Wednesday, March 25, 2015
5:45 P.M.
Immaculate Conception Chapel
The Pontifical North American College
Reflection on the Promise of Obedience

"On the Diaconal and Priestly Promise of Obedience to the Bishop"

by

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In the name of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

In the Book of Psalms (Ps 89:34-35) we read these words: "I will not take my mercy from him, nor will I betray my bond of faithfulness. I will not violate my covenant; the promise of my lips I will not alter".

Love has its own words. One of the words that best expresses the truth and the power of love is "promise"; and so the verb "to promise". Those who love somebody usually make promises: "I promise I'll be always near you", "I promise I'll help you", "I promise I'll be faithful", "I promise I'll make you happy", "I promise you the moon…" "I promise I'll give you my time, my home, my love." Promises are proper of the language of love, human love and divine love as well.

God himself makes promises. The history of salvation results from the fulfillment of God's promises. The Promise made to Abraham to generate a son, a people, a descendancy as large as the stars of the sky, the promise made to Moses to rescue his people from slavery, the promise made to David to have a kingdom firm forever, the promise of a Redeemer. The Gospels are full of promises: "I'll be with you always, to the end of time" (Mt 28:20), "everyone who has left houses, brothers, sisters, father, mother, children or land, for the sake of my name, will receive a hundred time as much, and also inherit eternal life" (Mt 19:29); "anyone who does eat my flesh and drink my blood has eternal life, and I shall raise him on the last day" (John 6:54). Up until the most important promise: "this is my body which will be given up for you". In a sense, if we ask "who are the Christians?" we should answer that the Christians are those who believed, and believe in the promises made by Jesus. The most

blessed Eucharist we now contemplate here, on the altar, is the pledge of Jesus' most important and deep promise: I'll be always with you…

If it is proper of lovers, then, to make promises; to fulfill them is a proof of the faithfulness of their love. It is reasonable, then, that God himself calls us to make our own promises. When considering the promises that deacons and priests make during the ceremony of their ordination —and more generally, when considering promises that all Christian make— we must always refer them to the language of love. Promises do not belong to the language of efficiency, of mere organization or productivity. In the Church, being faithful to a promise is not only a matter of human loyalty, it is a matter of love.

If this is true for all the promises deacons and priests make before their ordination, it is especially true for the promise of obedience. It is obedience to the Bishop, but is ultimately, obedience to God the Father, in Christ his Son. There is no Christian obedience without love. Even when obedience could meet incomprehension, loneliness, unfruitfulness; in a word, when obedience meets the cross, it must always be informed by love, because a cross without love is not the cross of Jesus.

During the liturgy of Ordination, the last of seven commitments that deacons and priests make manifest has (in Latin) the following words: *Promittis mihi et successoribus meis reverentiam et oboedientiam? – Promitto – Qui coepit in te opus bonum, Deus, ipse perficiat*. This is the promise which closes all the other commitments the candidate makes, to which he answers *I will*. In a sense, the promise of obedience —obedience to Bishop, obedience to God, obedience to those who help us to understand God's will— is a word of love able to summarize all the previous commitments, a word which identifies us with Christ, as Son obedient to the Father. The perfect living of the Son before the Father in the eternal Trinitarian life, all referring to Him as his most perfect image, here in history becomes obedience, in the time of creation becomes free and worthy obedience.

Here is the well known reading by the Epistle to Philippians (Ph 2:5-9): "Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus, Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. Because of this, God greatly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name".

If the Son is the perfect image of obedience, then we draw a first relevant consequence: our obedience must always be a *filial* obedience, because it is the obedience that a son lives. Actually, the adjective "filial" is able to characterize the entire Christian life. It applies to many concepts: filial prayer, filial love, filial work, filial freedom, and filial obedience. In Christianity everything must be filial, since everything must have the seal of the Son, that is, everything must be lived according to the Spirit of the Son.

