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## RECTOR'S CONFERENCE

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“Obedience lived out in Love”

*Miserando atque eligendo* – “Lowly and yet chosen.” This is the Episcopal motto of Pope Francis which he chose back in 1992 as Auxiliary Bishop of Buenos Aires. In our new Holy Father, we certainly have a model of meekness, humility, and evangelical littleness. This is the lowliness to which he refers – the lowliness of the person who knows that before God they are truly nothing and allows God to use them as He sees fit. Mother Teresa would often say of herself: “See what God can do with nothing?” and further reflect on the fact that she “was simply a pencil in the hand of God.” Lowliness, humility, evangelical littleness is not a sign of weakness, but a sign of supernatural strength, for “God has cast the mighty from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly” (Luke 1:52) and as St. Paul reminds us, “It is when we are weak that we are strong.” (2 Cor. 12:10). It is in this context that I wish to lead us into a reflection on priestly obedience. Trust the Lord to be with you always on this journey and once again hear echoed in your heart: “‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me” (2 Cor. 12:9).

“Do you promise respect and obedience to me and my successors?” I do! This is what you are about to enter into as deacons and priests. We place our hands inside that of our bishop at ordination demonstrating our complete subservience to the needs of the Church. However this servitude does not hinder our freedom, but liberates us ever more to be radically available to serve the people of God. St. Paul reminds us: “Whatever you do, do from the heart, as for the Lord and not for others, knowing that you will receive from the Lord the due payment of the inheritance; be slaves of the Lord Christ” (Col. 3:23-24). The definition of obedience is not “convenience.” This at times is a death to self – but a death that leads to greater life through surrender and trust. Obedience lived out in love is a freeing and life-giving gift that the Lord gives back to us.

Obedience is an expression of our sonship; that of being sons to our Bishop. We are called to live in “communion and collaboration with the ministry of the Bishop” as Venerable John Paul II wrote (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 17). We are called to be men of communion and collaboration, coworkers with our bishops in the vineyard of the Lord. Again, at ordination we place our hands inside the hands of our spiritual father and promise respect and obedience to him and his successors. Respect and obedience! Do we realize the meaning of this gesture? Do we truly respect our bishops, even when we might respectfully disagree with them? Do we pray for them daily and their apostolic ministry and reflect on the weight of *their* responsibility? Are we a part of the problem in our dioceses, or do we try to lighten the load of the bishop by being helpful, humble and obedient to the needs of our local churches? And don’t forget the last line about the unknown future regarding the bishop’s successors. We are making a blind statement and solemn promise before God and man to respect and be obedient to someone we don’t even yet know.

Who knows, we might not even like our next bishop on a human level, but on the spiritual plane we are called to love him, pray for him, respect him and be obedient to him. Thus there is always a danger for us of gravitating to the bishop of a diocese and not simply the diocese for its own sake. We wed the people of the diocese at ordination, them to us and us to them, until death do us part. Bishops will come and go (as do Popes!), but we and the people stay. Certainly draw close to your bishop, but realize that we belong to the diocese regardless of the one exercising the apostolic ministry. As an aside, if you have any serious and unresolved issues with your own father, I ask you to bring that to spiritual direction and counseling if needed. Unresolved “father issues” will affect your relationship with authority figures for the rest of your life. Please acknowledge them and expose them to the light of Christ that He might heal your heart of any trauma, verbal or physical abuse, absenteeism, or neglect. Bishop Lynch has told me more than once that the priests that he has the most difficulties with regarding authority are those who have unresolved problems from their childhood – please allow Christ to heal you and set you free.

Occasionally when a person is given a particularly challenging assignment I hear the phrase come out of their mouths: “I didn’t sign up for this!” as if they somehow are being mishandled by the Church. Well brothers, guess what? You actually did sign up for this! Through the years of seminary formation and even more so after ordination, we must trust and believe that the Father speaks through those men who are our *episcopoi* – our overseers, our bishops. Even when given an assignment of seeming distaste on a human level trust that God is working through all of this and that we can never go wrong by being obedient. Blessed Columba Marmion reminds us: “It is *impossible* that Our Lord should command you by the voice of obedience to undertake anything which would be detrimental to your soul. It will seem to you at times that the task imposed is above your strength but God is *bound* to give you all the light and grace necessary to fill an office in which He Himself places you” (*Union with God*, 179).

