

The Holy Family (A)
(Ecclesiasticus 3:2-6.12-14 / Matthew 2:13-15.19-23)
29.12.2019
Obedience

Today in our Gospel reading, St Matthew highlights one aspect of St Joseph's character: his obedience. The angel tells him to go to Egypt and he goes, then some time later on the angel tells him to go back to the land of Israel and he goes back.

Obedience is at the heart of St Luke's infancy narrative. To the angel who asks her to welcome Jesus in her womb, Mary answers obediently: "Here I am, the servant of the Lord" (Lk 1:38) and after having been found in the Temple, we are told of Jesus that he "was obedient to" Mary and Joseph (Lk 2:51).

As we commemorate the Holy Family, it is important to underline that we are not considering an obedience motivated by social conformity or a form of blind obedience to human rules and regulations.

What is important is that Joseph and Mary's obedience, as indeed Jesus' obedience also, is not first of all obedience to an external law, but to the inner voice of God, and therefore to their deep, truest and personal calling in life. The root of the obedience of Jesus, Mary and Joseph is found in their desire to be faithful to who they are and to what they are called to become.

In fact, in our lives too every call to obedience is supposed to help us to become the persons we are called to become in God's sight and in our relationships with others. This is why the family of Joseph, Mary and Jesus is a *holy* family.

Joseph and Mary heard and recognised God's calling in their regard and consented to it. They embraced the call to be a father and a mother and became so together with Jesus. Here *together* is the important word. Nobody can become a human being, nobody can grow in his or her identity without others, and without others who are themselves grounded in their own identity. Parents and children need one another in order to discover and embrace their calling in life.

Joseph, Mary and Jesus learned what it meant to be a father, a mother and a son by obeying their own calling in life and by obeying one another. They grew in their respective vocations through obedience.

Here is certainly what makes obedience difficult: in order to grow, whether we are a mother, a father or a child, one day or another we have to discover that obedience "wrenches us out of the limitations of our own landscape" (Joan Chittister OSB).

In this context obedience is the fruit of love and respect: self-love and self-respect and love and respect of others. Christian obedience is not a straightjacket whose goal is to imprison us. Christian obedience aims at wrenching us out of the limitations of our own landscape, of our own self-centred and narrow expectations.

Unfortunately for one reason or another we may refuse to grow; it happens that we do not want to obey our own calling in life and instead prefer to either escape our responsibility or to misuse our authority. The fact is that, in the family, when one member does not fulfil his or her vocation, all the other members are hurt in their personal desire to fulfil their vocation. In family life all members are responsible for one another.

In his *Rule*, St Benedict speaks of the "labour of obedience" (Prol. 2). Yes it is a labour for each one of us to become who we are called to be, it is hard work for us to obey

and consent to our own vocation and in the same way it is hard for us to work at building up respectful, loving and life-giving families.

Maybe one of our problems is that we think that families are naturally loving and life-giving, we want to believe that to be a father, a mother, a child is something which happens easily and spontaneously, that the family unit generates life and love by itself without having to put work into the project.

We all know that things are not so simple. The tensions, misunderstandings and crises which mark all our families bear witness to the fact that to live and to grow in our own identity in our families is everything but easy and spontaneous.

When Joseph and Mary find Jesus in the Temple (Lk 2:41-52), we see how the parents and the child want to be faithful to their personal vocation and how the fidelity of the parents and of the child lead to a misunderstanding. Things are never easy and rarely straightforward.

While other forms of community life are quite stable, the challenge of family life is that parents and children have to adapt themselves regularly to a new phase of their personal development and in the same time to adapt to the development of the other members of the family. We do not live and experience human relationships through obedience in the same way at 2, 10, 18, 25, 50 or 80 years of age. The kinds of relationship we have in our families have to be constantly revisited and updated if we want them to be fruitful and respectful. We know that there is something wrong when parents relate to their 50 year old children as if they were 10, or when an adult relates to his parents as a teenager.

What allowed the Holy family to fulfil its mission was their love and respect for one another, it was their mutual obedience lived as a service. Ultimately, through the challenge of obedience, Joseph, Mary and Jesus learnt to serve one another and to grow in their personal calling.

According to the philosopher Gabriel Marcel, “to love anybody is to expect from him something which can neither be defined nor foreseen; it is at the same time in some way to make it possible for him to fulfil this expectation” (quoted by Pope Francis in *Amoris Laetitia*, n. 322). In our families, through obedience and love, may we learn to be free so that we may grow “to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ” (Eph 4:13); may we be faithful servants who till and care for what God has sown in our hearts, in the hearts of our relatives and of all our brothers and sisters in humanity so that we may all become ourselves in truth.