Opinion
NCR Voices





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We have come through the most holy of days, the sacred triduum, in which Jesus Christ demonstrates his radical obedience to the will of the Father. What does this mean for the synodal process in which the church is engaged?

On Palm Sunday, we heard from St. Paul's Letter to the Philippians:

> Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God,
> did not regard equality with God
> something to be grasped.
>
> Rather, he emptied himself,
> taking the form of a slave,
> coming in human likeness;
> and found human in appearance,
> he humbled himself,
> becoming obedient to the point of death,
> even death on a cross.

On Good Friday, we heard from St. Paul's Letter to the Hebrews:

> Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered;
> and when he was made perfect,
> he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.

The first great theologian of the Christian church, in his effort to understand what had transpired in these critical days in Jerusalem, interpreted them in this light: Jesus was obedient to the will of God.

Not only the first great theologian of the church but Jesus himself understood the paschal mystery in terms of obedience. The synoptic Gospels all relate Jesus' agony in the garden, his moment of acute wrestling with the evil he was called to endure. He submits to the will of his father. "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want," Jesus prays (Matthew 26:39).

The history of Israel, too, is the story of the alternating obedience and disobedience of God's chosen people. At the Easter Vigil, we hear of Abraham's act of radical obedience, being willing to sacrifice his son Isaac as the Lord ordered him to do. The

prophets always call the people of Israel to return to their truest selves as children of the Covenant, bound to God and to his promises.

Obedience, then, must always be a Christian virtue and a characteristic of any Christian ecclesiology. Fundamentalist Christians do not mediate the demand for obedience. They believe they follow Jesus' biblical teachings without qualification. The biblical text is the sole authority. They do not, and cannot, admit the possibility that sometimes one demand of the Lord's many teachings might conflict with another.

For the rest of us, obedience is mediated through the church. Priests take a vow of obedience to the bishop at the time of their ordination. Bishops make a vow of obedience to the pope at the time of their consecration. Cardinals take a special vow of obedience to the pope. The laity are called to the obedience of faith in baptism.

For all Christians, the Blessed Mother is the model of this obedience. "The Virgin Mary most perfectly embodies the obedience of faith," states the Catechism of the Catholic Church. It continues:

> By faith Mary welcomes the tidings and promise brought by the angel Gabriel, believing that 'with God nothing will be impossible' and so giving her assent: Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be [done] to me according to your word.' Elizabeth greeted her: 'Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.' It is for this faith that all generations have called Mary blessed.

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Part of the reason synodality is so necessary for the Roman church is that it can restore some balance to our ecclesiology. In the past two centuries, obedience to the pope has subsumed entirely the idea of obedience to Christ and to the church. The dogmatic definition of papal infallibility at the First Vatican Council was the principal example of this phenomenon, indeed a kind of apotheosis of it. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, popes gained control over the appointment of bishops throughout the world, giving them yet more authority and control. Advances in communications technology also increased the ability of any pope to imprint his

ideas on the universal church if he has a mind to do so.

It is almost impossible to overestimate the degree to which this conflation of obedience to the pope with Chrisian obedience still governs the Roman curia. I remember a curial official telling me that Pope Benedict XVI was "over the moon" with his pastoral visit to the United Kingdom in 2010. The pope's subjective experience was the only metric that mattered. And, among bishops, the desires of the pope still exert enormous sway. The opposition to Pope Francis among some U.S. bishops is an extraordinary outlier.

Vatican II's emphasis on collegiality was potentially a large step toward re-establishing a better balance between Rome and the local churches, retrieving the idea that the bishop is leader of the local church, not the branch manager of Vatican Inc. The synod of bishops, established in the immediate wake of the council, was unwieldy in its early years under Pope Paul VI. It failed to become an expression of genuine collegiality under Pope John Paul II. Benedict revised the synodal process at the margins, introducing an open mic hour at the end of each day during which any synod father could talk about any topic.

It is Francis who has revivified the synod of bishops and, more than that, proposed synodality as a different approach to church governance. As he has made clear repeatedly, the embrace of synodality is not a rejection of monarchical governance in favor of democratic governance. He famously rejected the request for married priests adopted by two-thirds of the synod fathers at the Synod for the Amazon. As the Holy Father explained in an interview with La Civilta Cattolica:

> There was a discussion [at the 2019 Synod] ... a rich discussion ... a well-founded discussion, but no discernment, which is something other than arriving at a good and justified consensus or relative majorities […] We must understand that the Synod is more than a parliament; and in this specific case the Synod could not escape this dynamic. On this issue the [2019] Synod was a rich, productive and even necessary parliament; but no more than that. For me this was decisive in the final discernment, when I thought about how to write the exhortation [Querida Amazonia].

Discernment posits that the Holy Spirit is the arbiter, but someone or some group of people in the church must be tasked with determining, finally, to what the Spirit is, or is not, calling the church.

How will a synodal church incarnate the necessary Christian virtue of obedience? It is a question that might best be answered derivatively, as a consequence of making other decisions, as was the case in the Amazon synod. Or it might necessarily be faced head-on. But it is a question that must be posed and answered.