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Obedience in the Church and in the Society of Jesus

JÖRG NIES, S.J.

“We must get rid of the legal formalism to which our obedience has degenerated.”¹ This was written by the German Jesuit Alfred Delp (1907–45) during his imprisonment between September 1944 and February 1945. However, the outcome of the trial against him was already decided.² Delp, like many others, was ultimately condemned to death for his political convictions and social commitment, which were an expression of his faith. On February 2, 1945, the thirty-seven-year-old Jesuit was executed by hanging.

Today, Delp is known as a resistance fighter against Nazism. He was someone who not only experienced the devastating consequences of a problematic and widespread understanding of obedience but also had to pay for it with his life. This conception of obedience consists in abandoning all personal responsibility and relegating it to a conformist understanding of law.

In *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963), the philosopher and publicist Hannah Arendt (1906–75) showed how powerful and significant this understanding was, especially for National Socialism.³ Adolf Eichmann (1906–62), who was responsible for organizing the deportation of Jews under the Nazi regime, was accused in Jerusalem in 1961 of the murder of millions of Jews. In his defense, he explicitly addressed obedience and referred to the philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) and his understanding of duty.⁴ Eichmann claimed he had merely done his duty, meaning that he had not only obeyed orders but had also followed the law.⁵

Delp would have described this position as “legal formalism,” which limits action to dutifully obeying laws. At the same time, it should be noted that Delp initially addressed his critique of obedience not primarily to society as a whole but to his own religious order, the Society of Jesus. In fact, the Jesuits were long considered promoters of

1. Alfred Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften 4. Aus dem Gefängnis*, ed. Roman Bleistein (Frankfurt: Knecht, 1984), 325 (my translation): “Wir müssen von dem legalen Formalismus, zu dem unser Gehorsam entartet ist, loskommen.”

2. Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften 4*, 358–60. On Delp’s life and the trial, see Jörg Nies, “Alfred Delp (1907–1945): Un bravo luchador a la ignaciana,” *Manresa* 94 (2022): 201–4.

3. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 2006).

4. Though Eichmann’s understanding of Kant has to be questioned, in the trial “to the surprise of everybody, Eichmann came up with an approximately correct definition of the categorical imperative” (Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 136). Arendt reflects on Eichmann’s interpretation and concludes: “Whatever Kant’s role in the formation of the little man’s mentality in Germany may have been, there is not the slightest doubt that in one Eichmann did indeed follow Kant’s precepts: a law was a law, there could be no exceptions.” Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 137. In an interview, she later commented: “Quite an impertinent remark, of course, isn’t it? On Herr Eichmann’s part. After all, Kant’s whole ethics amounts to the idea that every person, in every action, must reflect on whether the maxim of his action can become a general law. In other words [...], it really is the complete opposite, so to speak, of obedience! Each person is a lawgiver. In Kant, nobody has the right to obey.” *Hannah Arendt: The Last Interview and Other Conversations* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2013), 49.

5. See Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 135.

obedience. When Eichmann described blind obedience and the “obedience of corpses” (*Kadavergehorsam*),⁶ he was speaking of a concept of obedience that had a direct parallel with the fundamental texts of the Jesuit order, whether he knew it or not.

The *Constitutions* of the Society of Jesus speak of “blind obedience” with regard to the governance of the superior, through whom the Jesuit should be guided “as if he were a lifeless body, which allows itself to be carried to any place and treated in any way; or an old man’s staff, which serves at any place and for any purpose in which the one holding it in his hand wishes to employ it.”⁷ The phrase “cuerpo morto,” the dead body, becomes “cadaver”⁸ in the Latin version of the text, from which the concept of cadaver obedience is derived.

But what is the background and context that led to the phrasing of this Jesuit understanding of obedience?

Ignatius of Loyola (c.1491–1556) is generally considered the founder of the Jesuits. With the centripetal force of the *Spiritual Exercises*, he gathered a group of companions. From this nucleus, the Society of Jesus emerged, and from it Ignatius became the first general superior. The prominent position given to Ignatius, however, can hide the importance of others. One such influential Jesuit is Juan Alfonso de Polanco (1517–76), whose written account of the Jesuit charism, and therefore a defining account of a Jesuit understanding of obedience, was and has remained one of the Society’s foundational works.

In 1548, as secretary of the Society of Jesus, an office he assumed in 1547 and held for twenty-five years, Polanco wrote a letter on obedience to Andrés de Oviedo (1518–77), the rector of the college in Gandía at the time.⁹ It is remarkable how large parts of the writing are only a partial response to Oviedo regarding his question of taking a longer period of time off and instead are a fundamental exposition of obedience. In the early 1540s, Ignatius had already explained why obedience should be “blind,”¹⁰ but it was Polanco who used the expression “cuerpo morto” to describe obedience in 1551 in a letter he addressed to Urbano Fernandes (d.1553), the rector of the College of Coimbra.¹¹ Though the text can be seen as part of a series of letters on obedience written in relation to the so-called crisis of Portugal, the rising importance of the topic

6. Arendt comments: “Eichmann, with his rather modest mental gifts, was certainly the last man in the courtroom to be expected to challenge these notions and to strike out on his own. Since, in addition to performing what he conceived to be the duties of a law-abiding citizen, he had also acted upon orders—always so careful to be ‘covered’—he became completely muddled, and ended by stressing alternately the virtues and the vices of blind obedience, or the ‘obedience of corpses,’ *Kadavergehorsam*, as he himself called it.” Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 135.

