."<sup>28</sup>

In addition to faith two other virtues are stressed by St. Catherine as being especially useful for obedience. Scarcely necessary to mention is the virtue of charity which gives life and form to all the virtues. There can be no formed supernatural virtue without charity. Throughout her works St. Catherine speaks of super-

natural virtue, those which accompany charity and grow with it. "How sweet and pleasant it is for the spouse consecrated to Christ to follow the way and the teaching of the Holy Spirit! What is his way and doctrine? It is nothing else but love. All other virtues are virtues because of love."<sup>29</sup>

The obedient religious is humble and the humble religious is obedient. St. Catherine makes these virtues correlative: she repeatedly states that one cannot be without the other. The importance of humility in Catherine's concept of obedience is easily understood. In her religious obedience, just as in general obedience, two essential aspects must be present: suppression of self-will and adherence to God's will. The former would be impossible without humility. "Who is the one who is saved from life's tempests on the stormy sea?" the Saint asks. "Only the obedient, because he is humble," she answers.<sup>30</sup>

Some religious through a false notion of penance which aims rather at mortifying their body than their will wish to choose the time and place of their tribulations. They say, "I should like this consolation, and not these battles and troubles with the devil: not for myself, but to please God, because it seems to me better to have it in this way than in that." But those who are truly humble and obedient consider themselves deserving of the trials imposed by their rule and the will of the superior.

The teaching of St. Catherine on religious obedience can be succinctly stated thus: the religious must no longer act under the influence of self-will. Suor Daniella thought she wanted God's will when in reality a subtle form of self-will was evident. St. Catherine writes to her: "Of the desire you have to go out of your convent and to come to Rome, leave it to the will of your Spouse; if it will be to his honor and to your salvation, he will send you a way that you would never have thought of. Leave it all to him, and lose yourself: and take care that you do not lose yourself in anything other than in the Cross; and in it you will find yourself perfectly."<sup>31</sup> Evidently the Saint is speaking here as she does in many places in her writings of a very lofty kind of obedience, possible only to those souls who are far advanced in virtue. For the religious who no longer possesses self-will is in all things resigned to the will of God, and lives in profound peace of soul. The devil tries to reanimate self-will, not by making the religious

desire great things or evil ones, or those patently opposed to the will of God, but rather by placing in the soul desires for things that seem good and useful to one's advancement. In this way he induces the soul to resist obedience, and by the very means intended to give peace, the religious is deprived of it. The answer to the difficulty seems all too simple: "In all things judge the sweet will of God. The soul is always prompt in obedience, in observing his will, obeying the Order and the superior; . . . it suffers no pain because its self-will has been taken away and put in the hands of the superior for God; judging his will in the will of God."<sup>32</sup>

St. Catherine has placed the ideal of perfect obedience on a very high plane. Most of her teaching would seem to apply to souls well advanced in the mystical life. No doubt many of the religious to whom she wrote were souls who had progressed far on the road of the higher spiritual ways. Her encouragement would urge them on to even greater heights of perfection. This does not imply, however, that her teaching is not applicable to less perfect souls.

The *Dialogue* presents a beautiful summary of all the characteristics of the obedient man.

What makes war on obedience? Injuries? No, for the obedient man is patient, patience being the sister of obedience. The weight of the observance of the Order? No, for obedience causes him to fulfill them. Does the weight of obedience give him pain? No, for he has trampled on his own will, and does not care to examine or judge the will of his superior, for with the light of faith he sees my will in him, believing truly that my clemency causes him to command according to the needs of his subject's salvation. Is he disgusted and angry at having to perform the humble duties of the Order or to endure the mockeries, reproofs, jibes, and insults which are often cast at him, or to be held at little worth? No, for he has conceived love for self-contempt and self-hatred. Wherefore he rejoices with patience, exulting with delight and joy in the company of his Spouse, true obedience, for the only thing which saddens him is to see me, his creator offended.<sup>33</sup>

