

OBEDIENCE IS AN UNPARALLELED VIRTUE

—by Nikiforos Theotokis—

“Now when the wise men had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, ‘Arise, take the young Child and His mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I bring you word ... **And he arose, he took the young Child and His mother by night and departed for Egypt** ... Now when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, ‘Arise, take the young Child and His mother, and go to the land of Israel’ ... **Then he arose, took the young Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel.**”

(Mt. 2:13-21)

Many virtues adorned the holy soul of blessed Joseph. The unparalleled virtue of obedience, however, rose above and beyond them all, and shined brilliantly through his works. An angel appeared to him two times in a dream: First, when Joseph was perturbed and considering to expel the Ever-Virgin Mary from his home; the second time, when he ordered Joseph to flee to Egypt. During these visions, Joseph saw and was informed of rare, extraordinary, and unheard-of things. **"For that which is conceived in her,"** stated the angel, **"is of the Holy Spirit" (Mt. 1:20)**. Furthermore, he was instructed to do something that was difficult, dangerous, and painful: to flee fearfully from his homeland into the foreign Egyptian nation on account of the persecution of king Herod (who was seeking to slay the newborn infant), uncertain of and not knowing the future.

Any other person would not have submitted himself so easily to the will of God, and would have suspected and assumed that these visions were merely meaningless dreams. Consequently, they would have been reluctant to carry out the orders they had received, they would have excused themselves by contending that such a task is difficult to execute, and they would neither have been convinced nor obeyed so eagerly and attentively. However, this righteous man, Joseph the Betrothed, had no doubts, he raised no objections, and he permitted no uncertainty to creep into his soul. On the contrary, having the treasure of obedience safely residing within his heart, he carried out everything that the angel instructed him to do. On account of this virtue, he was deemed worthy and suitable—and chosen from amongst all other people on earth!—to serve as the guardian of the holy Virgin Mary, and as an agent of the great mystery of Jesus Christ's incarnation.

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Many people believe that obedience is an insignificant virtue and that it is neither mandatory for man's salvation nor the cause of unimaginable rewards and crowns. And yet, obedience surpasses all gifts of thanks, all sacrifices, and all burnt offerings. Only obedience was able to reconcile man with God and to raise the human nature to the transcendent glory of the divinity. Listen to how clearly the Holy Spirit proclaimed the very thing I am stating, through the mouth of the prophet David: **"Sacrifice and offering hast Thou not desired" (Ps. 39:7)** says the incarnate Logos, Jesus Christ, to God the Father. Rather, You desired for me to incarnate on behalf of the sin of the world: **"But a body hast Thou prepared for me" (Ps. 39:7)**. You did not ask for burnt offerings in order to forgive the sin of humanity, says Christ, but You requested my obedience. Therefore, I will submit myself to Your will, just as every prophetic book proclaims concerning me: **"Then I said, 'Behold, I have come (it is written concerning me in the heading of the book); I desired to do Thy will, O my God" (Ps. 8-9)**.

The God-man indeed fulfilled God the Father's will by **"humbling Himself and becoming obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross" (Php. 2:8)**. On account of this obedience Christ's human nature was exceedingly exalted and glorified: **"Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name" (Php. 2:9)**. The God-man further demonstrated perfect obedience by submitting Himself not only to the will of God but also to the will of men. For He exhibited complete compliance and obedience to both His mother and to Joseph. **"Then He went down,"** says St. Luke the Evangelist, **"with them and came to Nazareth, and He was subject to them" (Lk. 2:51)**. Woe unto us! The perfect and almighty God Who has power and dominion over all things submitted Himself even to human beings whom He created! We, conversely, who are full of passions, imperfect, weak, and powerless, neither submit to the advice of our colleagues who are brighter than us nor obey the orders of our leaders and supervisors.

Elevate your mind to Heaven, and take a look at the state that existed there when the universe was first created. At that time all the celestial angels that God had created were shining brilliantly like stars in the firmament. Peace reigned, while joy and divine bliss radiated throughout the entire heavenly sphere, as the holy angelic spirits had their entire mind devoted to nothing other than the obedient worship of their Creator and Master.

