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Trinitarian Interpretation of Ignatian Obedience: Hans Urs von Balthasar and Adrienne von Speyr

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Abstract

The following essay seeks to provide a theological consideration of the concept of obedience in the Ignatian tradition through the lens of Hans Urs von Balthasar. We will first argue that Balthasar can indeed be considered an Ignatian theologian based on his personal engagement with the spirituality of saint Ignatius. Secondly, we will offer an outline of his treatment of the theme of obedience as he links it to related concepts such as service, mission, indifference, and election. Finally, we will suggest that the influence of Adrienne von Speyr provoked a deepening of the Ignatian tradition toward a Trinitarian interpretation. We seek to conclude with a tentative proposal that Ignatian spirituality can serve a foundation to his creative treatment of the Trinity.

Keywords: Hans Urs von Balthasar; obedience; Ignatian spirituality; Adrienne von Speyr; Trinity; service

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Balthasar considers that Erich Przywara along with Karl Rahner and Gaston Fessard are responsible for developing a theology of the Exercises that was never developed in the baroque era because of the rationalistic tendencies in theology at the time (Balthasar, 1989, p. 189). Although Balthasar does not include himself in this category, later scholars have extended this recognition to his work. There are a few scholars who have argued that Balthasar offers a dogmatic interpretation of Ignatian spirituality. For example, (Löser 1989, p. 172; see Löser 2015) and, more systematically, Fr. Jacques Servais, SJ mention a few key Catholic theologians in the twentieth century who attended such a task: Erich Przywara in his "*Deus Semper Major*," Gaston Fessard in his "*La Dialectique des Exercises Spirituals*," and Karl Rahner in his "*Existential Logic*." However, he believes that "although original and interactive their respective approaches may be, they hardly provide a decisive solution in the current crisis" (Servais 1994, p. 353). Fr. Servais proposes that "among the major theologians of our time who have closely examined the libretto from a doctrinal point of view, Balthasar is probably the author who has shed the most light on the Trinitarian, Christic and Ecclesial principle of Ignatian obedience" (Servais 1994, p. 354). In Servais' view, obedience must be explained not only as the central vision of Ignatian spirituality, which involves the choice presented to us for the service and praise of God (Exx 169) [Spiritual Exercises], and for the mission that imitates the "love descending from above" (Exx 184), "but also, on the doctrinal and metaphysical level. . . . not merely ascetic, mystical or pastoral, but the end is to derive from the original substance of the libretto the principles of a speculative theology properly so called" (Servais 1996, pp. 15–16).

There are also places where Balthasar's name is omitted, for example in the *Contemporary Approach to The Spiritual Exercises* edited by Philip Sheldrake, SJ even though they

stress the importance of a theological reading of the exercises as something "highly relevant for what happens in retreat houses" (Sheldrake 1991, p. 9). This essay pretends to offer a coherent outline of Balthasar's theological interpretation of obedience as readiness, election, and mission, in addition to Speyr's Trinitarian interpretation of Ignatian obedience.

Ignatius calls this innate availability or readiness to self-denial *indifference*. It is broadly defined as "a means of becoming open to deeper union with God" (O'Reilly 2020, p. 270; see López 2023). It is an attitude that allows the Jesuit to "distinguish himself in service "willingness (Rahner 1953, p. 12). In other words, indifference (which does not mean being uninterested in either option but available for whatever God desires) allows Jesuits to act in obedience to whatever task or mission is revealed to them. It is an "ascesis" that the exercitant undergoes throughout the four weeks of the Exercises, especially in the first week, where he works on the purification and cleansing necessary for the adequate discernment of spirits (Exx 21,23). This ensures the response of obedience in action: in the election of one state of life (Exx 169), acceptance of the mission to which one is sent in the command received by the Superior (*Constitutions* 6.1). It can be very personal and individual, such as the personal call one receives to a state of life, but it is also an attitude that unites one with the militant Church and her universal mission (Exx 352–3).

Balthasar's interpretation is undoubtedly speculative and dogmatically creative, less supported by a literal interpretation of the libretto. His approach differs from those studies O'Reilly that are biographical (Rahner 1953), historical (O'Reilly 2020) or pastoral (Sheldrake 1991). There is no assessment about his reception in Jesuit circles perhaps due to the often-fine line between "a legitimate adaptation and unauthentic deformation" (Endean 1998, p. 36). There are times when a creative reading of the Exercises seems to be encouraged in the context of pastoral application of the Exercises (Endean 1998, p. 40). There are other times when the same creativity is questioned in the dogmatic front, for example, when it comes to Karl Rahner's philosophical interpretation of the Ignatian heritage (Endean 2001). Balthasar, like Rahner, reads the Exercises philosophically and theologically.

Philosophically, indifference means the innate availability, openness, and vocation to the supernatural in nature. While Ignatius does not expand his understanding of obedience according to a philosophical style (and the Exercises cannot be considered an academic treatise), he nonetheless proposes a key theological anthropology. Ignatius derives his "Principle and Foundation" from the definition of man according to the purpose, or end, for which man is created: "Man is created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by means of this to save [his] soul" (Exx 23). It is more accurately a "praise, reverence and serve" done for love, as "love and praise" (Exx 15) or "love and serve" (Exx 233)" (Balthasar, 2014, p. 28). Human beings are made to be available for God, and the more they foster this attitude of availability, the higher their freedom will be. Servais summarizes with the claim that, "Indifference is the fundamental act of the creature; it is from it that the theology of *potentia oboedentialis* can be developed." Therefore, the finality of man for which he was created is to adore and to praise God, his nature, in Balthasar's words, "already bears the mark of God's kenosis", so that man is, by definition, a kenotic substance of a rational nature (Servais 1994, p. 360).

