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Ignatian Obedience and Evangelization: Jesuit General Congregations and Hans Urs von Balthasar

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Abstract: This article explores the relationship between Ignatian obedience and evangelization through the complementary perspectives of Hans Urs von Balthasar and recent Jesuit General Congregations. It argues that obedience, traditionally viewed as submission to authority, must be reinterpreted as a joyful and loving response to God’s mission, deeply rooted in the trinitarian life. Drawing from Ignatius of Loyola’s foundational texts and the evolving understanding of mission post-Vatican II, this essay highlights a shift from private, intellectual obedience to a more communal and justice-oriented service. The theological depth provided by von Balthasar’s trinitarian model is presented alongside the practical emphasis on social justice and dialogue found in contemporary Jesuit praxis and Pope Francis’ integral ecology. This paper ultimately proposes a synthesis of contemplative fidelity and active engagement, positioning obedience as a vital force in credible, mission-driven evangelization.

Keywords: mission; evangelization; obedience; Hans Urs von Balthasar

1. Introduction

It is widely recognized in the Catholic intellectual tradition that evangelization is not one isolated aspect among many others but the very centre of what it means to be Christian. It is a call universally present, albeit expressed in unique and personal ways, in every Christian; and thus, it seems imperative for all to respond to this either with acceptance of the responsibility and a sense of duty or with rejection and shying away from the mandate imposed upon us. There is no denial of the evangelical character of the Church, but there is reluctance to obey to this call “to go forth from our own comfort zone to reach all the “peripheries” in need of the light of the Gospel” (Pope Francis 2013, p. 20). This is a reluctance that coincides with our modern scepticism to deny ourselves for the sake of others, an inwardness and isolation that closes us off from God and our fellow man. For this very reason, the virtue of obedience, the virtue that encourages us to follow the mandate given to us by a legitimate authority, is key to explaining the lack of participation and joy in the evangelizing vocation of the Church. For to go forth and preach the good news is something one does in obedience to a person organizing the missionary activity or a legitimate priestly figure in charge of a project, but more fundamentally, it is an obedience to Christ and his new commandment to love God and our neighbours. Obedience is a loving response to God’s initiative to become man and be crucified for our salvation. It is not intended as a cold and tepid acquiescence but rather as the superabundant mutual self-giving of love. The lover seeks to do the will of the beloved and he freely surrenders his own will, even his own life, when the situation demands it; there is a sweetness to the bitterness of self-denial. Evangelization ought to be a joyful renunciation to “go forth from



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ourselves to seek the good of others” (Pope Francis 2013, p. 39) to be united with Him that came to seek us.

The renewal of the spirit of evangelization follows a renewal of the meaning given to obedience in the Church and, in the Jesuit tradition, the meaning given to the vow of obedience, which includes the right attitude to be effectively sent to mission. We have decided to develop our proposal following the thoughts of Hans Urs von Balthasar, with occasional references to Adrienne von Speyr, because their thought, while being based on the Ignatian tradition, can be considered an innovative or creative rendition of the Jesuit tradition. We do not discuss the Ignatian background of these thinkers, nor can we address the reasons behind the inseparability of von Speyr and von Balthasar on the notion of obedience, due to the limitations on the scope of this essay. It suffices to say that von Balthasar acknowledges that his treatment of obedience must be interpreted as a systematization of a mystical intuition of obedience from von Speyr, as narrated in her book *On Obedience*. In particular, he is inspired by her spiritual insight to treat obedience as a key to intra-trinitarian love relations.

Von Balthasar suggests that we must re-examine the theological depth of Ignatian obedience by grounding it in the trinitarian life of God, seeking this as a way for Christians to live out obedience more joyfully, whilst the latest General Congregations propose an expansion of the meaning given to obedience as the mandate to preach the Gospel and intervene in the social injustices that a Jesuit might encounter throughout his missionary activity. We seek to propose in this essay that these approaches can complement each other.

2. Introduction to Ignatian Obedience

Ignatian obedience brings us back to the original experience of Ignatius and the first companions, which can be called a “mysticism of service”. This original experience is found in *The Spiritual Exercises*, at the beginning, when the exercitants undergo a self-examination of their lives in light of the love of the merciful God, and then in the following weeks of the exercises, when they contemplate the life of Christ with a special focus on the contemplation of the Two Standards (Exx136). All this is done with the desire to discern God’s will and their own personal vocation with an attitude of indifference, desiring only that which God desires and “offering their whole selves for this labour” (Exx97, 96). For Ignatius, this labour of service is not lukewarm, it is complete and ever greater (*magis*). When the first companions took vows of poverty and chastity, they reflected on whether they should take the vow of obedience. Their decision was affirmative because they agreed that such a vow would allow them “to follow the will of God in all things with greater certainty and with greater praise and merit”.¹ This vow became characteristic of the order, distinguishing them from others, since they decided obedience was not only to their superiors but also to the Supreme Pontiff, to ensure that they would always serve God alone in the Church: “to serve the Lord alone and the Church, his spouse, under the Roman Pontiff, the Vicar of Christ on earth.”² With the addition of the fourth vow, the importance of obedience-to-mission is made evident, as the vow ensures that the followers give themselves to the mission of the Church, which is to preach the Gospel to the whole world.

