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OUTLINE OF THE CONFERENCES:

1. Preliminaries
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4. Obedience in RB
5. Obedience in Aelred of Rievaulx
6. Obedience in Bernard of Clairvaux
7. Humility in Gueric of Igny
8. Humility in Bernard of Clairvaux

1) PRELIMINARIES

1) There are **two ways** to look at obedience:

- a) in its function for the person
b) in its function for the community’.

The “**WISDOM PARADIGM**” is the first way in the old monastic tradition.

The “**SOCIAL PARADIGM**” is the second way.

- Individualism vs *Individuation*
- Individual vs *Person*
- Outer self vs *Deep self*

A **Individualism** is the preference for what I want to do instead of what the community does. I do things my own way. I rely on my own judgment. In the ecclesial documents, individualism leads to the denial of the social element in human nature (CARITATIS SPLENDOR).

The monastic word for individualism is SINGULARITAS.

Individuation is the process through which we become ourselves. It helps us to break through from the unfreedom of acting according to what we are not and starting leaving from our true nature. It is a process of liberation.

B **Individuality** is what separates us from others: a unique genetic complex. This is the source of fragmentation within oneself and also with others.

Personality is something different; it derives from participation in the sphere of the spirit created in god’s image and likeness, it brings interiority to self, it is the source of unity with others and God.

C **True and false self** are two distinct potentialities. Our true self is the reality, is what we are in the eyes of God, to use Christian terms. It is our self in all our uniqueness, dignity, littleness and ineffable greatness ... [Our] real and “homely” self, and nothing more, without glory, without aggrandizement, without self-righteousness and without self-concern.’ [self-concern blocks charity]

Unless we discover our true self or deep self, which is hidden with Christ in God, we never will know really ourselves, nor will we know God.

If we don’t liberate ourselves from the false self we cannot find God. The false self is the self opposed to grace; it is not just the disorderly passionate self. The aim of the monastic life, then, is the flowering of the true self and the restraint of the false self. (Merton)

2-3) TWO APPROCHES TO OBEDIENCE AND TO AUTHORITY:

THE WISDOM PARADIGM AND THE SOCIAL PARADIGM.

THE WISDOM PARADIGM

Obedience develops the growth of our true self and it has also a social dimension which is the growth of the community. The service of the authority helps the development of these two realities in fact the word *auctoritas* is related to the word for 'to grow' *augere*.

The first (The Wisdom Paradigm) is more charismatic and it happens between the relationship of master and disciple. We can see it in the early monastic tradition: the disciple approaches the master for counsel; a word of life is given to him to be followed. There is a dimension of listening and of trusting in the authority of the master

The second (the Social Paradigm) benefits the community. The superior has in mind the welfare of the group and does choices to assure its good order. He appoints officials and arranges externals: the subjects obey to ensure the good order of the social group. This often means subordination of personal will to common will.

We can see the reality of obedience in the Wisdom Paradigm through the teaching of some important figures in the Monastic tradition:

- **SAINT ANTHONY THE GREAT:** for him there was no guidance: he found God's will through the inner voice of conscience. That voice was the Scripture calling him: conscience and Scriptures cooperate to find the will of God. He found the will of God also through the call of charity.
- **DOROTHEUS OF GAZA:** For him God shows us His will which is always accessible to us through human mediation. We have always somebody to help us because by seeking for counsel we find God's will.
- **EVAGRIUS:** he says that ascesis consists in keeping the commandments of God but this is not enough to heal the soul: we need a contemplative activity appropriate to these powers." (Pratikos 79) and obedience prepares the way for this. Ascesis = Obediences * Contemplation
- **CASSIAN:** for him the principal monastic virtues are:

Withdrawal from the world Taking counsel Humility Obedience

In the **Conferences** obedience is seen more as an ascetical practice to mortify the self will. The vision is more on the person. We are obedient TO CHRIST and LIKE CHRIST.

In the **Institutes** there is more concern for social organization. The vision is more on the community. Humility is the goal, obedience is the means and the good zeal is the qualification.

