

## THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

### “Obedience To God Comes First!”

- that is, it comes before obedience to men. It seems very credible as a principle; but what does it mean in practice? Does God issue loads of orders, which take direct precedence over orders that we get from other people? We might have been told so as children, but as adults we may feel the truth is more complicated.

#### **Obedience**

When we are being obedient we are acting with proper regard for the others in our life, and especially those with authority over us, and those who are under our authority. When a tired (or just lazy) parish priest gets out of bed in the middle of the night to go to the hospital, he is being obedient to Christ, who entrusted him with the sacraments, and he is being obedient to the suffering person who sent for him. If he were fully rested, wide awake, and at a loss for anything to do, we might think he was pleasing himself; but because he is tired (or even lazy) we can say that his obedience is virtuous, and will help to make him a saint (hurrah for salvation!). Incidentally, “authority” has a very old root in the Latin word *auctor*, which means a farmer, *someone who makes things grow*. All authority must be used to make people grow. Some powerful people don’t know this.

#### **Saying No Can Be Best**

Not every call on our obedience is justified. We can be ordered to do some very iffy things by people in high places; and then it becomes praiseworthy to refuse; that is where obedience to God comes before obedience to men (or women) who are abusing their power over us. The Church has always had the experience of being ordered to do things by powerful forces. When the Roman Emperor became a Christian, he took it for granted that he would have large influence over the Church and its Bishops; for example, he was the one who summoned General Councils of the Church (like the ones at Nicaea and Constantinople which wrote the Creed we use on Sundays). But the Bishops used to fight the imperial power when it overstepped the mark, and many of the great Fathers of the Church became seasoned warriors against political interference. The struggle continued down the ages, with great signal moments which seemed to display the issues with great clarity: the slaying of

Archbishop Thomas Becket by the knights of Henry II was such a moment, and so (I believe) was the reduction of the Anglican Church to be a department of state, its Bishops being appointed by prime ministers (who can appropriately be anything or nothing religiously, so long as they aren’t Catholics!) I can *imagine* disobedient Anglican bishops, but there is much to suggest that they will be pretty rare birds.

#### **Persecution**

The principle at the top of this page was announced early in the life of the Church, in the context of persecution by the Sanhedrin of Israel. It won’t get better: the Church will be branded as heretical, and put at the mercy of the Roman religious policing which made a pagan sacrifice the ticket to state patronage. This disabled Christians for two centuries from holding political office, from joining the army, from becoming financially important; loyalty was secured by the religious oath, or (as the army called it) the *sacramentum*. No Christian could assent to it, and many were declared dangerous to good order and martyred instead. You can read, even in the New Testament, the Church assuring the Roman Empire that it wasn’t really dangerous, that Jesus isn’t Caesar’s enemy, that Christians were under orders to love God and honour the Emperor, that slaves should be obedient to their masters, and so forth. Still, there were many martyrs, and the Church treasures their memory, because they so clearly obeyed God instead of men.

#### **Being A Holy People**

You can’t become holy simply by being a nice person, a hail-fellow-well-met, or one of whom all people speak well. In order to bear witness to the reign of God, we must all be prepared to fail in the world to some degree. In the words of one old friend of mine, *You’ve got to be martyr-material*. This doesn’t mean seeking confrontation; but when the juggernaut of earthly counsels rolls forward, we have to be ready to stand in its way, even be crushed by it. There’s evidence we are in such a fix at present, and that the Establishment knives are out for the honour of the Christian Church in our country. We must stand against lies and hatred, and bear witness to the true dignity of our faith, which is the hope of the world. *Fr Philip*