St. Augustine had a valuable insight on obedience and freedom when he wrote that our freedom is the freedom of a son, not the freedom of a slave. The slave is free when he runs away from the jail; the son, to be free, needs not to abandon the father's house. Our obedience must be nurtured by an authentic filial freedom, all the time.

Today, March 25, Solemnity of the Annunciation of the Lord, we have in our Mother Mary a wonderful example of obedience. Many times we have contemplated the page by St. Luke describing the dialogue between her and the angel Gabriel. If we look for some adjectives to appreciate Mary's obedience, I would suggest three: *quick*, *intelligent* and *generous*. Her obedience is a prompt obedience, also it is a thoughtful obedience, in which Mary applies all her intelligence, and finally, it is an obedience perfectly formed by charity, without any restrictions, fully entrusted to God's providence.

«Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." But Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?" And the angel said to her in reply, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. […] Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word."» (Lk 1:30-38).

Mary answers quickly to the Word of God. She does not say: "well, you are asking me a very important task, you know… please come back in a week; I'll think about that…" In Mary's dialogue everything is resolved in a very short time. This does not imply that our obedience has to be superficial or hurried… A quick obedience perceives the importance of whom is before us: when God calls, we have to answer him as soon as possible. This quick

answer can be only the result of a continuous frequenting of the Word of God: when we are always in the presence of God, when we have a constant life of prayer, then we will recognize easily God's call and we are ready to answer "Yes": here I am. Mary's promptness is, for us, a marvelous insight into her life of prayer, into her acquaintance with God.

Here is a comment by John Henry Newman on the way we have to answer to God's call. "Such are the instances of Divine calls in Scripture, and their characteristic is this; to require instant obedience, and next to call us we know not to what; to call us on in the darkness. Faith alone can obey them […] For in truth we are not called once only, but many times; all through our life Christ is calling us. He called us first in Baptism; but afterwards also; whether we obey His voice or not, He graciously calls us still. If we fall from our Baptism, He calls us to repent; if we are striving to fulfill our calling, He calls us on from grace to grace, and from holiness to holiness, while life is given us. Abraham was called from his home, Peter from his nets, Matthew from his office, Elisha from his farm, Nathanael from his retreat; we are all in course of calling, on and on, from one thing to another, having no resting-place, but mounting towards our eternal rest, and obeying one command only to have another put upon us. He calls us again and again, in order to justify us again and again,—and again and again, and more and more, to sanctify and glorify us." (*Parochial and Plain Sermons*, vol. 8, n. 2).

The second characteristic of Mary's obedience is her intelligent and thoughtful answering to God. She asks what she does not understand. But, behold, without putting in doubt the angel's words —as Zacharias did—; she asks in order to know *how* God's word was to be applied to her. And she does it recalling to her mind what she knows and what she foresees, projects and consequences. In our Christian life, we have to obey in the same way. That is, applying all our intelligence. God needs all that we are, heart and mind, human experience, skills, virtues, expertise… all that must be put in the service of God, of the Church, of our brothers. In a sense, this a consequence of the mystery of the Incarnation. Jesus is not only perfect God, but also perfect man. All his humanity is put at the service of redemption.

Finally, Mary's obedience is generous. Her answer "I am the handmaid of the Lord" shows her intention to be fully (perfectly) disposed for God's plans. There is no measure, no constraints, no calculations, in her will and in her love. The measure of love is that love has no measure. In our life we will find many times the temptation of "calculus", that is, the attitude to ponder for and against, to measure and foresee the consequences of our personal

commitment to God. Again, the difference between a slave (or an employee, if you prefer) and a son, is that the former is always calculating rights and duties, searching for a perfect formula; the latter, on the other hand, fully entrusts himself to his father's love and providence. Here is a crucial point for us: be intelligent, but without too much calculation; be responsible, but without self-seeking.

Let's ask the intercession of Our Lady, so that our Christian virtues, obedience in particular, shall be always informed by charity. Let's ask the grace of the Lord, so that we can always speak the language of love, a language that requires promises, promises to which we want to be faithful. Amen