



The authority of those who suffer

1. From oppressive power to liberating authority

Speaking in an extremely abstract and simplified way it is possible to differentiate between two different modes of government or management regardless of the context, be it political or ecclesiastical, family or public. These two types of government can be defined by two words that have their origin in Roman politics: "potestas", power, on the one hand, and "auctoritas," authority, on the other.

The first type, defined as power, is based on a fundamental inequality, an asymmetry. Anyone who has power has an advantage over other people. This advantage may be based on knowledge, on the accumulation of economic resources or on the possibility of using superior physical, psychological or social violence. The sociologist Max Weber defined power with the now-classic formula: "Power means taking every opportunity of being able to assert one's own will within a social relationship, even despite resistance, and no matter what this opportunity is based on"¹ Whoever is powerful is able to maintain control of his or her sphere of dominance. He has the means to impose himself on his subjects, to eliminate all resistance and, in the worst cases, to destroy those who do not submit.

The second type of leadership, defined as authority, also presupposes an asymmetry. A person with authority also has an advantage over others. However, the type of relationship between a person with authority and the people who respect this authority is fundamentally different from power-based relations. Authority is not characterized by imposition and submission, but is primarily founded on a free and reciprocal recognition. In this kind of relation the "asymmetry" in experience, knowledge, social position or resources does not eliminate the fundamental equality between the two parties in the relationship. Furthermore, authority is not contrary to fraternity and never justifies superiority over other people. You can "take power", but you can never "take authority". The person who "has authority" owes it to a free and adult affirmation on the part of those who recognize it. Authority can never become a "possession".

¹ Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organisation*, Oxford University Press 1947, 152.

sion that cannot be lost", but rather one which has to be continuously re-earned and received anew. Whoever has authority, destroys it the moment he resorts to violence. Violent imposition and authority are essentially incompatible.

Not imposing your own will on others is by no means synonymous with a loss of authority or its self-suppression. This renunciation implies neither weakness nor an "anti-authoritarian" or "laissez-faire" attitude. Quite to the contrary, true authority needs people of great strength. Such people use their inner strength and energy not to keep others in a state of infantile dependence, but rather to encourage them to grow in every way: in their human, social, political and spiritual development

Also "liberating authority" has nothing at all to do with anarchy. To discern authority in a liberating way demands the use of all one's vital energies to create and firmly protect social spaces that make life flourish; that promote the development of persons and communities, that make free and respectful relationships possible. The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus, which are also the constitutions of my own congregation, say: "The Superior General has full authority over the Society ad aedificationem (in order to build it up)."² With authority the defenceless must be protected from those who exploit them both within and outside the community, without falling into the trap of paternalism or maternalism. The tragedy of authoritarian systems is the result of the way in which oppressed people seek to feel powerful by oppressing others who are weaker. (This, in my opinion, is one of the tragic roots of the scandal of sexual and physical abuse committed by priests and religious).

People with true authority are not bothered with trying to preserve their own power, but, on the contrary, are driven by the desire for other people to grow in autonomy and freedom of action. True authority increases in relation to the extent that it causes others to grow: Jesus frees the crippled woman from the demon that has bent her double, and protects her from authorities who want to prevent her healing by appeals to ritual law – thus endangering his own life. He uses his confident and vigorous authority to "empower her" so that she can straighten up on her own. He gives her back her human dignity, he liberates her to walk upright and free (cf. Lk 13: 10-17).

Application ad intra

What has been said so far can be taken for granted with regards to religious life. Certainly, in recent decades, religious congregations have changed their discourse with regards to the exercise of administration and authority. There is no doubt that there is also a great deal of good will directed towards putting it into practice. However, there are many concerns arising from the reality of everyday life. Can we take it for granted that superiors and formators, with authority, ensure that each Sister - from the novice to the most elderly – is able to develop "as God conceived her"? Or does it not happen all too often that the "formation processes" (both initial and ongoing) are more akin to a "Procrustean bed"? (Procrustes is an evildoer from Greek mythology who offered hospitality to solitary travellers. If the victims were tall and their body longer than the bed, then he cut the protruding parts of the body. If the victims were shorter than the bed, he stretched them by force. The "Procrustean bed" is, therefore, a metaphor for an arbitrary standard and for a brutally enforced conformity. Is there not still a dominant concern in the congregations that people "fit in" rather than being willing to accompany them on their fascinating and adventurous

² *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, N° 736.

journey to their very personal mystery and to their full self-realization? Is there not a predominant fear of those who exceed the norm? "What sticks out, gets cut off", as a German proverb has it.

