



spirituality path

Life between being and semblance

Sr. Christina Mülling OSF

Translation: IFC-TOR

I. Franciscan Foundation



Giotto, Obedience, Lower church, Assisi
© www.assisi.de 2011, Stefan Diller

In the lower church of San Francesco, the obedient Francis is depicted with a yoke the ropes of which God the Father holds in his hands. At first sight he looks like a puppet. Not a desirable image for a man of today: the obedient man as a will-less puppet in the hands of another?

1. Finding the Centre of Gravity

But if you look deeper, this picture gets a different meaning. In his essay on the marionette, Kleist wonders why marionettes are so fascinating for people. He comes to the conclusion that it is because they have only one focus. All limbs are assigned to this centre of gravity, no matter what thread you pull or how you move the figure. This is what makes the marionette's movements so elegant and fascinating. Seen in this way, leading a life in obedience means having found one's centre of gravity and assigning all movements of the heart, all doing and thinking to one's centre of gravity. In a second step, Kleist asks himself why people are often so uninspiring. He comes to the conclusion that people often have two main focuses: being and appearance. This inner conflict makes them untrustworthy and lacking in fascination.

Francis still fascinates many people today. Perhaps this is because in his life he found the focus to which he assigned everything: God! After all, it is not just any hands to which Francis has surrendered himself. They are the hands of God into which he laid his life. He experienced this God as one who loves him unconditionally, in whom he can trust blindly and who surrounds him with mercy. He wants to belong to this God, he wants to be guided by him, in him he wants to find himself ever more deeply.

2. Obedience must be Enlightened

If we look at this picture even more deeply, it decodes the essence of obedience even more.



Giotto, Obedience, Lower church, Assisi
© www.assisi.de 2011, Stefan Diller

It depicts a chapter room under Francis. In the centre, obedience imposes on Francis the yoke of which Jesus says: „Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart; in this way you will find rest for your soul. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light“ (Mt 11:29-30).

Obedience is admonishing to silence by holding a finger before the mouth. Silence is needed to hear the soft whisper of the Spirit, to recognize the soft voice of God among the many loud voices.



The hall has two windows through which light falls onto obedience, freeing it from darkness and blindness.

Below the left window St. Prudentia, Wisdom, is represented with a square halo. She holds a compass in her hand. In front of her is a sextant, a modern instrument for that time. Wisdom gives orientation by aligning herself with the knowledge of the time. She has a face in front and behind, i.e. she is prudent. She has the past, the present and the future in view. In this way she gives the conscience orientation and sharpens it. It is an elementary task of human persons to sharpen their conscience and to work on their development so that obedience remains prudent and does not become blind.

Below the right window faith is kneeling. It has a burning candle in its hand and gives light to obedience in its own way. Even Israel knew that faith comes from hearing. „Listen, Israel, Yahweh our God is the one, the only Lord“ (Dt 6:4).

Faith comes from listening to the Word of God. The obedient person wants to belong to God. It is therefore important to listen to the Word of God and to open oneself to it. For obedience not to become one-sided, however, both „lights“ are needed. Conscience must be formed and further developed so that there can be true orientation. An unformed conscience can easily be abused or get caught in feelings of guilt where there is no guilt. That is why conscience needs training, an opening up to theological and scientific knowledge of every kind.

3. Obedience for Francis

In the third admonition, Francis presents us with three forms of obedience. They offer guidance not only to religious, but also to all those who wish to shape their lives by listening to one another.

The Lord says in the Gospel: „Whoever does not renounce all that he possesses cannot be my disciple“ and: „Whoever wants to save his life will lose it“. That man leaves all that he possesses and loses his body and soul, who gives himself completely into the hands of his superior in obedience. And whatever he does and talks about, if he knows that it is not against the will of his superior, then this is true obedience, only provided that what he does is good. And when the subject once sees something which he considers better and more useful to his soul than what the superior commands him to do, he shall voluntarily sacrifice his

own insight to God; but what comes from the superior he shall actively seek to fulfill. For this is obedience borne by love, because it satisfies God and one's neighbour. But if the superior were to order the subject to do something against his soul, the subject may not obey him, but should not leave him. And if he were therefore persecuted by some, he should love them even more for God's sake. For he who endures persecution rather than wanting to be separated from his brethren truly persists in perfect obedience because he gives his life for his brethren.
Admonition 1-9 (FQ 47)

First of all, Francis speaks of **true obedience**. It is normal that in a relationship, a family, a religious community, agreements have to be made and kept. As soon as I share my life with others, I can no longer live as if I were alone. My decisions must also be based on the well-being of others and the whole.

Secondly, Francis speaks of **loving obedience**. This form of obedience involves letting go of my own ideas and conceptions for the sake of love and peace, even if I consider them the better solution. If I want to impose mine, but peace or love suffer from it, it is better to renounce it - if it is not against my conscience.

Francis, however, puts **perfect obedience** at the top. It represents the seriousness of obedience, which is rarely demanded of us in everyday life. In perfect obedience, a person is committed to his conscience, which he must follow, even if he must stand against his superior / neighbour. This form of obedience frees those who obey from following an order, but not from their relationship with others and from bearing the consequences of supposed disobedience: even if they persecute and beat you, you must not abandon them! This ability and willingness to suffer is the touchstone for the authenticity of this obedience.

Obedience in Francis is also always a **mutual event** at the service of fraternity. According to the Canon Law in force at that time, there were two types of Christians: „Those who command and those who obey. The former are clerics, the latter lay,“ wrote the learned Camaldolese Gratian around 1140 in his „Decretum“, which systematized ecclesiastical law decisively. Francis wished that no one, neither clergy nor laity, neither „superiors“ nor „subordinates“ should exercise power over another in any way. Love should be the only criterion by which obedience must be measured.

Similarly, no brother should exercise power or dominion here, least of all among the brothers themselves. For as the Lord says in the Gospel, „The princes of the nations rule over them, and those who are greater exercise power over them.“ It shall not be so among the brethren. But whoever wants to become the greater among them, be their servant and bondsman, and whoever is the greater among them, become as the younger. And no brother shall do evil to another, or speak evil to another. Rather, through the love of the Spirit, they should voluntarily serve and obey one another. And this is the true and holy obedience of our Lord Jesus Christ. unseres Herrn Jesus Christus.
Regula non bullata 5,9-15 (FQ 74)

Conclusion: Obedience has in mind the demands of everyday life, love and peaceful coexistence, insofar as this is not a question of conscience. Conscience has the highest priority in obedience. In the event of an earnest case, conscience frees us from obedience to a person, but not from our relationship with that person.

II. From Knowledge to Life

1. We contemplate Giotto's fresco:

- What attracts or disturbs me?
- What is important to me personally in relation to obedience?
- What forms of obedience am I familiar with in my own life? What are the experiences I have had with them?
- What can I/what can we do to form our conscience?
- Where do I sense that I have to be obedient and what can help me in this?

2. Listening as an Attitude of Obedience

An essential attitude of obedience is listening. There are different kinds of hearing. One can simply hear, one can listen and one can be "all ears". The person who simply hears, understands what is said. A good listener also notices how something is being said. But only the one who is "all ears" also understands what is meant. If I lend someone my ear, then I tune in to them, I am at their disposal. I feel I belong to them.



Giotto, Obedience, Lower church, Assisi © www.assisi.de 2011, Stefan Diller