#### RELATION OF THE OBEDIENT RELIGIOUS TO SUPERIORS

The proper relation between superior and subject is essential to true obedience. Excesses and defects on the part of either can weaken or even destroy supernatural obedience. All spiritual writ-

ers extol the blessings of prompt obedience on the part of subjects. "There are many whose obedience is so prompt, and has become, as it were, so incarnate in them, that . . . they hardly wait until the word is out of his mouth, for with the light of faith they understand his intention. Wherefore the truly obedient man obeys rather the intention than the word, judging that the will of the superior is fixed in my will, and that therefore his command comes from my dispensation, and from my will."<sup>34</sup> An obedience so prompt that it, as it were, anticipates the precept of the superior is undoubtedly of a very high order. The virtue of obedience, strictly so-called, has for its object the precept of the superior which may be expressed, tacit, or at least made known in some way. But there is nothing to prevent a subject, especially one who has reached a high degree of perfection, from recognizing the intention of the superior even before any precept has been formulated. In a sense, this is not considered to be an exercise of the virtue of obedience since the precept is lacking; nevertheless this kind of activity belongs to the perfection of obedience. This perfection of obedience is a certain superabundance in obeying and is determined by the lack of or at least the lessening of the aspect of *must* in the object. A certain foreseeing of the precept is involved in fulfilling the will of the superior or outside the true and recognized precept. The foreseeing and the fulfilling of the will of the superior in licit things is commonly considered more perfect than obedience strictly so-called, the perfection coming from the virtue of charity which gives obedience a higher mode of operating. St. Thomas clarifies the problem with a distinction between the divine will and the will of a human superior. "The will of the superior is not the rule of our will as the divine will is, but rather the superior's command."<sup>35</sup> Without the precept the obligation to obey is lacking. To obey in such circumstances is more perfect because it manifests a greater subjection, reverence, observance, charity in the subject. It demonstrates that the habit of obedience is profoundly rooted in the soul as to its material disposition and as to its psychological promptitude. St. Catherine exhorts her correspondents to practice this more perfect obedience, realizing that it must be founded on obedience to a precept.

Such perfection of obedience is possible only after a long period of asceticism to eradicate all remnants of self-will. St. Catherine

speaks of a will that is "dead." "Go to your abbot," she writes to a monk, "with your will dead, not alive. If you go with a live will, I tell you, you will not move a foot; because you will not act either for him or for yourself."<sup>36</sup> A will dead to itself is one which submits completely to the will of God, and to the commands of the superior which are an expression of the will of God for the subject. This is the ideal to be striven for by religious. The person who has yet a "live" will is one who does things according to his own desires, which, perhaps, may seem to be better in themselves. Such a one will surely encounter difficulties in a life devoted to perfection.

In regard to choosing a better course of action which is not opposed to the will of the superior, St. Catherine would counsel a subject to prefer the greater good. William Flete, the English hermit, who ordinarily remained in his remote hermitage during the week and came to the convent only on Sundays to celebrate Mass, is advised by the Saint to make the additional sacrifice of saying Mass every day in the church, if the will of the prior is not against it. On the other hand, the Saint's usual advice is: "In all things deny your own will; . . . allow yourself to be guided by the will of your superior which is not his, but God's. . . . Obedience and patience will show whether you will stubbornly go against the will of your superior or patiently follow it as a truly obedient religious, delighting at being able to break your own will."<sup>37</sup>

The desire to persevere in that obedience which one undertook to practice the first day of entrance to religious life will encourage the religious to use constantly the knife of obedience to kill self-will and never to rebel against his Order or a superior. Obedience to the latter is made easy by humility, the nourisher of obedience, which effects obedience even to the very least in the Order. The humble religious never presumes on himself, nor considers himself above others, and therefore subjects himself to everyone for the sake of Christ crucified, but not in a subjection of pleasure or sin, rather with humility and love of virtue. The motive for obeying is an important consideration; lack of a just one can render obedience evil and thus of no meritorious value.

The command of the superior may be extremely difficult either in itself or by reason of some weakness in the subject obeying; it may be impossible of accomplishment; it may even appear to be

a lesser good. In any of these instances St. Catherine always advises simply fulfilling the precept, without making any attempt to judge in matters in which more often than not a subject is in no way competent to form a judgment. If any judgment is made on the command, it is in favor of the superior. A more perfect mode of acting is not to desire to investigate the will of him who commands, not seeking to know the reason of what is commanded. Often the devil inspires a subject to judge acts of superiors according to his own weakness; this readily results in impatience, anger, sorrow, boredom. Even if the obedience imposed seems indiscreet and will deprive one of peace of mind, the subject should obey; to act otherwise would be at least an imperfection, and doubtless a deceit of the devil. A group of novices is told that they should choose death rather than ever disobey their superior. "But if ever such a case should arise (and may God, by his goodness, remove it!) that the superior command things that are against the will of God, you ought never to obey, because one should never obey a creature outside the will of the Creator. But in every other case, obey. Do not look for your own spiritual or temporal consolation."<sup>38</sup> The doctrine of the Saint is always basically the same: to grow in grace, one must despoil oneself of self-love in seeing and judging others, and be prompt in obedience. Ordinarily what the superior commands is what God wills, and he wills nothing but man's sanctification. All things happen and are permitted by God for this purpose. Simple obedience without judging motives or murmuring—but always accompanied by prudence, a necessary ingredient of every human act—brings sweetness to the soul in times of bitterness, and the life of grace at death.

#### CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD SUPERIORS

One phase of obedience which has far-reaching effects is the duty of superiors to correct their subjects for faults committed. St. Catherine blamed many of the evils existing in the monasteries of the fourteenth century on the failure of superiors, due to servile fear and self-love, to correct the evils in the lives of their subjects. She exhorts superiors in correcting not to refuse to use at times a temperate harshness and a moderate coaxing according as the need calls for it. "Do not be negligent in correcting defects; but



whether they be great or small, have them punished according as the person is able to receive them. . . . It is better for our negligences and ignorance and the little love we have for holy obedience to be punished now in finite time than to receive that hard reproof in infinite time."<sup>39</sup>

The choice of good superiors is of prime importance for good government in a religious community; consequently it is closely related to obedience. The Saint often wrote of the necessity of having temporal rulers capable of governing well. Once chosen to govern, the superior has an obligation to strive with even greater effort to attain personal sanctification. As the Saint so often remarks, "How can a person govern others if he cannot first govern himself?"<sup>40</sup>

If he is to govern, he is perfect in ruling if he has first nourished his soul in virtue at the breast of Christ crucified. Then if he is a good subject, having been chosen to rule, he is a good nourisher of his children, the pearl of justice shines in him, the odor of an honorable life is apparent, giving an example to his subjects. . . . To his subjects he renders to each according to his state; wherefore if he is perfect he helps him to increase in virtue; the imperfect and those who commit evils, he corrects and punishes—a little or to a greater extent according to the gravity of the fault and according as he sees the subject is able to bear it. But he never leaves a defect unpunished; and with charity and not with anger, he prefers to punish them in this life, than that they be punished in the next.<sup>41</sup>

Superiors with these qualities would receive a more perfect obedience from their subjects who would see and imitate their virtue. The power of good example in exacting obedience is especially insisted upon by St. Catherine.

In order to make their convents such ideal places, superiors will have trials to bear because of evil subjects who will refuse obedience to their commands. But they must suffer with patience the persecution and ingratitude they receive from their subjects. Like a good gardener, a superior must, in spite of opposition and difficulties, continue to uproot evils by correction and punishment, and to plant the seeds of virtue. Such unjust treatment may tempt superiors to become timid in correcting vices and they may become less zealous in their efforts to keep religious life flourishing. The cause of this weakness must be sought in self-love which stifles

personal good example, makes one fearful in correcting evildoers, and causes one to neglect to comfort and encourage the good religious in their efforts to acquire virtue.

## BLESSINGS OF VOWED OBEDIENCE

When conditions in the religious state are ideal on the part of both superior and subject, the blessings which result from obedience practiced in such circumstances are almost numberless. Life on earth which leads to eternal life requires the practice of all the virtues which obedience causes to flourish. St. Catherine speaks of the obedient religious as charitable, humble, patient, persevering, just, temperate—the practice of all of which tends to make life more perfect and consequently more happy, a foretaste of heaven. Perfect obedience imperated by charity and with the confluence of various other virtues is so pleasing to God that no other virtue has had so many miracles worked in its behalf. St. Catherine records the incident from the *Vitae patrum* about the monk who was writing a manuscript page when obedience called him away; he obeyed so promptly that he did not take time to complete the letter *O* he was forming. When he returned to his work, he found the other half of the letter completed in gold. This sign of God's great regard for obedience is only one of numerous examples found in the lives of holy people. Such examples of obedience may seem to the modern mentality too extraordinary to have been real occurrences. But the lesson to be learned from such accounts remains unchanged: the obedient man does well in obeying. In so doing he fulfills the will of God as expressed in a legitimate command of his superior, and at the same time denies his own self-will. Such obedience is one of the remedies for sin and the hope for eternal salvation. Like any other moral virtue, in order to be possessed of it fully, this virtue needs to be practiced constantly. By continuous use it becomes increasingly easy to practice so that in the moment of temptation it will not fail. All good things seem to flow from the exercise of it.

