

we were hurrying down the steps because we were late, and Manfredini ran up next to me and grabbed my arm. So I said to him: "What do you want?" "Just think: the fact that God was made man, was born as a man ..." He took a step in front of me, then he turned around, "it's something that is out of this world!" And I told him seriously, "Yes, it really is something that is out of this world ... in this world."

What instrument do you use to understand that it's like this? The lives of those called to this, the witness of our lives that are changed by faith. Therefore at Christmas we need to ask Christ that, having begun the good work in us, He bring it to completion. And what is the good work, the great good work, the greatest value in the world? Witnessing to Christ. If you get rid of this, you get rid of the meaning of everything that happens, you get rid of the meaning of the world. So the world becomes an empty desert, as Eliot says.<sup>7</sup>

## 2 TRUE OBEDIENCE IS A FRIENDSHIP

Following someone who is in front of you

Following means to look at someone who's before you. What's the first characteristic, the fundamental characteristic of someone before you? The person who's before you is the visage of what you have encountered and what first nudged you, gave you an idea, a desire. From the exterior point of view, it was someone, it was the encounter with someone (with a classmate, with a priest ...) or with some people in a context (in a church, on a street, in a class at school, at work)

that made you say, without even realizing it, "Look how different this guy is!" This person made you take note of a difference, a human difference that had, as a characteristic, that of corresponding more sharply, more deeply to the heart in its simplicity. It was a human difference, a difference in living the human life that you acknowledged – confusedly, more or less confusedly, but you acknowledged it – to the extent that the way of living that this guy or those other guys had corresponded to the needs of your heart in a way that was different from usual. It was inclusive, and was, therefore, an ideal. It brought out or provoked an ideal image that had never been brought out before by the way others lived.

More particularly, there was a characteristic that you didn't stop to reflect on, but that you now must stop and reflect on: that man, those people, those classmates ... that difference first of all implied a seriousness in living. Life, for that person, was a serious thing. It implied a seriousness in living that carried with it a taste for living, a desire to do things, a usefulness in relationships, a goodness.

Normally in life, the problem of money is serious for everyone, the problem of children is serious, the problem of man and woman is serious, the problems of health and politics are serious: for the world, everything is serious except life. I don't mean life – life as health is a serious thing, certainly – but *life*. Yet what is more *life* than health, money, the relationship between a man and a woman, children, work? What more is life than this? What does it involve? Life involves all these things, but with a goal for everything, with a meaning. You were struck by a way of living that

heralded, that brought with it – it isn't that you were told all these things, but, thinking it over, you should find all these things within your own beginning! – that bore with it the affirmation of the meaning of life. Life is a serious thing with meaning. It's a serious thing. Therefore it's a task before the whole world, before all creation, before all times, before history, before time and space, and it's an ultimate, definitive, complete meaning.

Following: to understand and imitate

So how does watching someone before you become following? If you imitate him. You must watch the person before you and imitate him. What does it mean to imitate him? It means two things: first of all, it means to understand what the person says, to understand the steps he takes. Man's steps are translated into thoughts, words, judgments ... Therefore, to understand thoughts, to understand what the person says, and then, to imitate him in the way he does things.

If you stop at the first step, that is, at only hearing the words, you won't follow him. You also have to try to be attentive to how he does things and try to do them as he does. This is why not all wordmongers are teachers, because to be a teacher you have to show how it's done, too. More precisely, to be a teacher is to use words such that you make *how* to use them understood by the very way you use them.

To understand things someone says requires the least amount of effort imaginable. It requires simplicity, requires having the heart of a child. And to be attentive to how a person does things also requires the curiosity of a child.

There's a word we use to indicate all this. We say that the rule of life is to follow. If you don't like the word (as I don't), you can get rid of it. What matters is that you retain the concept. The concept implies: first, something you have before you; second, something from which we try to understand the words; and third, something from which we try to understand how the words are carried out, are lived. The whole thing is called following. Without following, without the intensity of following, our life has nothing before it, doesn't know what to think, doesn't know how to do things. Therefore it identifies whatever pops into its head (the reaction to its own opinions) as its own thought and identifies doing whatever it feels like, whatever pleases it, as a rule of action (which means it's ruled by instinctiveness). The alternative to life as following is instinctiveness, which means to degrade man to the level of animal. (Well, for these insights you have to have a heart that is so simple that it's already very wise. You need a lot of wisdom to understand these things!)

Obedience, gesture of the I

To follow, then, implies trying to understand what you're told. What does it mean to understand? Understanding is an act of reason, it's a verb that refers to reason, it's reason's way of living. What does understanding as reason's way of living mean? It means to light upon, to grasp, to make evident to yourself (or at least to glimpse) the correspondence between what you're told and what you are (and the needs of your heart, that is, the needs of your life, the profound needs of

your I). To understand means to grasp the profound correspondence between what you're told and your I, the needs of your I, the profound needs of your heart, the profound needs of your life.

Therefore following isn't something I can put on like an overcoat (I'm dressed, more or less, and I grab an overcoat and put it on). No, it's not an overcoat like the concept of obedience that you find around, where to obey means to say yes, to do what they tell you. No sir! Obeying begins as effort and work. (Take heed, because it's a question of simplicity of heart, thus of recognizing the evidence of a correspondence between what you're told and the needs of your heart, of your life.) What you're told is out of love for your life, and should be heeded! What you're told makes your taste for life increase, makes all of your life become truer. To be able to say "I" consciously, with an ever greater dignity – said *The Journeying*<sup>8</sup> – you have to really listen to what you're told and try to understand.