The vow of obedience in the Constitutions (their sixth and seventh parts) is fundamental to the regulation of Jesuit life. In the sixth part, Ignatius insists on the importance of becoming obedient to the Pope and to one’s superiors: “whose commands the formed Jesuit should obey as if they come from Christ because it is for love of Christ that he obeys” (GC35, 4, 8: *Constitutions*, 547, 551). The seventh part marks the principle of the *magis* as the foundation of obedience, seeking an ever-increasing obedience to the divine will in fidelity, creativity, discernment, and freedom. Obedience means to “be sent,” on a mission, and this “being sent” is crucial to Ignatian self-consciousness (every Jesuit is identified as

one who has been “sent”). In his personal letters, for example, the letter sent to the Jesuits of Portugal, obedience is stressed as a gift and an invitation to share in the life of Christ, and he wishes other members of the Society to accept it joyfully. One gets the impression that it is the indifference to mission and obedience in service that defines a Jesuit. Ignatian obedience ultimately becomes a fidelity to the values of the Gospel in apostolic activity: “availability for being at the service of the Kingdom of God and freedom to be a ‘man for others’” (GC35, 4, 8). In the words of Saint Ignatius,

In the purity and perfection of obedience together with the true resignation of our wills and the abnegation of our understanding, I am very desirous, my dear brothers, that they who serve God in this Society should be conspicuous, so that by this virtue its true sons may be recognized as men who regard not the person whom they obey, but in him Christ our Lord, for whose sake they obey. (Ignatius of Loyola 1547, p. 16)

The Ignatian tradition argues that one should obey his superior because he represents Christ to him. When one obeys the will of a superior, he is ultimately obeying the will of God. The motivation of the vows is not to create legalistic control over inferiors but rather to encourage a love for God and openness to do His will. This obedience, according to Ignatius, must be radical and absolute, with the only exception being when the command that is being given is sinful. For it to be perfect it must be, first, an obedience of execution, where the inferior does what he is commanded; secondly, an obedience of will, where the inferior desires to do that which he is commanded, seeking to make the will of the superior his own; and thirdly, an obedience of judgement, where the inferior seeks to have not only the same will as their superior but also the same mind: “submitting his own judgment to the superior’s to the extent that a devoted will is able to influence the understanding” (Ignatius of Loyola 1547, p. 7). The highest and most difficult is the obedience of judgement, although this is key since “obedience without submission of the judgment is marked by dissatisfaction, pain, reluctance, slackness, criticism, excuses, and other imperfections and obstacles of no small moment which deprive obedience of its value and merit” (Ignatius of Loyola 1547, p. 16). Ignatius calls that total and perfect obedience a “blind obedience.” The obedience of the walking stick of an old man (*bastón de hombre viejo*). For example, he writes “the much-extolled simplicity of blind obedience is lost when one debates whether the command was good or bad perhaps even condemning the superior because what he commands is not to the person’s liking” (Ignatius of Loyola 1547, p. 15).

It seems that the blind obedience of Ignatius fails to meet the demands for a “responsible autonomy of the subject [who] must be included with the ruling wisdom of the superior” (Ignatius of Loyola 1547, p. 6). It discourages us from making authority more democratic, respecting the dignity of the person in the inferior position, and preventing the superior from acting in a totalitarian and autocratic way. The General Congregations clarify that Ignatius does not mean to discourage Jesuits from thinking or analyzing what they are being told but instead to try to understand the superior’s judgement so that they can more clearly see God’s will in it. It is not a demand to renounce our intellect, but to affirm all of our self in the free disposal of our faculties. In other words, the judgement of the superior might be imperfect, and we might judge it thus, but we would still need to love and understand this command as coming from God. The focus is not to seek the best course of action but to be completely available to be more effectively sent by a superior. Ignatius writes:

to make every effort to attain it through a glorious victory over yourselves, overcoming yourselves in the highest and most difficult part of yourselves, your will and understanding, so that in this way true knowledge and love of God our Lord may wholly possess and guide your souls throughout this pilgrimage until

he brings you, and many others by means of you, to the final and most happy end of his own everlasting bliss. (Ignatius of Loyola 1547, p. 6)

In response to the demand for higher participation and responsibility, the Ignatian tradition has implemented some qualifications of the concept. GC35 mentions, for example, “in our lives together as Jesuits, we have experienced an ongoing process of renewal and adaptation of our mission and way of proceeding as called for by the Second Vatican Council” (G35, 3, 1). First, when the command seems imperfect to the inferior, there is the long-established tradition among Jesuits of representing these concerns to their superior. The superior can then accept what is being represented to him and change his decision or consult with one of his superiors or a third party that is agreed upon by both of them. Second, the command can be refused without being disobedient if it is sinful or goes against the inferior’s conscience. It is with the addition of passage 10 in decree 17 of the General Congregation 32 that the Jesuit can not only represent his troubles but request that the demand is temporarily suspended.

