

PASTORAL
LETTER

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Christian
obedience

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CHRISTIAN OBEDIENCE (10 FEBRUARY 2024)

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Contents

- Introduction (no. 1-3)
- Obeying God (no. 4-5)
- God's will and human mediation (no. 6-7)
- Obedience and freedom (no. 8-10)
- Obedience and trust (no. 11)
- Obedience and apostolic fruitfulness (no. 12-13)
- The intelligent obedience of Saint Joseph (no. 14)
- Mary's obedience (no. 15)

Introduction (no. 1-3)

My dear children: may Jesus watch over my daughters and sons for me!

1. Several years ago, I wrote you a letter dedicated to freedom. All of us will have tried to meditate on it and bring it into our daily lives. I reminded you then that we are called to do things out of love and not simply out of obligation. We want to follow our Lord closely, fulfilling his will, moved by the desire to respond to his love. Now I am writing to you about obedience, which at first sight might seem to be a virtue opposed to freedom. Yet we know very well that, in reality, true obedience is a consequence of freedom. Moreover, contrary to what we might expect from a merely human point of view, Christian obedience leads to ever greater freedom.

Some decades ago, a great intellectual who studied in depth the works of Saint Josemaría pointed to an important contribution of our founder, namely the fact of emphasizing that in the Christian life freedom has a certain priority over obedience.^[1] We obey because we “feel like” doing God’s will, because it is the deepest desire of our soul. In fact, obedience without freedom is not worthy of the human person, nor, therefore, of a son or daughter of God.

Love, as we well know, is much more than simply a passing inclination of our feelings. Love entails the readiness to give one’s life for someone (cf. *Jn* 15:13). Hence one of its deepest manifestations is identifying our will with that of the one we love: “I want what you want, I want because you want, I want how you want, I want when you want.”^[2]

2. We all have often considered, at greater or lesser length, God’s loving plan for the world. This plan includes creation as well as supernatural elevation, out of pure love, to share the Blessed Trinity’s happiness with every man and woman, and to give us a life that fulfills every yearning of our heart. But right from the beginning, sin also made its presence felt in the world, the sin of our first parents, which was fundamentally an act of disobedience.

Nevertheless, we should never tire of contemplating with gratitude that God did not want to abandon us to our fate. In a decision of the freest possible love, which we cannot understand because it surpasses our poor understanding, he sent his Only-Begotten Son to restore us to his friendship. When Jesus dies on the Cross for all humanity – for you and for me – he gives his life in an act of full obedience to his Father’s will. Freedom and obedience are closely intertwined in the story of Salvation. The lamentable consequences of human disobedience are redeemed by Christ’s obedience. His grace gives us the possibility of living with the freedom of the children of God.

3. In these pages I would like to invite you to meditate with me on some aspects of the virtue of obedience, so central to the mysteries of our faith and, at the same time, so present in the life of every person. The need to obey is part of human life on many levels, since there are obligatory laws and rules: from the content of the natural law to the laws of civil coexistence; from the obedience minors owe their parents to the obedience of those who have voluntarily taken on a serious commitment to other persons or institutions. In an analogous sense, for a person to follow his or her own conscience can also be viewed as obedience. And in an even broader sense, to follow specific spiritual counsels can also be called obedience.

Being fully immersed in today's culture, we all realize that obedience is rarely considered to be something positive. Rather it is seen as a sometimes unavoidable necessity, which one tries to evade as much as possible, since it seems contrary to the great value of freedom. In addition, in not a few environments, there is a crisis of authority figures, along with a view of any dependence as something negative, as an unavoidable exception to the capacity to judge and decide for oneself. Thus, for example, today's heightened sensitivity to any kind of abuse of power, while in itself very positive and necessary, can sometimes unjustly call into question all forms of authority. In reality, there is an innate tendency to disobey, which is the legacy of original sin when "man, tempted by the devil, let his trust in his Creator die in his heart (cf. *Gen 3:1-11*) and, abusing his freedom, disobeyed God's command."^[3]

To understand the highest value of obedience and its existential connection with freedom, we need to rise above these necessary levels of obedience in human society and contemplate Jesus Christ. This is another aspect of his centrality that has to be the goal of our life: that Christ reign in our hearts and direct our entire existence.