Theologically, Balthasar reads this tradition according to his dramatic theology (Goulding 2009). In Saint Francis, the spirit of the Gospel is most evident in the joy of poverty, in giving up all personal possessions for the highest form of receptivity or obedience to the mystery of the crucified. In Benedict of Nursia, this same spirit manifests in the love of Christ as reverence and humility, which he integrates into the concept of Christian obedience, as exemplified in the fourth degree of humility. For Ignatius, the spirit of the Gospel is found in the drama of human freedom, which must be placed at the service of love or, to use more precise Ignatian language, when human freedom is disposed to the

election of God. A loving obedience that Ignatius expresses as "give me loving humility and loving reverence".[1] The mysticism of obedience inspires Balthasar and Speyr because of its radicality. It is an ever-greater obedience always marked by the *magis* principle (*siempre más*) and the through all things (*en todo*), it is "blind," not only of execution but also desire and judgement, and also because of its concreteness, it is about action-in contemplation, effectively going out into mission, electing the state of life God is calling us to. As Balthasar writes: it "is a willingness to be completely exposed 'on the mountain of the Lord,' a willingness to embody Christ's own obedience for the sake of all and each one in particular (Exx 95)" (Balthasar, 1995, p. 153).

1. Balthasar's Jesuit Identity

Balthasar was raised in a Catholic family in Lucerne, with no connection to the Jesuits apart from occasional visits to a beautiful Baroque Jesuit church in the town center, which stands just opposite to the lake where he is now buried. He began his education at the Benedictine school at the Abbey of Engelberg, but later transferred to the Jesuit school in Feldkirch after completing his secondary studies. As a student, Balthasar participated in a retreat of the Spiritual Exercises in the Black Forest at Wylhen in 1929. It was during this retreat that he underwent a profound conversion of heart, feeling called to leave everything behind and follow Jesus. He was particularly moved by the program and spiritual direction set forth by Ignatius of Loyola:

> Even today [in 1959], after thirty years, I could still find again the tree on the lost path in the Black Forest, not far from Basel, under which I was struck as if by lightning. . .. [I]t was neither theology nor the priesthood that, at that moment, appeared in a flash before my mind; it was this alone: You have nothing to choose; you are called. You will not serve; another will use you. You have no plans to make; you are only a small little tile in a mosaic that has long been ready. I needed only to "leave everything and follow," without making plans, without wishes or ideas: I needed only to stand there and wait and see what I would be used for—and so it happened (Balthasar, 1991c, p. 22).

The notion of "serving" and being "called" reflects the significant influence of Ignatius of Loyola, of whom Balthasar would later say, using the Pauline metaphor of election, that he was struck by lightning: "I did not choose him; he set me ablaze like a bolt of lightning" (Balthasar, 1988). Soon after his mother's death, in the same year he experienced this conversion, on 18 November 1929, Balthasar entered the Society of Jesus. For his commemoration card, he chose an image depicting the evangelist John leaning on the Lord's breast at the Last Supper, accompanied by the motto "*benedixit, fregit, deditque*" (he blessed, broke, and gave), perhaps anticipating the influence that John would have on his deepening understanding of Ignatian spirituality. Balthasar certainly felt at home in the Society, describing it with such warm words as "most dear and self-evident home" (Löser 1999, p. 38).

Balthasar was particularly interested in the spiritual exercises of Ignatius, to which he attributed, if not necessarily a good theological erudition, a wealth, nevertheless, of Christian fruitfulness of following and of obedience in the service of God, in whatever way God desires for his greater glory. In 1955, he would write:

> I often gave talks at retreats and conferences about the idea of the Exercises, about their philosophical and theological foundations, about the encounter between Ignatius' thought and modern thought in theology. The most important thing always happens of course during the exercises themselves: one cannot lead them without receiving them anew from the origin (Schindler 1991, p. 99).

He frequently cited Ignatius throughout his works, notably in "Theo-Drama Vol. 5," "The Explorations in Theology Vol. 4," and "The Christian States of Life," where he contrasts Ignatius' understanding of election with Aquinas's works on the counsels of perfection. While he never produced a treatise exclusively dedicated to Ignatius, he did translate the Spiritual Exercises. He recounts: "I translated the exercises and gave about a hundred retreats; if anywhere this is where Christian joy lives. If anywhere this is where it becomes clear what being a Christian means in its 'origin': listening to the word that calls and becoming free for the expected answer" (Schindler 1991, p. 99). His theological colleagues Henri de Lubac and Joseph Ratzinger both reinforced this Ignatian imprint, considering him a true follower of Ignatius (De Lubac 1975, pp. 228–49). It is significant for a fellow Jesuit like Lubac to have noticed this influence and for a theologian of Ratzinger's caliber to emphasize it so decisively. More significantly, they stress this Ignatian influence around the concept of obedience:

> The bond of obedience was the Ignatian trait of his entire life. He did not traverse the path of his own will; he walked the path he found himself led against his own desires, to the point where his will and his being became more and more free, more and more pure. In this way, he was, in the deepest sense, a man of the Church. . . an authentic teacher of faith, a guide to the sources of living water—a witness of the Word, from whom we can learn about Christ, from whom we can learn about life (Ratzinger 1989, pp. 351–53).

Balthasar's decision to leave the Society in 1950 came just before taking his final vows, a choice he made after completing the spiritual exercises with this question in mind. He deeply understood the importance of obedience, and it would be unfair to suggest that he disregarded this principle during the deliberations within the Society, instead, one needs to see his departure as an extension of Ignatian obedience (Balthasar, 1995, p. 160). After encountering Speyr, Balthasar came to understand that God was calling him to establish a secular institute, not as a departure from the Society, but as a continuation of its mission within the world: "what Ignatius wanted in his time clearly meant for me from then on, 'world community' (secular institute), the difficult sacrifice demanded by the transition was accompanied by the certainty of serving the same idea with greater exactness" (Schindler 1991, p. 99). This decision placed him in the delicate situation of seeming to disobey ecclesial authority, who thought it was incompatible his life as a Jesuit with his role as director of the institute, represented at the time by his Superior, in order to fulfil his mission in deeper obedience to Christ. He would express this tension, saying: "This is a real test of one's tensile strength, and in this crucible the one contesting the authority must remain conscious that he can contradict the office only in (ecclesial!) obedience to Christ" (Balthasar, 1995, p. 161).