Thirdly, and most importantly for our essay, in response to the growing crisis of obedience in the Church, the Congregations opted to speak of obedience as interchangeable with service. Ignatian obedience is a form of service, a service that was founded on a selfless following of Christ and his mission to preach the Gospel to the end of the world. Obedience in this understanding is “more than just being subjected to somebody and acting under orders” but also an awareness that the service provided is for the world (Schnoor 2019, p. 10). Walther writes in this regard: “a conscious step out of the sphere of privacy into the public in which obedience was demonstrated in concrete political and social way namely a service to the right to live of every human being” (Walther 1984, p. 155).

A crisis in obedience is also a crisis in the way in which evangelization is carried out. A renewal of obedience in Post-Conciliar Jesuit circles, which would renew evangelical zeal, must come in two ways: first by means of a theological deepening of the concept, which we believe is carried out by von Balthasar, and second, by a more credible evangelization highlighting the social and political aspects of Christian obedience.

3. Post-Conciliar Jesuit Obedience in Evangelization

At the outset of the Second Vatican Council, on 8 September 1973, Superior General Fr. Pedro Arrupe, SJ announced to all delegates that General Congregation 32 would convene in Rome starting in December 1974. It intended to confront the new challenges brought about by modernity in our society. The fourth decree of this congregation acknowledges that the Society is “confronted today, in fact, by a whole series of new challenges” (GC32, 4, 3).³ GC32 emphasizes the promotion of justice as an indispensable element of our apostolic work: “to promote justice, to proclaim the faith and to lead others to a personal encounter with Christ are the three inseparable elements that make up the whole of our apostolate” (GC32, 4, 51). This service is directed towards addressing various challenges, including individual injustices such as poverty or political oppression and broader social injustices within human societies or organizations, such as inequitable economic systems or societal imbalances that perpetuate poverty and hunger. For instance, unfair economic structures institutionalize poverty and exacerbate global disparities.

The proclamation of the Gospel must be followed by efforts to harvest its fruits in this life: “the struggle to transform these structures in the interest of the spiritual and material liberation of fellow human beings is intimately connected to the work of evangelization” (GC32, 4, 40). The spirit of GC32 continues to resonate through all subsequent Congregations up to the present day. Following the resignation of Fr. Pedro Arrupe, General Congregation 33 sought to uphold the focus on the Jesuit mission while adding further elaboration. The document clearly articulates a call to justice within the broader context

of the Society's mission and underscores the invitation from the Supreme Pontiff to adapt the Society's evangelization in light of the new ecclesial orientations of Vatican II: "He [the Jesuit] should also provide that, in a way suited to our times, the 'Rules for Thinking with the Church' be applied in the light of the Second Vatican Council" (GC33, 1, 8).

General Congregation 33 reminds the Jesuits to keep a "discerning attitude with self-abnegation." This should be achieved with the confronting joy of a "progressive identification with Christ," who "emptied himself being born in the likeness of man"; this abnegation is required in *The Spiritual Exercises*: we must divest ourselves of "self-love, self-will, and self-interest" (GC33, 1, 13). It is only by preserving this obediencial attitude that the Jesuit can ensure a greater availability to respond obediently to their challenges and mission: "a greater availability on the part of the whole Society as well as the individual Jesuit which will enable us to respond, in obedience, to the cultural differences and changes in our modern world" (GC33, 1, 13). However, the document goes beyond merely reminding Jesuits of the foundations of obedience; it also provides directives for their obedience. Building on the legacy of GC32, it offers detailed guidance to Jesuits on how to renew their commitment and focus on their mission, how obedience must ultimately result in effective evangelization. To that effect, the document highlights several areas of social injustice that Jesuits are called to address through their evangelization efforts. These include

...discrimination against whole categories of human beings, such as migrants and racial or religious minorities; the unjust treatment and exploitation of women; public policies and social attitudes which threaten human life for the unborn, the handicapped, and the aged; economic oppression and spiritual needs of the unemployed, of poor and landless peasants, and of workers, with whom many Jesuits, like our worker priests, have identified themselves in order to bring them the Good News. (GC33, 1, 45)

One notable focus is the preferential focus on the poor, as Jesuits are guided by Gospel directives to preach the Gospel to the poor. This serves as a constant reminder to embrace greater solidarity with the poor and address the root causes of poverty, not merely attending to individual needs but also challenging unjust structures that perpetuate poverty: "the situation of the poor, who live today in a world where unjust structures force the greater part of the human family to exist in dehumanizing conditions" (GC33, 1, 29). However, while obedience sends a Jesuit to mission, the manner in which the mission is carried out must reflect the quality of the person "being sent"; it is particularly noted that "it is poverty that makes us believable." This encourages Jesuits to renew their commitment to a life of poverty and to embody the preferential option for the poor, which should "directly or indirectly, [. . .] find some concrete expression in every Jesuit's life, in the orientation of our existing apostolic works, and in our choice of new ministries" (GC33, 1, 48).