"Let us learn from Jesus to live obedience. He wanted to place on the pen of the Evangelist that marvelous biography which, in Latin, has only three words: *erat subditus illis* (*Lk 2:51*): he was obedient to them. See how necessary obedience is for a child of God! God himself came to obey two creatures, very perfect creatures, but creatures nonetheless: Holy Mary – greater than her only God – and Saint Joseph. And Jesus obeyed them."^[4] The Son of God wanted to be fully man and, like any good son, to obey Mary and Joseph, since he knew that by doing so he was obeying God the Father. And this obedience marked his whole life on earth, up to his obedience on the Cross (cf. *Phil 2:8*).

[1] Cf. Cornelio Fabro, "A Teacher of Christian Freedom," in *L'Osservatore Romano*, 2 July 1977. Also see "The Primacy of Freedom."

[2] Saint Josemaría, Prayer to the Holy Spirit, April 1934.

[3] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 397.

[4] Saint Josemaría, *Letter 38*, no. 41. Below, quotations that do not mention the author are from Saint Josemaría.

[Back to Contents](#)

Obeying God (no. 4-5)

Obeying God

4. In a strict sense only God is worthy of obedience always and at all times, because He alone fully knows the path that leads each of us to happiness. “If you obey the voice of the Lord your God, being careful to do all his commandments which I command you this day, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth” (*Deut 28:1*). Moses then describes all the blessings that their obedience would bring to the people.

In some way, all biblical revelation is a pedagogy leading to the most intelligent and freest obedience. It is an obedience that leads us to the full attainment of who we truly are, by identifying our will with God’s in an unconditional yes. Thus, through the prophets and despite the many betrayals by his people, God continues to tell them: “Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people; and walk in all the way that I command you, that it may be well with you” (*Jer 7:23*). Our small plans are made great when they are integrated into His; things are never better for us than when we walk in God’s ways.

Christ shows himself to us as an obedient son. Obedient, first of all to Mary and Joseph, to relatives and authorities. But above all, obedient to God the Father. Jesus finds his nourishment in doing the Father’s will: “My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work” (*Jn 4:34*). Even in his most difficult moments, the Son makes the Father’s will his own, despite his deep awareness of the suffering this entails: “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done” (*Lk 22:42*). Saint Paul writes that “being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross” (cf. *Phil 2:7-8*).

But it is not Christ’s death in itself alone that has brought us salvation, but his free and loving obedience to the Father in order to become one of us and give his life for each of us: “By one man’s obedience many will be made righteous” (*Rom 5:19*). His is an obedience that is not restricted to specific moments or instances, but is a way of acting at all times, docile “to the end” (*Jn 13:1*).

5. When Saint Peter was forbidden by the national and religious authorities to preach in Jesus’ name, he responded, “We must obey God rather than men” (*Acts 5:29*). But as Benedict XVI remarked, “this implies that we truly know God and that we truly wish to obey him. God is not a pretext for one’s personal will, but is really the One who calls and invites us, if necessary, even to martyrdom. Therefore, in measuring up to this word that ushers in a new history of freedom in the world, let us pray above all to know God, to know God humbly and truly,

and in knowing God, to learn the true obedience that is the foundation of human freedom.”^[5]

Those who seek to know God undertake this continuous search with great hope and trust, for from Him we can expect nothing but blessings, even if at times they are obscure or hard to understand, or make us suffer. In this sense, personal prayer also entails an attitude of obedience. “Lord,” Saint Josemaría prayed, “we are ready to heed whatever you want to tell us. Speak to us: we are attentive to your voice. May your words enkindle our will so that we launch out fervently to obey you.”^[6]

^[5] Benedict XVI, *Homily*, 15 April 2010.

^[6] *Holy Rosary*, 4th Luminous Mystery.

[Back to Contents](#)

God's will and human mediation (no. 6-7)

God's will and human mediation

6. What God wants for us is often presented to us through the mediation of others. In the first place, it comes through the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ. "Obedience is the fundamental decision to accept what is asked of us, and to do so as a concrete sign of that universal sacrament of salvation which is the Church."^[7] God can also make us see his will through the people around us, invested with greater or lesser authority, depending on the specific context. Because we know that God can speak to us through other people or through ordinary events, the conviction that we can hear his voice in them generates in us a docile attitude towards his designs, which can also be hidden in the words of those who accompany us on our path.

