

THE GIFT OF SIMPLICITY.
REFLECTIONS ON OBEDIENCE
IN THE WORK OF
ADRIENNE VON SPEYR

• Adrian J. Walker •

“True obedience proceeds from a filial attitude that rests assured in the intimate awareness that I belong to my father’s house, that I do not have to justify myself, as if I were only conditionally a member of the family.”



It is risky to speak of Christian obedience, because the topic lends itself easily to misunderstandings. These misunderstandings arise from our tendency to confuse true obedience with an impostor. Despite the superficial resemblance between them, the two things—obedience and the simulacrum that masquerades as obedience—proceed from two mutually opposed attitudes.

In the parable of the prodigal son, the elder brother exemplifies the simulacrum of obedience. Unlike the prodigal son, the elder brother has remained in his father’s house. He does not, however, live there as a son, but as a slave: “Lo, I have *slaved* for you,” he says to his father (Lk 15:29). By the same token, the elder son is not genuinely obedient. True obedience, in fact, does not proceed from the servile attitude that he, the elder brother, displays, but rather from the filial attitude which the younger brother, the prodigal son, receives anew at the end of the parable, thanks to the forgiveness granted to him by his father.

True obedience, then, proceeds from a filial attitude that rests assured in the intimate awareness that I belong to my father's house, that I do not have to justify myself, as if I were only conditionally a member of the family. True obedience, which exists only in Christianity, is not in the first place an *ought* (*un deber*), a debt to be paid, but a *power* (*un poder*)—the power to be children of God.¹ “To all who received him,” St. John teaches us, “he gave power to become children of God” (Jn 1:11). As the power to be children of God, Christian obedience is liberation and freedom, or better, the only true freedom. As St. Paul writes to the Romans, “You did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoptive sons, in which we cry, ‘Abba, Father!’” (Rom 8:15).

One of Adrienne von Speyr's many contributions to Christian theology and practice is her rediscovery of this essential connection between true obedience—properly Christian obedience—and the filial attitude of those who have received the power of being children of God. Adrienne sees this connection anchored in the eternal generation of the only-begotten Son of God, Jesus Christ. In the fourth volume of his *Theo-Drama*, Hans Urs von Balthasar cites several key passages in which Adrienne contemplates

¹I hasten to add that I do not wish to demonize the concept of *owing*. I reject the contemporary tendency to oppose owing to the gratuity of gift. True, to owe is to be under a sort of obligation, but this obligation is one that any properly disposed person would (and not just should) be *glad* to be under. For to owe, in the primary sense, is to “owe a debt of thanks,” a debt which arises precisely where there is nothing to be paid for or paid off—that is, in the presence of a gratuitous gift. Indeed, to pay for the gift or to pay it off would be to escape the debt of thanks, and so to escape the claim of gratuity, whereas to pay one's debt of thanks is to enter into the logic of gratuity with a gratuity of one's own: gratitude. The elder son, for his part, goes wrong because, instead of paying his debt of thanks for belonging to the father's house, he wants to pay for his residence there by means of his work. The elder son goes wrong, in other words, because he replaces the debt of thanks with another kind of owing, one that, eventually, he hopes to pay off, so as no longer to owe a debt of gratitude. Ironically, since the father takes it for granted that the elder son belongs to the household, he never gives the elder son the kind of payment the latter desires—and so appears to the elder son like a slavedriver. The elder son does work that the hired hand could use to bargain for payment—but, though he, too, wants payment, he never gets it, which is precisely the condition of the slave. By nonetheless staying in the father's house with this attitude, the elder son degrades himself below the level even of a hired hand.

the trinitarian foundation of the obedience that Jesus lived out during his mission on earth:

“The Son even cooperates in his begetting by letting himself be begotten, by holding himself in readiness to be begotten. . . . The Son prefers nothing to doing the Father’s will, for even in being begotten he carries it out The divine processions occur in eternal simultaneity,” so that the Father’s very act of begetting “is an act of surrender to the Son, to which the Son replies with his surrender.”²