When Balthasar presented his initiative to his Superior, he faced a decisive choice: to remain in the Society or to establish his own secular institute. To understand the weight of this dilemma, it is essential to recognize that a Jesuit always seeks the divine will, which precedes our human actions and aims for God's greater glory. Typically, this divine will is communicated to a Jesuit through the command of his Superior (Balthasar, 1991a, p. 312). While the Superior's command is not infallible and can be prone to error due to poor judgment, lack of prudence, or other deficiencies, a Jesuit understands that obedience is owed on matters related to the community life and mission when the command does not contradict what is already approved as God's will, such as natural law, the Constitutions of the order, and the teachings of the Church. According to Fr. Carlos Palmés, there are two forms of imperfection in a Superior's command that might affect a Jesuit's obedience. The first is a positive imperfection, where the command, while not sinful, conflicts with a rule or obligation rooted in Christian charity. The second is a negative imperfection, where the

Superior chooses a less perfect option when faced with a choice between two alternatives. Fr. Palmés asserts that a Jesuit should always obey in the case of negative imperfection and is encouraged to obey in the case of positive imperfection (Palmés Genover 1963, p. 231). While the Superior's command may have been imperfect in terms of what was best for Balthasar and the Society, the command did not contravene Christian charity or the teachings of the Church.

The matter of disagreement was that they judged it incompatible to direct the Community of St John while remaining a Jesuit priest, making it impossible for Balthasar to continue being a Jesuit. He would have preferred for the Community to be an extension of the Jesuit Order, like a third order in other religious orders, but the refusal from his Superiors of this request meant that he could only proceed with the Community by not taking the final vows. For that reason, knowing that he would have had to obey those directives preventing him from stablishing the Community, he decided, after a 30-day retreat, and with the approbation of his Jesuit superiors, to leave the society before taking the final vows. Thus, he was no longer bounded by the vow of obedience toward his Jesuit Superiors.

He deeply felt his vocation and calling to establish the secular institute, guided by a profound sense of "obligation" and mission privately revealed. Balthasar describes his decision with the resignation of someone left without alternatives: "the brokenness that I sensed was effectively consummated when, in obedience to another express command of St. Ignatius—against my will—I had to leave my spiritual home, the Society of Jesus, in order to carry out a kind of prolongation of his idea in the world" (Balthasar, 1984, pp. 27–28). His choice resulted in ostracization, years without episcopal support, inability to publicly celebrate Mass, and only a limited capacity to hear confessions. In a letter to his Superiors, he explains his departure as a genuine interpretative challenge between Jesuit availability and obedience to God or his Superior:

> I am leaving then, voluntarily and involuntarily. Voluntarily because my resignation has no other reason than to obey God. Now, as always, the work of our Father Ignatius seems to me the most beautiful thing on earth, and to dwell in his house the most desirable death. . . but I am also leaving to be myself, compelled by a series of circumstances in which I cannot but recognize an unavoidable necessity. . .It cannot be objected, then, that the best solution to the conflict consists, in principle and in any case, in obedience to the Order. This consists, in principle, and in any case, in obedience to God. The superior, who should never be confused with God, is the ordinary way of manifesting the divine will. . . And if by this, almost necessarily, the rule of exercises number 167 is fulfilled, it will be received with gratitude in the deepest part of your soul. But again, what does it matter? God will ensure that such obedience, if offered with the simplicity of a child, and not heroically or presumptuously, does not fall in vain but on the foundation of the Catholic Church. . . God is permanently free in relation to humans, especially when it concerns someone who has chosen to be completely at His disposal. He is free to use them according to His pleasure, as He sees fit. What order preaches more and understands better the instrumentality and availability before God (not only for its members but also for itself) than the Order of the Jesuits? (Balthasar, 1991b, p. 17).

While it is true that Balthasar left the Society of Jesus in 1950, we have provided ample evidence of his self-confessed sympathy for this tradition. This does not demonstrate that his speculative interpretation recovers faithfully the core of Ignatian speculative, but it encourages as to highlight the influence of Ignatius in his thought. In this sense, following a recent distinction of GC35, we consider Balthasar can certainly be labelled as Ignatian since

his "manifests the Ignatian charism: i.e., when it intentionally seeks God in all things; when it practices Ignatian discernment; when it engages the world through a careful analysis of context, in dialogue with experience. . .." (GC35, 6, 9–10). It is more subject to controversy to consider him a Jesuit. Since the General Congregation reserves this title only to those who have a "clear and definitive relationship with the Society of Jesus and when its mission accords with that of the Society by a commitment to a faith that does justice through interreligious dialogue and a creative engagement with culture" (GC35, 6, 9–10). It would be fair to disqualify Balthasar for not having a clear and definitive relationship to the Society of Jesus (not because of his own choosing) but not for criticizing him for a lack of dialogue with other religious and cultural traditions. There have been few theologians who have engaged with so much of Western cultural tradition and with the Protestant tradition seeking always a symphonic reconciliation to the Gospel unity (Balthasar, 2012b).

2. Obedience as Readiness to Serve

The first feature of Ignatian obedience is the desire to "clothe ourselves with the same grab and uniform of the Lord" out of love, an availability that seeks to "fulfill the will of God" (GC 35, 4, 96). This open search for God's will is discussed by Ignatius in the context of the Third Degree of Humility: "I desire to be accounted as worthless and a fool for Christ, rather than to be esteemed as wise and prudent in this world" (Exx 167). It corresponds to the three classes of men mentioned by Ignatius. The first type wishes to retain his money, which he has received through questionable means, without changing his attachment to his possessions, seeing neither willingness nor need to change (Exx 153). The second type wishes to correct his attachment to money because he considers it a "disordered" attachment, but he seeks to do so "in such a way that they will keep the acquired money, so that God will come to where they desire" (Exx 154). The third type, which Ignatius praises, wishes to rid himself of his attachment and is willing for his money to be taken from him if that is what God disposes for him. This third type transcends through indifference to a higher good, beyond the desires of his lower nature, by denying even the act of choosing. Ignatius portrays this third man as being willing to dispose of the money yet having "no inclination either to keep the acquired money or to dispose of it" (Exx 155).

Balthasar situates Ignatius at an intersection between the ancient patristic understanding of asceticism and the medieval spirituality of the mendicant orders (the Franciscan tradition of preaching and ministering to the poor in particular), in continuity with the German mystical tradition of the Rhineland mystics (of the subjective kind of self-abasement) but adding a "correction" of their respective excesses (Balthasar, 2012a, p. 52). For example, Ignatius avoids the extreme of German mysticism that exalted passive contemplation. This can be seen in an overly literal interpretation of Meister Eckhart, who proposes an "annihilation of one's own being".[2] According to Balthasar, this tendency toward mysticism detached from apostolic work was evident among contemporary movements such as those led by Fr. Araoz, the Spanish *alumbrados*, and the Quietists. This trend "attained the height of subtlety in the teaching of P. Balthazar Alvarez (P. de Ponte was his biographer) and, dependent on him, in the Doctrine spirituelle of P. Louis Lallemant and his school" (Balthasar, 2012a, p. 113). It is not that Ignatius turned away from representatives of medieval piety, but rather that these influences came to him more through his readings of meditations on the life of Jesus, such as in the *Life of Christ* by Rudolf of Saxony or the *Ejercitatoria de la Vida Espiritual* by Garcia de Cisneros.[3] They all "understood this fundamental attitude as 'becoming empty' and as readiness to 'transcend beyond all other creatures into immediacy with God'" (Schindler 1991, p. 117).

