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Last October, I had the privilege of attending the annual Catholic Identity Conference (CIC) for a fifth consecutive time, a gathering which features some of the brightest minds and most articulate voices in the cause of defending the Faith and Mass of all time and restoring all things in Christ.

One of the weekend's most impressive talks was presented by Dr. Peter Kwasniewski, an author and speaker known for his Thomistic precision, liturgical expertise, sharp wit, and good humor. His speech, "Discerning True and False Obedience in the Era of *Traditionis Custodes*," was geared specifically towards the Pope's odious liturgical diktat and the proper Catholic response to it, but the principles outlined by Dr. Kwasniewski made his remarks applicable to any number of subjects wherein the true nature of obedience and legitimate resistance are at issue.

For that reason, I was delighted when I learned that Sophia Institute Press had published an expanded version of Dr. Kwasniewski's speech in booklet form. Entitled *True Obedience in the Church: A Guide to Discernment in Challenging Times*, this tract (as the author calls it in his preface) offers readers a succinct blueprint for understanding the nature and role of obedience in the life of every Catholic, the inseparable link between authority and the common good in the life of the Church, the proper formation and exercise of conscience, and related subjects.

Extolling the Excellence of True Obedience

Dr. Kwasniewski begins by explaining and extolling the excellence of true obedience, a moral virtue connected to the cardinal virtue of justice[1] — one which every disciple of Christ is obliged to practice in varying ways, according to their state in life.

While acknowledging the dangers of "blind obedience," Dr. Kwasniewski rightly observes that "we must be careful not to throw the baby out with the bath water. The statement that 'obedience is the root of all evils' expresses the very attitude of modernity," which he correctly traces to the "so-called Enlightenment" of the 18th century.[2]

"The truth," says Kwasniewski, "is much different. As St. Thomas Aquinas says in his beautiful work *On the Perfection of the Spiritual Life*, obedience is the proper response of the creature, who is a servant by nature and by grace.… By humbly obeying God and His representatives on earth, man negates the illusion of autonomy and enters into the liberty of

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the children of God who are led by *His* Spirit of love, not by their own easily mistaken desires."[3]

Ultimately, as he sums up after quoting Philippians 2:5-11 (the traditional Epistle for Palm Sunday), "Our Lord Jesus Christ presents to us the royal road of obedience that has always been put forward by the great saints," and he goes on to connect this "royal road" to "the traditional liturgical rites of East and West," noting that "[t]he traditional liturgy exemplifies the virtue of obedience by having the priest obey the rigorous and comprehensive rubrics, giving him no options, no room for spontaneous improvisation, no open-ended flexibility of movement. He humbles himself, takes up the Cross, and follows Christ to Calvary."[4]

Obedience and Authority

Throughout the next two sections of his tract, Dr. Kwasniewski lays the foundation for understanding what he calls the "structure and strictures of obedience" and the "hierarchy of authorities". He explains:

> "Catholics owe their superiors in the Church free, intelligent, conscientious obedience. What does that mean? For obedience to be able to be given, there are two fundamental conditions that must always be present, either explicitly or implicitly.
>
> First, there is trust. Trust is based on a belief that the superior loves us with Christian charity and wills our good, or at the very least does not seek our injury or destruction. Little children have this trust quite naturally toward their parents, and in most cases it is fully justified by the affection the parents have for the children. This is why obedience, though difficult for fallen human nature, is natural and obvious enough within the family. But we know, sadly, that in an abusive family, where a child sees that a parent is actually harming or seeking to harm him, trust is undermined, and therefore an essential condition for the child's obedience to the parent vanishes.
>
> Second, there is what might be called *rightful subordination*. This means two things. First, it means that the superior himself is obedient to higher authority. The superior must subject himself to God: to divine and natural law. But he should also be respectful of custom and tradition, especially within the Church, where these things have the force of law. Second, it means that the inferior is subject to the superior only in those matters over which the superior has discretion or command, and that the inferior has the capacity to see when the

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> superior is or may be transgressing the boundaries of his own position."[5]