The great monastic abbas and ammas were transmitting their wisdom not only by example but also by teaching. We have various collections of the Sayings of the Fathers of the Desert which little by little were systematized and a theology of monastic life began to appear.

THE SOCIAL PARADIGM

THE ORGANIZATION OF MONASTICISM.

Pachomius begins a form of organized life but a bit military, and from Cassian to the Rule of the Master and to the Rule of St. Benedict we see an increase of prescriptive organization of the monastic community. The abbot becomes not only responsible of the transmission of wisdom but also for all the details which were codified in Customaries to maintain the "good order" of the community.

This "good order" however is new, because law and obedience, are not generated by external force as in the ancient world, but by "individual consent and the role of the conscience. We are not a regimented life and monks never become identical.

Our Fathers appealed to conscience many times and obedience is seen in a very mature way. While in the ancient world persons have value for their social state, by birth, the Church valued each person for what she was. This is new; the dignity of person is new.

Then, when asceticism became communal these Christian believes began to generate a new conception of community, a new form of social organization based on **voluntary association** since people come from their free will. With our daily choices we associate to the community.

This act of the will is the heart of the monasticism, and **sociability is founded on the role of the individual conscience**. This had another important consequence: it rehabilitates work which acquires a new dignity becoming even a requirement of self-respect.

In the community all are brothers and sisters. Sharing a common life conforms more closely to the Gospels; we are communities of shared values; we have a shared vision which becomes a style of life and the formators communicate these values to the newcomers.

The Rule of St. Benedict insists on the fact that monastic leaders should temper their government with a ‘listening’ culture and respect for the needs of the individuals. The object was to work toward the fellow citizenship of the heavenly kingdom promoting moral equality. Moral equality and limited government became then associated because **obedience and rules become self-imposed**. This is the Pauline paradox of the liberating obedience and the “desire to be governed” by an abbot as in the rule of St. Benedict.

This was the **Medieval thought** and the idea of ‘order’, which was a key idea of St. Augustine, was transposed also to the **society** which was divided into the Three Estates:

THOSE WHO PRAY: THE CLERGY

THOSE WHO FIGHT: ROYALTY/NOBLES

THOSE WHO WORK: PROFESSIONALS/SOLDIERS etc.

From the 1650s to the 1780s great changes happened in the Western Europe and the term “**Enlightenment**” is applied to this period in which Western Europe moved away from the traditional reliance and emphasis on authority in the direction of asserting the autonomy of human reason and the rights of the individual. The movement is paralleled by the growing influence of the empirical sciences and the consequent displacement of theology and philosophy as explanations of reality.

Evil is no more a consequence of the ‘original sin’ but the result of social progress, then, if you renew society you will have a new man. Immanuel Kant coined the term **heteronomy** [opposite of autonomy] – to be ruled by another – as something to be avoided.

Positivist Approach to Authority

Auguste Comte (1798-1857, Positivistic Philosophy 1830)

At the beginning of the 19th century, with Augusto Comte a Positivist view of obedience sees it as just doing what one is told to do, following orders. This Positivist approach to authority is based on the theory that laws derive their validity from the fact of being legislated by authority rather from any moral concern. Such a theory could bring divorce between law and morality: no need to think, no need to stand to own conscience. It is the **Bane** of Obedience against the **Boon** of Obedience as seen in the Rule of St. Benedict.

Monastic obedience, as **Abbot Pierre Miquel (of Liguge)** says in his book “La vie monastique selon saint Benedict”, does not pursue a social goal, but one that is quite individual: it is at the service of the ascetical perfection of the individual, it restrains the violence of self-will and helps people to grow free and fulfill themselves. The superior should make use of persuasiveness to persuade people that obedience is the good action. Domination in fact is opposed to the Gospel idea of authority as service, besides it makes people too dependent and they cannot develop fully their potentialities.

