

The meaning of *obsequium religiosum*

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Pope Francis' many controversial statements have brought with them a new interest in how Catholics should respond to non-infallible teachings of the Magisterium. The Pope's infallibility was only solemnly defined in the late 19th century, so it is no surprise that careful reflection on non-infallible-but-still-authoritative teachings is a fairly recent thing. Vatican II's constitution *Lumen Gentium* tackles the topic head-on, but even there it just says that we owe the Pope's non-infallible statements a religious *obsequium* of mind and will. This language was picked up in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, Canon Law, the CDF's Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the theologian, the *Professio fidei*, and the CDF's doctrinal commentary on the concluding formula of the *Professio fidei*, so it appears to be the Church's phrasing of choice for describing a Catholic's proper response to non-infallible magisterial teaching in general.

But what does it mean? Sometimes "religious *obsequium*" is translated "religious assent," at other times "religious submission," and at other times "religious respect". What exactly are we being asked to do? Taking into account everything said in the above-mentioned documents, and looking a bit deeper for a theological account of what they say, let's unpack the key term *obsequium*.

The dictionary meaning of the word

The Latin word *obsequium* is not a mystery in itself. Its basic meaning is compliance or a readiness to comply.¹ So for example, the Roman army would bring a people back to *obsequium* – that is, subjugate them – by force of arms. Or a lover would show *obsequium* – a readiness to, erm, "comply" with her man. In English we have an old-but-not-quite obsolete word "obsequy" to signify the same thing. In the context of theology, the meaning of *obsequium* is admirably captured by the English word "submission."

As the above examples show, to call something *obsequium* is a fairly outward description of what is going on: the interior motivation behind the *obsequium* could be almost anything. One complies with one's lover out of amorous love. One has a readiness to comply to the Roman army because they kill disobedient people. One complies with the commands of one's parents out of respect for them as parents – or perhaps for fear of a spanking. One complies with the government's laws both because they are the custodians of the common good (reverence) and because they can punish (fear). In some of these cases the *obsequium* is a moral obligation, while in others it is

just a fact arising from the situation. When someone's readiness to comply is driven by flattery, such that he changes with every slightest perceived whim of his master, we call him "obsequious".

The *obsequium* we give to the Magisterium is specified as "religious": it does not arise from fear for our lives, nor from amorous love, but from reverence.

Reverence for what? For the office, bestowed on certain men by God, of protecting the Church's common good, a common good that includes the truth of the faith. We meet a teaching from the Magisterium with an act of submission (*obsequium*) inspired by reverence for the Magisterium's God-given office (*religiosum*). It is like the reverence one has for a sacred place: one would not carry out a non-religious activity in a Church without a pressing reason; one would be even more reluctant to transgress the sanctuary itself except in a case of great necessity; one would never in any situation agree to strike a monstrosity or a tabernacle or do anything else that would endanger the Eucharist; and one could not conceive of disrespecting the Eucharist itself. The reverence due to the sacred forbids it.

To refuse assent to a magisterial teaching is to transgress the Magisterium's sacred office, while to assent is to act with reverence toward it. This is why some translations of *Lumen Gentium* render the word *obsequium* as "respect." Although this is a decent attempt to describe the nature of the act, the English word "respect" seems to fall somewhat short of the strong reverence due to a sacred office, and it reaches for one of the more extended lexical meanings of the Latin word *obsequium*. For the purposes of this article, I will continue to render *obsequium* as "submission," as better capturing the natural species of the act, while pursuing the idea of "reverence" as expressing the moral species of the act.

Degrees of engagement of the Magisterium's authority

While I compared reverence for the Magisterium to reverence for a church or a tabernacle, there is a key difference between reverence for inanimate sacred things and reverence for a sacred person. The sacred thing is simply there, more or less sacred as the Church has made it so. But a person holding a sacred office can choose to bring the sacredness of his office more or less to bear on a situation. So while a church is only as sacred as it is, and the sanctuary inevitably more so, and the tabernacle even more so, a person holding the magisterial office can engage his office to a lesser degree, a greater degree, or a maximal degree, depending on his judgment.

There is nothing mystical about this. Every moral authority works the same way. For example, a child should obey his father out of piety, and the father can invoke his God-given role as father to a greater or a lesser degree. Sometimes the father only interposes his paternal office slightly, and the child knows that a slight reason would be enough to

justify transgressing his father's request. At other times the father interposes his paternal office more significantly, so the child knows that it is unlikely any reason would justify disobedience. And sometimes, in rare cases, the father can lay his entire paternal office between the child and a given deed, as though to say: If you do this, you utterly disrespect my paternity. The child who goes ahead with the deed at that point estranges himself from his father.

The same thing is true of governmental authority. While the government has power to punish those who are not motivated by anything more noble than fear, a good citizen obeys the law out of reverence for the office of the lawgiver. And the government indicates the greater and lesser degrees to which it interposes the dignity of its office between a citizen and a given deed by assigning greater and lesser penalties. For something trivial, like a speeding violation, the penalty is trivial. For something that defies all the demands of reverence for lawful authority, like treason, the penalty can even be death.

Notice that neither of these cases depends on the particular expertise of the one who holds the office. It helps if one's father is wise, but piety makes demands even toward a mediocre parent; no one in his right mind presumes the government knows best, but every good citizen intuitively obeys laws promulgated by the legitimate authorities.