When I was first discerning the call to the priesthood, I attended a picnic sponsored by the vocation’s office. In my heart I was hearing the voice of Christ as he spoke to his first disciples: “Drop your nets and follow me.” He certainly was calling, but I was on the fence regarding my response. My bishop at the time, the now Archbishop Emeritus of Miami, had spoken to me earlier in the evening, but when he was leaving and saw me sitting on a picnic table talking to a seminarian, he walked up to me and gave me a little Italian slap on the check and said “The Lord spoke to the Apostles, ‘Drop your nets and follow me.’” With that, Bishop Favalora turned and walked away. I had the grace that day to experience the prophetic voice of our bishops as they speak to us. It was that day that I made the decision to enter St. John Vianney as I heard God speak prophetically through the bishop. Since that day I have always had confidence in the voice of my bishop when he invites me to follow Christ in one way or another.

Now, let me also be clear, that we no longer live in a Church of blind obedience. The vast majority of our bishops desire to enter into a respectful dialogue with us. If you feel in conscience that a task chosen for you is not within your power or competence, then you express that to your bishop with the utmost respect. If, after he has all of this information at his disposal, he still needs you for a particular task, then you embrace it as the will of the Father! St. Paul reminds us: “Be slaves of Christ the Lord” (Col. 3:24). At the end of the day, this may entail the embracing of the Cross, but as Pope Francis said in his first homily: “when we walk without the Cross, when we build without the Cross, when we profess a Christ without the Cross ... we aren’t disciples of the Lord. We are worldly, we are bishops, priests, cardinals, popes, but not disciples of the Lord” (VIS, 14 March 2013).

Our obedience is to be lived out joyfully. And as Blessed Teresa of Calcutta would tell her sisters, it must be lived out “with a smile!” Blessed Columba Marmion wrote: “Your priestly obedience must be essentially supernatural, based on faith and charity. It must come from the bottom of your heart and be eager and joyous, given because of the love you have for Christ and souls” (*Christ the Ideal of the Priest*, 124).

If we do not live out obedience in a spirit of loving and trustful abandonment, then bitterness and cynicism creep into our hearts and hinder our ministry. Pope Francis commented on this in his address to the College of Cardinals: “Let us never give in to pessimism, to that bitterness that the devil offers us every day. Do not give in to pessimism and discouragement. We have the firm certainty that the Holy Spirit gives the Church with His mighty breath, the courage to persevere and also to seek new methods of evangelization, to bring the Gospel to the ends of the earth” (VIS 15 March 2013). A seminarian or priest who has a sense of entitlement or who wants to serve on his own terms is not the man of the New Evangelization that the Church needs today.

This third of the evangelical counsels is the crowning jewel of our promises at ordination. When we are obedient sons of the Church, then all else falls into place because we are simply faithful to all else that is asked of us. We are to see the three promises we make as completely integrated to one another. If one of our promises is neglected, then they all suffer. It is a three legged stool or tripod that keeps us firmly grounded in Christ and in our vocation to the priesthood. As we have previously spoken of the promise of embracing the Liturgy of the Hours and Chaste Celibacy, this third leg of the tripod allows us to embrace the *diakonia* and servitude to which Jesus calls us: – “At the end of the day, after we have done all that we have been commanded to do, say ‘we are useless servants, we have done no more than we have been commanded to do’” (Luke 17:10).

Let us be men of integration that find meaning in all that we do as servants of the Lord. We serve God and not man. As St. Paul wrote: “If I were striving to please man, I certainly would not be pleasing God” (Gal. 1:10). We know the word obedience finds its root in the word for listening – listen, trust, and live it out in love! This entails a balance between abandonment and discernment. Allow me to offer two simple examples. The first is one of failure and the second of success. There was a priest who I was close to who began a dynamic ministry and outreach in the parish in which he was the associate. When the bishop asked him to move, he begged the bishop to stay stating that there was no one who could take his place (i.e. pride!). The next year came around and he adamantly pushed back this time with the same excuse. This man who had been very prayerful and dedicated in his service left within months with a beautiful Latina with whom he had fallen in love. I have often reflected on this scenario and believe in the core of my being that he would still be an effective priest today had he been obedient – any ministry that depends solely on us, at least in our own minds, has gone awry. The second example is that of one of my former students. This young priest had a great experience in his first assignment and was thriving. His bishop called him with his second assignment and he was devastated. He called me distraught saying that he wasn’t sure that he could ever love any other parish as much as he loved his first assignment (as an aside, your first parish will hopefully always hold a special place in your hearts). My first and very pastoral response to him was “shut up and calm down!” and that he needed to be docile, obedient, and trust in the voice of his bishop. I assured him that he indeed would be given the grace to love and be loved by his new flock. Within the first months I received the long awaited phone call: “These people are so wonderful and I love them so much, thank you.” Remember, the people of God are the same wherever we go and they are simply longing for us to offer them ourselves and love them – and in return they offer the same. The abandonment and resignation at every change for us (and they will be legion) is not simply a challenge, but a

grace when it is lived in love – love for Christ and the faithful. “Fear is useless, what is needed is trust” (Mark 5:36).