Another prominent theme is the global nature of the Jesuit mission. Building upon the developments of GC33, General Congregation 34 emphasizes the Society's mission to contribute to the evangelization efforts of the Church while also prioritizing the promotion of justice. Both congregations underscore the Ignatian attitude recommended in *The Spiritual Exercises* of contemplating the Trinitarian God to understand "its needs as God does and offer ourselves to share in His work of its salvation" (GC33, 1, 34). This trinitarian vision inspires Jesuits to embrace the global dimension of the Church, aiming for "integral salvation in Jesus Christ of all women and men, a salvation begun in the present life and brought to its fulfilment in the life to come" (GC33, 1, 34). Similarly, the fourth vow ensures that the Society is not confined to local concerns but remains prepared to serve the universal mission of the Church: "Serving Christ's mission today means paying special attention to its global context" (GC35, 2, 20). GC34 summarizes it like this:

The international character of our mission finds its genesis in the Trinitarian vision of Ignatius; its meaningful expression is found in our fourth vow of obedience to the Holy Father. Ignatius and his companions decided to form a single apostolic body to be placed at the disposal of the Vicar of Christ for universal mission. For Ignatius, the more universal was the service the more was it divine. This has meant, throughout our history, that Jesuits are ready to go wherever in the world their service is most needed; availability is to be an attitude of the individual Jesuit and a characteristic of the whole Society: mobile, agile, responding to the needs of a fast-changing world. (GC34, 21, 1)

The third crucial element added to the service of faith, stemming from an “obedient attentiveness to what the Risen Church is doing as he leads the world to the fullness of God’s Kingdom” is dialogue, particularly in the evangelization of cultures. The proclamation of the Gospel, which evangelizes cultures, must be followed by dialogue. This emphasis emerges from the experiences of many Jesuits already engaged in missions worldwide. In light of these experiences, GC34 and GC35 encourage Jesuits on mission to actively engage in dialogue with other traditions (GC34, 2, 49). This dialogue should begin among Jesuits, united “by the love of Christ our Lord” and often bound by personal connections (such as that between Francis Xavier and Ignatius), but also “by the obedience that sends each one of us on a mission to any part of the world” (GC35, 3, 17). The promotion of dialogue extends to fostering collaboration among Jesuits, an apostolic body committed to creative obedience in their mission, to offer a more compelling witness to the world. Furthermore, the Congregations stress the need for Jesuits to establish deeper collaboration with a diverse range of people in their mission work, including a more “profound collaboration with the laity” (GC35, 6, 7). The implementation of their mission, especially when proclaiming the justice of the Kingdom in the contemporary world, is seen as most effective “in the contemporary world if inculturation and dialogue become essential elements of our way of proceeding in mission” (GC35, 3, 3).

Finally, GC34 and GC35 emphasize the importance of considering environmental concerns as being integral to promoting justice in the international context that we have described. Often, injustices are inflicted upon the poor and vulnerable when natural resources are exploited by third parties: “Ecological equilibrium and a sustainable, equitable use of the world’s resources are important elements of justice towards all the communities in our present ‘global village’; they are also matters of justice towards future generations who will inherit whatever we leave them” (GC34, 3, 9). This calls upon all of us to take greater responsibility for our environment because it “affects the quality of our relationship with God, with other human beings, and with creation itself. It touches the core of our faith in and love for God, ‘from whom we come and towards whom we are journeying’” (GC35, 4, 32). Like with poverty, Jesuits are also encouraged to demonstrate this ecological solidarity in their “spiritual, communal, and apostolic lives” (GC35, 4, 31).

In summary, what the latest Congregations point to is the desire to understand evangelization in connection with the promotion of justice, as it has historically been believed that evangelization is overly intellectual and impersonal. One might have had the impression that the preaching of the Gospel only had an impact on the spiritual life of the people as opposed to directly affecting their life in the world. Examples of the connection between social justice and the religious vow of obedience can often be traced to liberation theologians. A good example for this can be found in González Faus, SJ, who in his book *Adiestrar la libertad* argues that Jesus is free in his obedience to God: “Jesus obeys God breaking the Law and being free, with a freedom that is born of the obedience to God.” (González Faus 2007, p. 58). This vow of obedience, according to Faus, is all about encouraging an experience of God which emanates from a love for the neighbour, and from political freedom. Chastity

is no longer a simple renunciation of pleasure but the capacity to love more and more profoundly. Poverty is not a renunciation of some material goods but a freedom to be more available for the poor and for the preferential option of the poor. Obedience, then, is reread in this light not just as a surrender of our wills for the prudent judgement of the superior but as an act of consent that makes group action more productive. In other words, obedience is the right attitude for effective and group-lead efforts to fight for justice in our society (González Faus 2007, p. 92). The experience of God necessarily radiates into a love for other human beings, into the particular praxis of caring for the poor for justice and to combat unfair political organization (González Faus 2007, p. 90). Evangelization without political action is insufficient.