7. *Monumenta historica Societatis Iesu* [MHSI], *Sancti Ignatii de Loyola Constitutiones* [M.Cons.], ed. Arturo Codina (Rome: Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu [IHSI], 1934), 1:547. Cited after: *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus and Their Complementary Norms: A Complete English Translation of the Official Latin Texts* [Cons.], Jesuit Primary Sources in English Translation 15 (Saint Louis, MO: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996).

8. *Cons.* 176.

9. MHSI, *Sancti Ignatii de Loyola Epistolae et instructiones* [MI.Epp.] (Madrid: López del Horno, 1904), 2:54–65.

10. *MI.Epp.* 1:228f. The letter is addressed to Giovanni Battista Viola, who was completing his studies in Paris. Regarding the dating of the letter, see *MI.Epp.* 1:229f.n3.

11. *MI.Epp.* (Madrid: López del Horno, 1905), 3:499–503, here 502.

of obedience should not be determined geographically.¹² Nor should it be limited to individuals, which is especially true in the case of the first provincial of Portugal and co-founder of the Society of Jesus, Simão Rodrigues (1510–79).¹³

First of all, it can be pointed out that several letters with the theme of obedience were sent to various addressees. And, although the subject seems to have been especially urgent on the Iberian Peninsula, it thematizes a general question rather than a specific one. In Portugal, there was a certain heightening of the question due to the rising number of candidates and Jesuits. The understanding of obedience became a fundamental question in the establishment of the new order, and it is to be considered a constitutive element in its transformation from a charism to an institution. Since this process has to be described as multi-layered, the official correspondence serves as only one element among others, all the while determining the urgency of concrete conflicts, which influenced both the content and the style of the letters.¹⁴

Not only did Polanco shape the language of the letters but he also incorporated studies of various religious traditions and rules, which he undertook at the same time in order to prepare the drafting of the *Constitutions*.¹⁵ In fact, the concept of “blind obedience” dates back to the time of early Christianity and was used in monastic communities.¹⁶ The expression of the “dead body” can already be found in the Franciscan tradition.¹⁷ Through the analysis and evaluation of the correspondence, one simultaneously discovers not only the sources of a Jesuit wording of obedience but also the situation in which the young Jesuit order formulated its understanding of obedience.

12. The crisis of Portugal was caused by several factors. These involved spiritual issues and religious and penitential practices that raised questions about governance structures and principles, eventually leading to the removal of Rodrigues as provincial.

13. The MHSI has collected documents on the “Causa Patris Simonis Rodericii”: MHSI, *Scripta de Sancto Ignatio de Loyola [MI.Scripta]* (Madrid: López del Horno, 1904), 1:666–707. If today a re-evaluation of Rodrigues is occurring, it is also necessary to consider the function that he, together with Nicolás de Bobadilla (c.1509–90), had for the historiography of the Society of Jesus. See José Vaz de Carvalho, “The Rehabilitation of Simão Rodrigues, S.J.,” in *The Mercurian Project: Forming a Jesuit Culture, 1573–1580*, ed. Thomas M. McCoog (St. Louis, MO: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2004), 421–35; Mark A. Lewis, “The Rehabilitation of Nicolás de Bobadilla, S.J., during the Generalate of Everard Mercurian,” in McCoog, *Mercurian Project*, 437–59.

14. The theme of obedience can already be found in the Ignatian correspondence, but it is treated more systematically and continuously since the first letter to the scholastics in Coimbra in 1547: *MI.Epp.* (Madrid: López del Horno, 1903), 1:495–510.

15. Juan Alfonso de Polanco, *Regulae aliarum religionum: Texts of Collectanea Polanci*, ed. Aloysius Hsü (Rome: Typescript, 1971). On the manuscript, interpretation, and classification, see Aloysius Hsü, *Dominican Presence in the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus* (Rome: Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1971), 15–67.

16. Bradford E. Hinze, *Prophetic Obedience: Ecclesiology for a Dialogical Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016), 139f. summarizes: “Though the term *blind obedience* is not widespread in early Christianity, unhesitating obedience to religious superiors is commonplace in classic formulas from ascetic monastic communities dating back to the fourth and fifth centuries. In practicing discernment, novices in religious communities were trained to cultivate humility and indifference by being obedient to religious superiors in the religious community.”