Thomas Merton said that monastic obedience has become formal and it needs a **renewal** in the sense that we have to recover the sense of obedience to God in all things. Every kind of paternalism,

maternalism is only good to create dependence and infantilism in the people and it is a kind of abuse of power. Adult, religious obedience should be seen in the context of love and discipleship, not as the obedience of a child to his parents or of a citizen to civil authority.

4) OBEDIENCE IN ST. BENEDICT'S RULE

The Rule is Magistra and all are obliged to follow it, all need to be helped by it. It is a holistic concept; not a matter of domination but to be under the guidance of the Gospel.

Chapter five (5), which is taken with few changes from the RM, clearly shows the promptness, the rapidity in obeying. Sometimes a work is given but it takes years to be finished. It is done but one can see that they don't want to do it. Instead to do it eagerly and with enthusiasm they grumble and sigh.

The reason to obey, to tread and take hold of the narrow road, to take the burdens that are associated with it, are the **fear of God** and the desire **to make our way to eternal life**; the ultimate purpose of obedience is then, eschatological. Obedience, then, is not only a particular act, but is an **attitude** for which we put aside our own judgment in order to follow the judgment of another.

St. Benedict is not content with only the material execution; **he wants the monks to act with good will** because 'God loves a cheerful giver'. This is the preoccupation of St. Benedict because those who murmur or grumble will be not acceptable to God. Murmuring is not only a degradation of the monastic life but it acts like a virus which spread discontent in the community and for this St. Benedict requires that a satisfaction must be made. It can become slander. Usually are those who have nothing to do that more complain.

For St. Benedict, the **opposite of obedience** is not rebelliousness or insubordination, but laziness, **negligence**, doing nothing (prol.). In the **Prologue** is expressed **a labor of obedience against the laziness of disobedience**. Obedience is the opposite of inertia. So, rise from sleep, open your eyes, and let us hear God's voice! RUN! He doesn't say walk or...take a taxi! To run is very active. Run is the work of a lover. It speaks of a certain enthusiasm, to be at tune with what God tells us. Obedience is **to act now**, in this moment. Benedict calls here upon the subjective conscience of each person to complement external regulations with the awareness of further possibilities for doing good and avoiding evil.

Keeping the commandments is the minimum. A fuller righteousness is required. It is the good zeal. It is going "the extra mile" of the Gospel. It is sensitivity to the promptings of the Spirit, not just to obey to commands.

Vertical obedience is complemented by horizontal obedience (**RB71**). Mutual obedience for St. Benedict, is the way to go to God. It doesn't substitute vertical obedience, but complements it. It is a pure form to defeat self-will. We have to obey with good zeal because subjective dispositions can destroy the merit of good action.

THE FUNCTIONING OF ABBATIAL AUTHORITY

Compared to the Rule of the Master the Rule of St. Benedict is more human and more theological, its language is more that of master-disciple than that of abbot-monk. The **abbot** has the duty that what he says correspond to the will of God; he is the representative of God, but he can delegate to others in important matters so that he can have more time for spiritual activity.

Monastery is a school and the abbot is the master and he is obeyed because by obeying him one hopes to fulfill the law of God and to imitate Christ. The quest for salvation is the motive which causes the adoption of obedience.

The abbot should communicate fundamental beliefs and values by word and example and his teachings and commands should be not far from the Gospel, nor go outside the teaching of the Lord. His duty is:

1. **To Command** and we comply with his orders.
2. **To Establish Policy** and we live in accordance with his policy
3. **To Teach** and we allow ourselves to be changed.

Obedience is the full acceptance of the abbot leadership. Leadership is a communication of Moral Energy. Saint Bernard was giving moral energy to his monks.

We trivialize the function of the abbot saying that he has only to think about administration. The quality of the obedience of the disciples is proportioned to the abbot's teaching and if there are problems in the community it maybe because the abbot's teaching is lacking.

The abbot has to create a **climate of meaning**. Outside there is no meaning and this is the cause of suicide, drug, alcohols. This meaning is a meaning for choices, for not doing things for habit.

The meaning of monastic life is dependence on faith. We enter monastery to pursue our process of conversion and this happens by internalizing the teaching of Tradition. **A community with a clearer vision of goals is more likely to be attractive**: young people accept structures as long as they make sense; they are escaping from a tolerant and permissive society.