Invoking the office of the Magisterium to varying degrees

So it comes as no surprise that those entrusted with guarding the Church's common good, the truth of the faith, can interpose the sacredness of their office between believers and a given path to a greater or lesser degree, even to the point of putting their entire office at stake. When the Magisterium only partially interposes its office between believer and deed, we have non-infallible yet magisterial teachings. When the Magisterium entirely interposes its office between believer and deed, it makes a difference who does this and how:

- If an individual bishop completely interposes his office and the believer goes ahead anyway, he is estranged from that bishop, although not necessarily from the Church. One might have to do this sometimes, if the bishop in question has himself betrayed the office he invokes. This is like the case when a child simply must disobey an abusive father, who has made a mockery of his paternity.
- If the bishops all together, or the bishop of Rome acting as their head, completely interpose their office – not just this man's episcopacy, but the episcopacy as a whole – and one goes ahead, then one is estranged from the Church. Because God gave the episcopacy to the Church, breaking ties with the episcopacy as such can never be a good idea.

- If the bishops all together declare that statement X is in the deposit of revelation, then the case is more serious still. When a person begins to consider whether he should adopt the Christian faith, he hears many different voices: the Bible says things, this and that preacher say things, bishops say things, and even his own experience and random books he picks up. But when he makes the decision that is the act of faith, what he commits to is this: All these many voices were but one voice, the voice of God inviting me to him. His act of faith is an act of hearing the voice of God in obedience. And when the bishops all together, or the Pope speaking as their head, declares that a given statement is in the deposit of revelation, their statement merges into the many voices that the believer originally heard and accepted as the voice of God. The believer's response is no longer one of reverence for the office of the Magisterium but of trust in God. To withhold assent at this point would be to void the act of faith itself, to undo one's original commitment. It would no longer be a sin of irreverence toward the Magisterium but of heresy. In the analogy of respect for sacred things given above, this would be like desecrating the Eucharist, the very reason why everything around it is sacred.

Each of the above-mentioned levels of authority has a distinct term to describe it. As regards non-infallible magisterial statements, i.e., lesser interpositions of the office, normal people normally do not have any sufficient reason to transgress the interpositions. So the normal outcome of reverence for the Magisterium is compliance, i.e., assent. This assent does not take the form of saying "I know X is true" – this is for acts of faith or of compliance with the definitive magisterium – but of saying "I think that X is true," using the language of firm opinion. Even though the Magisterium can invoke its office more and less here, yielding varying degrees of moral obligation to comply, the responses to these various degrees do not differ *in kind* and so are all described by the same terms.

When the magisterium completely interposes its office, i.e., hands down a definitive teaching, the response is not in any way uncertain. So the response is not described here as *obsequium religiosum*, but *firmiter tenere*, to "hold firmly," saying not "I think" but "I know."

The response to God's voice is *credo* – I believe.

***Obsequium religiosum* in cases of disagreement**

With regard to the lesser interpositions of the Magisterium's office, people can find themselves in a hard situation where a good reason for withholding compliance presents itself. However, the reverence given to non-infallible acts is always the same for the same degree of interposition of the office, even though how one acts on that

reverence will depend on other factors like one's academic training, one's responsibility for instructing others, the harmony of the teaching with other magisterial teachings, etc. Disagreeing with a non-infallible teaching does not mean withdrawing that which makes the *obsequium religiosum* a meaningful act: in a given case one may not comply, and yet the reverence that normally drives compliance is still present.

The reverence still present is not an empty form, either, because it still imposes certain limits on one's actions. If necessity forced a soldier to move through a church sanctuary with a rifle, for example, he still would not spit chewing tobacco or write on the walls: his reluctant violation of the space would not eliminate his reverence. And similarly, even when we must disagree with magisterial statements – e.g., when they disagree with other magisterial statements – we do so with sorrow at the necessity and respect for the office and its holder.

It might seem as though the fact that magisterial statement A disagrees with greater magisterial statement B voids the reverence due to A, because reverence for the magisterium itself outweighs what would have been given to A. But this is not so. Suppose for example that a Catholic saw the Eucharist in danger of desecration in the sanctuary and ran pell-mell through the church and through the sanctuary to prevent the desecration: his religious reverence for the church and the sanctuary would not diminished by his apparently disrespectful behavior. Quite the contrary: he could reverence the sanctuary *only* by rushing to save the Eucharist, the reality which makes the sanctuary sacred.

And again, none of this is mysterious: it is the way moral authority normally works. If a father has repeated command X time and again, in the most serious terms, and then later gives command Y once casually as the child leaves for school, what does the child do if he finds that obeying Y conflicts with obeying X? He understands that his father has substantially invested his paternal office in X and only slightly in Y, and consequently to obey command Y would be to disrespect his father's very fatherhood, and therefore would constitute "obedience" only in an outward and physical way.

The difference in authority levels is also crucial from the parent's point of view: the father expresses some things more seriously and other things more casually precisely because he wants his child to know which things give way in a crisis and which things do not. Imagine the pressure on a father if he knew that every statement he uttered put his entire paternity at stake. Imagine the constraint he would feel if he knew that every command he gave his child, no matter how small, absolutely bound that child in all circumstances. It would be practically unworkable.

The Magisterium is no different in this regard. Sometimes the Church speaks infallibly, putting her entire office at stake and forcing a Catholic to choose: union with the

Church or estrangement? Sometimes the Magisterium invests its office not entirely, but substantially. At other times, the Magisterium puts its office behind a given statement only in a small way. These differing levels of authority are there both for the faithful and for the Magisterium itself, to make its moral authority workable. The Pope does not have to suffer the intolerable burden of speaking infallibly in every circumstance, no matter how casual his utterance. And in hard circumstances, when choices must be made between teachings of higher authority and teachings of lesser authority, the faithful can know that only assent to those teachings in which the Magisterium's office is more invested is true *obsequium religiosum*.

¹ So the Oxford Latin Dictionary, which also offers as extended meanings "assiduous service or attention," "deference," or "solicitude."