17. For the references to the Franciscan tradition, see Silvia Mostaccio, *Early Modern Jesuits between Obedience and Conscience during the Generalate of Claudio Acquaviva (1581–1615)* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 71–75.

This is especially true when speaking about the *Letter on Obedience*, a document from 1553 addressed by Ignatius himself to the Jesuits in Portugal. Contrary to its fame, the letter does not contain many novelties, as it mainly recalls elements already discussed in previous letters on obedience, most notably in Polanco's letter from 1548.¹⁸ In the text, obedience is divided into different levels and at the same time presented as *the* signature characteristic of the Society of Jesus. As Ignatius states:

We may let other religious orders outdo us in fasting, night-watches, and other austerities, which each one, following its own institute, holily observes. But in the purity and perfection of obedience, with genuine resignation of our wills and abnegation of our judgment, I am very desirous, dear brothers, that those who serve God in this Society should distinguish themselves, and that its true sons may be recognized by this—never looking to the person whom they obey, but in that person to Christ our Lord, for whose sake they obey.¹⁹

This powerful description of the importance of obedience tries to convince and to motivate its readers. The same intention can be noticed in numerous references to biblical texts, and also in authorities such as Popes Gregory (c.540–604, r.590–604) and Leo the Great (c.400–61, r.440–61), Benedict of Nursia (480–547), John Cassian (360–435), and Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153). The letter thereby recalls the understanding of obedience as articulated in the monastic and ascetic tradition.²⁰ It was by means of these references that Ignatius and Polanco attempted to address the crisis in Portugal that specifically emerged with regard to their understanding of spirituality and external penitential practices.²¹ On the one hand, the Roman curia wanted to show that the Jesuits were completely in the mainstream of the religious tradition and, on the other hand, to enhance penitential practices by strengthening the concept of obedience as a mental sacrifice. Thus, a transformation from a physical to a spiritual dimension was

18. *MI.Epp.* (Madrid: López del Horno, 1906), 4:669–81. Regarding the importance and the interpretation of the letter, see John C. Futrell, *Making an Apostolic Community of Love: The Role of the Superior according to St. Ignatius of Loyola* (St. Louis, MO: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1970), 195–213; John W. O'Malley, *The First Jesuits* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 329–35. Christoph van Ginhoven Rey, *Instruments of Divinity, Instruments of Divinity: Providence and Praxis in the Foundation of the Society of Jesus*, Brill's Studies in Intellectual History 226 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 220.

19. Ignatius of Loyola, *Letters and Instructions*, ed. Martin E. Palmer, John W. Padberg, and John L. McCarthy (St. Louis, MO: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2006), 413. "En otras religiones podemos sufrir que nos hagan ventaja (en ayunos) y vigiliias, y otras asperezas que, según su instituto, cada vna sanctamente (obser) va; pero en la puridad y perfección de la obediencia, con la resignación verdadera de nuestras voluntades y abnegación de nuestros juicios, mucho deseo, hermanos charísimos, que se señalen los que en esta Compañía siruen á Dios nuestro señor, y que en esto se conozcan los hijos verdaderos della; nunca mirando la persona á quien se obedece, sino en ella á Christo nuestro señor, por quien se obedeçe." *MI.Epp.* 4:671.

20. "To convince the enthusiastically fervent companions at Coimbra that obedience is the most noble of personal sacrifices to God, Polanco brings up a battery of examples from the Bible and the saints." Futrell, *Making an Apostolic Community of Love*, 204.

21. The practice of various and extraordinary penitential practices seems to have been a virulent one shortly after the foundation of the College of Coimbra. A letter by Peter Favre (1506–46) from 1543 bears witness to this, in which he addresses obedience: *Fabri Monumenta: Beati Petri Fabri, primi sacerdotis Societatis Iesu, epistolae, memoriale et processus ex autographis aut archetypis potissimum deprompta [M.Fabri]* (Madrid: López del Horno, 1914), 284–87. With regard to the later troubles: "The main source for the penances in the second half of July 1545, is the letter of the rector Martín de Santa Cruz to Peter Favre from the beginning of August 1545 [*M.Fabri*, 342–50]." Georg Schurhammer, *Francis Xavier: His life, His Times*, vol. 3, *Indonesia (1545–1549)* (Rome: IHSI, 1980), 217n48.

implemented. Asceticism should now consist in subordinating one's own will and understanding to the command and judgment of one's superiors:

But whoever aims at making a complete and perfect oblation of himself must, in addition to his will, offer his understanding. This is a further and the highest degree of obedience. He must not only have the same will as the superior but also be of the same mind as he, submitting his own judgment to the superior's to the extent that a devoted will is able to influence the understanding.²²

This challenging concept of obedience, however, required some explaining. This is clearly reflected in the document's lines of argumentation and use of authority. Brian O'Leary notes: "This letter is polemical in intent, rhetorical in style and ascetical in its emphases."²³