Clearly, Adrienne’s account of the relationship between Father and Son (as I have paraphrased it) re-states, and attempts to develop in terms of “gift,” the classical theology of the Son’s consubstantiality with his paternal source. For to say, as Athanasius repeatedly did, that “there was never a time when the Son was not” is to say that “there was never a time when the Father was not Father,” which is to say that “there was never a time when the Father’s being God did not coincide with his total sharing of being God with the Son (and the Spirit).” It is to say, in short, that the Father has no being outside of his complete self-gift to the Son. But if the Father has no being outside of his complete self-gift to the Son, then two things must be true. First, the Son, for his part, must share completely in the Father’s being God. Second, however, he must do so in such a way that being and self-gift coincide as totally in him as they do in the Father, for that coincidence belongs by definition to the one, undivided godhead. The Son, then, is the same one God as the Father in the unity of being and self-gift, albeit according to a different “mode of subsistence,” as the Greek Fathers would say.

Of course, since the Son is from the Father, but not *vice versa*, the Son’s way of being-as-self-gift means saying and being a “yes” to the Father that excludes every shadow of a “no.” Nevertheless, this “yes” does not involve any kind of subordination, but is a way of having, indeed, of *being* the same divine essence as the Father, of

²Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theodramatik IV: Das Endspiel* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1983), 76 [*Theo-Drama V: The Last Act*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 87]; the passages cited can be found in Adrienne von Speyr, *Welt des Gebetes*, 2nd ed. (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1992), 57; 59; 223/194 [*The World of Prayer*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985)].

being the same one God that the Father is. Furthermore, this filial way of being God is not only of equal dignity with the Father's paternal mode of divinity. Rather, the filial mode of being God is so internal to the Father's essence as self-gift that Adrienne can affirm that the Son's "yes" is a co-cause of his own eternal generation.

What does Adrienne mean, then, when she states that the Son "lets himself" be begotten by the Father? The Father, we have seen, gives himself to the Son. More: The Father does not exist outside of his act of giving himself to the Son. There never was a time when the Father had not given himself totally to the only-begotten, whom he loves. For that reason, the Son reposes, with perfect confidence, in the embrace of the Father's love. This confidence saturates the Son completely; it constitutes him, thus totally excluding *a priori* even the shadow of the temptation to want to exist outside of the act of being generated by the Father. The Son is sheer "yes" to the Father—and just so "true God from true God . . . consubstantial with the Father."

Now, for Adrienne, this filial attitude of allowing oneself to be generated is the fundamental root of obedience. Once again, this divine root of obedience by no means implies a subordination of the Son to the Father. On the contrary, the Son's eternal obedience is his manner of being the same one God as the Father is, indeed, of co-executing the act in which the Father generates him eternally. The Father's generosity is so powerful that he can in some sense owe even his Fatherhood to the Son—while remaining the "sole source" of the entire godhead.³

We could sum up what we have said so far by saying that the Son is the person in whom freedom, obedience, and "filiality" are simply one. This simple unity is ontological, as it must be if "there was never a time when the Son was not (Son)." But, for this very reason, it is also a "moral" attitude as well. That is, since the Son just *is* a free filial "yes," he also (always already) *says* "yes." And he does so precisely with the *simplicity* of someone who does not have to

³There is never a time when the Son is not. The Son, then, is always already internal to the Father's essence. Indeed, the eternal presence of the Son within the Father's essence is in a sense necessary for the existence of the Father's paternity: not as a part of the Father's essence or paternity, but as an *entailment* precisely of the Father's own generosity as sole source of divinity. The Father could not be Father (and nothing but Father) unless the Son were always already internal to his divinity (as a distinct hypostasis, not as a part).

deliberate about whether or not to be in accord with the Father, because there is never any question in his mind about the Father's absolute goodness.