A similar approach to evangelization is found throughout the pontificate of Pope Francis, and on the front of integral ecology in particular. The treatment of the environmental crisis is pressing for Pope Francis: “they wonder how anyone can claim to be building a better future without thinking of the environmental crisis and the sufferings of the excluded” (Francis 2015, p. 13). It is an extension of his overall concern for the poor in this world, a connection that is made frequently throughout his encyclical *Laudato Si*.⁴ The poor are the ones that suffer the most because of their proportionally lesser contribution to the generation of waste but also proportionately larger difficulty in adjusting to the changes in the environment produced by global warming, such as the increase in water levels or the scarcity of resources. At one point, he even speaks of the environment as someone “poor”, as someone being unjustly treated and wounded because of human sinfulness: “this is why the earth herself. . . is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor.” (Francis 2015, p. 2). The idea behind his argument is that the same attitude that prevents us from caring for and loving the poor also results in the exploitation of natural resources. This incorrect attitude is the opposite of humble, loving obedience, it is domination over the other as opposed to surrender to the other. The lack of obedience to God, which is made evident as a lack of service to the world, is at the root of Pope Francis’ proposal of new forms of evangelization.

The figure that inspires his encyclical is saint Francis of Assisi, who he perceives as a person who lived in wonderful “harmony with God, with others, with nature and with himself”, showing just how connected our concern for nature is with justice for the poor, a “commitment to society, and interior peace” (Francis 2015, p. 10). The poverty and simplicity, and we can include here obedience, of saint Francis was not a “veneer of asceticism”, some internal disposition that ensures a harmonious relationship between him and God, but instead, according to Pope Francis, it was something “much more radical: a refusal to turn reality into an object simply to be used and controlled” (Francis 2015, p. 11). In other words, the mystical attitude of obedience, a humble availability to God, prevents self-love and the consumerist and narcissistic mentality of our contemporaries, which leads to the formation of unjust economic systems and to the exploitation of nature.

Pope Francis argues that never before has humanity had such technological and scientific power making it more capable of exerting “an impressive dominance over the whole of humanity and the entire world” (Francis 2015, p. 104). He acknowledges the biblical statement that human beings are made for the “dominion” [a word subject to many possible translations] of the earth, that, to an extent, the environment is put there by God for us to reveal his glory to us and to provide the necessary resources for our sustenance. Yet, the right interpretation of this “dominion” is more like a form of stewardship than the “promethean vision of mastery over the world” (Francis 2015, p. 116). Pope Francis writes “instead, our ‘dominion’ over the universe should be understood more properly in the sense of responsible stewardship” (Francis 2015, p. 116). The increase in our power and the modern obsession with human autonomy leads precisely to people “lacking the

wherewithal to control it”, making it almost impossible for them to have enough “clear-minded self-restraint” to allow them to set boundaries. That is, enough restraint to judge critically which technology ought to be applied, and in which way it ought to be applied, bearing in mind the negative consequences it might have for their surroundings and for the poor. The increase in technological implementation that is advertised as the only form of societal progress underlies a false ethical assumption about humanity as something unbounded by anything, with a strong “unrestrained delusion of grandeur” (Francis 2015, p. 114), which is nothing but an “excessive anthropomorphism (Francis 2015, p. 116). Our current society is highly individualistic and self-centred, based on human autonomy and not on principles or morals. People seek instant gratification (Francis 2015, p. 162) and they find meaning and realization in the continuous desire for consumption: “this paradigm leads people to believe that they are free as long as they have the supposed freedom to consume” (Francis 2015, p. 203). The consequences of this self-centeredness, self-absorption, and self-enclosure are an increase in greed and an obsession with the consumption of goods and people. It results in people feeling frustrated because they cannot keep up with it, resulting, at the end of the day, in “violence and mutual destruction” (Francis 2015, p. 204). It is also a selfishness and lack of interest in the well-being of others, with no desire to care for our fellow brothers or for the natural environment: a lack of loving obedience to God and to our fellow man.

Pope Francis was inspired by the contemplative gaze of the Holy Trinity, seeking here a reading of reality and human beings in the “trinitarian key” (Francis 2015, p. 239). The divine persons, having subsistent relations, denote a community of persons whose relations to each other are a “tend[ing] towards other things” (Francis 2015, p. 240). What Pope Francis desires is to argue that this model of relationship “invites us to develop a spirituality of that global solidarity which flows from the mystery of the Trinity” (Francis 2015, p. 240). It encourages a willingness to encounter Christ and undergo an “ecological conversion” to be protectors of God’s handiwork (Francis 2015, p. 217).

Crucial for this conversion is that by “cultivating sound virtues will people be able to make a selfless ecological commitment” (Francis 2015, p. 211). We believe that obedience is a key virtue for this commitment. First, obedience to God’s will includes an attitude of humility, servitude, and gratuitousness to the things we have received from God. It is when we see creation not as our property but as “God’s loving gift” that we can respond to this loving gesture with a proportionate loving will “to imitate his generosity in self-sacrifice and good works” (Francis 2015, p. 218). Obedience is the virtue that reminds us that we are not ourselves autonomous and that we cannot replace the need we have for God with our own ego and narcissistic habits. It is a reminder that the human being is perfect when it “goes out of themselves to live in communion with God, with others and with all creatures” (Francis 2015, p. 240). When the sound virtue of humility is cultivated, it is easier to understand our authority on earth not in a totalitarian way but as our responsibility to rule over the earth in a way that honours our indebtedness to God. Pope Francis writes “we do not understand our superiority as a reason for personal glory or irresponsible dominion, but rather as a different capacity which, in turn, entails a serious responsibility stemming from our faith” (Francis 2015, p. 220).