A particularly sad variant of the "Procrustean bed" was the "formation" of African, Asian or Latin American sisters in foundations of European origin. In the name of religious formation their cultural characteristics were destroyed and subjected to a violent 'Europeanization'. Individuals were severely mutilated, separated from the deepest sources of their vitality and creativity. Have we really in the depths of our being overcome the arrogance of Eurocentrism and the mania of superiority associated with it? Have we Europeans really given up the "sovereignty of interpretation" concerning what religious life is and has to be? Can we serenely accept and respect the process of 'de-Europeanization' and the richness of cultural diversity: the many different and varied ways of living in community, of living out our personal mission, and of expressing our relationship with God?

Similar questions are arising with respect to the way human relationships are lived in congregations. In our discourse we have passed the vertical-hierarchical model, centred on the superior who then controls all the relationships of the sisters within the community and, even more particularly, the relationships they have outside it. There is no question that these models, suffered and internalized over the centuries, continue to act on an unconscious level, and therefore in a more subtle manner. Have formation processes actually freed themselves from the model of dependence and control, or do they still continue, in a hidden way, their destructive work? Do they actually promote and facilitate the development of adult relationships and recognize the fundamental value of friendship among the sisters and with the people we want to serve? An abyss separates the harmony and liveliness between mature adults who are secure in their own identity, and barren uniformity. In the final analysis, a community structured along lines of control and uniformity is of no use to its evangelical mission. The only model of community which commits us is the movement of Jesus: simple, fraternal and with great human warmth to welcome and share life with all those excluded from the banquet of the rich and powerful.

Application ad extra

These two conceptions of leadership can be illustrated also by using the "Meditation of the Two Standards"³ in the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola. Ignatius invites us to engage in an exercise of the imagination, imagining two opposing leaders, Christ and Lucifer. He describes the profile of these two modes of governance, poles apart, with metaphors which are both striking and primitive: Lucifer, the "mortal enemy of human nature" can be found established in Babylon "on a great throne of fire and smoke, horrible and frightening in its appearance." It is an impressive manifestation of power that is fascinating and, at times, almost inevitably, results in a first reaction of submission and servility. It is a power based on fear. Lucifer teaches his demons subtle tactics of seduction. He commands them to awaken in their followers, first of all, a greed for riches, then to make them susceptible to the wiles of vain ambition and pride. His cunning trick consists in seducing them with the false promise that those who submit to his rule will increase in power and prestige. But, in truth, this dynamic leads to a system of dependency, which destroys all self-determination

³ *Spiritual Exercises* No. 136-147.

and leads to a brutal subjugation. In the end, perpetrators and victims will find themselves trapped in the same "chains and nets."

The application of these primitive metaphors to the forces that today dominate much of the world is obvious. The arms industry, stock markets and rating agencies with their bombastic liturgies and symbols of power, are condemning countless human beings to misery. Just like the demons, the individuals who act, moneylenders and lobbyists, are faceless: they remain hidden behind a deceptive facade, behind "the smoke and fire."

The "other standard", the other leader that Ignatius presents to us is "Christ our Lord", resident in Jerusalem, "a humble place, beautiful and pleasant." No demonstration of power, but rather an invitation to poverty and humility. Ignatius wants to provoke us with the paradox that Christ "conquers" the whole world with a radical renunciation of all violence and imposition – and he invites his disciples to follow him on the same path. The world's motor, at the time of Ignatius of Loyola, as well as today, is greed for the accumulation of wealth and possessions. The prestige granted to a particular person, or a social group, is measured by the amount of their accumulated wealth. Those who do not submit to this logic are ridiculed and made to feel their impotence. The call of Christ to poverty and humility is an invitation to "reverse the course" of the logic of the world in a radical way. , In a speech given in Barcelona on November 6, 1989 ten days before his assassination, Ignacio Ellacuría said: "Only utopically and hopefully can one believe and have the courage to stand alongside all the poor and oppressed people in the world and with them to attempt to change history, to subvert it and throw it in another direction." Humility is not a perverse and self-destructive desire for humiliation, but rather it is the courage and the freedom to live in a radically counter-cultural way and a willingness to assume the consequences of this courage without a fuss. Revealing nets of dependency and bringing them into the open, unmasking the power games, the servilism and the voracity for profits disturbs the interests of the powerful and, for this very reason, attracts persecution and the cross as a matter of course. But it is only through those who have the courage to risk taking the path of Jesus, that the Kingdom of God can break into this real world and only through them is it possible for relationships between people to become truly human.