Saint Josemaría, aware of the delicate nature of this mediation (listening to God, but through ordinary men and women), advised fostering an attitude of humility, sincerity and interior silence. "Sometimes he suggests his wishes in a whisper, deep in our conscience; and we must listen carefully to recognize his voice and be faithful. Often he speaks to us through other people. But when we see their defects or doubt whether they are well informed – whether they have grasped all the aspects of the problem – we feel inclined to disobey. All this may have a divine meaning, for God does not impose a blind obedience on us. He wants us to obey intelligently, and we have to feel responsible for helping others with the light of our own intelligence. But let us be sincere with ourselves: let us examine, in every case, whether it is love for the truth that moves us or selfishness and attachment to our own judgment."^[8]

7. Moreover, we need to keep in mind that those who hold positions of authority at various levels are not called to do so because they are perfect. We do not give heed to those in authority because of their personal qualities. "What a pity that whoever is in charge doesn't give you good example! But, is it for his personal qualities that you obey him? Or do you conveniently interpret Saint Paul's *obedite praepositis vestris*, 'obey your leaders,' with a qualification of your own – always provided they have virtues to my taste?"^[9]

Nor does this mean that those who give indications or advice cannot make mistakes. They are well aware of this and, if necessary, they will ask for forgiveness. With intelligence and sincerity and in a context of supernatural faith and trust, we can always confront this possibility of error in one way or another, depending on the nature of the matter and the area in question. And we do so with humility, because it is reasonable to doubt our own judgment at least a little

and to dialogue trustingly with those in authority when it seems to us that a mistake has been made.

Saint Thomas explains that obedience is the virtue that inclines us to fulfill the legitimate directive of those in authority, inasmuch as this obedience is a manifestation of God's will.^[10] Naturally, not every legitimate directive is necessarily the best possible one. Nevertheless, obedience will then be the path to fruitfulness, since sometimes God gives more supernatural value to humility and unity than to the fact of being more or less right. Hence the importance of supernatural outlook, of not limiting oneself to a merely human evaluation of the indications received.

In any case, those in authority need to have extreme refinement in order not to impose their own criteria unnecessarily and to prevent their indications or advice from being interpreted as though they were a crystal-clear expression of God's will. As I wrote to you in my 9 January 2018 letter: "Giving directives with respect for souls is, first of all, to delicately respect the privacy of consciences, without confusing government and spiritual accompaniment. Secondly, this respect leads one to distinguish directives from what are only opportune exhortations, counsels, or suggestions. And thirdly (and not, for that reason, less important), is the need to govern with such great trust in others that one always tries to take into account, to the extent possible, the opinion of the people involved" (no. 13).

Let us contemplate, above all, Christ's example. "Jesus obeys Joseph and Mary. God has come to the world to obey, and to obey creatures."^[11] It is very significant that, after Jesus tells his parents in the Temple, "I must be in the concerns of my Father," Saint Luke adds that Jesus "*erat subditus illis*, he was subject to them" (cf. *Lk* 2:49-51). Following God's will, which we must seek always and in everything, is often found *in* trustingly following certain people.

[7] Francis, *Speech*, 17 February 2022.

[8] *Christ is Passing By*, no. 17.

[9] *The Way*, no. 621.

[10] Cf. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 104 a. 1.

[11] *Christ is Passing By*, no. 17.

[Back to Contents](#)

Obedience and freedom (no. 8-10)

Obedience and freedom

8. In all of human history, no act has been so deeply free as our Lord's self-giving on the Cross (cf. *Jn* 10:17-18). "The Lord lived the crowning point of his freedom on the Cross as a summit of love. When they shouted at him on Calvary: 'If you are the Son of God, come down from the Cross,' he showed his freedom as the Son precisely by remaining on that scaffold, to do the Father's merciful will to the very end."^[12]

The Cross, wrote Saint Josemaria, "is not pain, or annoyance, or bitterness. It is the holy wood on which Jesus Christ triumphs, and where we triumph too, when we receive cheerfully and generously what He sends us."^[13] The Cross shows us most clearly what I mentioned at the beginning of this letter, namely that freedom and obedience are not opposed, because in fact one can obey out of love and one can only love in freedom. More specifically, Christian obedience not only is not contrary to freedom, but it is an exercise of freedom. "I am a great friend of freedom, and that is precisely why I love this Christian virtue so much,"^[14] wrote our Father, referring to obedience.