Since "God alone" is "supremely and infinitely good," and since He has no superior, it is He alone Who "deserves absolute and unconditional obedience, because He is worthy of all our trust," Dr. Kwasniewski rightly observes. As for human superiors, obedience to them always "has conditions for its existence, levels at which it operates, and limits."[6]

Regarding those conditions and limits, Kwasniewski turns once again to Aquinas and quotes from a portion of the *Summa Theologiae* wherein the Angelic Doctor addresses the virtue of obedience — specifically, the question: "Are subjects bound to obey their superiors in all things?":

> "It is written (Acts 5:29): 'We ought to obey God rather than men.' Now sometimes the things commanded by a superior are against God. Therefore, superiors are not to be obeyed in all things."[7]

And further:

> "Man is subject to God simply as regards all things, both internal and external, wherefore he is bound to obey Him in all things. On the other hand, inferiors are not subject to their superiors in all things, but only in certain things and in a particular way, in respect of which the superior stands between God and his subjects, whereas in respect of other matters the subject is immediately under God, by Whom he is taught either by the natural or by the written law."[8]

Here, we see clearly the "rightful subordination" described by Dr. Kwasniewski.

Inseparable Link Between Authority and Common Good

One of the most crucial concepts Dr. Kwasniewski covers in his tract is the inseparable link between authority and the common good, describing the latter as a good which "can be shared simultaneously by many, perfecting them all" (he cites peace and truth as examples).[9]

"Now, unlike the private goods of individuals," he goes on, "who are already inclined by nature to seek their own good, the common good does not automatically take care of itself;

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it requires someone to care for it, act explicitly on its behalf, and coordinate individuals for its pursuit and its defense. This is the birth of authority: it is born to serve and promote the good of many. … An authority's power to morally bind resides in the common good, so if the authority deploys his office overtly *against* the common good, then that command inherently lacks moral binding power."[10]

This well-crafted description harkens back to Our Lord's admonition regarding the exercise of authority in His Kingdom, the Church:

> "You know that the princes of the Gentiles lord it over them and they that are the greater, exercise power upon them. It shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be the greater among you, let him be your minister. And he that will be first among you, shall be your servant. Even as the Son of man is not come to be ministered unto, but to minister and to give His life a redemption for many." (Matt. 20:25-28)

Equally important for Catholics is knowing what constitutes *the common good of the Church*, which Dr. Kwasniewski beautifully defines as follows:

> "The Church's common good is the divine life of Jesus Christ, her sovereign Head — the superabundant grace of His divinized soul, shared with His members through the illumination of the intellect by revelation and the inflaming of the heart by the supernatural charity of His Heart — and the divinization of souls by the sacramental life and prayer (chiefly the solemn, formal, public worship we call the sacred liturgy). To this common good belongs the treasury of all the goods that God has revealed to us, all the goods Christ has obtained for us by His Most Precious Blood, and all the goods that the Father and the Son together have poured forth upon the Church by the descent of the Holy Spirit not only at the moment of Pentecost but, beginning then, over her entire history until the Second Coming."[11]

Abuse of Authority: Dealing with a Tyrannical Pope

With this definition in mind, Dr. Kwasniewski proceeds to focus on "the realm of the liturgy," which he demonstrates is "inherent to the Church's common good," and how Catholics should respond to a "pope who sets himself against the common good".[12]

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"Since the liturgy truly is the 'font and apex of the Christian life,' the home of divine revelation and the primary agent of our transformation in Christ," he says, "it follows that to abolish or prohibit or in any way work against the venerable Roman Rite that was humbly received, gratefully loved, and lavishly praised for century after century of uninterrupted is the most notorious and damaging attack possible or imaginable."[13]

And this is precisely what Pope Francis seeks to do via *Traditionis Custodes* — "to abolish … the venerable Roman Rite" in favor of Paul VI's novel and Protestantized rites. As Dr. Kwasniewski emphasizes in an endnote: "The motu proprio *Traditionis Custodes* is manifestly an attack on the patrimony of the Church and on its common good. This means that obedience to *this* pope in regard to *these* matters would be disobedience to Christ and to the papacy as such."[14]