Effective leadership is not a point of temperament but of a freely chosen and contextualized behavior; obedience can be affected by believes and values that can transform it in something different from what St. Benedict had in mind; he, according to Sr. Aquinata *"is not concerned with clearly separated vows but is concerned with the personal dedication of a person in his or her totality..."*. When a person is promising Obedience she is committing herself to the integrity of Monastic Conversatio; Obedience is not to comply with certain commands but is a mental attitude towards agreeable and disagreeable events which can be contrary to natural human instincts.

5) OBEDIENCE IN AELRED OF RIEVAULX

For Aelred the three principal virtues are **Charity / Humility / Chastity**. He didn't speak so much about Obedience because maybe he was a so charismatic leader that there was no need to talk too much about it. Obedience is a way to subdue self-will and, at this level, **Abraham** is an important biblical model. **Christ** is the exemplar of Obedience; through obedience we share in the sufferings of Christ. **Mary** is also the model of obedience because she submitted herself to the command of Another and through it she found wisdom.

In the Sermon 146.7 which Aelred took from Odo of Canterbury (10th c Benedictine) he speaks of twelve steps of Pride opposed to the steps of humility:

Forgetfulness of sins / Levity of words and behavior/ inappropriate happiness of mind /talkativeness /singularity /self-love / love of the world / defense of sins / impatience / disobedience / love of self-will/ impudence.

Aelred then, reflects on the role of the abbot in his Pastoral Letter, he says that the abbot, by virtue of his office, receives the grace of an *Affectus Officialis* that is the power to love each of his monks as an individual. He should build up his monks in faith, hope and love; in chastity and humility, patience and obedience, fervor of spirit and devotion of heart; not slowly and murmuring because he would be a negligent prelate. The abbot should teach by example, his duty is:

Refectio ** Erudito ** Correptio (a cycle)

Exemplum ** Consilium ** Affectus (a cycle)

Excitatio ** Erudito ** Correptio (a cycle)

[non] Austerus [harsh] ** [non] superbus [proud] ** [non] indiscretus [indiscreet]

Aelred is concerned with the quality of the relationship of the abbot with his monks, not with social organization. He wants to devote himself to the care of the monk patiently enduring their weaknesses and he says that obedience blocks **self-will and self-love**. Adam withdrew from God by loving God less and the world more, for he loved his own excellence which pertained not to God but to the world. Clinging obstinately to our own opinion we go far from God, we need a life-long effort to fight against self-will. He expresses this in a very neat expression: *“The whole perfection of monks consists in getting rid of self-will.”*

He speaks also of **‘persistence of self-will’**. It happens when we lose our initial fervor and become sluggish in following the will of another and we start to murmur. There are people who have left the world but continue to live by their own will; the abbot has to be a watchman in these cases. Obedience is a state of living in harmony with the community while disobedience makes us alien and isolated from the community. Each one of us in the community has to be like a pigeon which has always company and not like a dove which is always solitary.

The community is our mother and as such we have to honor her because we are born, feed and educated in her. We honor her by keeping well her good customs, guarding her from every scandal and having always good zeal for her improvement. We have to pay attention to those who make disorder in the community or by singularity or by tantrum, anger, or, moved by curiosity, they take note of everything done by the brethren; they judge and speak about everyone. These attitudes set us up above the community, making our way better than the one of the community. Small things matter; we don’t have occasions of grave sins and Aelred wants the monk’s conscience to become more sensitive.

There is a **real** and an **apparent** obedience: when nobody hurts us or tells us evil words we are in peace and we think that we are patient, and when others ask us to do what we, actually want to do, we think that we are humble. Because we seem to be humble everybody honours us and loves us and so we think we are humble. Sometimes the Lord comes to put us to the test in our complacency, not so that He may know but so that He brings us to know of what quality we really are, and then we can see if we are really patient and humble.

