



Teaching the Faith

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Elizabeth Shaw, Editor

The Feast of the Holy Obedience

By Anthony Esolen

*Feast of the Holy Family
December 29, 2013*

*Readings: Sirach 3.2-6, 12-14;
Colossians 3.12-21; Matthew 2.13-15, 19-23*

There's a moment in Dante's *Inferno* that is so true to the genuine good of mankind, and yet so alien to the modern mind, that I pause to dwell upon it whenever my students and I arrive there. The pilgrim Dante has been seized with sudden doubts about whether it's a good idea to accompany Virgil on a journey down into Hell, that place that is easy to enter and not so easy to leave. It's notable that Virgil does not give Dante a set of reasons to analyze by logic. Instead he tells a love story. These are his opening words:

*I was among the souls in Limbo when
so lovely and blessed a Lady came to me,
I asked her for the grace of a command.*

Beatrice has not even opened her lips. But Virgil – a pagan poet and no Christian – is so struck by her beauty and her blessedness that he is the first to speak. He asks her *for the grace of a command*. It would be a blessing to him, a favor he cannot merit, a grace, if she would ask him, indeed if she would *command* him to do something for her.

That may seem a bit distant from the Feast of the Holy Family. I don't think it is. Why, I wonder, in a land far richer than any that the world has known, do people find it too great a hardship to marry, to have children, and to stay married? I suspect that Virgil could tell us. It is because we do not know the blessedness of freely giving our wills away, of asking for the grace of a command. Jesus says that all they who would save their lives shall lose them. That is no threat. It is simply a law of being. God, who is Love, has made us in his image and likeness; and therefore we are made for love, for that free surrender of ourselves to the good of another.

If we hoard up worldly treasure for ourselves, the robbers rob, and the rust and the moths consume; time devours all things. If we hoard up our wills for ourselves, we are ourselves the robbers, and the rust and the moths, stealing from God and from our neighbor the love that we should bear to them, and emptying ourselves in the process. "Take my will and make it Thine," says the wise old hymnodist, "It shall be no longer mine."

Two Holy Virtues: Obedience and Love

That's why Yeshua ben-Sira, in the verse that immediately precedes our first reading, says, "The sons of wisdom are the church of the just; and their generation, obedience and love." Only then does he go on to speak of the duties that children owe to their parents. Let's look at that verse closely. The phrase "son of wisdom" isn't just an ornate Semitic way of saying "a wise man." For Wisdom was in the beginning with God; so to be her son is to dwell as it were in the household of God himself. Then the son of Wisdom bears children in his turn, and their names are Obedience and Love. Let us call them brother and sister, these two holy virtues, Obedience and Love.

It is not slavishness; not idolatrous worship of an evil man; not mere grudging compliance; but true Obedience, that finds its delight in obeying, because to obey the Father, or even a worthy father or mother upon earth, is to hear him, to take his wisdom within your soul, and to act accordingly. Far from asking whether Obedience and Love can be reconciled, we might instead ask whether Love is even possible without the hearing, the heeding that Obedience implies.

Joseph, the foster father of Jesus and the husband of Mary, is the head of that Holy Family. He is the one of those three who was born prone to sin, and he is the leader whom God has chosen! We do not see Joseph give commands.

We do not hear him speak at all. Instead, we overhear his hearing: he hears in a dream that he is not to put his betrothed Mary aside; he hears in a dream that he is to take the child Jesus and his mother and flee into Egypt; he hears in a dream that he is to return to Palestine; he hears in a dream that he is to retire to the back-country, to Nazareth. "That's well for Joseph," we say. "He was granted the grace of a command by dreams sent by God! Certainly if God spoke to us in a dream, we would heed him too."

Would we, then? Would we really? Dreams are shadowy things, easy to dismiss. Joseph might have woken from his dream and shaken his head and blamed it all on the sour wine he had drunk the night before. He might have weighed the dream's command in the balance with his own wisdom or, more typically, with his inclinations. He might have, while weighing them, put his thumb on the scale, so that it would tilt the right way, that is, the way involving the least inconvenience to himself. But Saint John does not tell us that God is Inclination or Convenience. God is Love.

And, because God is Love, he seeks to train us up in a life of love, which is also and inevitably a life of obedience. That is how we should regard Saint Paul's constant exhortation, that we set aside self-will and live in obedience even to the pagan authorities, when they are not demanding evil, because "all authority is of God." The Christian life is characterized by both love and obedience, and we cannot really have one without the other.

