



Christian Disobedience

Kurien Kunnumpuram SJ
Christ Hall, Kozhikode

The title of this article will probably shock some people. In this article I shall contend that there are times and occasions when disobedience is the only Christian thing to do.

1. Biblical Perspectives

The Bible does not directly deal with this topic. But there are instances of disobedience in the Bible. Chapter 7 of the 2 Maccabees has a vivid account of the martyrdom of seven brothers who disobeyed the king's command to eat swine's flesh out of loyalty to God's law. The seventh brother clearly expressed the attitude of all the brothers and their mother: "I will not obey the king's command, but I obey the command of the law that was given to our ancestors through Moses" (2 Macc 7:30).

In the Acts of the Apostles there is an instance of Christian disobedience. The rulers of the Jews ordered Peter and John not to speak or teach in the name of the Jesus. Peter and John answered them; "Whether it is right in God's right to listen to you rather God, you must judge" (Acts 4: 19). In other words, the apostles chose to disobey the Jewish leaders out of loyalty to God. This, I think, is a case of Christian disobedience.

2. The Teaching of the Vatican II

Obviously the Council did not expressly deal with Christian disobedience. But there are three passages in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World which seem to advocate Christian disobedience. While discussing the life of the political community the Constitution states:

Let those who are suited to it, or can become so, prepare themselves for the difficult but most honourable art of politics. Let them work to exercise this art without thought of personal convenience and without the benefit of bribery. Prudently and honourably let them fight against injustice and oppression, the arbitrary rule of one man or one party, and lack of tolerance (GS 75).

Now to “fight against injustice and oppression and the arbitrary rule of one man or one party or lack of tolerance” definitely involves Christian disobedience, and probably something more.

There is another passage in the Constitution which also advocates Christian disobedience. “Where public authority oversteps its competence and oppresses its people, these people should nevertheless obey to the extent that the objective common good demands. Still it is lawful for them to defend their own rights and those of their fellow citizens against any abuse of this authority provided that in so doing they observe the limits imposed by natural law and the gospel” (GS 74).

Defending people’s right against the abuse of the authority will involve Christian disobedience.

There is a third passage in the Pastoral Constitution which is relevant here:

Contemplating this melancholy state of humanity, the Council wishes to recall first of all the permanent binding force of universal natural law and its all-embracing principles. Man’s conscience itself gives ever more emphatic voice to these principles. Therefore, action which deliberately conflict with these same principles, as well as orders commanding such actions, are criminal.

Blind obedience cannot excuse those who yield to them.”
(GS 79).

This is a call for Christian disobedience.

Vatican II is quite sympathetic to conscientious objectors. “Moreover, it seems right that laws make human provisions for the case of those who for reasons of conscience refuse to bear arms, provided, however, that they accept some other form of service to the human community” (GS 79). Conscientious objection involves a certain Christian disobedience of the law of the land asking people to join the armed forces.

3. Concluding Thoughts

Many years ago Gandhiji, as part of our freedom struggle, advocated and practised civil disobedience. He was convinced that the British rule in India was colonial and so illegitimate. Hence Indians had no obligation to obey its laws.

It is possible that in the years to come some government in one of the states of India or the central government may issue orders or enact laws which we Christians, because of our faith, ought not to obey. At such times Christians have to show courage to disobey and pay the price for such disobedience. The martyrs of the Church were men and women who practised Christian disobedience.

There is often in the Church a tendency to lay great emphasis on docility, loyalty and obedience to the neglect of such virtues as love, fortitude, commitment to justice and fair play. The formation of our people – be they candidates for the priesthood or the religious life or lay people – should include training in Christian disobedience. The most important thing here is the proper formation of their conscience so that it will tell them when to obey and when to disobey.

What the Church in India needs today are well formed adult Christians who have the courage to stand up for truly Christian

values. They will, most of the time, know when and how to practise Christian disobedience.

NEWS FROM THE HOME OF LOVE

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