What Ignatius intends is to cultivate a contemplative attitude of readiness and obedience, always prepared to embrace the loving will of God, regardless of where it may lead,

such as in the mission entrusted to us. This complements the attitude of self-ablation found in contemplatives, while also emphasizing "the spontaneity of human action in the analogy of freedom and election, and thereby brought active asceticism to the fore" (Balthasar, 2012a, p. 113). These two aspects are unified in the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius: the passivity of the contemplative, receptive to hearing the voice of God in indifference, and the active life that emerges from this encounter rejuvenated and invigorated to perform God's will in apostolic work (*actione contemplativus*) (Barry and Doherty 2014, p. 238). Balthasar summarizes: "[The] Jesuit receives his mission in that school of abandonment and contemplation which is the Exercises and is thereby enabled to fulfil a particular task without any mental reservations and from a disposition of transcendent universality, being basically ready for anything" (Balthasar, 2012a, p. 103). The two actions are often implemented together: the obedience of the contemplative, characterized by letting be and availability, which transitions into an obedience of self-giving love in action. As Balthasar states, "but we learn how to do this only when we love this self-giving love, and for that we will always need an attitude of pure receptivity, of letting be, that is, of contemplation" (Balthasar, 1995, p. 302). In the Ignatian sense, this contemplation is not purely passive; it requires a responsive element from the person (Balthasar, 1989, p. 227).

Indifference carries dual meanings within the context of the Spiritual Exercises. Negatively, it entails undergoing a phase of purification and acknowledging one's sinful condition, that is, "we need to cleanse our readiness from the filth of our sins" (Balthasar, 2014, p. 46). This phase could be likened to the "purgative and preparatory 'hell of self-knowledge' (Theologia Germanica), which strips the sinner, as he stands before the cross of Christ, of any consciousness of his own goodness" (Balthasar, 2012a, p. 103). As early as the "Principle and Foundation" or the "Introductory Explanations," the purpose is to train the exercitant in this kind of indifference, the "extirpation of 'disordered inclinations', which are nothing other than an open or veiled striving for power, a drive to elbow one's way to the first place" (Balthasar, 2014, p. 36). For instance, the exercitant is guided through cycles of consolation and desolation, learning to recognize disordered attachments and combat them by cultivating a desire for what opposes them. This process trains the exercitant to master his appetites, achieving "conquest of all 'disordered affections' that act as a prior constraint upon man, inducing him to seek the objects that attract him and to avoid those he finds unpleasant" (Balthasar, 2014, p. 38). Balthasar writes:

> For the sake of indifference, a man who "feels an affection or inclination to something in a disordered way" should "strive with all possible effort to come over to the opposite of that to which he. . . is wrongly" "attached. . . [He] should try to bring [himself] to desire (*afectarse*) the opposite. [He] should make earnest prayers and other spiritual exercises and ask God our Lord for the contrary (Exx16) (Balthasar, 2014, p. 39).

Positively, the right attitude of indifference allows the exercitant to be liberated from disordered desires and to "seek and find" the "higher will of God" (Balthasar, 2014, p. 39). He derives this higher will not by elevating his human aspirations, but by adopting a form of life bestowed from above (de arriba), "man's configuration to the image of his crucified Son. . .. by remaining in the pure letting be of God's downward movement, which leads to the Cross through kenosis, obedience, and common mortality (Phil 2:7–8)" (Balthasar, 2014, p. 37). By embracing this obedience (listening to the command of the Lord and being willing to carry it out) according to Ignatius, the exercitant may reach the center of the living Christian form, which "secures for him true freedom." (Balthasar, 1991a, p. 135). His freedom is not about self-actualization through individualistic progress toward perfection. Instead, it enables the exercitant to listen to God's will, which directs one beyond oneself to

the praise and service of God, directing all earthly goods "to order toward this transcendent goal" (Balthasar, 2014, p. 39).

3. Obedience as Election

The second feature of obedience in Ignatius refers to the acceptance of the call which we receive from God. We can relate it to the Two Standards. Here, the exercitant is asked to meditate on who they follow: "The one of Christ, our supreme leader and lord, the other of Lucifer, the deadly enemy of our human nature" (Exx 136). Either to follow the army of Devil prioritizing worldly riches, pride, and honor or to follow the eternal King and choose instead: "first, poverty as opposed to riches; the second, insults or contempt as opposed to the honor of this world; the third, humility as opposed to pride" (Exx 146). Obedience, therefore, is the response to an electing God.

Balthasar argues that the call or the election is a central part of the Exercises where the freedom of God and the freedom of the creature engage with each other in an encounter: "the central encounter with God is an encounter with an electing God" (Balthasar, 2012a, p. 105). To choose the right goal and for the culmination of the Exercises (the election), the exercitant must achieve a higher indifference to desire God to make a decision about himself: "he should 'beg' God to deprive him of his treasure, 'even though it is contrary to our lower nature' (Exx 157)" (Balthasar, 2014, p. 40). According to the Exercises, this contemplation promises to provide the exercitant with a form of life from above, given as a gift of grace, to ensure that through this form of life he is "totally receptive to being conformed to God, can conform to his will and so attain the perfection of the Christian life" (Balthasar, 2012a, p. 103). There is a universal election to which all human beings are called, corresponding to the end for which human beings are created. This general election is the vocation to the perfection of Christian charity, and whichever state one might be called to, every election leads to "attain perfection" (Exx 135). This perfection is the commandment of love imposed by God: to love God and our neighbor and to fulfil this commandment by belonging to the Church. The first call to the Christian life is then defined by a second concrete call to each individual that commands the person to a particular state of life. The analogy of election and vocation, therefore, is a universal call to all human beings to share in the life of God, and for some to share in this life through a supererogatory vocation. There is an "analogy of the call, since God does not elect and call all men in the same way but sends forth his call in varying degrees of intensity and urgency" (Balthasar, 1983, p. 410).