Aelred speaks more about Non-Obedience which is the refusal of counsel: we think that we are self-sufficient and we don’t need anything. When we are under self-will whatever the other says is rejected, but obedience means seeking and accepting the counsel of the elders. Once persons make themselves slaves to their own will whatever comes from another source is found to be intolerable.

Self-will expresses itself often through timidity but this timidity can be overcome only by trusting the abbot.

Monastic Living is hard work; *Ordo noster crux Christi est* [our Order is the cross of Christ] – Aelred said in one of his sermons. (S10.29). In the Cross there is nothing tender or soft or delicate, nothing that is sweet to flesh and blood. The Cross of Christ is as mirror for us in which we can look at our life to see if our way of living is compatible with Christ’s cross. Aelred invites us not to reject the bitterness of Christ’s cross to avoid doing things against it.

6) OBEDIENCE IN ST. BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX

Our Cistercian Fathers didn’t give too much attention to the topic of obedience because the Order was so blessed with charismatic leaders that they didn’t had trouble at this level. Even when we find references to it we should read that reference in its particular context because not always the term is referred to the abbot-monk relationship but it may be referred to fidelity to God’s will or to monastic conversatio.

It is true that in St. Bernard we find quite many references to obedience but much more are those to humility and love. While the occurrence of the word ‘obedience’ in St. Bernard’s works appears 616 times, the word ‘Humility’ appears 1372 times.

Bernard entrusted the temporal affairs of his monastery to competent people; he remained in control of the affairs, but he delegated so he could concentrate more in his task of spiritual guide because he

knew that his principal task was to teach his monks and his concern was the spiritual life of the community. We have a total of 718 talks to his monks. Bernard had a great humanity and he treated each monk in a different way and he was also very humble accepting suggestions from others.

Bernard received some proposals to become a bishop but he refused them because he wanted to remain abbot. He was counselor of many peoples whom he treated the same as his monks.

Bernard could assert himself strongly when it was needed, if one of his basic principles was involved.

This was the case of one of his monks who wanted to become a hermit (Bernard hated hermitical life). He wrote him a **letter** where he spoke of **counsel and not of authority** and he supported his words with Scriptural texts. The tone of the writing was quite harsh also because he wrote already to him in the past and now he has to turn back to the same topic. The harshness of the tone of the letter was due to the fact that Bernard was afraid for the salvation of the soul of this monk who wanted to escape from a difficult situation without knowing that later he would have to face the same difficulty. He wanted to let him understand that only persevering in the Order and in the vocation in which he was called, he would find salvation.

In this letter we have some indications of how St. Bernard was dealing in difficult situations: he is not imposing something but counseling using the Scripture and applying it to the present situation.

DE GRADIBUS HUMILITATIS ET SUPERBIAE

(Obedience and Humility)

This works a counterpoint to RB 7 and has a strong behavioral tone and describes how monks act contrary to Benedict's commands. Here the word Obedience appears 15 times of which 11 times are referred to obedience to Christ, one time, as a command given, and two times are two quotations from RB. He speaks also of disobedience more as a state of the relationship more than to a specific act.

DE DILIGENDO DEO

(Obedience and Love)

The word obedience and its cognates are found 5 times in this Treatise. He speaks of obedience to the commands of love and of obeying the Prophet.

He speaks of obedience to God among the means through which we develop a familiarity with God:

In no. 39, he includes obedience to God among the means by which we develop a familiarity with God: **cogitando** (thinking), **legendo** (reading about God), **orando** (praying to God), **oboediendo** (obeying God)

DE PRECEPTO AND DISPENSATIONE **(Social Paradigm and not Wisdom Paradigm)**

Some black monks asked Bernard some questions: he started with a letter and he ended with a treatise. The questions were:

Are all the precepts of the Rule binding or are they like counsels?

How can the two categories be distinguished?

To what extent is the superior subject to the Rule?

“The abbot of these monks was authoritarian and so they put charge on him trying to find in the Rule the means of questioning his decisions. Full of resentment, they disagree with him refusing to obey him and were trying to limit his power. They hoped that Bernard could understand them...” (from J.Leclercq)

St. Bernard saw that the problem was an institutional difficulty since it was dealing not with asceticism or interior life.