What, then, about us? We confess, of course, that the Son of God is the only one who is Son by nature. The good news of Christianity, however, is that the Father allows us to become his children by grace. This means that the simplicity of the filial "yes"—the simplicity of the Son's obedience—also becomes ours by grace.⁴

It is true that, unlike the only-begotten Son ("before" his Incarnation), we have to learn filial obedience. And it is true that this learning process inevitably contains aspects that are hard for us, since, as the author of the Letter to the Hebrews writes, "What son is there whom his father does not discipline?" (Heb 12:7).⁵ Nevertheless, difficulty is not the heart of obedience, because the process of learning the attitude of sonship unfolds within the grace of adoptive filiation, which precedes and makes possible our effortful apprenticeship in filiality. For this reason, the fundamental posture of Christian obedience is, as we saw just now, (a share in) the basic attitude of the Son. And that attitude is characterized for Adrienne by the simplicity of the One who does the Father's will spontaneously, without complications, not because he *is constrained to* do it, but because he *wants to*, because he loves the Father with a love that has no need either of complicating things or of being complicated by anything.⁶

⁴It is clear that for us, this simplicity is a gift of the Holy Spirit, poured out in our hearts by the Father so that we might participate in the filial attitude of the eternal Son (cf. Rom 5:5). But this gift is not extraneous to us; it wells up from the most intimate interior of our hearts. Not because we possess the Son's simplicity by nature, but because the grace of the Spirit capitalizes on the fact that our being bears a distant but real image of the simplicity of filial love. Because of this, Balthasar gives much importance to Aquinas's affirmation about being: "Being is complete and simple, but not subsistent" (cf. *De potentia* I, 1). "Not subsistent" is a technical term that means "does not exist apart from being-given, poured out by the Creator as an expression of his generosity."

⁵The same Letter to the Hebrews explains that Christ, "although he was Son, learned obedience through what he suffered" (Heb 5:8).

⁶The Son is *eager* to do the Father's will. This filial attitude helps us rightly to understand Ignatian indifference, a frequent theme in Adrienne's works. This indifference, in fact, is precisely *not* the posture of someone who is convinced that the differences between things are not real or important, that "it's all the same." Ignatius himself gives us the key to understanding the true meaning of indifference

Christian obedience is nothing but the simplicity of filial love, the power to be children of God, which frees us from our permanent preoccupation with ourselves so that we might live in “the glorious freedom of the children of God” (Rom 8:21).

Adrienne constantly forbade her spiritual daughters to “reflect on themselves.” I do not think that she meant to direct this admonition against a right knowledge of the self, but to help her daughters—and us, too—to avoid the trap of wanting to latch onto our identity in the mirror of our self-consciousness, instead of receiving it ever anew from the mirror of the incarnate Son.⁷ In

in the famous act of entrustment at the end of the *Spiritual Exercises*: “Take, Lord, and receive all my freedom, my memory, my understanding and all my will, all that I have and possess. You gave it to me; to you, Lord, I return it. Everything is yours, dispose of it according to your will. Give me your love and your grace, for this is enough for me” (no. 234). The last words of the *Suscipe*—“give me your love and your grace, for this is enough for me”—convey to us the “naturalness” of indifference, which flows from the experience of being loved by God in the Word made flesh. That is to say, in encountering Christ in the *Exercises*, I can finally see myself with the loving eyes of God. I am set free from the compulsion to create myself according to the likeness of the many images of myself that I project onto the mirror of my self-consciousness. At the same time, I am set free to see creation as it really is: not as an accessory to my idolatrous project of self-creation, but as the Father’s gift, a gift that reflects the glory of his gratuitous (but not at all arbitrary) love. In brief, then, indifference is the gift of the freedom of seeing all created things as a trace of God’s self-gift, through the same Word made flesh whom I have encountered during the course of the *Exercises*.