For an adequate interpretation of the text, it is important to consider the intentions of Ignatius and Polanco. With the theoretical sharpening of obedience, they aimed at very practical consequences. By giving importance to obedience, conflicts could be resolved that gave the final decision-making authority to the superior.²⁴ The other advantage of complete obedience was its contribution to an efficient structure and function of governance. Decisions could be taken much faster and applied in a clear hierarchy with the superior general and the Roman curia at its top. The particular Jesuit has to execute what is ordered. The authority of the local superior derives in this centralized system from that of the higher-ranked one and therefore finally from the general and the supreme pontiff, who relies consequently on God. The theological legitimation of obedience is therefore based on the concept of substitution (derivative authority), which first of all is given to the pope as *Vicarius Christi* and is further derived from him in the structure of the Jesuit order.

That the Jesuit order should take this path could in fact not be foreseen, as the *Spiritual Exercises* highlight the importance of discernment and are based on the conviction that every person has an experience of God. Although the church and spiritual directors represent an objective framework, the essence of the *Spiritual Exercises* rests on the individual. By founding the Society of Jesus, the first companions endowed the superior general with a great capacity of power, though its consequences could hardly be foreseen. The rapid growth of the Jesuit order and its global scope required solutions that the first companions in their deliberations could not have had in mind.²⁵ This is especially true for a government that requires an organized administrative structure.

Although the core principles of the Society of Jesus have been laid through a pro-

22. Loyola, *Letters and Instructions*, 415. "Pero quien pretiende hazer entera y perfecta oblacion de sí mesmo, ultra de la uoluntad es menester que offrezca el entendimiento (que es otro grado y supremo de obediencia), no solamente teniendo un querer, pero teniendo un sentir mesmo con su superior, subjettando el proprio juicio al suyo, en quanto la deuota uoluntad puede inclinar el entendimiento." *MI.Epp.* 4:674.

23. Brian O'Leary, *Sent into the Lord's Vineyard: Explorations in the Jesuit Constitutions* (Oxford: Way Books, 2012), 64.

24. Futrell, *Making an Apostolic Community of Love*, 207 states that "the entire discussion of blind obedience is in function of a situation where a personal judgment contrary to that of the superior is in play."

25. The different founding steps are documented in the *MHSI*. Particularly important for the topic of obedience is the *Deliberatio primorum partum* (*M.Cons.* 1:1-7) and *De obedientiae voto faciendo* (*M.Cons.* 1:8).

cess of common decision-taking,²⁶ the development of an administration was a work in progress and delegated to Ignatius as the first superior general.²⁷ In a set of tensions that were caused by different needs of the various apostolates, obedience became important, not only in terms of dealing with conflicts but in terms of establishing a mode of governance and in creating a sense of unity and identity. In fact, the question of forming a common ground was crucial and led to the letters on obedience. These letters in turn are instances of occasional writing that mix fundamental considerations while at the same time dealing with a specific, ad hoc context.

Keeping this background in mind is important when reading the *Letter on Obedience*, a text that can hardly be overestimated in its historical impact, as it even surpasses the *Constitutions* on this matter.²⁸ The *Letter on Obedience* was soon printed and used for table readings.²⁹ In addition, it was the only letter to be included in the collection of authoritative texts in the *Institutum Societatis Iesu*.³⁰ All this has contributed to the fact that the letter has been used as the synoptic presentation of the Jesuit understanding of obedience *par excellence*.

Although a textual analysis of the *Letter on Obedience* shows how different aspects of obedience are addressed, the text promoted an understanding of obedience that undermined the importance of the individual and emphasized the immediate meaningfulness of the performance of obedience. Later, in manuals, obedience was further codified and reduced to a few assertions that failed to take context into consideration.³¹ The understanding of obedience was mainly expressed therefore in a set of rules. The

26. The foundation of the Society of Jesus is laid through the so-called “Five Chapters” (*M.Cons.* 1:I, 14–22) of 1539, which were the basis for the papal approval of the order with the bull “Regimini militantis ecclesiae” (*M.Cons.*, 26–32). The “Constitutiones anni 1541” (*M.Cons.* 1:34–48) are not arranged systematically but rather deal largely with individual questions of differing importance.

27. A report on the election of Ignatius is found in: *MHSI, Fontes narrativi de S. Ignatio et de S.I. initiis* [MI. FN] (Rome: Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu, 1943), 1:16–22.

28. O’Leary, *Sent into the Lord’s Vineyard*, 63: “Ignatius understood obedience as central to Jesuit identity and somehow distinctive of it. He wrote a series of letters on the subject in response to difficulties that were arising in Spain and Portugal. The last of these became known as ‘The Letter on Obedience’ and for some centuries assumed an importance greater than the more rounded teaching on the subject in the *Constitutions*.”