This choice confronts us with two options and is only made once, requiring the exercitant to enter the exercises with a commitment to listen voluntarily and to accept God's vocation for him (Balthasar, 2014, p. 41). The first vocation is to follow the commandments imposed by God, as exemplified in the married state, while the second stage consists in the perfection of the Gospel as demonstrated in Jesus' adult life. Ignatius distinguishes between these two states of life as "the way of the commandments" and the "way of the counsels" (Exx 135), so that we might "arrive" at perfection "in whatever state or way of life God our Lord may grant us to choose" (Exx 135) (Balthasar, 2014, p. 46). This decision must be made with indifference [total availability] toward one or the other state of life. Therefore, from an Ignatian standpoint, it is crucial to enter this election without a preconceived notion of one state of life being more elevated than the other, or any impediments that would make the decision impossible. Balthasar summarizes the spiritual exercises as follows:

> The sole purpose of this book is to provide a comprehensive meditation on the foundations and background of St. Ignatius' contemplation on the "Call of Christ", and the answer we must give if we want "to give greater proof of our love" (Exx 97), and on the choice explicitly demanded of us: either to follow Christ our Lord to "the first state of life, which is that of observing the commandments",

> of which he has given us an example by his obedience to his parents; or to follow him to "the second state, which is that of evangelical perfection" of which he has given us an example by leaving his family, "to devote himself exclusively to the service of his eternal Father." And this so that we can "arrive at perfection,"—which is, of course, the perfection of Christian love- "in whatever state or way of life God our Lord may grant us to choose" (Exx 135) (Balthasar, 1983, p. 9).

The paradox of this election lies in understanding how individual freedom is found in the response to God's call, specifically in obedience to God's election. We choose what God chooses for us. The Spiritual Exercises tell us that we "have to prepare (*disponer*) ourselves, so that in every state or life which God our lord gives us to choose (*nos diere para elegir*) we may come to perfection" (Exx 135). This perfection is only possible if the calling we receive aligns with what God has created us for from eternity, as Schindler explains: "by choosing God's choice we realize our own idea as it exists in God, and this is supreme freedom" (Schindler 1991, p. 109). Obedience is the response of man who, in praying with the Incarnate Word, discovers God's specific will for his life (Servais 1994, p. 370). Depending on whether the Lord's call is to a distinct mission or the common mission of all Christians, those who are called are placed either in a state of election or in *religio*. This state could be marked by the external taking of vows or by the internal vow of love (obedience to the commandments) (Balthasar, 1983, pp. 162–63). Either option requires obedience to God's will and the acceptance of a more or less specific mission which involves an action. Balthasar writes:

> Man's calling is to action because the grace of God always charges him with a mandate or task to be carried out by his own efforts. In thus charging him, however, God draws the recipient of his grace into his confidence, reveals to him a part of the divine plan, and commissions him to realize a part of it by his own strength and ingenuity. But man's calling to action is likewise a calling to contemplation because the recipient of grace can understand and complete the task assigned to him only by holding all the more closely and exclusively to the thought of God in gratitude for the trust God has shown him, by undertaking no deed independently of God . . . (Balthasar, 1983, p. 80).

4. Obedience to Mission

Especially in the early stages of the Society of Jesus, obedience became a key concept in the organization of the Society. The Constitutions, for example, emphasized the importance of being obedient to one's Superior, to be effectively sent. In other words, the mission the Jesuit is given is made known to him through the vow of obedience, which involves renouncing one's decision making to receive the will of God through the command of his Superior: "the religious recognizes and embraces the will of God manifested to him by one who has authority to send him in the name of Christ" (GC 32, 11, 31). As the *Constitutions* say: "It is very helpful for making progress and highly necessary that all devote themselves to complete obedience, recognizing the superior, whoever he is, as being in the place of Christ our Lord and maintaining interior reverence and love for him. . .They should obey entirely." (Constitutions, 284) Furthermore, Ignatian obedience to the Superior is extended, through the Fourth vow, to an ecclesiastical obedience to: "our blessed Mother Church" (Exx 363), insofar as Ignatius recognizes the unsurpassable authority of "Christ our Lord," her "Bridegroom" (Exx 365).

Balthasar interprets the relationship of the obedience between the inferior and the superior away from categories of subordination such as the master–slave dialectic. For example, he stresses the importance of obedience to bind both superior and inferior. In the case of the superior, it would ensure that the leadership is done responsibly, in the inferior

that the command is followed reverently. They both must obey the demands of the mission stablished by the Order and Church: "although both superior and subject must realize that it is the mission that binds superior and subject in obedience to the Lord" (Balthasar, 1995, p. 166). The commands received are also not a passive obligation that renders the discerning Jesuit submissive in a negative sense, denying active cooperation. For example, while the Jesuit is asked to submit in perfect indifference to the command received, he should do so with "fidelity to God, to the truth and to a well-formed conscience" (GC 33, 11, 31). Therefore, while Ignatius repeatedly mentions in the Constitutions that obedience should be blind and total, it cannot exclude the Jesuit's prayerful discernment and contemplation of the action to be followed. "Obedience, then, cannot exclude our prayerful discernment of the course of action to be followed, one that may in some circumstances differ from the one suggested by our religious Church superiors" (GC 33, 11, 31). It is important to stress that Balthasar thinks of legitimate obedience as being necessary for true and authentic freedom. To illustrate it, he argues that Jesus receives the Father and hence eternal freedom in the same sovereign manner as the Father but in "the mode of obedience" to the Father, and this mode of receiving freedom and exercising freedom in light of the pursuit of happiness becomes "the concrete norm [with] universal application" (Balthasar, 2013b, p. 267).