What recourse do Catholics have against such an egregious abuse of authority? Dr. Kwasniewski quotes from such sources as the medieval Papal Oath of the *Liber Diurnus Romanorum Pontificum*, the Council of Constance (1414-1418), and the renowned Jesuit Francisco Suarez (1548-1617) to demonstrate "the pope's solemn duty toward the immemorial liturgical practice of the Church."[15]

He also invokes "St. Pius V's Apostolic Constitution *Quo Primum*," arguing that it "is not 'just a disciplinary document' that can be readily set aside or contradicted by his successors. Since the liturgy itself concerns matters of faith and morals, *Quo Primum* must be considered a document *de rebus fidei et morum*, and therefore its substantive content is not susceptible to being set aside by a later pontiff…. The pope didn't cause the Mass to become inviolable by publishing Quo Primum, but rather, *Quo Primum* was inviolable because of the Mass."[16]

Dr. Kwasniewski then drives home his point with "a syllogism":

> "[Major] The Tridentine Profession of Faith recognizes, as essential to Catholicity, adherence to 'received and approved ceremonies of the Catholic Church in the solemn administration of all the sacraments' (i.e., the traditional rites). [Minor] *Quo Primum* recognizes the *Missale Romanum* of 1570 as the traditional rite of the Mass — *that*, and not a mere positive law, is the basis of its perpetual standing. [Conclusion] Therefore, adherence to the liturgy codified and canonized in this *Missale Romanum* is essential to Catholicity in the sphere of the Latin-rite Church: it is what makes one a Roman Catholic. A corollary follows: the rejection of traditional rites as an authoritative criterion, and the embrace of a non-traditional missal, makes one … something else!"[17]

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Legitimate Resistance Grounded in the *Sensus Fidelium*

The threat of false shepherds — of wolves in sheep's clothing — has been a problem in the Church since her founding. Our Lord warned us in His Sermon on the Mount, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in the clothing of sheep, but inwardly they are ravening wolves" (Matt. 7:15). And St. Paul, just before leaving Ephesus, told the clergy of that city, "I know that after my departure ravening wolves will enter in among you, not sparing the flock. And of your own selves shall arise men speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them" (Acts 20:29-30).

Thankfully, Our Lord has not left His sheep defenseless in the face of such threats. Through Baptism, He has infused into our souls the theological virtues (habits) of faith, hope, and charity — and the virtue of faith includes something called the *sensus fidei* ("sense of faith" of individuals) and the *sensus fidelium* ("sense of the faithful" as a whole), the latter sometimes called the *sensus fidei fidelium* ("sense of faith of the faithful").

According to *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church*, a 2014 Vatican document from which Dr. Kwasniewski quotes:

> "The *sensus fidei fidelis* confers on the believer the capacity to discern whether or not a teaching or practice is coherent with the true faith by which he or she already lives. …
>
> The *sensus fidei fidelis* also enables individual believers to perceive any disharmony, incoherence, or contradiction between a teaching or practice and the authentic Christian faith by which they live. They react as a music lover does to false notes in the performance of a piece of music. In such cases, believers interiorly resist the teachings or practices concerned and do not accept them or participate in them."[18]

Moreover, according to the same document:

> "Alerted by their *sensus fidei*, individual believers may deny assent even to the teaching of legitimate pastors if they do not recognize in that teaching the voice of Christ, the Good Shepherd. … For St. Thomas, a believer, even without theological competence, can and even must resist, by virtue of the *sensus fidei*, his or her bishop if the latter preaches heterodoxy. In such a case, the believer

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> does not treat himself or herself as the ultimate criterion of the truth of faith, but rather, faced with materially 'authorized' preaching which he or she finds troubling, without being able to explain exactly why, defers assent and appeals interiorly to the superior authority of the universal Church."[19]

Thus, we see that resistance (disobedience) is indeed necessary at times, and that its legitimacy is rooted in the supernatural sense of faith (*sensus fidei*) and the exercise of a properly formed conscience — a responsibility which precludes "blind obedience," as Dr. Kwasniewski explains:

> "To do anything good and avoid evil, we must make a judgment about the good to be done or the evil to be avoided; we must engage in practical reasoning about any proposed course of action; we must interiorly will conformity to the truth and reject falsehood. While there are general rules of action and exceptionless norms, only the individual can, at the moment of acting, know and choose what is right to do or not do; this responsibility over oneself cannot be 'outsourced' to someone else who will think and choose for him. …
>
> Today, a true appeal to conscience can and should be made by Catholics who see vital goods being violently taken from them or evils being pressed on them. This is not to be 'progressive'; it is to be *human* and *Christian*. It is to be rightly traditional, knowing and witnessing to the perennial value of what has been loved and venerated before us and was always handed down with unwavering fidelity."[20]

For priests who legitimately resist and are unjustly punished as a result, Dr. Kwasniewski reassures them that "as long as the sole reason for disciplinary action is their principled adherence to the traditional rites of the Roman Church, such penalties will be null and void, and their priestly ministry may continue unabated." In a corresponding endnote, he quotes from Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò's response to *Catholic Family News* (Sept. 1, 2020):

> "If you only celebrate the Tridentine Mass and preach sound doctrine without ever mentioning the Council, what can they ever do to you? Throw you out of your churches, perhaps, and then what? No one can ever prevent you from renewing the Holy Sacrifice, even if it is on a makeshift altar in a cellar or an attic, as the refractory priests did during the French Revolution, or as happens

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> still today in China. And if they try to distance you, resist: canon law serves to guarantee the government of the Church in the pursuit of its primary purposes, not to demolish it. Let's stop fearing that the fault of the schism lies with those who denounce it, and not, instead, with those who carry it out: the ones who are schismatics and heretics are those who wound and crucify the Mystical Body of Christ, not those who defend it by denouncing the executioners!"[21]

Free Copies Available for Priests and Seminarians

In an effort to circulate Dr. Kwasniewski's tract as widely as possible, especially among the clergy, free copies of *True Obedience in the Church* are available for priests and seminarians who visit **trueobedience.com** and request a copy. I heartily encourage both clergy and laity to read the tract in full (I have only scratched the surface in this review) and urge their local Catholic brethren to do likewise (the text is brief and very accessible). With Dr. Kwasniewski's tract as a guide, may all of us reflect on our duty to use our God-given intelligence and free will "to the praise and glory of His Name, to our benefit, and that of all His holy Church" (Roman Missal, *Oráte Fratres*).

For a preview of Dr. Kwasniewski's latest work, The Road from Hyperpapalism to Catholicism *(Arouca Press, 2022), see below:*

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[1] Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 104, a. 2, ad. 2.

[2] Peter A. Kwasniewski, *True Obedience in the Church* (Manchester: Sophia Institute Press, 2021), p. 3.

[3] *Ibid*., p. 4.

[4] *Ibid*., pp. 5-6.

[5] *Ibid*., pp. 9-10.

[6] *Ibid*., pp. 10, 14.

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[7] ST II-II, q. 104, a. 5, *sed contra*.

[8] *Ibid*., ad. 2.

[9] Kwasniewski, *True Obedience in the Church*, p. 20.

[10] *Ibid*., pp. 20-21.

[11] *Ibid*., p. 22.

[12] *Ibid*., pp. 23, 33.

[13] *Ibid*., p. 33-34.

[14] *Ibid*., p. 102 (note 83).

[15] *Ibid*., p. 34.

[16] *Ibid*., pp. 38-39.

[17] *Ibid*., pp. 41-42.

[18] International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church* (2014), nn. 61-62; cf. Kwasniewski, *True Obedience in the Church*, p. 44.

[19] *Ibid*., n. 63; Kwasniewski, *True Obedience in the Church*, pp. 45-46.

[20] *Ibid*., p. 50.

[21] Brian M. McCall (ed.), *A Voice in the Wilderness: Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò on the Church, America, and the World* (Brooklyn: Angelico Press, 2021), p. 203; cf. Kwasniewski, *True Obedience in the Church*, pp. 105-106.

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