⁷We tend to place ourselves again and again in difficult situations. It is as if the human being had a taste for *complexity*, or rather, for the insoluble problem. Why are we like this? I think that our affinity for complexity is a symptom of a deeper pathology. If we constantly place ourselves in some confusion or other, it is not because we want the confusion itself, but because we want that which inevitably produces confusion. To what am I referring? To the false images of ourselves that we project and that we intend to realize. Where do these images come from? I would describe the situation in which we find ourselves using the following comparison. When we look in a mirror, what we see is only an image of ourselves. Moreover, this image shows us only one aspect of ourselves, for example, our face or profile. Now, our consciousness of ourselves—our self-consciousness—is like a mirror. When we look at ourselves in this mirror, we see at most a partial aspect of our identity. And then what happens? We latch on to this partial image of ourselves as if it were able to contain all our identity. More: We want to create ourselves according to this image, in order to realize the identity we (mistakenly) think it expresses. But instead of securing for ourselves the solid identity we seek, this idolatrous effort interiorly fragments us still more. It produces in us a complexity, a lack of unity with ourselves, of which the outward disorder of our

other words, Adrienne wants to help us to rise above the idolatrous illusion of being able to know ourselves apart from the filiation which Christ, as the one sent by the Father, communicates to us in the Spirit. For Adrienne, Christian obedience represents the great liberation from the supposed necessity of creating ourselves according to an image that is not the Image par excellence—the eternal Son—in whom the Father grants to us our true identity. Christian obedience is the gift of freedom, which liberates us from the illusion of a false autonomy in order to generate us as persons in the full sense: as adopted sons and daughters in the Son. Christian obedience is our point of access to the identity that is most ours, which is not given outside of adoptive filiation, but only in and through it.

To whoever wishes to receive the gift of filial simplicity, Adrienne recommends the practice of daily contemplative prayer, the “object” of which, as she explains, is “the incarnate Word in all its plenitude,”⁸ a plenitude that is the perfect identity of filiation, freedom, and obedient love, which constitutes the Son’s very being. Contemplating the incarnate Word in Scripture within the context of the Church (and ecclesial obedience), we see, and receive, the unity of ourselves that we try vainly to find in what Eliot calls the “heap of broken images” that we otherwise idolatrously mistake for our true identity. Contemplative prayer, for Adrienne, is one of the privileged *loci* where we experience the truth, summed up in *Gaudium et spes*, 22, that Christ alone fully reveals man to himself.

There is, however, no encounter with the plenitude of the incarnate Word outside of the immaculate “yes” of Mary. Adrienne describes the Marian assent at the beginning of her book, *Handmaid of the Lord*:

As a sheaf of grain is tied together in the middle and spreads out at either end, so Mary’s life is bound together by her assent. From this assent her life receives its meaning and form and unfolds toward past and future. This single, all-encompassing act accompanies her at every moment of her existence, illuminates

lives is merely the external reflection. My argument in this essay is that, for Adrienne, obedience to God in the following of Christ is the gift of a simplicity that heals this inner fragmentation.

⁸Adrienne von Speyr, *Kostet und Seht. Ein Theologisches Lesebuch. Aus ihren Schriften ausgewählt und eingeleitet von Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Einsiedeln-Trier: Johannes Verlag, 1988), 429.

every turning point of her life, bestows upon every situation its own particular meaning and in all situations gives Mary herself the grace of renewed understanding. Her assent gives full meaning to every breath, every movement, every prayer of the Mother of God. This is the nature of an assent: it binds the one who gives it, yet it allows him complete freedom in shaping its expression. He fills his assent with his personality, giving it weight and unique coloring. But he himself is also molded, liberated and fulfilled by his assent. All freedom develops through surrender and through renunciation of liberty. And from this freedom within commitment there arises every sort of fruitfulness.⁹

For Adrienne, Mary's "yes" includes us vicariously, giving us the confidence and therefore the freedom to say "yes" ourselves. For this reason, Mary's "yes" constitutes the center of the Church.¹⁰ Thanks to Mary, the Church is really, and not merely metaphorically, Mother: the immaculate Mother who, rendered fruitful by the Holy Spirit, brings us to birth as sons and daughters in the Son.

There is more: For Adrienne, Mary forms the "first living cell"¹¹ of the Church together with St. John, who for his part receives the Mother as a "true last will and testament" from the

⁹Adrienne von Speyr, *Handmaid of the Lord*, trans. E. A. Nelson (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1985), 7.