Moreover, the Ignatian vow of obedience is somehow further specified by stressing "the openness of the Society of Jesus to the Pope (as its real superior)," highlighting that obedience is not limited to the interests of any particular order or its superiors. Instead, all these orders and superiors are ultimately accountable to the universal mission of the Church, and the obedience vowed to Christ, safeguarded in the vow of obedience, is "concretized for everyone in the Pope" (Balthasar, 1995, p. 164). The particular instance of obedience, as Balthasar calls it, as regulated by the attitude of the counsels, needs to be ultimately put at the service of the "universal obligation in the Church" to which it is ultimately already open" (Balthasar, 1995, p. 165). Later in the development of the order, the concept of availability to be sent on a mission by the superior was expanded to encompass readiness for the Church's mission as a whole. Balthasar explains this evolution:

> Obedience only became prominent in the thinking of the founder and his first companions at a later stage, that is, when, with their new Christian disposition of being ready for anything, they began to offer themselves openly to the visible hierarchical Church as instruments at her disposal. The Pope became the administrator of this store of 'readiness,' the real 'general' of the new society, which became the outstanding instrument of the Counter-Reformation (Balthasar, 2012a, p. 109).

The obedience to the Church hierarchy and her teachings, however, is more fundamentally a sharing in the obedience of the faith of the Church. Balthasar argues that the role of Mary is very important in this regard, as seen in the repetition of the *suscipe* prayer ("through Mary to Jesus, and through Jesus to the Father"). "This insistence can only mean that Mary-and of course Jesus-archetypally embody the governing idea of the Exercises, the ideal to which they aspire" (Balthasar, 2014, p. 41). He understands this obedience of faith as an imitation of the obedience of the Son through the archetype of Mary: "We can easily show that Mary belongs to the ideal," Balthasar points out, "because if, as Catholic dogma teaches, she was conceived immaculately and remained sinless ever after, then she has always already attained the perfection of the creature's attitude of indiferencia vis-à-vis God." (Balthasar, 2014, p. 41)

This could be perceived, for example, when the preaching of the Church might not match our own understanding of things, which requires that the individual Christians "pass beyond [their] personal 'views' and 'opinions' (2 Cor 10:5) into the perspective of the Church (where she truly obeys, and her obedience is guaranteed)" (Balthasar, 2017,

p. 60). This is not only intellectual but also pertains to the will. There could be a diversity of opinion about the will to love and how this is realized. However, if this interpretation is done outside the Church, then there arises a difference of opinion that is not proper to the unity of the Lord himself

5. A Trinitarian Interpretation of Ignatian Obedience?

The distinctively Balthasarian impute is not to highlight the military and knightly context of obedience by tracing it to the biography of Inigo, the soldier and noble man (Rahner 1953, p. 112). He, instead, believes that Ignatian obedience has a Trinitarian theological background that animates it. An intuition that has no clear support except in the form of pointers. One is the connection between Divine Majesty, as the service to an eternal King, and Ignatius' first vision of the Trinity. Ignatius says: "he felt a great devotion to the Divine Majesty whenever he prayed to the Blessed Trinity" (Olin 2024, p. 15). In his letter to the Portuguese Jesuits, when Ignatius invokes the Trinity in reference to the potential of self-surrender to God, he says: "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, 1996, pp. 495–510). Finally, we also find suggestions in the recent General Congregations that the Jesuit imitates the Trinity in his being-sent to mission: "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). To illustrate this innovation, we will look at Speyr's Trinitarian interpretation of Ignatian obedience first, and then, briefly provide Balthasar's account of Trinitarian obedience.

Balthasar's encounter with Speyr and his witnessing of her mystical ecstasies, during which she dictated profound spiritual interpretations of Scriptures, particularly the Gospel of John, profoundly impacted his life as a Jesuit priest. Her extraordinary charisms deeply shook his Jesuit spirituality, leading him to interpret these mystical revelations as a profound extension and deepening of Ignatian spirituality. This extension broadened the Ignatian charism of apostolic mission into the secular world, as exemplified by Speyr and her community's formation of a secular institute. He acknowledged Speyr's works as inseparable from his own, attributing to them and to the community of Saint John, which they co-founded, an importance that he, in his humility, did not attribute to his own publications: "my own publications I would put third and last" (Balthasar, 1993).

Balthasar met Speyr at a social gathering in her house in Basel while he served as a student chaplain at the University of Basel (Balthasar, 2017, p. 117). Their encounter unfolded on the balcony of her picturesque home, which offered views overlooking the main square and church. It was there that Speyr approached him with questions about her desire to convert to Catholicism. Speyr had a lengthy history of experiencing extraordinary graces and visitations, yet she grappled with the clause from the Lord's Prayer: "thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." She approached Balthasar, inquiring about how human beings could discern and fulfill God's will. Balthasar assumed the role of her spiritual director and confessor, guiding Speyr in this pursuit. After he received her into the Catholic Church through conditional baptism, their collaboration deepened. The struggle with the clause of the Lord's Prayer became the distinctive characteristic of her spirituality, like in other saints, the aspect most misplaced about the person is transformed by God's grace to become something distinctive of his personality, just like the misguided desire for military glory, which is motivated by a sense of self-love and pride of Ignatius, lead him to a conversion that resulted in a dedication of his life for the much humbler and less elegant service and praise for the glory of God. In Speyr, her struggle to understand how to carry out the divine will led her to center her charism on obedience that is "is entirely a question of 'not my will but thine be done" (Speyr, 1986, p. 84). Balthasar was

called upon to witness Speyr's one-hour-long mystical interpretations, often focused on the scriptures. This experience profoundly influenced him, prompting him to dedicate a significant portion of his illustrious academic career to editing and publishing the content of these revelations in a manner that was intelligible within ecclesiastical circles. His mission in the Church became secondary to Speyr's charism of "deepening and enlivening" of the existing dogmas (Balthasar, 2017, p. 57).

Part of this expansion of theological understanding involved a profound development of Ignatius's concept of obedience, which aligns with the analogical-Trinitarian interpretation of obedience. The deepening was facilitated by the influence of mystical insights, both from Ignatius himself and from other spiritual sources, and by integrating Ignatius's notion of obedience with the Trinitarian foundation of obedience found in Johannine literature.

> The encounter with Adrienne gave all this a special depth. What was theologically implicit in Ignatius began from then on, with full fidelity to the spirit of the Ignatian initiative, to become explicit in the biblical commentaries that were dictated, especially in those referring to John. The theology of the Exercises acquired a formidable Christological-Trinitarian transformation and at the same time, evidently, a Mariological-ecclesial background (Balthasar, 1988, p. 49).