It is always possible to do what we should "because I feel like it," out of love. And when it is for love of God, this "because I feel like it" is "the most supernatural reason," as Saint Josemaría also said. Hence "nothing is more false than to oppose freedom to self-giving, because self-giving is a consequence of freedom."^[15]

9. "Love and do what you will."^[16] Saint Augustine's famous statement, as he himself wrote, means that those who do what is good moved by charity do not act only out of necessity or obligation, because *libertas est caritatis*, "freedom belongs to charity."^[17] Thus we can understand why Christ's law is "the perfect law of freedom" (*Jas* 1:25), since all of it is summed up, "recapitulated," in love (cf. *Rom* 13:8-9).

In everything we can act freely like Christ, by making our own what we are told, out of love. Hence, "in obeying, we must listen, because we are not inert or passive instruments, without responsibility or thought. And then, with creativity, with initiative, with spontaneity, we put all the energies of our intellect and will into what is indicated, and into everything that is indicated and only what is indicated. Anything else would be anarchy. Obedience in the Work fosters the development of all your personal values and helps you to live, grow and acquire a greater maturity without losing your personality. You are the same person at the age of two as at the age of eighty-two."^[18] This initiative, naturally, is not limited to the occasions when we need to obey. We can always make suggestions and

contribute with our creativity wherever we are, without waiting to receive indications, but always in union with those in authority.

Saint Basil the Great said that it is characteristic of children to obey out of love: “Either we turn away from evil out of fear of punishment and we are in the state of a slave, or we seek the incentive of a reward and resemble mercenaries, or rather we obey out of love for the one who commands . . . and then we have the disposition of children.”^[19] To obey out of love is not a form of voluntarism that dispenses with our intelligence. Rather, it means bringing into play all the powers of our soul, using the best of our intellect in seeking the good by reasoning, and the best of our will in desiring to carry it out.

In fact, without intelligence and freedom – above all without interior freedom – a fully human obedience is not possible. And even less so is an obedience like that of Jesus. As our Father said, “I do not think that there can be truly Christian obedience unless that obedience is voluntary and responsible. The children of God are not stones or corpses. They are intelligent and free beings, all raised to the same supernatural order.”^[20]

10. But we can ask ourselves: is it possible to obey without understanding, or even having a different opinion on the matter? Clearly it is. And then too – perhaps even more so – what is asked of us can be done out of love, and therefore with freedom. Here, together with charity, faith will often come into play. I obey without understanding or without having the same opinion, when I accept that the indication comes from prudent people, who can judge better than I can myself; or when I accept that, once things have been carefully considered, a decision needs to be made, and it falls to some particular person to make it. Obedience becomes an act of faith, when we see the grace of the Holy Spirit in that decision and in our willingness to accept it.

As Saint Thomas taught, following Aristotle, the will is the faculty that properly directs the person, although it needs the understanding to present to it the objects of choice.^[21] From the heart comes all that is good and all that is evil (cf. *Lk* 6:45); a person can decide not to want to understand, or not to want to dialogue in order to better understand a question. The will – as experience shows – can so dominate the intellect that it can even force it to deny something objectively evident. But our free will can also spur our intellect to embark on new paths, without having understood everything at a given moment.

If, in the face of difficulties and suffering, we find ourselves bewildered and unable to understand, it will be helpful to contemplate Jesus who, in his human nature, also wanted to undergo this kind of suffering. In praying “my God, my God, why have you forsaken me” (*Mt* 27:46), he fulfills the prophetic words of Psalm 22. His response, with an ardent freedom in the midst of his suffering, is also nourished by the psalms: “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (*Lk* 23:46, cf. *Ps* 31:6). The obedience of Jesus makes reparation for the disobedience of Adam (cf. *Rom* 5:19). His whole life and death is obedience to God the Father and the cause of our salvation (cf. *Phil* 2:6-11).

[12] Benedict XVI, *Angelus*, 1 July 2007.

[13] *The Forge*, no. 788.

[14] *Christ is Passing By*, no. 17.

[15] *Friends of God*, no. 30.

