



## CONGREGATIO PRO CLERICIS

### **“Do you promise filial respect and obedience to me and my successors?”**

(Pontificale Romanum. De Ordinatione Episcopi, presbyterorum et diaconorum,  
Edition typica (Typis Polyglotis Vaticanis 1990))

From the Vatican, 18<sup>th</sup> November 2009

Dear Brothers in the Priesthood,

Even if they are not bound by a Solemn Vow of obedience, ordinands profess a “promise” of “filial respect and obedience” to their own Ordinary and his Successors. If the theological standing of a Vow and a promise is different, the total and definitive moral obligation is identical, and likewise identical is the offering of one’s will to the will of Another: to the Divine will, mediated through the Church.

In a time such as ours, marked as it is by relativism and democraticism, by various forms of autonomous individualism and libertinism, such a promise of obedience appears ever more incomprehensible to the prevailing mindset. It is not rare for it to be conceived as a diminution of dignity and human freedom, as a perseverance in obsolete forms, typical of a society incapable of authentic emancipation.

We who live authentic obedience know well that this is not the case. Obedience in the Church is never contrary to the dignity and respect of the person, nor must it ever be understood as an abandonment of responsibility or as a surrender. The Rite utilises a fundamental adjective for the right understanding of such a promise; it defines obedience only after mentioning “respect”, and this with the adjective “filial”. Now the term “son”, in every language, is a relative name, which implies, specifically, the relationship of a father and a son. It is in this context that the obedience we have promised must be understood. It is a context in which the father is called to truly be a father,

and the son to recognise his own sonship and the beauty of the fatherhood that has been given to him. As happens in the law of nature, no one chooses his own father, nor does one choose one's own sons. Therefore, we are all called, fathers and sons, to have a supernatural regard for one another, one of great reciprocal clemency and respect, that is to say the capacity to look at the other keeping always in mind the good Teacher who has brought him into being, and who always, ultimately, moulds him. Respect is, by definition, simply this: to look at someone while keeping Another in mind!

It is only in the context of “filial respect” that an authentic obedience is possible, one which is not only formal, a mere execution of orders, but one which is ardent, complete, attentive, which can really bring forth the fruits of conversion and of “new life” in him who lives it.

The promise is to the Ordinary at the time of ordination and to his “Successors”, since the Church always draws back from an excessive personalism: She has at heart the person, but not the subjectivism that detracts from the power and the beauty, both historical and theological, which characterise the Institution of obedience. The Spirit resides also in the Institution, since it is of divine origin. The Institution is charismatic, of its very nature, and thus to be freely bound by it in time (the Successors) means to “remain in the truth”, to persevere in Him, present and operative in his living body, the Church, in the beauty of the continuity of time, of ages, which joins us enduringly to Christ and to his Apostles.

Let us ask of the Handmaid of the Lord, the obedient one par excellence, of her who, even in weariness, sang her “Behold, do with me according to your Word”, the grace of a filial obedience, entire, joyful, and ready; an obedience which frees us from being the protagonists of our own selves and which can show the world that it is truly possible to give all to Christ and to be men fully real and authentic.

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