Obedience is an eager spouse who does not wish to remain idle. O delightful obedience; O pleasant! O sweet! O illuminative! For thou hast scattered the darkness of self-love. Thou, O vivifying obedience, givest the life of grace to the soul. Thou art so generous that thou sub-

jectest thyself to every rational creature. Thou art kind, and meekly bearest the greatest weights, for thou art accompanied by fortitude and true patience. Thou art crowned with true perseverance, for thou dost not fail through the importunity of thy superior on account of the heavy loads which he indiscreetly may impose upon thee, but with the light of faith endurest everything. But thou art so closely bound to humility that no creature can snatch thee from the hand of the soul who possesses thee.<sup>42</sup>

Religious obedience as St. Catherine conceives it cannot be practiced in a vacuum; many other virtues are associated with it, are in mutual dependence on it. The social nature of man ought always to be taken into consideration. His obedience will have an effect on the community, on the superior, and on his fellow religious. Thus his life becomes a harmonious exercise of all the virtues, above all, that of charity which makes of obedience a quasi-end in St. Catherine's teaching. As such it is a fundamental element in striving for perfection. The exceptional efficacy which St. Catherine attributes to obedience gives it a value similar to that of the theological virtues. Along with charity, it is a constant necessity during the whole of the Christian life. In fact, for her, its full development is equivalent to charity; this love-obedience perfects all those salutary acts which aid in the attainment of eternal life.

Few writers have better treated this virtue which is the key of heaven and an essential expression of charity and humility. St. Catherine's doctrine on obedience is so universal as to apply to all men of all ages, and yet so precise and so personal that acquaintance with it cannot leave one spiritually unchanged.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Santa Caterina da Siena, *Dialogo della divina Provvidenza*, a cura del P. Innocenzo Taurisano, O.P. (Roma: Libreria Ed. F. Ferrari, 1947), p. 448. All quotations from the *Dialogue* are taken from this edition. Where useful and practical, the English translation of Algar Thorold has been utilized—*The Dialogue of the Seraphic Virgin, Catherine of Siena*, Algar Thorold trans. (London: Burns, Oates, and Washbourne, 1925).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 457.

<sup>3</sup> Santa Caterina da Siena, *Lettere*, con note di Mons. Lodovico Ferretti (Siena: Tipografia S. Caterina, 1918-1930), Letter 154, III 317 f. All quotations from the *Letters* are taken from this five-volume edition.

<sup>4</sup> *Dialogue*, p. 456 f.

<sup>5</sup> Letter 84, II, 68 f.

<sup>6</sup> St. Catherine did not take public vows, nor did she live a community life, but remained in her own home.

<sup>7</sup> *Dialogue*, p. 489 f.

<sup>8</sup> Letter 156, III, 30 f.

<sup>9</sup> Letter 95, II, 140 f.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Dialogue*, p. 459.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 458.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 466.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 493 f.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 463.

<sup>16</sup> Letter 203, III, 249.

<sup>17</sup> *Dialogue*, p. 480.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 472.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Letter 203, III, 253.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Letter 84, II, 70.

<sup>24</sup> Letter 82, II, 54.

<sup>25</sup> Letter 154, III, 13 f.

<sup>26</sup> Letter 84, II, 75 f.

<sup>27</sup> Letter 173, III, 101.

<sup>28</sup> Letter 35, I, 296.

<sup>29</sup> Letter 79, II, 32.

<sup>30</sup> Letter 84, II, 72.

<sup>31</sup> Letter 316, IV, 433.

<sup>32</sup> Letter 330, V, 43 f.

<sup>33</sup> *Dialogue*, pp. 470 f.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 491.

<sup>35</sup> *De veritate*, q. 23, a. 8, ad 3um.

<sup>36</sup> Letter 72, I, 416.

<sup>37</sup> Letter 201, III, 243 f.

<sup>38</sup> Letter 86, I, 205 f.

<sup>39</sup> Letter 30, I, 173 f.

<sup>40</sup> Letter 358, V, 232.

<sup>41</sup> Letter 86, II, 91 f.

<sup>42</sup> *Dialogue*, p. 485.