It is obvious that the Church in all its dimensions and on all levels, as well as the religious orders, can be attacked by the the mould of the "logic of the world". Even in our communities we live in a constant struggle between "the two kingdoms," between "the two standards". Therefore, to exercise authority within and outside the Church, we need people that have integrated all their vital and aggressive energies and are able to use them freely for the inevitable "battle". Certainly, the motivation that drives them is not the thirst for power, but the passion for life, the passion for the victims of power, which is Gods own passion. If we are to discover and denounce the structures (and the hidden people standing behind them) which subjugate and exploit people we need clear eyes and pure and honest hearts

Jesus *is* the incarnated "liberating authority" and his way of "governing" is the archetype and the "canon", the normative measure of any legitimate authority in the Church. However, in the early centuries of Christianity, the patriarchal model began to replace the style of Jesus. What a difference between the authority of Jesus and the good patriarch of the pastoral letters! On the one hand Jesus, who values the small and the marginalized, and maintains fraternal and equal relations with women -

and therefore challenges the priests and elders and freely faces Pilate, the representative of the Empire, who has the power to torture and kill him. On the other hand, as a model of the forthcoming ecclesial authority, the "one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence." (1 Tim 3:4). Forgive my question, which may seem naive or malicious, but which is totally sincere: How was it possible that the Church should move away so quickly from the words of Jesus: "You are all brothers. Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven" (Mt 23:8f)?

We know that things became even more complicated when the Church, in the fourth century, was no longer a persecuted minority and became the Church of the Empire, participating in and supporting its power. Evangelical authority was transformed into "potestas sacra", "sacred power". The Christian community ceased to be a martyrial Church in the way of Jesus, the first martyr, giving his life for the defence of victims. More and more, the Church became part of the world that produces victims, or at least tolerates their being treated as "collateral damage." This symbiosis between political and ecclesiastical power bears the serious danger that the Church may betray its essence, its mission, and may thus lose its authority, which has its only valid foundation in Jesus. It turned itself into a powerful institution that primarily defended its own interests. However, from its beginnings as a community of Jesus, the Church has only one right to exist:: to present the Gospel as a liberating and redeeming reality – in the midst of what is hassling, bedevilling and enslaving mankind here and now.

2. The Empty Chair

For the Catholic tradition, the concept of "representation" is essential to the understanding of authority in the Church.⁴ An echo of this is found in the rules and constitutions of orders and congregations. The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus speak in a very natural way of the Pope as the "Vicar of Christ our Lord," and the Superior as "one who holds the place of Christ our Lord." But, is it really possible to "represent", to "hold the place of" Christ, of "the Messiah"? And can this principle of the "opus operatum" be effective, the "representation" not by the authority or charisma of a particular person, but by virtue of a given assignment? Can Jesus' liberating authority really be institutionalized? Is it possible to represent the absolute authority of God in this world in which everything remains subjected to contingency and relativity?

One can assume, of course, that all this should not be understood in the manner of pharaohs and emperors, as an apotheosis that elevates a historical figure to the rank of the gods, nor in the way of rulers and leaders who "by the grace of God" subdued populations. In the course of modernity, the Church and theology have learned through a painful process that it is not possible to apply this model to the government of the Church and that the dictates of the time demand that spiritual authority and political power be separated. Far too late did the Second Vatican Council finally teach us that "representation" should not be understood as an anti-democratic concept that denies people's dignity and codifies as well as perpetuates top-down constructions of power.

⁴ Cf. J. B. Metz, "Zum „katholischen Prinzip“ der Repräsentation", in: id., *Zum Begriff der neuen Politischen Theologie. 1967-1997*, Mainz 1997, 192-196.

Ultimately, what is the true meaning of "representation" and "Vicar of Christ on earth," of being "in the place of Christ"? In effect, ecclesial and spiritual power is a paradox that exists only in the continuous nullification of itself. It betrays its essence and vocation at the very moment in which it "takes" the power, in which power is established as among the powerful of this world. On the contrary, the more it represents the authority of God, the authority of Christ, the more it remains only an indicator, a hand pointing outwards towards the greater Other. "Neither be called masters, for one is your master, the Christ" (Mt 23:10). The over long index finger of the Baptist that points to Christ crucified in Mathias Grünewald's altarpiece can serve as the symbol of this representation: "I am not. I am not the Christ" (John 1: 20-21).