Bit by bit as you begin to understand, you no longer depend on who says it to you. Bit by bit as it's said to you, it's as if the one who told you has become one with you yourself. You follow yourself. At its limit, the extreme form of obedience is following the discovery of yourself operating in the light of the words and example of another, without which you fumbled in the dark, or lived like an animal.

It's because it corresponds to you that I say: "Do this, pay attention to this other person." I say it to you out of love for your life. And you know what makes me capable of saying it to you out of love for your life? Love for my own life. It's because I've taken my own life seriously that I tell you,

“Look, please, because this is important for your life. If you follow me, you’ll understand. And then, after, you’ll follow yourself. Following me is like following yourself, we’re friends.”

True following is friendship

This is friendship. Real obedience is when it reaches this level of friendship. Otherwise it isn’t obedience, it’s slavery, it’s something childish and “yes ma’am” (with the rod even!). Then, if you try to understand, it becomes easier and easier, and becomes more of a desire to understand how I live what I’m letting you understand, or how whoever’s before you lives what he or she tells you. “How can I live this?” you say, without saying it to him or her. Following who is before you means asking: “How can you live this? How does one live this?” Understand that here, the principal accent is on desire, the desire to live that we also have, the desire to live. The seriousness in living, the truth in living, and the desire to live. It’s the desire to live that makes you ask: “How do you manage to do it, how do you fulfill what you understand?”

Do you understand why I said before that true obedience is a friendship? Because, if I make you understand that what I’m telling you, I’m telling you because it corresponds to the needs of your heart, you’ll say: “Thanks for telling me that! Thanks for telling me that!” and this becomes yours, and you have to follow yourself. This is following your own conscience. Your own, true conscience is really the very conscience that’s made great and mature by an encounter. And this makes people friends.

If you're friends, then you understand more. If you place everything in the light of friendship, you understand that you have more desire, you understand more that you have the desire to ask, "What about you? How do you do this, how do you carry out these things?" And the other tells you, "I don't know how to explain it to you, watch me!" Or, "Come with me!" Or, "Start to do it like this. For example, fix yourself on the moment during the day in which you say 'God,' but say it stopping and thinking about the word you're saying. Or, because it can be too abstract that way, say: 'Come, Lord.' This is already more readily full of feeling. Say it three times a day. Or: Three times during the day, stop for two minutes to think about the moment in which God became a clot of blood in the body of a woman, the *Angelus*." Or I might tell you, "Sing a song, such as *Povera Voce* or *Mi Prendi Per La Mano*. Sing this song, but give weight to the words, be attentive to the words." Or I'll tell you: "Every night say a Hail Mary to understand the things you don't understand, and also to understand how to do things, because I don't know what else to tell you. Just watch how I do things." Or: "If you don't understand what I'm doing, ask me about it. That way it's easier for me to respond to you, I'll explain it better. Because otherwise, it becomes theoretical. If you ask me how to do things, I'll answer you in a theoretical way. But if you tell me, 'Why did you do it like that?' then I'll be more concrete, more practical."

Listen, friendship unfolds like that. This is friendship. Therefore, true following is friendship, true obedience is friendship. What is called obedience is really friendship, and in fact Saint Paul, speaking of Jesus, said that lov-

ing the Father (He who was in front of Him, before Him), He became obedient unto death,<sup>9</sup> right to the end. He had understood that what the Father wanted from Him was right (it was right out of pity for man, to be able to save man, to be able to give man freedom, to be able to bring man to happiness) and He could not *not* do it because His divine nature could not say no (He was man, thus obedient, but His person, His I, that was of the Father's substance, His divine heart was an impetus of love, because "God is love," as Saint John said<sup>10</sup>). He understood what the Father asked of Him and knew how to do it. He imitated the Father who had created the world for love.

### Synthesis

Anyway, I wanted to say that the word obedience is identical to the word friendship. A friendship that isn't obedience is a sentimental thing, without fruit or history, without aim or duration, without a face. The face is given by something that came before you and moved you. And then you began to try to understand the words, and to understand the words (to begin to understand means to begin to see how much they correspond to your heart), and now it's almost second nature to ask, "And how do you do it, afterwards?" And that person told you, "Listen, you have to follow me, watch what I do. Keep following me." Now, really, symbiosis happens between what happened to me and my life. It happens as a oneness, an ever deeper oneness. This is what they call friendship. This is why the Bible says, "He who finds a friend truly finds a treasure,"<sup>11</sup> finds the richness of life. So what characterizes a friend? A friend is character-

ized first and above all by seriousness towards life, by the affirmation that life is a serious thing. Life is a serious thing: serious before the universe (thus it has a task) and serious before destiny (thus it has an ultimate meaning that must be reached). Nothing corresponds to your heart more than these two things.

And then there are many other things that you understand, that correspond, and so you ask, "How do you approach your destiny?" And as I am the one here before you, I tell you. But I know that I'm explaining it badly, so I say to you, "Come back tomorrow, OK? Because tomorrow I'll try to tell you in a better way, and the day after tomorrow I'll try to tell you in an even better way, and then, finally, we'll need to tell it to each other every day, because that way, we'll say it to each other better. And after many, many, many days, it becomes like something that's flowing, like looking each other in the eye. We look each other in the eye and we understand. We understand how to do it. The desire to do it comes. The desire to do it actually comes. And one is no longer alone. One is finally oneself, because one is together. And, in fact, man's I is destined to be united with everything there is, to the mystery of Being. Why? Because man was made in the image of God and God is a communion: the communion of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, the mystery of the Trinity. The root of the fact that the I is not alone is in the mystery of the Trinity. An I that is alone is an I that is lost. So the I that is not alone is created in a companionship, by a companionship that is friendship. And friendship is created by obedience.

The word obedience is nothing other than the virtue of friendship.