¹⁰Through the mediation of Balthasar, Adrienne is the ultimate source of John Paul II's teaching in the apostolic letter *Mulieris dignitatem* that Mary's assent "is antecedent to" the hierarchical ministry, including the papacy. Quoting Balthasar, the Pope writes, "This Marian profile is also—even perhaps more so—fundamental and characteristic for the Church as is the apostolic and Petrine profile to which it is profoundly united The Marian dimension of the Church is antecedent to that of the Petrine, without being in any way divided from it or being less complementary. Mary Immaculate precedes all others, including obviously Peter himself and the Apostles. This is so, not only because Peter and the Apostles, being born of the human race under the burden of sin, form part of the Church which is 'holy from out of sinners,' but also because their triple function has no other purpose except to form the Church in line with the ideal of sanctity already programmed and prefigured in Mary. A contemporary theologian has rightly stated that Mary is 'Queen of the Apostles without any pretensions to apostolic powers: she has other and greater powers' (H. U. von Balthasar, *Neue Klarstellungen*)" (*Mulieris dignitatem*, 27, note 53).

¹¹Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Unser Auftrag* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1984), 105 [*Our Task*, trans. John Saward (San Francisco: Ignatius Press/Communio Books, 1994), 124].

crucified Lord.¹² “Receiving” Mary “into his home” (Jn 19:27), John simultaneously receives Mary’s attitude, an attitude that permits him, in a specifically masculine way, to “receive” Jesus and, with him, the gift of “power to become children of God” (Jn 1:12).¹³

For this reason, John exercises a double mediation: On the one hand, he is the bridge by means of which the Marian attitude penetrates the heart of the Petrine Church; on the other hand, the Evangelist assures all of us of a place in what is now the Marian heart of the same Petrine Church. John represents *all* at the foot of the Cross, that is, in the living womb of the Church: not only the clergy, not only committed Catholics, but also ordinary people, even non-believers.

In Adrienne’s vision, then, John is not only priest and apostle, but also “the man” who “‘remains’ simply in the world, beyond the sphere of the priestly office.”¹⁴ This does not mean, of course, that Johannine mediation offers some sort of laicist “counter-balance” to clericalism. The point is rather that John is located beyond *both* clericalism and laicism, and so stands for the ultimate, eschatological unity between the visible Church and the world, a unity of which the visible Church is indeed the sacrament—but precisely *only* the sacrament. John (together with Mary) stands in the pan-sacramental realm in which the unity of visible Church and world sacramentally anticipated by the visible Church is anticipated through a direct share in the Lord’s death on the Cross for all. This is why Balthasar can write that “by the work” John does “in the world, though always in deepest union with Mary,” John heals “what is wounded and divided in hopes of restoring it to the Petrine Church.”¹⁵

¹²Ibid.

¹³Mary is not only mother; she is also the virginal bride, who entrusts her fruitfulness to the Apostle so that he might receive Jesus in his heart and, with Jesus, the gift of being a son in the eternal Son. We find this vision of Mary as mother and virginal bride in another author who is not normally associated with Adrienne, Meister Eckhart, who writes in one of his German sermons that the human spirit under grace is like a maternal virgin and a virginal mother that “bears with the Father the very Only-begotten Son himself and bears itself as the self-same Son and is the self-same Son in this light” (Meister Eckhart, *Predigten*, I [Frankfurt: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1993], 28f.).

¹⁴Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Unser Auftrag*, 106f. (*Our Task*, 126).

¹⁵Ibid., 107 (*Our Task*, 126).

The figure of John as the man who remains in all simplicity at work in the world conveys to us another important point that I would like to highlight here: The Christian's obedience in and to the Church does not remove him from the world, but includes an obedience to his profession. What does it mean to obey one's profession within the framework of ecclesial obedience? I will touch on only one aspect of the question. We have seen that the elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son works hard, but instead of working out of love for his father, he works to justify himself. The elder brother's work does not express a filial attitude; it is servile. This is an ironic situation, because the slave as such, although he may work a great deal, cannot work well. Only a son (as such) can work well, because only the son (as such) works gratuitously, and only he who works gratuitously is capable of loving his work as something that has value in itself. Along the same lines, to obey one's profession as a Christian means to receive, as a son, the gift of the simple gaze that penetrates directly and exclusively to the good of the work itself, to the good of the profession in all its aspects. It is precisely in this good that the Son waits for us and requests our collaboration in the Work par excellence that is the restitution of the whole world to the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit.