Every "representation" of God's authority is subject to the "prohibition of images": "You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God" (Ex 20:4-5). The noblest task of spiritual authority is to keep free, decidedly, the space which belongs to God alone.

In the Jewish tradition there is the metaphor of the empty chair. During the Seder, the meal of the night of Pesach, a chair is left at the table for the prophet Elijah, which expresses the hope that he will return with the Messiah. Agnes Heller, a philosopher of Hungarian-Jewish origin who narrowly escaped the Nazi killing machine, interprets this metaphor in a brilliant way. "The empty chair is waiting for the Messiah. If anyone occupies this chair, you can be sure that he is a false or perverted Messiah. If someone takes the chair away, everything is over and the Spirit will leave the community. Politics cannot make use of this unoccupied chair, but as long as it is left where it is, exactly in the centre of the room, in which it remains motionless with its admonishing – and perhaps even pathetic - emptiness, political actors will have to deal with its existence. At least they can choose to deal with its existence. Everything else is pragmatism."⁵

If this requirement is applicable to any exercise of political power, it is even more valid for any exercise of spiritual authority. It does not allow for any "enthronement", for whoever sits upon the chair profanes it. Authority in the Church is legitimate only insofar as it decisively leaves as empty that space which does not belong to it.

3. "The terrible banality of evil" in the name of obedience

To speak of obedience in a world that has experienced the Enlightenment's critique is a very difficult matter: "Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity" resounds the Kantian motto. In a post-Enlightenment world the renunciation of self-determination is no longer considered a virtue, but a form of cowardice which does not dare to accept the responsibility for its own actions– in the final analysis, an immoral way to behave. To be guided by the policy and the will of others without reappraising it seems to be an alienation which is unworthy of an adult person. However, it is not only difficult but virtually impossible to speak of obedience – or even of obedience as a religious virtue – after the scary fascist and totalitarian systems of the twentieth century.

⁵ Cited in J. B. Metz, *Zum Begriff der neuen Politischen Theologie 1967-1997*, Mainz 1997, 180.

In 1961, the German-Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt witnessed the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem, as a journalist. Eichmann organized the transport of millions of Jews to concentration death camps. Her most horrible discovery was that of the "terrible banality of evil". This man, who sent thousands of human beings to their gruesome deaths, lacked any motive, nor was there anything grandiose in his perversion. Eichmann was simply a bureaucrat, an "administrative mass exterminator" who committed his crimes with a clear conscience, because he was performing the acts required by his duties, acting in obedience to "higher orders". Submission to authority thus showed itself to be a tool of barbarism.⁶

In Arendt's story it is jarring to read how Eichmann, in his defence, exalted "blind obedience" and "corpse-like obedience", a perverse echo of the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus.⁷ Nazi executioners, like the slayer of all the military dictatorships and totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century, justified themselves by saying that they acted moved by "due obedience". Since then, the word "obedience" has been definitively besmirched and spent.

With this in mind, can one hope to redeem obedience as a concept of religious life, of religious life renewed according to the Second Vatican Council? Of course we must remember that Ignatius of Loyola – in harmony with the whole tradition of religious life – poses one essential condition for obedience: to listen to the voice of the superior "as if it came from Christ our Lord," "in all cases in which there is no evidence of sin" and "in all things to which obedience can be extended."⁸ In no way does Ignatius suspend individual responsibility, nor does he deny the dignity of every person's conscience or deliver it to the whims of a superior. But this will not suffice as an answer if we honestly expose ourselves to just criticism.

The vow of obedience, religious obedience, can ultimately only be addressed to God.⁹ In traditional language, fulfilling the will of God is the only legitimate reason for religious obedience. For this very reason, the truly obedient are also truly free and are therefore a threat to the powerful. They are fully aware that they are unconditionally committed to the ultimate authority, and consequently they are free from all kinds of servilism. Even if their own lives are at risk, they have the courage to brave any penultimate authority: they are liberated to see clearly and to walk upright in the footsteps of Jesus.

The decisive question is, however,,: how do we find the will of God in the daily reality of our lives without deceiving ourselves and without lapsing into infantilism? Ultimately, is there nothing for us to do but to protect the "empty chair" that leads us to the transcendent mystery of God and, thus, at the same time protects the individual conscience? Or is there ultimately a true mediation, a "real presence", a "sacrament"

⁶ Cf. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, New York 2006, first published 1963.