This experience of Christian obedience kept Speyr's personal charism; it was a principle that she embodied throughout her life. Balthasar says that "Adrienne's obedience is perfect and complete, with both natural and mystical trials powered over and over again. All the subsequent themes were able to be elaborated only on the basis of this absolute obedience. Her soul was pliant clay out of which God could fashion whatever form he wished, without resistance." From this spiritual experience of obedience in her life, Speyr was able to place obedience at the core of her spiritual mission. Despite the sheer number of perspectives and angles through which the Bible is approached, one can easily identify a fruitful leitmotif. It is the desire for Speyr to obey God in everything and in all possible ways that is not motivated by rigidity to the letter of the law nor by tepid observance of commandments that come to us as external impositions: there is a mysticism of obedience that results from a total love to God and results in supreme joy. Balthasar recounts: "for her it was a supreme grace and supreme joy to be allowed to obey—God, Christ, the Church—regardless of the severity of what was demanded. From her experience of obedience, she was able to give the most discerning descriptions of the obedience of Christ and also that of the Church" (Balthasar, 2017, p. 60).[4]

She offers three scriptural interpretations of obedience. The Pauline tradition denotes for her imitation and mediation. The Johannine refers to the primacy of obedience as love. The Marian highlights obedience as availability and assent. The three are incorporated across Speyr's corpus, in various degrees of specification to give shape and form to the Ignatian obedience. Balthasar summarizes thus Speyr's influences on her understanding of obedience:

> (1) It was part of the mission of the new foundation, in which Ignatian spirituality was to be traced back to its Johannine sources and origins; (2) Adrienne tended towards a certain feminine quality of the Johannine attitude, which, moreover (3) is itself closely related to the Marian one. She related least well with Paul; there is much to read in her diary on this subject: the placing of his own personality in the forefront, the exhortation to imitate him (as he imitates Christ) was difficult to reconcile with Adrienne's spirit of "effacement" (Balthasar, 2017, pp. 81–82).

Obedience as Imitation: Obedience is closely linked with imitation, where Paul serves as a model of imitation of Christ ("Be imitators of me as I am of Christ", 1 Corinthians 11:1). The mission that shapes his entire life is filtered through his personality, because his

"mission is embodied in him." To the extent that he becomes identified with the mission, there is a double movement: the more he grows into the mission, the more the mission grows into him (Speyr, 1956, p. 31). This is because the Lord has given him a very "personal" task, the message being only comprehensible when the listeners are aware of his personality: what he does, why he does it, and to whom he does it. He knows that when he invites the audience to obey him, and he obeys the Lord, that he is only a mediator and no away is he replacing the God as the rightful authority. The crux is "it is part of his mission to be able to imitate the Lord in such a way that, on the basis of this imitation, he can make the truths he is to preach come alive to others" (Speyr, 1956, pp. 312–13). What Paul, however, transmits to the followers is not his own truth or his own personality but the tradition (1 Corinthians 11:2). An obedience that accepts certain aspects of the individual person that is obeying but which nonetheless is firm in what it is to be obeyed and how it ought to be done. Speyr suggests that Paul is in this way prefiguring the importance of obedience to a Canon, and to the ecclesial authorities, which he is himself being commissioned to embody. It is important to see his authority not as something which he himself claims but something that is God given and obey his exhortation not because of his insightful interpretation of the Gospel but insofar as they are God given. It reinforces the importance of hierarchy and representation in obedience, which according to Speyr, was necessary at those communities that did not have the apostles and their testimonies of having walks along Jesus to contrast the daily life exigencies.

Obedience as Love: Johannine obedience stresses less intensely the element of representation/mediation of obedience since John never presents himself as a model to be imitated. However, there is, certainly, a level of mimesis here as well, since every obedience is an imitation of the obedience of Jesus to the Father. The priority for John is the new commandment: to love God and the neighbor, which come down to essentially the commandment to love God through our love of neighbor. The way to obey God, however, is to observe all the commandments and keep them all as being part of the one new commandment. Nothing more is demanded, nothing but love, but to love is to desire his will, to observe what he has commanded. Speyr writes: "demanding nothing but love, he demands that those who love him walk his path, and that means keeping his commandments" (Speyr, 1993, p. 112). The bottom line is that one ought to love God, and that because of this love, one also loves the neighbor. Obedience is not seen as constrictive, repressive; it is not strictly speaking a rule imposed from without but instead it should emanate as the natural expression of the lover. To the point that the more one loves the beloved the more wishes to obey, and the more this obedience is seen as perfect union of will, and thus as love. Speyr writes: "But the dichotomy within him between his will and the Lord's will must disappear. This dichotomy eclipses the Lord's love as well as his will, thus thwarting his working too" (Speyr, 1993, p. 112).

Obedience as Assent: Obedience takes the form of the attitude of the handmaid as openness, availability, and readiness to the commands and revelations of God in Mary. Her whole being is marked by these traits: "she is indivisibly and forever a handmaid, and her whole being endeavors to meet the expectations of the divine Lord. The loftiest or the most meagre thing can reside in each and every gesture that obedience demands of her, and yet she pays no attention to this" (Speyr, 2003, p. 14). Her identity as handmaid, places her availability and assent to the Holy Spirit as the central feature of her being and everything steams from it: "In freedom she said Yes, and everything now develops out of her assent, it all develops after her freedom" (Speyr, 2003, p. 46). The centrality of assent permeates, according to Speyr, her unique way of integrating the three vows: her virgin body is complete availability for the Incarnation of the Son of God, her poverty guarantees the space to receive "all the blessings of heaven" (Speyr, 2003, p. 26), and her obedience is

perfect to the extent that it seems to define her entire existence, since there is no "painful obedience" in the person that is all assent, that the assent proceeds the deliberation of the commandment given "Her very existence is obedience" (Speyr, 2003, p. 25).

According to Balthasar, Speyr's take on obedience is characterized by a clear preference for the Johannine emphasis on love and mission, finding its synthesis in a characteristically Ignatian interpretation of obedience: "the Ignatian, in a new, bold, and powerful expression intended for our time, expounded in the medium of the Johannine as the concluding interpretation of biblical revelation." What is then this new expression of an Ignatian understanding of obedience? Balthasar answers quite decisively: "Ignatian obedience (which was always understood in the scope as love) will now be interpreted in the context of Johannine love; this love gives its stamp not only to Christology, but (which is ultimately the same thing) also penetrates the very heart of the doctrine of the Trinity". The trinitarian obedience is deduced by looking at the mission of the Son: a mission of loving obedience to the Father. This loving obedience becomes everything that comes the way of the Son endurable, and it is not lukewarm or tepid. It is a steadfast commitment to serve the mission of the Son: "a love that is ready to take everything on itself, even the Cross, [. . .] a love that fully renounces itself and therefore bears everything. It bears the whole sin of the world" (Speyr, 1993, p. 68).