29. O’Malley, *First Jesuits*, 333.

30. *Institutum Societatis Iesu I–III* [ISJ] (Florence: Typographia A SS. Conceptione, 1892/93). The letter is found on 27–33 and is also summarized in an overview (665f.). On the importance of the collection, see Markus Friedrich, “Jesuit Organization and Legislation,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Jesuits*, ed. Ines G. Županov (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 23–43, here 24; John O’Malley and Timothy O’Brien describe the aim and the importance of the collection: “Early on in the Society’s history, the *Institute* came to stand for a collection of official documents designated by general congregations. The last such collection, published in the mid-nineteenth century, consisted in three folio-sized volumes of some six hundred pages each. Those pages included the *Constitutions*, the *Exercises*, the official *Directory* to the *Exercises*, the *Ratio Studiorum*, all the rules of the Society, the decrees of all the general congregations up to that time, letters to the Society from the fathers general beginning with Claudio Acquaviva, official documents from the Holy See directed to the Society, and other documents. To understand the Society was, then, according to our congregations, to understand this collection.” John W. O’Malley and Timothy W. O’Brien, “The Twentieth-Century Construction of Ignatian Spirituality: A Sketch,” *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 52, no. 3 (2020): 31f.

31. Henri Ramière, *Compendium Instituti Societatis Iesu: Praepositorum generalium responsis et auctorum sententiis illustratum*, ed. Jules Besson, 3rd ed. (Toulouse: Loubens, 1896), 135–40; Antonio M. Arregui, *Annotationes ad Epitomen Instituti Societatis Iesu* (Rome: Apud oeconomum generalem, 1934).

historical reception of the obedience letter can be used to show how a formalized, theoretical understanding of obedience began to take shape.

But this process should not be viewed in isolation. Developments within the Society as a whole and within the Catholic Church in particular are reflected in the Society of Jesus and in its understanding of obedience. For example, during the so-called “Pian period”—from Pope Pius IX (1792–1878, r.1846–78) to Pope Pius XII (1876–1958, r.1939–58)—a “classic Catholic Church response” attempted to “counteract the loss of relevance of faith in God through increased demands for interior obedience.”³² After its restoration in 1814, the Society of Jesus in turn took a decidedly papal and anti-modernist position, echoed this ecclesial shift, and was itself an important agent in its development. Most strikingly, this can already be seen in the writings of Superior General Jan Philipp Roothaan (1785–1853, in office 1829–53), who specifically emphasized the importance of obedience in his interpretation of the *Spiritual Exercises*.³³ Despite Roothaan’s emphasis on the *Exercises*, he also contributed to a narrow reading and ascetic understanding of them.

In his critique of obedience, Delp referred to the Jesuit order after its restoration and attested to this “second Society,” as he puts it, as it “remained a reconstruction in too many relations that constitute life.” To counteract this one-sidedness, Delp called for a return to the fundamentals of the Society: “Back to Ignatius, from consuetudinaries to the *Constitutions*.”³⁴

Consuetudinaries are a collection of practices that were transformed into law through the authorization of the superior general.³⁵ Consuetudinaries can therefore be seen as an expression of a more formalized and disciplined approach. The *Constitutions*, on the other hand, do not outline only a single understanding of obedience but rather include multiple elements of different traditions that support a multi-layered approach to the topic of obedience. At least two major conceptions can be distinguished.³⁶ According to the first understanding, obedience is treated within the three evangelical counsels.³⁷ Here, as in *the Letter on Obedience*, obedience is broken down into different stages, and the images of blind obedience and the dead body are used. In the second understanding, obedience is put in relation to the missions and explains the meaning of the fourth vow to the pope,³⁸ namely “to obey him as the supreme vicar of Christ

32. Rainer Bucher, “Gottesfrage und christliche Theologie in kapitalistischen Zeiten,” in *Die Gottesfrage zwischen Umbruch und Abbruch: Theologie und Pastoral unter säkularen Bedingungen*, ed. Julia Knop, *Quaestiones disputatae* 297 (Freiburg: Herder, 2019), 199–213, here 199 (my translation).

33. Jan Philipp Roothaan, *Opera spiritualia*, ed. Ludovicus de Jonge and Pietro Pirri (Rome: Apud Postulatorem Generalem S.I., 1936), 1:465, 513, 523; *Die geistlichen Uebungen des heiligen Ignatius nach dem Geiste des P. Johannes Roothaan: Bd. 2 Anleitung zu den Geistlichen Uebungen* (Regensburg: G. J. Manz, 1855), 412f.

34. Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften* 4, 325 (my translation): “Die zweite Gesellschaft hat in wenigen Menschen nur den Impuls und die Leidenschaft der ersten erreicht. Sie ist in zu vielen Lebensbeziehungen Rekonstruktion geblieben. Zurück zu Ignatius, von Konsuetudinarien zu den Konstitutionen.”