4. A Trinitarian Interpretation of Obedience in Hans Urs von Balthasar

We believe that von Balthasar’s understanding of obedience can also be used to respond to these urgent contemporary concerns in the Church today. He proposes redefining obedience not as an adhesion to external rules but as a loving surrender to the beloved. Therefore, one might say that obedience is the virtue that, when cultivated, encourages Christians to go out and preach the good news. It is a loving surrender that should take

out the legalistic connotations and see obedience in faith as an opportunity to participate in trinitarian life. True, authentic Christian obedience is an expression of love, unity, and freedom of the servant's will to follow the divine will (to which it owes its being, thus submission to him is not contradiction of its nature). The main characteristic of his treatment of obedience is his analogical–trinitarian interpretation. Von Balthasar writes “Obedience is almost too limited, too specialized a concept for this attitude of letting God dispose of oneself. For this kind of ‘obedience’ precedes specialized obedience in an analogous, transcendent way, just as the kenotic obediential will of the Son preceded his earthly obedience once he had taken on the form of a servant” (von Balthasar 1995, p. 149).

He offers a reading of Christian obedience inspired by an intra-trinitarian obedience that can be applied, on the one hand, to general metaphysics and anthropology and, on the other hand, to participation in the supernatural life of the Trinity. If we take the revelation of Christ as our starting point, we can interpret an imitation of his obedience to the Father as participation in trinitarian love relations and a perfection of our natural potential to obey. Nonetheless, since obedience in human terms implies an assent to someone else's command, and even subordination, defining the immanent Trinity as obedient could imply an inferiority of the Son to the Father, just like the begottenness of the Son, according to the Arians, implies the inferiority of the Son. If we are to apply the subject of obedience to such a wide range of areas, including the trinitarian foundation, we cannot fall into the error of thinking that the word obedience comes to mean the same thing when speaking of the human and divine natures of Christ. In fact, there are four levels of reality in which obedience is predicated: the Trinity, Christ, the Church, and the being and Christian life. They all connected by relations of proportion and together they form what von Balthasar and von Speyr call a “ladder of obedience” (*Eine Treppe aus Gehorsam*).⁵ Von Balthasar derived this intuition from the mystical experiences of von Speyr, as transcribed in her book *On Obedience*:

this whole means the Trinity, Christ, Mary, the Church and the individual. The chain cannot be broken; the last link cannot be grasped without knowledge of the one that comes before it, then the one before that, and so on, reaching all the way to the mysterious pinnacle of Triune love, which in the concept of obedience appears more clearly than ever as the ground and goal of all things. (Von Speyr 2024, p. 10)

The connection between the lower and the higher levels of the ladder is ensured by the concept of analogy (similarity within a far greater dissimilarity). The lower level resembles the higher as the effect resembles the cause. That is, the less perfect the obedience, the more the difference in wills becomes a reason for separation or subordination, as opposed to perfect love and unity. Von Balthasar asks provocatively: “Are there grounds for thinking that the Son's eternal otherness vis-à-vis the Father, indeed, his eternal readiness to do the Father's entire will, even down to the uttermost consequences of created freedom, is the original foundation of the creature's otherness and attitude before God?” (von Balthasar 2014, p. 23).

We do not wish to extend the theological background of von Balthasar's proposal but instead to outline the quality of Christian obedience that is derived from his insistence on shaping human obedience in light of the trinitarian relations of love, especially in the context of evangelization, where the mission of the Church must be carried out in an analogous way to the Son's carrying of the Father's mission. As adopted sons, individuals receive a new “ontology,” transitioning from being merely worldly to becoming participants in the Church's mission to save the world: “by being thus ‘de-privatized’, the man who has passed over into God's possession becomes ‘*homo ecclesiasticus*’” (von Balthasar 1992, p. 527). Participation in the mind of the Church occurs primarily through engagement

in sacramental life. Consider Baptism, for instance, where we are not only cleansed of sins but also reborn into the likeness of Christ; the form of a servant, an obedient and loving Son: “all Christians are inscribed into this form of life through baptism (Rom 6:3f) but in the particular form that is ‘counselled,’ the form of Christ—as ‘*forma servi*’ (form of a slave) (Phil 2:7; Mt 20:27–28)” (von Balthasar 2004, p. 137). In the sacrament of the Eucharist, where the sacrifice of the Son is commemorated and re-enacted, we participate in the kenotic movement of the Cross. By uniting ourselves with Christ, we share in his self-emptying on the Cross. His cruciform life, in which he lived out in his mission for the world, finds its continuation and fulfilment in our mission as well. The celebration of the Eucharist serves as an anamnesis; an active remembrance that involves contemplation in love and communion with love. It is through such a celebration that the “Christian mission extends into the world: *ite missa est* [go forth, the Mass is ended]” (von Balthasar 2004, pp. 109–10).