Now these two examples remind us of the big moments which only come every few years, but then there are what I would call subordinated obediences (*sic*) that appear daily on our path.

Are we faithfully and joyfully obedient in the following four areas?

1. To the Holy Father and the teachings of the Universal Church? When we take the Oath of Fidelity we promise that we will follow those teachings which are definitive and even non-definitive. I have spoken to many priests who have either left active ministry on their own accord or who have been removed and virtually every one of them would like to turn back the clock if they could. One particular conversation was remarkable to me. It was with a gentleman who became a very successful business and family man and he said to me with remorse: “My mistake was when I began to think that I was smarter than the Church, that I knew more and better than her – that was my downfall.” Trust the structures we have in place to lead us closer to Christ and to protect us at times even from ourselves.
2. To our Bishop as our spiritual father and the apostle given to us by Christ to shepherd the local Church that we are a part of? To local diocesan norms and his guidance? There will be times you will disagree, but our task is to be faithful and assist the bishop in “building up the body of Christ” (cf. Ephesians 4:12), and not take as our theme that of Frank Sinatra song: “I did it my way.”
3. To our pastor and the people of the parish? You will be asked at times by both pastor and faithful to do what you do not want to do. Think of Our Lord’s words to Peter: “Amen, amen, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to dress yourself and go where you wanted; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go” (John 21:18). How true this is in the life of a priest in the parish.
4. To the Rector and the administration and faculty of the seminary? You learn obedience now and if you think that following the recommendations and guidance of the dean of men, the formation team, and the Rule of Life are superfluous, please think again and reassess your desire to take a promise of obedience.

But what about when we are displeased or concerned with one of the aforementioned owed obediences? First of all pray about it and bring it to spiritual direction. Speak to the Lord in prayer and listen (*obedire*) to what God might be saying to you. Then, notice I called them sub-ordinated (*sic*) obedience. In other words, there is an order in which we follow to express our particular challenge or concern. There is a proper ordering and thus we don’t go right to the top. For example, if you have a problem at the seminary (but certainly not here!) you don’t simply go right to the pope. Part of obedience is going through the legitimate channels and to the proper authority first – that is why we have a hierarchy, which literally means, a holy ordering. And if you don’t know who you should talk to or bring an issue to, seek the counsel of your spiritual director as well as trusted friends of good judgment. This is the path Our Lord set before us in Matthew’s Gospel – “‘If your brother sins [against you], go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have won over your brother. If he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, so that ‘every fact may be established on the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ If he refuses to listen to them, tell the church” (Matthew 18:15-17). Circumventing and being subversive in the order of obedience is certainly not what the evangelical council is all about, rather such actions can be destructive and divisive. If we have an issue that needs to be dealt with, we must stand up and bring it forward ourselves, we must own it and share it with the proper person first, and then if needed their superior. One day as pastors you will understand how

important this when a parishioner writes to the bishop to complain about you and you didn't even know there was a problem – and trust me, it *will* happen.

Obedience is about being faithful in the big things and the little things. If you cannot be faithful in the small things, then why should you be trusted with greater? (cf. Luke 16:10). Activities such as house jobs, pastoral work, our studies, the daily horarium – these small things matter, and we build up virtue by embracing them joyfully. Be little, be small, be lowly, be humble, be docile, in a word, be obedient! St. Paul's letter to the Philippians reminds us that we were saved through Christ's obedience to the Father. Christ's obedience is his salvific offering of love to the Father for us (cf. Phil. 2:7-8), and the author of Hebrews writes, Christ learned obedience from what he suffered (cf. Heb. 5:8). Our Lord Jesus was obedient to the will of the Father, and thus we are called to follow His supreme and salvific example of obedience even or especially when it entails the Cross.

We turn now to our Mother during these *33 Days of Glory*: let us pray with Mary and learn from her every day as we offer the *Magnificat*:

“My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant. From this day all generations will call me blessed: the Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his Name. He has mercy on those who fear him in every generation. He has shown the strength of his arm, he has scattered the proud in their conceit. He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly” (Luke 1:47-52).

Are we weak enough, little enough, and humble enough to be the strong men of obedience that God and the Church need us to be? Let us ask Our Lady to help us imitate her *Fiat*. Hail Mary...