35. Markus Friedrich, *Der Lange Arm Roms? Globale Verwaltung und Kommunikation im Jesuitenorden, 1540–1773* (Frankfurt: Campus, 2011), 74.

36. Antonio M. de Aldama, *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus: An Introductory Commentary on the Constitutions*, trans. Aloysius J. Owen (St. Louis, MO: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1989), 218–25.

37. *Cons.* 547–52.

38. *Cons.* 605: “Intetio quatri voti ad Summum Potificem” (*M.Cons.* 1:197).

without any excuse meant that the members were to go to any place where he judges it expedient to send them for the greater glory of God and the good of souls, whether among the faithful or unbelievers.”³⁹

This special vow of obedience applies in the strict sense only to the so-called “professed Society” and thus to those who make “an explicit vow to the present or future sovereign pontiff as the vicar of Christ our Lord.”⁴⁰ The *Constitutions*, in addition to the “Missions from the Supreme Pontiff,”⁴¹ address also the “Missions Received from the Superior of the Society.”⁴²

In the actual development of the order, factors such as the organization and implementation of missions and the number of members of the religious order played a much more important role than the “grades” in the Society, which determined if the Jesuits made three or four vows.

Direct missions from the pope remained the exception, lending to a decline in the importance and knowledge of the fourth vow. The vow was often simply called “the papal vow” and was seen as related to the status and qualification of a single Jesuit. Questions later arose about the vow’s relevance during a period of conflicts with the Vatican. The “dramatic intervention”⁴³ of Pope John Paul II (1920–2005, r.1978–2005) in October 1981 especially challenged the understanding of the fourth vow.

Following a period of increased difficulties between the papal curia and the Jesuits, the superior general Pedro Arrupe (1907–91, in office 1965–83) was unable to continue his work because he had suffered a stroke. But instead of following the foreseen procedure in such a case, Pope John Paul II took it upon himself to intervene and appoint the Italian Jesuit Paolo Dezza (1901–99) in charge of the Society of Jesus in place of the US Jesuit Vincent O’Keefe (1920–2012), who had been appointed vicar general by Arrupe.

John O’Malley, who presented a historical study in 1983 on the original context of the fourth vow in the series *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*⁴⁴ described in retrospect:

The event sent waves of shock and fear through the Society. The intervention seemed to relate to the Jesuits’ fourth vow, often incorrectly and deplorably described as a vow of loyalty to the pope. [...] The scandalous fact is that at that time even Jesuits were not altogether clear about what the vow they pronounced entailed.⁴⁵

39. Cons. 603. Cited after *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus and Their Complementary Norms*.

40. Cons. 7.

41. Cons. 603–17. The chapter title is cited after *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus and Their Complementary Norms*.

42. Cons. 618–32. The chapter title is cited after *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus and Their Complementary Norms*.

43. James Corkery, “John Paul II,” in *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the Jesuits*, ed. Thomas Worcester (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 429–30, here 430.

44. John W. O’Malley, “The Fourth Vow in Its Ignatian Context: A Historical Study,” *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 15, no. 1 (1983): 1–59. O’Malley’s initial research interest in Jesuit studies was decisively influenced by the post-conciliar conflicts between the Jesuits and the popes: Emmauele Colombo, “So What? A Conversation with John O’Malley,” *Journal of Jesuit Studies* 7, no. 1 (2020): 128–30.

45. John W. O’Malley, “Past, Present, and Future of Jesuit Studies. Historiographical Thoughts,” *Journal of Jesuit Studies* 5, no. 4 (2018): 501–10, here 502.

Today, on the contrary, the fourth vow is commonly understood as referring only to the missions—“circa missiones.” It is because of this so-called “vow of mobility”⁴⁶ that there is a break with monastic tradition. Subsequent repercussions are observed regarding the understanding of stability for religious life as well as in a new understanding of obedience established by the Society of Jesus. In a historical analysis, it is also possible, as the earlier studies of Burkhard Schneider and Johannes Günter Gerhartz show, to give a different value to the importance of the pope as a source of orientation in the founding phase of the Jesuit order. In their perspective, the role of the pope is important in an essential way and is not only to be seen in the function of sending Jesuits to their missions.⁴⁷ Apart from questions regarding the interpretation, however, it is to be noted that the *Constitutions*, in addition to the missionary understanding of obedience, also—in line with the *Letter on Obedience*—incorporate elements of the monastic tradition and stress the value of asceticism.

How obedience should be understood within the three evangelical counsels is not answered directly by a missionary understanding of obedience. Therefore, the question arises not only for the Society of Jesus but also for all religious orders, spiritual communities, and the church as a whole: How should one explain obedience in societies that are critically opposed toward it—especially if this is the case because of personal and historical experiences?