This transformation involves imitating Christ’s ongoing economic mission of an “ever-new (eucharistic) coming to his Church (and through the Church to the world)” (von Balthasar 1999, p. 139). We witness a participation in the Church’s mission that compels us to an active engagement, as we emulate Jesus’ fundamental attitude of loving obedience. This attitude manifests itself through our orientation towards Christ’s mission in the world. Thus, the faithful are called to go out into the world and love their neighbour: “For since he has laid down his life for us, we too ought to lay down our lives for the brethren (1 Jn 3:16)” (von Balthasar 2008, p. 49). As von Balthasar writes, “For the grace of God is fundamentally a call, it is being enlisted in God’s service, it is being commissioned with a special take” (von Balthasar 2008, p. 28). It is through participation in this mission that the Church’s original kenosis (its self-emptying love) is impressed upon the hearts of the faithful: “In this originating cell of the Church, the loving trinitarian obedience of the incarnate Son can be imprinted without resistance” (von Balthasar 1995, pp. 148–49).

In other words, von Balthasar’s focus is the return to Revelation and gazing upon the ministry of Christ to derive from this the right attitude of obedience, which will shape our encounters with our fellow man. While the recent General Congregations seek a revision of the concept of evangelization by presenting the Gospel in new ways that are less intellectual and more political, von Balthasar’s approach seems to take a different trajectory. Of course, he also wishes more effective evangelization, but he believes that for this to happen we must return our gaze to the mission of the Son and, by extension, to the missions of the Trinity as a whole. In other words, evangelization should show the receivers, through the example of the saints, the beauty of the Christian life, which carries in its glory a certain power of attraction.

Bishop Robert Barron, when writing on new methods for evangelization, gives credit to von Balthasar for proposing the idea that adequate evangelization ought to present the beauty of the Revelation of Christ, his love and sacrifice for the forgiveness of our sins, in the hope that his love for the world might move the hearts of undecided wanderers. He writes:

The project of much modern theology, Balthasar felt, was to draw skeptics into the cathedral of Christian truth by showing them the windows from the outside—that is, on their terms—but this finally had little or no compelling power. . . In point of fact, people will understand the truths of Christian revelation and find them beautiful only from within the Church—that is, from the standpoint of worship and contemplation. (Barron 2020, p. 74)

5. Discussion: Trinitarian Obedience and Social Justice

Two distinct methods of evangelization can be identified: one that proceeds by fleshing out the depth and beauty of the Gospel's message, and the other that manifests this depth not through intellectual reflection but in political action: in concrete interventions that express the fruits of the Gospel. It is not to say that von Balthasar thinks of obedience as part of private mysticism and detached from evangelization. For him and von Speyr, like for any other Jesuit authors, obedience is both active and contemplative: "readiness for obedience to the Divine Word requires first of all a complete interior cleaning, an emptiness, an availability, a complete readiness for everything that the Word might work or command. In the moment of decision [secondly], what matters is letting everything go, even at the risk of seeing one's entire self-disappear, because another world claims us" (Von Speyr 2024, p. 20).

However, it has been argued that von Balthasar's approach lacks sufficient political focus, perhaps due his overly adverse reaction to the rise of political theology in the academy. For example, scholars such as John Milbank and Cyril O'Regan argue that the vision of von Balthasar, while rich dogmatically and spirituality, lacks a strong enough stress on the "implications of their integralism, precisely to the degree that they [includes de Lubac here] fail to develop a social or political theology" (Gonzales 2019). This general critique should not be interpreted as a suggestion that von Balthasar does not account for the importance of evangelization, turning spirituality into something belonging to the private sphere. The love for our neighbour and God is the new commandment that we must follow, and it sets a demand and obligation in every Christian to love: "Christian obedience would thus be, in a first, most general description, the reception of the Lord's commandment to love, agreement with the one who lives it before God, and the adjustment of one's own life to the meaning of love" (Von Speyr 2024, p. 18). It is this love that pushes us outwards to care for the unfortunate and to fight unjust situations that enslave our fellow man.

The most articulate criticism of von Balthasar has been that by Todd Walatka, who argues that while von Balthasar may share the desire to care for the poor and the Church's preferential option for them, his theology is not fundamentally transformed by this ministry. However, Walatka believes that von Balthasar's theological method can provide the foundations for a convincing political theology. Walatka seeks to complement von Balthasar's theological dramatics with liberation theology. He does this partly by appealing to the Ignatian heritage of von Balthasar, which strengthens the centrality of mission in his theology. Walatka believes that it is precisely because of "von Balthasar's appropriation and development of the Ignatian tradition, his fundamental fidelity to Ignatius allows his thought to be opened more fully in the direction of Arrupe, Sobrino, and other post-Vatican II Ignatian thinkers who have located a concern for social justice within the Ignatian call to service" (Walatka 2017, p. 90). Walatka, therefore, complements von Balthasar's "expansive theological vision flexible enough to be able to include a genuine appropriation of the insights of liberation theology" under the conviction that it is his Ignatian vision that provides the fundamental structure and methodology to offer a theological account of "that struggle for justice which [faith] includes" (Walatka 2017, p. 90).

