

Vatican document says vow of obedience shows dependence on God

VATICAN CITY - A religious vow of obedience is a witness to the truth that obeying God's will sometimes involves reining in unbridled personal freedom, said a new Vatican document.

"With their very existence, consecrated persons present the possibility of a different way for the fulfillment of their own life, a way where the goal is God, his word the light and his will the guide," said the document from the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life.

The document, "The Service of Authority and Obedience," was released May 28 at the Vatican and was presented the same day to the heads of men's religious orders at the assembly of the Union of Superiors General.

In the past, the document said, religious superiors risked focusing so much of the order's mission that they could overlook the needs and gifts of individual members; "today, the risk can come rather from excessive fear of hurting others' feelings" or by focusing so much on individual talents that the impact on the order as a whole is neglected.

Neither religious obedience nor exercising authority in a religious community is easy, which is why both must take place in an atmosphere of prayer, with members seeking the will of God and listening to one another, it said.

Those in authority must be instruments of God's love and mercy, the document said.

While forgiving one another must be the "general rule" in religious communities, it said, behaviors such as sexual abuse that harm others must be dealt with seriously.

"Understanding for the confrere cannot exclude justice, especially in the face of vulnerable persons and victims of abuse," the document said.

“To accept and recognize the real evil and to assume the responsibility for it and its consequences are already steps on the path that leads to mercy,” it said.

The document said that in a world that considers “any kind of dependence humiliating,” religious obedience testifies to the fact that every person is dependent on God and that personal growth and expression reach their highest point in relationship to God and in service to others.

“For the consecrated person it might also come to having ‘to learn obedience’ through suffering or from some very specific and difficult situations,” such as having to leave one job and start another, it said.

But the same holds for those elected by their orders to serve as the superior, it said.

The superior must be a person of deep prayer who listens to and consults others, but is not afraid to take responsibility for making the final decision, it said.

“Persons in authority must act in such a way that the brothers or sisters can perceive that when they give a command they are doing so only to obey God,” said the document.