At least with regard to the Jesuit order, historical research can show the complexity of the different understandings of obedience, but they have to be evaluated and interpreted adequately if we are to speak of obedience in a meaningful way today. An approach limited to “ad fontes” (back to the sources) is therefore not enough, as Delp already remarked: “The order should again become a foundation for creative growth. I very much hope that Karl Rahner can do this in a theological way.”⁴⁸

The reference to Rahner might seem surprising in this context. Delp not only worked with Rahner for the review *Stimmen der Zeit* but already knew him as a friend from novitiate.⁴⁹ Already at this early stage, Karl Rahner, influenced by his brother Hugo, was dealing with foundational Jesuit texts and wanted to make them accessible to others.⁵⁰ Delp had probably recognized that Ignatius was a “productive model” for

46. O'Malley, *First Jesuits*, 298f.

47. Burkhard Schneider, “Nuestro principio y principal fundamento: Zum historischen Verständnis des Papstgehorsamsgebüdes,” *Archivum historicum Societatis Iesu [AHSI]* 25 (1956): 488–513; Schneider, “Die Kirchlichkeit des Heiligen Ignatius von Loyola,” in *Sentire ecclesiam*, ed. Jean Daniélou and Herbert Vorgrimler (Freiburg: Herder, 1961), 268–300; Johannes Günter Gerhartz, “*Insuper Promitto [...]*: Die feierlichen Sondergelübde katholischer Orden (Rome: Verlagsbuchhandlung der Päpstlichen Universität Gregoriana, 1966).

48. Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften* 4, 326 (my translation): “Der Orden müsste wieder ein Grund schöpferischer Quellen werden. Ich hoffe sehr, dass Karl Rahner theologisch das schafft.”

49. It was Karl Rahner who referred to Delp not only as a fellow Jesuit but as a friend: “Delp war mir nicht nur persönlich bekannt, er war mein Mitbruder im Orden, er war (so kann ich ruhig sagen) mein Freund.” Karl Rahner, “Einleitung zu den Texten [Alfred Delp S.J.],” in *Erneuerung des Ordenslebens: Zeugnis für Kirche und Welt*, Karl Rahner Sämtliche Werke [KRSW] 25 (Freiburg: Herder 2008), 176–80, here 176.

50. Here, reference is to be made in particular to the text first written by Hugo Rahner in 1922 and expanded in 1925: “Die aszetischen Schriften in den Monumenta historica Societatis Iesu,” in *Frühe spirituelle Texte und Studien: Grundlagen im Orden*, KRSW 1 (Freiburg: Herder, 2014), 5–15.

Rahner and the development of his theology.⁵¹

In fact, Rahner went on to deal with the question of obedience on various occasions.⁵² Slipping into the role of Ignatius, he makes the founder of the Society of Jesus say to a Jesuit of today: “You might also want to demythologize a little the traditional teaching on obedience, despite its unconditional nature, and along with it what our dear Polanco wrote on my behalf in the famous letter on obedience.”⁵³ The sobriety and matter-of-fact character (“Nüchternheit”) that Rahner recognized as characteristic of Ignatius belongs together with a demythologization of the concept of obedience.⁵⁴ Therefore, historical research is needed that, in addition to contextualization, shows the development and the sometimes difficult legacy of the various understandings of obedience.

Because the Jesuit order is not just a historical entity but rather a living, growing organism, it needs to renew its “founding”⁵⁵ again and again. A first attempt was done by the Thirty-First General Congregation (1965/66) and the Second Vatican Council (1962–65). But the consequences for a uniquely Jesuit understanding of obedience were not taken into account for a long time, partly because of the post-conciliar “difficulties with the Vatican.”⁵⁶ It was only in 2008 that the Thirty-Fifth General Congregation finally presented a decree entitled “Obedience in the Life of the Society of Jesus.” In this decree, the apostolic aspect of obedience is strongly emphasized, but questions concerning specific concrete effects and the structure of the religious order, especially regarding the vows, remain largely unanswered, so that in many ways one can still speak of “unfinished business.”⁵⁷

In the words of Rahner, the permanent task that remains is to make the “legitimate existentialism of Ignatius”⁵⁸ visible. For this, obedience must become clear in its exis-

51. Rahner demanded with reference to Ignatius that every generation has to discover Ignatius again: “Immer neu und immer wieder muss jede Generation darüber reflektieren was gerade ihr ein produktives Vorbild in der Geschichte zu sagen hat.” Karl Rahner, “Der. Hl. Ignatius und die Englischen Fräulein,” in *Ignatianischer Geist: Schriften zu den Exerzitien und zur Spiritualität des Ordensgründers*, KRSW 13 (Freiburg: Herder, 2006), 467–70. To what extent this applies to Rahner’s theology as a whole is discussed in Arno Zahlauer, *Karl Rahner und sein “produktives Vorbild” Ignatius von Loyola* (Innsbruck: Tyrolia, 1996).