In response to liberation theology, von Balthasar highlights the importance of the interior disposition of obedience, which is distinguishable, although often compatible, with the external manifestations of that obedience. For instance, the external praxis of fighting against systems of oppression must be matched by a more important interior attitude of "selfless action and surrender to God" (von Balthasar 1978, p. 180). The response to the injustice is not a direct confrontation of the system that is oppressive but an approach that converts the hearts of the individuals which are ultimately responsible for building those structures and participates in this mission in the context of a love for Christ. For

example, von Balthasar says “the Church must work to achieve an educational ideal in which everyone acquires an awareness of responsibly and personal participation in the matters of the State and society, that is creating a clean democratic mindset that overcomes the dictatorships that can advance from the left and right” (von Balthasar 1978, p. 179).

One could argue that von Balthasar’s excessive focus on the dogmatic depth of obedience does not do justice to the practical demands of obedience on the political front. However, von Balthasar’s intention of offering a dogmatic reading of the *Exercises* can also encourage and ensure that later political applications remain fixed to the original attitude of Ignatius. It is not about undermining the political action of our evangelization but to model our evangelization on the very life of God. In fact, we can also see von Balthasar’s trinitarian explanation as aligned with the concern of recent General Congregations, which model the Jesuit mission according to the trinitarian missions themselves.

It is, therefore, in mission that the Jesuit imitates the whole Trinity: “In the Spiritual Exercises, we contemplate the mission of Christ as a response of the Blessed Trinity to the sins which afflict the world” (GC34, 2, 26). The same is intended throughout the encyclicals of Pope Francis, as we have noted previously. This might suggest an analogy between the self-giving nature of the Trinity and the prayerful person, something which has its roots in Ignatius himself. The best evidence from the works of Ignatius can be found in his letter to the Jesuits in Coimbra, where he declares that human beings are created in the image of the Trinity insofar as they are capable of giving themselves to God, namely, to obey: “Look also at the people around you and realize that they are an image of the Holy Trinity. They have potential for the glory of Him to whom the universe is subject” (Ignatius of Loyola 1547, pp. 495–510).

6. Conclusions

We have argued that the Ignatian understanding of obedience has recently undergone some changes which affect the way in which Jesuits carry out their mission of evangelization. The latest General Congregations seem to push for a renewal of obedience by stressing its link with the notion of “service”, a service which is first and foremost to God, but which is expressed in concrete forms through the promotion of social justice. By doing this, they seek to move away from more intellectual or dogmatic understandings of obedience to prefer a more pastoral approach linked to political action. We have also briefly outlined von Balthasar’s response to the same crisis of obedience. He intends to reinterpret this Christian virtue in light of the trinitarian relations of love between the divine persons. These two approaches are complementary when it comes to the importance of obedience in evangelization. It is ultimately the obedience to God that must be translated into a responsibility to care for the poor. Active participation in fighting injustices is, as it has been repeatedly suggested throughout the papacy of Pope Francis, an imperative quintessential to the experience of the Gospel. Nonetheless, by surrendering oneself to the world one ought not to forget the original depth from which the mission originated; one might love the world in excess by forgetting that the work of charity undertaken is motivated and directed by a love for God. At present, we see countless examples of people engaging in charity without recognizing the importance of charity being motivated by faith. Obedience, when isolated from its theological depth, ends up similarly purposeless and sterile.

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Notes

- ¹ Deliberatio primorum Patrum (1539), § 4 (MHSI 63, 4) In GC35, 4, 2.
- ² Formula of the Institute, Expositio Debitum (1550), § 3 (MHSI 63, 375). In GC35, 4, 2.
- ³ It is constitutive of his obedience, and it is his remaining celibate for the Kingdom of God, that makes such obedience for mission possible. If this apostolic availability is not to cripple his affectivity, it is only because his chastity embodies a contemplative love that includes all human beings and makes the Jesuit open and able to find God everywhere: “GC34, 8, 11”.
- ⁴ Pope Francis (2013, p. 16): “I Will point to the intimate relationship between the poor and the fragility of the planet.” See also, (Ibid., p. 48): “The human environment and the natural environment deteriorate together, we cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend to causes related to human and social degradation.” (Ibid., p. 63): “the development of the Church’s social teaching represents such a synthesis with regard to social issues; this teaching is called to be enriched by taking up new challenges.” (Ibid., p. 93): “for believers, this becomes a question of fidelity to the Creator, since God created the world for everyone. Hence every ecological approach needs to incorporate a social perspective which takes into account the fundamental rights of the poor and the underprivileged.” (Ibid., p. 117): “when we fail to acknowledge as part of morality the worth of a poor person, a human embryo, a person with disabilities—to offer just a few examples—it becomes difficult to hear the cry of nature itself; everything is connected.”
- ⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar. In German: H III/2/1, pp. 206–7. (Von Speyr 2024, p. 142).

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