This participation, according to Speyr, takes the more concrete form of mission as an extension of the Ignatian obedience, which is always fundamentally about mission, about action in contemplation, about ministering to the world and serving the Church. The acceptance and living of this mission that is entrusted to us therefore facilitates the final step of the trinitarian obedience. To allow a mode of life modelled after the trinitarian infinite exchange of love, whereby the persons are modes of subsistence, being themselves in their tending to the other, proving the infinite substantial unite in the difference of the missions. Speyr writes commenting on John:

> From the Son to the Father, the Son transforms us, and the Father receives us as his children; and on the way from the Father to the Son the Father perfects our childhood by allowing us to participate in the Son's mission. The mission with which we are sent out is an echo of the Son's trinitarian mission. Once the trinitarian life begins to unfold in us and we have become children of God, once the Trinity comes into our souls, and the three Persons have lovingly become one in us, we are sent out on the trinitarian mission (Speyr, 2023, p. 124)

6. Discussion

The spiritual intuitions of Speyr are systematized in Balthasar's dramatic theology. He also locates in the dynamic of obeying the command of the one sending the very heart of Johannine theology and as a participation in the "intra-trinitarian relationship of the Son to his Father" (Servais 1996, p. 370). He acknowledges the challenges in understanding "how his trinitarian being and action can be translated into something that (by grace) can be imitated by creatures" (Balthasar, 2013b, p. 120). Nonetheless, the trinitarian analogy from the economy (the Son's mission) to the immanent Trinity (the eternal life of God) gains depth by establishing the measure between these two analogical poles. The convergence of the two axes of the concrete analogy is found in the obedience of the Son: "the making present of the life of the Trinity and the ultimate foundation and perfection of the attitude distinctively characteristic of the creature before his God meet together in the miracle of the God-man's archetypal obedience" (Balthasar, 1963, p. 42). Obedience thus serves as a means to partake in the Son's filial relationship with the Father. Participation in the Trinitarian life is dynamic; it necessitates not only involvement in the divine attributes

but also in the intimate relations among the divine persons. These relations, as previously explained, are rooted in a principle of loving obedience. To Balthasar:

> It is insufficient, therefore, to portray the life of grace in terms of a special "presence" and "indwelling" of the Persons of the Son and the Spirit (sent by the Father) in the souls of the recipients of grace; the purpose of this indwelling is to enable men to participate in the relations between the Divine Persons; and relations are precisely what these Persons are, wholly and entirely (Balthasar, 1998, p. 428).

In other words, the dual call to emulate Christ's obedience and to partake in the divine life manifests concretely through sharing in Christ's mission, and consequently, in the mission of the Church. The Christological mission of the Son inherently reflects the Trinitarian nature analogically, and by participating in Christ's obedient mission, we also participate analogously in the Trinitarian life of love. Balthasar summarizes this perspective succinctly:

> If grace grants us a share in the divine nature (2 Pet 1:4), and if this elevates and transfigures the created imago into a *similitudo*, it follows that the person thus endowed with grace must participate in the triune life in ways that are ever new and ever more profound (. . .) the rigid statue of the *imago*, which somehow has a form, comes alive; it lives and moves in the realm of the Son's mission (Balthasar, 2013b, p. 528).

This essay has argued that Balthasar can be considered an Ignatian theologian despite his personal decision to abandon the Society of Jesus. He offers a rich and complex treatment of the notion of obedience in the Exercises by relating it to indifference, election, service, and mission. Balthasar's interpretation, enriched by Speyr's mystical theology, situates Ignatian obedience within the Trinitarian life of God, where the Son's loving submission to the Father becomes the paradigm for Christian discipleship. This obedience is not passive but a dynamic readiness to be sent, to serve, and to love. It is contemplative and active, ecclesial and personal, rooted in the discernment of God's will and the joyful surrender to it. Thus, Ignatian obedience, when viewed through a Trinitarian lens, emerges as a profound participation in the divine mission of love.

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Notes

1 (Rahner 1953, p. 111) citing Ignatius Spiritual Diary, MI 3, I, 131: "dadme humildad amorosa y así reverencia y acatamiento."

2 The practice of indifference, as understood by Ignatius, does not therefore mean the inevitable annihilation of man's own being and will. That interpretation, which is to be found in varying degrees of strength in spirituality from Eckhart to Fenelon, is the symptom of a latent Monothelitism, not to say eastern-style pantheism:" (Balthasar, 2012a, p. 104).

3 To be precise, there are three books that impacted him. "*The life of Christ* by German Carthusian, Ludolph of Saxony, was that which had been translated into Spanish by Fary Ambrosio Montesino and published at Alcala in 1502–03. He read *The Golden Legend* by Jacopo de Voragine in the Spanish translation by the Cistercian Goberto Maria Vagad, which appeared at Saragossa in 1493 and was reprinted at Toledo in 1511. Concerning *The Imitation of Christ*, . . . ascribed at the time to Gerson, the one-time chancellor of the University of Paris" (Rahner 1953, pp. 24–25).

4 She identifies obedience with similar Ignatian themes that we have previously discussed. On the intention of the First Week of the Exercises, she writes: "Moreover, this effort, which runs like a thread through the whole of the Spiritual Exercises, is supposed

to bring me to the point where I can elect what God has elected for me (Exx135)" (Speyr, 2022, p. 30). On the meaning of prayer, contemplation and action, she writes: "obedience and contemplation interpenetrate one another. It is altogether impossible that someone who is disobedient might practice genuine contemplation. Contemplative prayer is grounded in and fructified by obedience" (Speyr, 2022, p. 30). Finally, on the Ignatian theme of "Thinking with the Church", she writes: "The unity of the development of doctrine is preserved in this attitude of obedience to its teachings and exhortations: 'where unity is to reign, there must be order, and therefore, for the attainment of this order, there must be obedience'" (Speyr, 1993, p. 185).

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