[16] Saint Augustine, *In Epist. Ioannis ad parthos*, VII, 8 (PL 35, 2033).

[17] Saint Augustine, *De natura et gratia*, 65, 78 (PL 44, 286).

[18] *Letter 11*, no. 39.

[19] Saint Basil, *Regulae fusius tractatae*, prol. 3 (PG 31, 895).

[20] *Conversations*, no. 2.

[21] Cf. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Quaest. disp. De malo*, q. VI: *Intelligo enim quia volo; et similiter utor omnibus potentiis et habitibus quia volo.*

[Back to Contents](#)

Obedience and trust (no. 11)

Obedience and trust

11. Obedience and trust also require each other, to the point that, when they are genuine, we pass naturally from the one to the other. Where trust exists, consulting the judgment of another person and, if necessary, making it our own, is a normal manifestation of wanting to choose what is best. On the contrary, when trust is weakened, obedience runs the risk of becoming something purely external, formal and distant. Therefore, in order to facilitate a healthy obedience, an atmosphere of affection and good will is essential. That people know they are loved and not controlled, that they are listened to carefully, that they see their opinions are valued: all these attitudes enhance freedom and, at the same time, obedience.

Saint Josemaría stressed that trust is the key to building a friendship between parents and children: “if they have no freedom, if they see that no one trusts them, children will always be inclined to deceive their parents.”^[22] When trust is absent, distances are quickly created and transparency is easily lost, because intimacy is a delicate area that needs a safe environment to flourish. Trying to ensure a merely external obedience, without a communion of wills, is like building a house on sand (cf. *Mt* 7:26).

In the mission of creating an atmosphere of trust, those who occupy a position of authority in the family or in a group have a greater responsibility. In fact, their first act of service can be to actively foster this space of trust with everyone, while at the same leading the way in searching for God’s will for themselves and for their mission. Thus, by leaning on one another, the others will also seek and find God’s will. Even with the necessary organization (that which is indispensable, since the Work is a “disorganized organization”^[23]), everyone should be able to know and feel, as our Father said, that they are “as free as birds.”^[24]

It was precisely the need for a context of trust and family warmth that led Saint Josemaría to say that, in the Work, the strongest command is “please.” This was not simply a question of terminology, but a sign of the natural attitude found among intelligent and free adults within a family environment. Moreover, the fact that the Work is a *supernatural* family means that faith and charity, together with trust, are the true foundations both of the exercise of authority and of obedience.

[22] *Conversations*, no. 100.

[23] Cf. *Conversations*, no. 63.

[24] *Letter 18*, no. 38.

[Back to Contents](#)

Obedience and apostolic fruitfulness (no. 12-13)

Obedience and apostolic fruitfulness

12. Our Lord “learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him” (*Heb* 5:8-9). Our salvation, as the fruit of Christ’s obedience unto death on the Cross, also illuminates the relationship between obedience and the apostolic fruitfulness of our life.

We have often meditated on that scene where Peter obeyed our Lord, even though from a human point of view it was not very reasonable to follow his instructions: “Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch” (*Lk* 5:4). Let us consider this slowly. How much good followed from Peter’s obedience to our Lord’s words *Duc in altum!* “The power of obedience! The lake of Genesareth had denied its fishes to Peter’s nets. A whole night in vain. Then, obedient, he lowered his net again to the water and they caught *piscium multitudinem copiosam*, a huge number of fish. Believe me: the miracle is repeated each day.”^[25]

13. In the apostolic mission, we can and should have a wide-ranging personal initiative, which is the fruit of our love for God and for others. And at the same time, following the person who directs them, we need to bring forward so many activities organized in the centers of the Work, with fidelity to the means that our Father transmitted to us. We do all this without forgetting that our principal means will always be prayer. “Prayer, this is our strength: we have never had any other weapon.”^[26]

In the direction of the Work and in the organization of its apostolates, the manner of obeying is that proper to a family, to a communion of persons. To think of a communion of persons is to think of a communion of freedoms, a communion of personal initiatives that are also “doing Opus Dei,” and a communion of generations. The conviction that God acts in the hearts of all, and that we are all attentive to the divine will, gives rise to the obedience proper to a family, in which each member seeks actively to help carry out the common project. Understood and lived in this way, obedience is an expression of unity, of that unity which is precisely the condition for apostolic fruitfulness: *ut omnes unum sint... ut mundus credat*, that all may be one, so that the world may believe (*Jn* 17:21).