But woe! A great tragedy occurred! Waves of tumult, upheaval, and chaos emerged. How did this happen? It was the result of Lucifer's disobedience! He rejected the sweet yoke of obedience and desired to ascend above all the angelic ranks in order to become equal to God: **"I will**

ascend,” he said, **“above the clouds; I will be like the Most High” (Isa. 14:14).** Alas, he became Satan! He fell from Heaven, and he plummeted into Hades. Furthermore, one third of the stars (i.e. the angels) were deceived by him, fell away from Heaven with him, and came crashing down to the earth: **“And his tail drew a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth” (Rev. 12:4).**

Now, enter with your mind into Paradise. In the Garden of Eden there was unimaginable beauty and ceaseless delight. Endless joy and happiness, profound peace and spiritual contemplation of divine concepts, cohabitation with the angles, conversation with God Himself, blessed life, divine grace, and perfect rest. God gave all these things to our forefathers; however, He simultaneously gave them a commandment to test their obedience and their free will. As long as they obeyed the divine commandment, they enjoyed all the goods of Paradise. When, however, they stretched out their hands to take from the tree of disobedience and tasted its fruit, then suddenly innumerable misfortunes encircled them! Immediately death entered their souls; that is, they were separated from the grace of God. Next they were exiled from that blessed land into the valley of lamentation, which we also as their descendents inhabit to this day. The land that is filled with thorns and thistles; that is, sorrows and sadness.

One virtue, **obedience**, conveyed to man every good fortune and all blessings. One single sin, **disobedience**, brought upon man all the evils and endless misfortunes.

We witness this truth with our very own eyes, and we perceive this reality with all our senses. Walk into any household. If the head of the house fears God and obeys the Lord's commandments, and if, in turn, the family members and servants obey the head of the house, within that home you will notice love and agreement between the husband and wife; well-disciplined children being raised and instructed in a praiseworthy and correct manner; the servants eagerly and conscientiously carrying out their work; in brief, order and decorum predominating throughout the entire establishment. If, however, the head of the house transgresses God's commandments, and if, likewise, his family and servants show no trace of obedience to him, in such a home you will find the couple disagreeing and quarreling; the children undisciplined and unruly; the servants completely indifferent and inadequately fulfilling their responsibilities; in brief, an utterly mismanaged and dysfunctional home.

Enter a church. If the presiding priest is a living example of obedience to God's commandments, and if, in turn, the parish members obediently listen to him as required, you will witness within such a community God's commandments and the divine canons being followed; order reigning throughout the ecclesiastical services; sincere concern for

the salvation of the people; and every good work and virtue shining brightly. If, however, the presiding clergyman races along the road of disobedience to God's laws, while the members of the parish openly resist and are insubordinate to their shepherd, then in such a church there exists indifference and complete disregard for God's laws and the ecclesiastical canons; disorder during the church services; negligence and inattentiveness for the salvation of souls; and, in general, the darkness of every evil deed and sin.

Visit any city or municipality. If the governor obeys God, and the citizens obey their ruler, in such a municipality there is no oppression; justice prevails; love between people radiates like the sun; all the civil laws are observed; commerce, law enforcement, the armed forces, trades, and the educational system thrive; fortune and prosperity increase. If, however, the governor or mayor disobey God, and if, in turn, the citizens refuse to obey their community leader, who can adequately describe the oppression, the injustice, the conflicts and disorder, the scandals and the lawlessness of that city? In such a region, the commodities are untrustworthy, the law enforcers resemble thieves, sailors hold company with pirates, the various trades decline, science and education begin to deteriorate. In such a place all types of sin and misfortune prevail.

Therefore: Obedience! You are truly a great and magnificent virtue! When you became absent, Heaven fell apart. When you departed, Paradise was closed. When you hid, man plunged into the abyss of misfortune. When, on the contrary, you reign, kingdoms, cities, households, and people, in general, prosper; virtue and holiness exist within the churches. When people guard God's commandments they become His friends and sons, and they ascend to the glory from which they fell. Adam's disobedience rendered all men sinful; Christ's obedience rendered everyone who believes in Him and who obeys Him righteous and holy: **“For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man’s obedience many will be made righteous” (Rom. 5:19).**