I cannot resist citing here a passage from Charles Péguy that seems to me to capture an essential feature of Adrienne's attitude towards work. In this text, Péguy distinguishes servile work from honorable work. Honorable work, he says, radiates the gratuity of love for the job well done—a gratuity that, according to the parable of the prodigal son, is only possible for those who work in the confidence that they are children who belong to the father's house. Servile work, on the other hand, is typical of the contemporary economy, which makes things primarily for the sake of buying and selling them, rather than primarily for the sake of those things themselves (not coincidentally, the text comes from a reflection on the inversion of means and ends that occurs when the chief goal of making becomes making money, rather than finding its natural limit in the good of the things made):

We have known honor in work, exactly the same as that which in the Middle Ages guided the hand and the heart. It was the same, secretly preserved. We have known this care pushed to the point of perfection, the same in the whole, the same in the minutest detail. We have known this piety of a work well done,

pushed, maintained to its furthest demands. All during my childhood, I saw chairs being woven with exactly the same spirit and the same heart, and the same hand, with which this same people cut the stones for its cathedrals Those workers did not slave. They worked. They had honor, absolute, as is proper for honor. A stick of a chair had to be well made. It was understood. It was a law. It didn't have to be well made for the boss or for a salary or for wages. It didn't have to be well made for the boss or for connoisseurs or for the boss's clients. A tradition, come from, arisen from the fathomless depths of the race, a history, an absolute, an honor demanded that this stick of a chair was well made. All the parts of the chair that are not seen were just as perfectly made as the parts that are seen. It was the very principle of the cathedrals.¹⁶

We have seen that Christian obedience is, so to speak, the quintessence of filial love, which does the Father's will without complicating things by asking whether it would be better not to do it. In conclusion, I would like to turn briefly to a point that we touched upon at the beginning of our itinerary. When Adrienne von Speyr stresses the absolute rigor of obedience and tells us that its simple gaze flies directly to Christ, without straying to the right or the left, this is not to deprive us of freedom and subject us to the law. To the contrary, Adrienne wants to remind us that our freedom consists in filial obedience, and that obeying in a filial way means allowing ourselves to be loved by the Father. The demand of Christian obedience is nothing other than the objective truth of our being, which does not exist outside of the Father's self-gift. The rigor of obedience is the rigor of a fundamental truth: either we are beloved sons and daughters who really belong to the Father's house, or we are nothing:

¹⁶Charles Péguy, *L'Argent*, in Charles Péguy, *Oeuvres en prose*, II (Paris: Éditions de la Pléiade, 1957), 1050f. It should be noted that Péguy is not against making money. He is against putting the good of money-making above the good of making. This inversion of means and ends removes the limit placed on acquisitiveness by the good of the job well done (when that good is in truth the chief good of making). But when money replaces the thing sold as the chief good sought by production, the quality of the thing itself inevitably suffers. Wealth then comes to be defined as an ever-greater volume of junk bought and sold—increasingly on credit to boot. By “junk” I do not mean products lacking any quality whatsoever, but products that are not made to last and that often, if not usually, are not aimed at fulfilling real needs, but at (temporarily) satisfying engineered desires wrapped up with just the sort of self-image from which the contemplation of Christ frees us.

It is clear that the world is not the Son. But the world has its being in the Son God generates the Son, he does not create him. Yet when the Son becomes man, he will have the properties of the creature, too. What is created is not extraneous to what is generated. And the fact that being generated and being created will form a unity in him means that the world is as if included within his generation When the Son becomes man to save the world, he will give to the world the gift of the Father's Spirit, who is also his own Spirit. That is to say, the Father will generate us anew as his children in the Spirit. And this will allow the world to return to the Father, participating—as the created world—in the generation of the Son in the Holy Spirit.¹⁷

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¹⁷Adrienne von Speyr, *Kostet und Seht*, 121.

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