Love without obedience is not really love but a pleasant or cheerful self-will, a charming thing to have nearby when the sun is shining, but not so charming when you really need the charmer to hear you. Obedience without love is not really obedience but blank compliance or subservience, often concealing a snarl. "Let him who has ears to hear, hear," says the Lord.

God Wills the Family

So God does not visit all of us with prophetic and commanding dreams. But he does will that all of us should be raised within the haven of the family; the man for the woman, the woman for the man, and both together for the children they beget. Because the man is for the woman, he is not for himself or for one like himself; because the woman is for the man, she is not for herself or for one like herself. Their surrender is written upon their very bodies.

In the family, God gives us the grace of commands more obvious than what we may remember in our dreams. The father is there in person, asking the son to help him rake the leaves in the yard or nail shingles to the roof. The mother is there in person, asking the daughter to see to the needs of the crying baby while she must rush to the pharmacy. They are there in all their bulk, with all their human faults. They don't overawe us with their blessedness, as Beatrice did to Virgil. They don't have to. They are bound to us by the bonds of natural affection and duty and gratitude. Every member in a family is God's messenger to every other member, and those messages must be heard.

You will notice that I have said nothing yet about the verse that is now notorious, which was never controversial in the least until our own day, but was merely taken as a matter of course. That is, "Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord." That Greek word that we translate *be subject* is the same that Saint Luke used of the lad Jesus, *after* he returned to Nazareth from his lingering stay in Jerusalem where he was about his Father's business. If that Jesus, a young man and a *bar mitzvoth*, a *son of the commandments*, placed himself beneath the authority of Mary and Joseph, we should in our turn consider it a gift to be given any clear authority to heed.

God commands only what is good for us, and forbids only what is bad. We are now a people starved for marriages, and so many of those few who do marry will divorce. Even if we were Marriage Specialists, it would hardly do for us to give advice to Saint Paul – or to God. But we are far from that. Perhaps we would do well to heed these twin commands, too, that wives should hear their husbands by a loving obedience, and husbands should hear their wives by an obedient love.

Our Times and Theirs

Something of that sensitive hearing, that grateful desire to give one's will away, must have been present in the rich and mysterious silences of that blessed home in Nazareth. Joseph and Mary and the child Jesus enjoyed the inestimable advantage over us, of the sounds of God's vast world around them, and the regular chatter of those other human beings called neighbors. Now we have almost to stifle the world in order to hear; just as people in a city of glare must turn off the lamps and the searchlights and the neon advertisements simply to behold the stars.

But perhaps I overstate the difference between our times and theirs. For the noisiest and most obstreperous thing in my world is within me. It is that squalling self-will, boasting, whining, wheedling, hollering, whispering, warning me always against Obedience, because it is too terrifying, and against Love, because it is more terrifying still. For God – and let us never forget how awesome a claim this is – is Love.

About the Author

Anthony Esolen teaches at Providence College. A senior editor for Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity, he writes regularly for Touchstone, First Things, Catholic World Report, Magnificat, This Rock, and Latin Mass. His most recent books are Ten Ways to Destroy the Imagination of Your Child (ISI Press, 2010), The Politically Incorrect Guide to Western Civilization (Regnery Press, 2008), and Ironies of Faith (ISI Press, 2007).

FOR FURTHER READING

Benedict XVI, Angelus, 27 December 2009, Feast of the Holy Family, available at:
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/angelus/2009/documents/hf_ben-xvi_ang_20091227_en.html


John Paul II, Familiaris consortio, available at:
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents

John Paul II, Letter to Families, available at:
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_02021994_families_en.html

“Novena to the Holy Family,” available at: <http://www.ewtn.com/devotionals/novena/HolyFamily.htm>

“The Feast of the Holy Family,” available at: <http://www.churchyear.net/holyfamily.html>

“Two Papal Homilies for the Feast of the Holy Family,” available at:
<http://www.marriageuniqueforareason.org/2011/12/30/two-papal-homilies-for-the-feast-of-the-holy-family/>



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- **God wills that all of us should be raised within the haven of the family.**
- **Love without obedience is not really love but a pleasant or cheerful self-will.**
- **Obedience without love is not really obedience but blank compliance or subservience.**
- **In the family, God gives us the grace of commands, and every member in a family is God’s messenger to every other member.**