⁷ "denying with blind obedience every opinion and personal judgment to the contrary, in all things being led by the order of the superior ... convinced as we are that everyone who lives under obedience should allow himself to be led and governed by Providence, through the superior, as if he were a dead body." *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, No. 547.

⁸ *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, No. 547 and 549.

⁹ Cf. *Code of Canon Law*, cann.1191 y 654.

of the supreme authority, "materialized" in a real and concrete way in this world that, in its own right, demands - and deserves – our unconditional obedience?

4. The authority of those who suffer

"I only know one authority that cannot be withdrawn by any enlightenment or emancipation: the authority of those who suffer,"¹⁰ states the German theologian Johann Baptist Metz, in a conversation with the Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize winner, Elie Wiesel.

The authority of God is certainly not realised in some kind of apotheosis, in the manifestations of power – neither of political power nor of sacral power – but rather "sub specie contrarii", in that which appears to be its opposite. The plenitude of God's authority is truly present, has body and visibility, in the most vulnerable, in the powerless, in the victims. Jesus himself, in his famous parable of the final judgment (Matthew 25) puts the whole history of mankind under "the authority of those who suffer." They are the only authority in which the authority of God who is Judge of all humanity, of the whole world and at all times, becomes manifest. "The moral conscience constitutes itself in obedience to their authority. What we call the voice of conscience is our reaction to the visitation by the suffering of others."¹¹

The present dominant political system, liberal democracy, has an ideology strongly focused on the "equality" of all human beings. As a result, with good or bad intentions, it often simulates a fantasy world, presenting the illusion of an egalitarian world without suffering, where everyone possesses the same opportunities. But this fiction has nothing to do with our real world. Precisely because our world is characterized by the scandal of inequality and injustice, does the "partiality" of God need a "representation" in concrete history, for the benefit of the victims, the marginalized and the excluded. "The Church does not exist in order to represent political power, but to remind us of political impotence."¹² This, ultimately, is truly the legitimization of every authority in the Church.

Those who die of hunger or violence as a result of a scandalous inequality; migrants, beaten back by the USA and the European Union on their southern borders; political prisoners, indeed all victims: – they all represent the highest authority which we, without any ifs or buts, must obey. No instance, not even the highest hierarchical instance in the Church, stands above this authority. A mature sense of obedience and mature love of the Church know that this is the noblest vocation of religious life – the service which we indeed owe the Church – to submit to the authority of the victims and to plead prophetically for the whole Church to be determined and configured by this authority. If the Church does not do this, she disfigures the face of Jesus Christ.

How to live the vow of obedience when faced with "the authority of those who suffer"?

¹⁰ Johann Baptist Metz / Elie Wiesel, *Hope against Hope: Johann Baptist Metz and Elie Wiesel Speak Out on the Holocaust*, New York 1999.

¹¹ Cfr. J. B. Metz, *Zum Begriff der neuen Politischen Theologie 1967-1997*, Mainz 1997, 203.

¹² Vgl. J. B. Metz, *Zum Begriff der neuen Politischen Theologie. 1967-1997*, Mainz 1997, 194.

Basically, "blind obedience" – in the distorted sense – is an attitude of convenience and unworthy of adult conduct: to refer to the command of another, to carry out an order and escape, in this manner, personal responsibility and the consequences of one's actions. "Those who suffer" are also "issuing orders" which commit us in an unconditional and radical way, but this does not at all cancel our individual responsibility. To obey the command of the victims does not make us infantile, but on the contrary requires of us a free and adult act which comes from the depths of our person. It is exactly this act which makes us truly human persons.

To live our vow of obedience under the authority of those who suffer is a complex process with many dimensions: personal and communal, mystical and political. But it all starts with something simple and basic: awakening from our narcissism and our self-referential world, and opening our eyes and hearts to the suffering of other human beings. The key thing is to resist the temptation to look the other way or to take refuge in apathy. In the parable of the "Good Samaritan," Jesus says that a man had fallen into the hands of bandits who robbed and beat him. A priest and a Levite saw the injured, but had "more important interests" with which to deal. But those looking for "God" in the sense of Jesus do not know any "more important interests". God is waiting for them in their oppressed brothers or sisters, and they are not going to find God anywhere else. Christianity knows no other mysticism than the mysticism of "open eyes".