While respecting strictly the separation between spiritual accompaniment and the government of persons, we must always live and work with great gratitude for our Christian vocation in the Work, fostering the riches of each person, so that we can all work together as a team and as a family.

Cultivating the authentic virtue of obedience protects us both from the inability to listen and from the servility that only executes without the mediation of all the interior richness that God has given to every person. Saint Josemaría warned us about these possibilities. He said that, on the one hand, “most acts of disobedience come from not knowing how to ‘listen’ to what one is being asked to do, and in the end are a lack of humility or of interest in serving.”^[27] On the other hand, precisely as a consequence of the desire to listen with an attitude of service, he said that “in Opus Dei we obey with our head and our will; not like corpses. I can’t go anywhere with corpses; I bury them piously.”^[28] Hence to obey is not simply to carry out the will of another person, but to collaborate with that person in a union of wills and heads, of thinking.

[25] *The Way*, no. 629.

[26] *Letter*, 17 June 1973, no. 35.

[27] *Furrow*, no. 379.

[28] Notes from a family gathering, 9 November 1964, in Vázquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei* (III), p. 407.

[Back to Contents](#)

The intelligent obedience of Saint Joseph (no. 14)

The intelligent obedience of Saint Joseph

14. In his letter on Saint Joseph, Pope Francis considered how “in every situation, Joseph declared his own *fiat*, like Mary at the Annunciation and Jesus in Gethsemane.”^[29] When Saint Josemaría spoke about obedience, he often referred to Saint Joseph, because he saw in the patriarch a heart eager to listen, a heart that was attentive to God and also attentive to the circumstances and the people around him. For example, in speaking about the return from Egypt, he points out how “Joseph’s faith does not falter; he obeys quickly and to the letter. To understand this lesson of the Holy Patriarch better, we should remember that Joseph’s faith is active, that his prompt obedience is not a passive submission to the course of events.”^[30]

In this regard, our Founder appreciated the fact that Saint Joseph, being as he was a man of prayer, applied his intelligence to the situation facing him: “In the various circumstances of his life, Saint Joseph never refuses to think, never neglects his responsibilities. On the contrary, he puts all his human experience at the service of faith . . . That is the way Saint Joseph’s faith was: full, trusting, complete. And it expressed itself in an effective dedication to the will of God with an intelligent obedience.”^[31]

We can understand why Saint Josemaría, especially for those called to be saints amid the changing and challenging situations of this world, stresses the need to learn an intelligent obedience that is integrated into our personal freedom.

^[29] Francis, Apostolic Letter *Patris corde*, 8 December 2020, no. 3.

^[30] *Christ is Passing By*, no. 42.

^[31] *Ibid.*

Mary's obedience (no. 15)

Mary's obedience

15. In recent years, devotion to Our Lady Untier of Knots has spread throughout the world. This devotion has very ancient roots, for already at the beginning of the third century Saint Irenaeus of Lyons wrote: “Eve, by her disobedience, tied the knot of misfortune for the human race; but Mary, by her obedience, untied it.”^[32] How many knots that seem impossible to untie in the world and in our lives will be undone if, like our Lady, we live for God's plans!

Our Father said, “Following her example of obedience to God, we can learn to serve with full freedom. In Mary we don't find the slightest trace of the attitude of the foolish virgins, who obey, but thoughtlessly. Our Lady listens attentively to what God wants, ponders what she doesn't fully understand and asks about what she doesn't know. Then she gives herself completely to doing the divine will: ‘Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done unto me according to your word.’ Isn't that marvelous? Our Lady, our teacher in all we do, shows us that obedience to God is not servile, and does not bypass our conscience. Mary will help us to discover, deep in our heart, the freedom of the children of God.”^[33]

If at some point our obedience should seem to conflict with our freedom, let us turn to Mary. Our Lady will obtain for us the grace to find, in authentic obedience, the freedom of God's children. And, along with freedom, joy.

Your Father blesses you with all his affection,

Rome, 10 February 2024

^[32] Saint Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*, III, 22, 4 (PG 7-I, 959-960).

^[33] *Christ is Passing By*, no. 173.

[Back to Contents](#)

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