His approach, then, in the answer is canonical and juridical. He discussed the relationship between the abbot and the monks at the level of the external forum. He insisted on the fact that it is not possible to escape from an abbot and transfer in another monastery and, to eradicate the ground of revolution, he insisted on obedience even to a less-than-ideal abbot and on the priority of the Rule.

The limits of obedience are defined by the form of the profession; profession is made according to the Rule which is the supreme norm, it is determined by the vow of the one making profession. The Rule is the limit of obedience.

The abbot is not above the Rule, because he freely subjected himself to it; he serves only charity. The abbot and the monks are both tied to the Rule and they have mutual obligations. The profession binds the monks and also the one receiving it; both of them are doing the will of God which is nothing else than charity. So there is a common will; they become mutual debtors: on one side faithful care and on the other humble obedience. The abbot is the guardian of his monk's fidelity and he helps them to fulfill their obligations; he should play his role of "vicar" of God by helping the monk to show himself faithful to the common obligation toward God and the Rule.

DE DIVERSIS: *MONASTIC SERMONS*

They are talks given to the monks in the chapter at Clairvaux on various aspects of monastic doctrine but they are delivered in a practical humorous, friendly way. The word 'Obedience' appears here 85 times and more than half of these are in the Sermon 41 entitled "The Way of Obedience" and many times this word is associated with love.

Obedience contributes to the growth of monastic virtues and it repairs the damage caused by disobedience. Our primary obedience is due to God, to God's commandments, to the Gospel and behind all this lies the example of Christ's obedience. Many times Bernard has in mind Acts 5,29 that we must obey God more than human beings.

Obedience to the abbot reinforces the obedience to God and we must look at what the abbot is pointing to us, because he is helping us to be faithful to God. He talks also of Leprous Obedience which is an outward deference or servility that does not flow from our inward dispositions and he is more concerned about the inner obedience. The practice of virtues gain solidity through obedience and by faithful obedience, continence in the flesh, patience in troubles and perseverance in working are won.

In the **sermon De Diversis 2, 4-6** he says that obedience is 'a good food' but it is not enough by itself; it needs the '*condiment of wisdom*', '*justice in intention*', '*cheerfulness in inner feelings*' and '*humility in assessment*'.

Real obedience concerns then the quality of our inner dispositions; it can **counteract self-will**, which Bernard in the **Sermon 11** calls '*a bad viper which can bring us to damnation*'. We must learn to live from the heart, from our true self because if we live in the false self we will be concerned with things that don't matter (*vanitas/voluptas*) and we never will find fulfillment. Self-will counteracts the effects of Baptism putting us back under the power of darkness and brings us to self-destruction because the soul lives by truth and if it goes far from the truth it dies.

In the **Sermon 8,2** he says that the soul taken by self-will is rejecting God and it is forced to live without Him and in the **Sermon 26** he says that we should look at the Scripture and at our heart (conscience) and learn to love the things that bring us back to God and hate those which bring us far from Him as apostasy, fornication, evil and especially **impatience** which means not to believe in the Providence of God.

When we are not certain about things to do and we are in doubt, let us suspend our decision; and if we wish to do something for which we have no mandate let us ask the superior and seek from him the will of God and we will be in peace because scandal comes from following our own will.

In the **Sermon 41**, “The Way of Obedience”, he starts talking about the spirit of wisdom, he is encouraging and he wants to persuade his monks that through obedience they can reach wisdom. To be obedient is to travel the roads that lead to joy; as the Apostles we have to suffer restrictions and insults for the Name of Jesus because this was their joy: to obey God more than men.

True obedience is a very powerful reality: we obey the commands of God to do good actions and to abstain from doing bad actions and this will free us from every kind of oppression.

Actually Saint Bernard followed Saint Benedict in believing that obedience is a crucial element in monastic discipline and not merely a means of organizational control, since its purpose was primarily ascetical.