And so how must we respond to what our eyes see and our heart feels in the face of a human being who is suffering? In the most simple and natural way: making sure that his wounds are cared for, that he has something to eat, somewhere to sleep and that his immediate needs are dealt with. Doing this is not an act of generosity, but rather this means in a very elementary way obeying the authority of those who suffer. A long process of discernment is not necessary in order to decide what to do. Quite to the contrary, it cries out for every upright person to respond in this way. This experience corresponds to what Ignatius describes as "the first time one can make a good and healthy choice": the will of God is revealed in an immediate and unsettling way. "Without doubting or even being able to doubt, carries out what was proposed"¹³ - otherwise it would be a clear case of disobedience. In the words of a modern philosopher: "Look closely and you'll know what you have to do."¹⁴

It would be a big step if we would only act sincerely and unreservedly in those situations that make demands on us in a clear and obvious way. But we know that life is often much more complex and ambiguous than that. Firstly, because it is not always obvious which measures are really those that will benefit the life of another person and, secondly, because most of the time the perpetrators are not the odd robber out there, but people who become really dangerous by being part of the "nets of evil". These "nets" can be organized crime, international trafficking with people and organs, or neo-liberal economic politics and the greed for oil or "rare-earths", or...

In addition, there is a disturbing and difficult question: how is it possible to translate the message of the parable of the Good Samaritan into the context of a globalized world? Today it is not just one person who has fallen into the hands of some bandits,

¹³ Cf. *Spiritual Exercises* No. 175.

¹⁴ Hans Jonas, cited in J. B. Metz, *Mystik der offenen Augen. Wenn Spiritualität aufbricht*, Freiburg 2011.

but rather a decisive part of humanity that is at their mercy. A serious and profound discernment is needed here in order to understand how to defend the lives of victims in the face of this mass threat. With regards to this, obeying "the authority of those who suffer" demands mobilising all the scientific insights as well as all the creativity and imagination available to us and using our drive and energy in order to create spaces in which life can flourish in this real world - so disfigured by sin and the structures of sin.

What Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great martyr of the German Lutheran Church, said in his historical context, is still true today: it is no sufficient "to assist the victims under the wheel," we are required to "block the spokes in order to stop the wheel."¹⁵ In this dimension, mercy and passionate love must be translated into well-thought-out strategies. With the shrewdness of the Gospel we, as religious congregations, are called to become aware of our advantage and our experience as one of the first "global players" in human history and to use it as a trump card: using the international networks both within our congregation and also in cooperation with other congregations, to build up relationships with all those who struggle for the humanization of the planet.

Responding "to the authority of those who suffer" with discernment – and thus living out our vow of obedience - is an ongoing and demanding task. It is a task that calls for the surrender of every person in their innermost being, and is a task that requires a community commitment which is both constant and dogged. Basically, it is an exercise in "contemplation", the exercise of awareness and fidelity, looking and listening, so that "the authority of the victims", the "sacrament of God's will" can speak to us. What is necessary, is a heart that listens patiently in order to understand what it means for us in concrete terms and in this particular situation to obey the victims.

If we are serious about this concept of obedience to the authority of those who suffer, what are we to make of the role of a superior in a religious community? Has this role become superfluous? Certainly not, but a rigorous effort is required in order to rethink its function, going back to the origins of religious life. There is no doubt that even superiors are under "the authority of those who suffer" and committed to it. Exactly because of this, however, is the authority of the superior more necessary than ever. Her most noble task is to watch carefully over this, to ensure that the whole community submits to the only legitimate representation of God's authority in a continuous process. The superior's role is to call for discernment insistently, above all ensuring that the whole community gets in gear "ready and diligently"¹⁶: to seek physical proximity to the poor and excluded, sharing with them their life and their misery, learning their language and seeking and enjoying their friendship. In accordance with this, tremendous hope is given by Pope Francis defining his ministry in exactly this way, thus opening a path which we can follow when he says: "The Church is called to step outside herself and to go to the margins, not just geographical ones, but also those which are existential: those of the mystery of sin, pain, injustice, those of ignorance and lack of faith, those of ignorance, those of every form of misery."

¹⁵ Cf. D. Bonhoeffer, *DBW 14*, p. 421.

¹⁶ *Spiritual Exercises* No. 91.

If we decide to submit ourselves definitely to "the authority of the suffering," we will be moving towards a profoundly evangelical renewal of religious life, towards a life which is both authentic and fruitful, lived according to the evangelical counsels. And our most vulnerable brothers and sisters will become our true champions, showing us the way into the mystery of God.