

McNabb, Vincent Joseph
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THE OBEDIENCE OF AUTHORITY

BY FR. VINCENT MCNABB, O.P.



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THE OBEDIENCE OF AUTHORITY

Fr. VINCENT McNABB, O.P.

WITH great diffidence I will set down what appears to me one of the most fundamental, yet forgotten, principles of Social Well-being. The principle is drawn from two quotations from Saint Thomas Aquinas. He says "It is impossible for the Commonweal to be well unless the citizens are good; at least, those citizens on whom rests the Government. But it is sufficient for the Commonweal that the others should have goodness enough to obey the command of their Governors." (Sum. Theolog. Pars 1a, 2æ; Qu. 92 Art. 1, ad 3m.)

The other quotation is "A man is bound to obey the secular powers in so far as the order of justice requires. And therefore (a) if these (secular powers) have a usurped and not a just authority, or (b) if they command what is unlawful, these subjects are not bound to obey them, except, by accident, in order to avoid scandal." (Ibid 2a, 2æ; Qu. 104., Art. 6 ad 3m.)

1. From the first of these quotations it is seen that the sin of the subject as subject is neither so great nor so dangerous as the sin of authority as authority. Provided that the subject has sufficient obedience to obey, with external obedience, the

necessary minimum of all human commonalties is secured. Their internal attitude towards things in general or towards authority is not a grave menace to any but themselves.

2. It is otherwise with those who are in authority. In so far as these are superiors and not subjects, they are bound to initiate and command rather than to follow and obey. For this reason their personal lack of virtue is likely to have its effects on the commonweal. A spendthrift or sensual king may mean the ruin of his people. The amours of Henry VIII lost the Blessed Virgin Mary her Dowry. If, as Plato suggests, the four cardinal virtues, Prudence, Justice, Fortitude and Temperance are as necessary for the State as for the citizen of the State, then they are especially necessary for those who have authority in the State. The personal, and still more the official, sins of authority are of much greater menace to the State than the personal or even the official sins of the citizens. From this it would appear that if the ills of the commonwealth seem critical and almost irremediable, the likelihood is that authority is yielding to some personal or official sins:

3. The second principle of S. Thomas introduces us to rightful and wrongful authority, rightful and unrightful commands.

As only the supreme authority of God is infinite Power guided by infinite Wisdom and exercised by infinite Love; in other words, as only God's Authority is self-limited, all other authority must be limited by another person or by a law. Some higher person or law must authorize and control all created authority whether individual or collective.

No Authority is rightful if it has not been chosen or appointed and authorized by the will of some one in higher authority. No command of authority is rightful unless commanded or authorized by the will, explicit or tacit, of some ultimate person or law.

4. From this follows the momentous principle, which we may enunciate thus: **NO AUTHORITY HAS THE RIGHT TO COMMAND, UNLESS IN COMMANDING IT IS ITSELF OBEYING.** In other words, authority can command obedience only when its act of command is an act of obedience.

This obedience of authority is perhaps wider than the obedience of the subject; because, as Saint Thomas suggests, the commonweal is not greatly hurt where the citizens have at least sufficient obedience to obey those persons who have authority over them. But these persons who have authority in

the Commonwealth have a duty not merely to persons but to laws. They must know and keep the laws which govern themselves or safeguard the rights of their subjects. All this requires an attitude of obedience which is the more heroic because it seems to be wholly self-determined and self-controlled.

5. But it may be urged that this is very dangerous doctrine to preach, seeing that much of the authority in the world and many of the commands are unrightful. Subjects therefore are largely absolved from the duty of obedience. But any public preaching of such a doctrine would mean the total overthrow both of obedience and authority.

The answer to this difficulty will serve to bring into clearer light the doctrine it is meant to disprove. The answer is found in the very doctrine of Saint Thomas that even an unlawful authority or the unlawful command of a lawful authority must sometimes be obeyed "in order to avoid scandal." In other words even when the citizens of the Commonwealth have no duty of direct obedience to an unlawful authority or an unlawful command yet indirect obedience may be due to the Commonwealth. But as this indirect obedience is "in order to avoid scandal," and as scandal is a sin against charity rather than against justice it follows that this

indirect obedience to an unlawful authority or an unlawful command is a duty not of justice but of charity.

6. From this, again, it follows that **AUTHORITY MAY HAVE NO RIGHT TO COMMAND WHAT THE SUBJECT HAS THE DUTY TO OBEY**: or again, "Authority may be wrong in commanding what the subject would be wrong in disobeying": or again, "It does not follow that because the subject has the duty to obey, therefore authority has the right to command." These principles rest on the further principle, which we have already proved, that the laws or commands of any person in authority have a right to obedience only when they themselves are in obedience to some higher person or law.

7. We greatly wonder if the various authorities in the world of to-day are stating their duties and even their rights in terms of obedience! Is Westminster "greatly troubled to be wise" in seeking out the will of God, or in listening to that law of ethics which can be disregarded by nations only under penalty of national death?

8. Many evils are now militant and indeed for the moment, triumphant in the world: evils of those who should obey and of those who should

command. In other words the capital evils of a world *in extremis* are the disobedience to authority and the disobedience of authority. But the greater evil of the two is the disobedience of authority.

THE FOURTH COMMANDMENT

WHEN Our Lord was subject to His parents He was giving a lesson in obedience not only to other children but to other parents. Parental authority is from God and the parent must obey God even as his child must obey him. Absalom was not only disobedient to his father, but disobedient to God and the wages of his sin was Death.

In these days parental authority has been usurped by various institutions, chiefly the school teacher and State doctor, so that many children are brought up without being taught either in what Gods' authority or that of their parents consists. The blame therefore for their normal disregard for either authority lies with their parents. Though the poorer classes suffer more noticeably in this confusion, the richer are in a worse state. Among the poor it is still recognised (in spite of the destroying effect of Old Age Pensions) that the child should support his parents in their old age. Among the rest of the community every kind of usury and contrivance of insurance is used to enable the parent to reach his death-bed with a substantial bank balance. The modern parent in this class desires that his son should begin where he left off, that is that his son

should be saved the drudgery of beginning at the beginning, and may step at once into the privileges of managing those who, for poverty, have to begin at the beginning. This desire is not in itself evil, the mother of the sons of Zebedee was not asking either a wicked or an impossible thing for her children, but it is putting a heavy, dangerous, and unnecessary burden upon the young to train them to consume what they have not produced, to rule others before they have ruled themselves. It also demands the maintenance of the family bank balance and makes the idea of material security the dominating motive in family considerations. Perhaps it were better that a millstone should be hung about the parent's neck than that he should handicap his son by such traditions. If the parent dishonour God, how can the son honour the parent? The Fourth Commandment is cut out of the Decalogue.

THE DEVIL OF IT

“What is going to happen to the elder men who are to be thrown out of their positions at a comparatively early age? How are they and their dependents to live? The only answer that I can give is that in the majority of cases they will become dependent upon their sons and daughters. Instead of father or grandfather helping the young people along in the early days of business life, the young folk will have to keep them.” PHILLIPA MARTIN, in the *Daily Sketch*.

The devil of this is if it goes on much longer we shall have to keep the 4th Commandment! (5th C. of E.)