52. Rahner explicitly dealt with the topic in Karl Rahner, “Marginalien über den Gehorsam,” in KRSW 13, 540–54; Rahner, “Was heißt Ordensgehorsam? Überlegungen für eine heutige Theologie des Ordenslebens,” in KRSW 25 (Freiburg: Herder, 2008), 466–76. Rahner also stated his position with regard to Pope John Paul II’s intervention: Rahner, “Der Papst und die Jesuiten,” in KRSW 25, 333–34; Rahner, “Zur Situation des Jesuitenordens nach den Schwierigkeiten mit dem Vatikan,” in KRSW 25, 335–50.

53. Karl Rahner, *Ignatius of Loyola Speaks*, trans. Annemarie S. Kidder (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2013), 53.

54. See Karl Rahner, “Der. Hl. Ignatius und die Englischen Fräulein,” KRSW 13, 467.

55. John O’Malley, *The Jesuits: A History from Ignatius to the Present* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 116f.

56. Karl Rahner, “Zur Situation des Jesuitenordens nach den Schwierigkeiten mit dem Vatikan.” To what extent and if the difficulties have been solved can be judged differently. The Italian Gianni La Bella describes ongoing intervention attempts by the Vatican. For instance, before the Thirty-Fifth General Congregation, the possibility of appointing the then cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio as head of the order was considered by the Vatican. See Gianni La Bella, *I gesuiti: Dal Vaticano II a Papa Francesco* (Milan: Guerini e Associati, 2019), 296f.

57. Mark A. Lewis, “Unfinished Business: The Spiritual Coadjutor in the Society of Jesus Today,” *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 47, no. 3 (2015): 1–30.

58. Karl Rahner, “Erfahrungen eines katholischen Theologen,” KRSW 25, 47–57, here 53 (my translation).

tential dimension as an inter-subjective event, which is not confined to conformity to rules but is to be determined as a place within a concrete community, in which the will of God is sought. In the words of Pope Francis (r.2013–), this means: “We are men in tension, we are also contradictory and inconsistent men, sinners, all of us. But we are men who want to journey under Jesus’ gaze.”⁵⁹ The risk that accompanies a vow of obedience becomes evident under this consideration, which is why the insistence on obedience should take place within the observance of specific safeguarding mechanisms. These are embodied in the Jesuit religious tradition, as, for example, in consultation, control, and appeal to authorities.

If obedience is restricted more to its existential dimension, obedience will rarely be demanded, although the weight of obedience may be much heavier, both for the superior and for the individual Jesuit. As the demands become more explicit, self-will takes a back seat to availability before a concrete mission. According to this understanding of obedience, both concepts of Jesuit obedience come together and complement each other. Obedience remains provocative and challenging but precisely in its concreteness with regard to the mission and the one who demands obedience. The first Jesuits discovered a realization of the divine will manifest in the church embodied in the pope. Exploring the Jesuit heritage of obedience in its lights and shadows, on the one hand, illustrates the changes that the Jesuit order has undergone in its history and, on the other hand, reveals the need for a constant reassessment of obedience.

If it could be possible to demonstrate the ambivalent heritage of obedience and at the same time show its remaining spiritual significance, then the Society of Jesus could once again become an example and promoter of obedience that enhances today’s theology of religious life while also contributing to ecclesiology and theological epistemology. This would mean facing today’s legitimate questions regarding the concept of obedience and rethinking it at the same time with the help and insight of the Jesuit tradition. This also has consequences for the reception of Ignatius, however, who is then not to be understood as the giver of a static doctrine but as the founder of a dynamic spiritual charism that can be made meaningful for today’s questions.⁶⁰ To put it pointedly, there must be a reversal of the understanding of obedience. In creative fidelity,⁶¹ the point of reference should no longer be the dead body but the living human being. And obedience should not be described as blind but as an act of seeing, taking

59. “Homily of Pope Francis, Holy Mass on the Liturgical Memorial of the Most Holy Name of Jesus, Church of the Gesù, 3 January 2014”, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2014/documents/papa-francesco_20140103_omelia-santissimo-nome-gesu.html (accessed July 24, 2023).

60. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, “Creative Fidelity in Mission,” *Review of Ignatian Spirituality* 95 (2000): 25–40, here 27: “Our experience of Ignatius is not that of a founder who builds on stable and enduring underpinnings, but of an animator, an inspirer who sends us out on one of the possible paths toward God. If ‘refounding’ means to give or to restore a foundation to Consecrated Life, then we must recognize that for Ignatius the Society’s foundation was not a rule or a doctrine, an organizational chart or an organization, but a source of living water which, in discerning the Spirit, gushes up ceaselessly anew, cooling and revitalizing for a greater service of God and God’s kingdom of love.”

61. See Kolvenbach, “Creative Fidelity in Mission,” 28: “St. Ignatius was not familiar with the expression ‘creative fidelity,’ but the apostolic tension it connotes defines the identity of the apostolic body of the Society from its origins until now.”

into account both the concrete individual and the goal of obedience, which is the glory of God and the salvation of souls.