

Teaching for the 4th Session of the School of St. Joseph

I have been given the task to speak about, *how to be a cell leader that is accountable, or obedient*; reflecting on this attribute of our dear St. Joseph.

In keeping with the overall theme and spirit of these reflections on St. Joseph, I prefer the word ‘obedient’ rather than ‘accountable’. Another more descriptive phrase would be to speak about a cell leader who ‘*comes under authority*’.

To be ‘accountable’ to someone or ‘answerable to someone’ can sometimes sound a bit cold and better suited to the business world or impersonal relationships. It can imply that you do so unwillingly and that the relationship with the person involved may be unbalanced. [It may also imply a lack of freedom in exercising obedience.]

The word ‘obedience’, although it may also have many negative connotations, especially in certain cultures, the **obedience** we speak of here and the *authority that we come under* is of a different kind. Our obedience as Christians, is a **holy** obedience, and can be understood as a participation in the obedience of Christ to the Father.

“If you keep my commandments,” Jesus says, “you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and remain in his love.” John 15:10

Jesus continues by saying, “I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete.” John 15:11

We should feel at home with the idea of holy obedience, since, after all, Jesus is not asking something of us that He Himself was not willing to do.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church says that “every human community needs an authority to govern it. The foundation of such authority lies in human nature..... . However, the authority required by the moral order derives from God:” CCC 1898,1899.

As cell leaders, even when we are doing the work of cells in the parish, we are working under God’s authority and so is the pastor.

The obedience and accountability that is our guide is exemplified in the person of Jesus Christ in his Passion, Death and Resurrection and reflected in the fatherhood of St. Joseph, the heavenly Father’s counterpart in the Holy Family. If ever I forget who I am as I serve God in His church, I can always turn to Philippians 2:1-8, and get a serious reality check. Verse 5 of this passage says:

“Have this mind among yourselves, which was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.”

So, since we strive to have the mind of Christ as leaders, God the Father will always be the ultimate authority that the cell leader comes under. We come under the authority of the pastor and he also has God as his ultimate authority. There is an invisible **life line** of responsibility, obedience, authority, leadership, mothering/fathering and love, going back and forth, as we share our faith with one another, disciple one another and challenge one another on our great journey. As cell leaders we understand that our obedience and our authority as leaders are two sides of the same coin, and that both come from the ‘Person’, (with a capital ‘P’), whom we represent as sisters and brothers in Christ, and not from our ‘own person’.

So, how can we be obedient and accountable as cell leaders?

- The most important thing to remember is that being a cell leader is “**a work of love.**” A leader who is obedient knows they are engaged in a work of love.

In my own parish of St. Edward in Florida, the first line, and most important line of our parish vision statement, is that “our parish be a place of real salvation for all who enter the church.” This is certainly top of the list but the reality is—*we* can’t personally save anyone, as cell leaders or otherwise, nor can a ministry or program or group save anyone! Clearly, there is only one Savior of the world and that is Jesus Christ! But as cell leaders...our personal experience of the love of Jesus in our lives gives us *the ability and opportunity* to make His love visible in our interactions with others. We can model Christ for others and they will be attracted to the Christ whom they see in us.

At some point, cell leaders engaged in this work of love, can help others on the way to salvation by their actions, words and lifestyle. Unfortunately, sometimes leaders can also put up obstacles for others instead. People can tell immediately whether they are loved, trusted and valued by those who are leading them, or if those who are leading are fulfilling their own ‘power-agenda’: making rules, holding their authority over others or keeping up pleasing appearances.

Instead, a cell leader who has genuinely taken on this ‘work of love’, delights in seeing that others are growing in love and truth, and they rejoice in this.

- An obedient and accountable cell leader **is an instrument of unity.**

A cell leader should be a ‘bridge-builder’, an instrument of unity. This is oftentimes a quiet, gentle skill that reminds the group going off in all directions that they have more in common as Christians who follow the teachings of Christ, than their differences. This cell leader accompanies their brothers and sisters and places the good and the mission of the cell above their own ‘agenda and interests’ and who works for unity. If we are made in the image of the Triune God, Who is Perfect Unity of Persons, then division is not part of our true nature.

CCC 1878 “All men are called to the same end: God himself. There is a certain resemblance between unity of the divine persons and the fraternity that men are to establish among themselves in truth and love.”

- An accountable and obedient cell leader **is a ‘servant’ leader.**

Over the years I have found that those members who seem the least likely to choose to be a cell leader and may even have the greatest obstacles in their lives, are often the most dedicated, loyal and the most giving leaders. The secret is their willingness to *serve*. They have *servant-hearts*.

Christ, through His Church, calls for people ‘*after his own heart*’ to take on responsibilities within the Church to carry on His mission of evangelization. In order to walk the path of obedience and service, we need many, many servants, not just a few. If you visit the palace of a king or the castle of a nobleman, you will find many more servants than masters. In a parish community, it is vital that the cell leader, in service to others, is not leading from the front so much as *accompanying* others *by his side*. The ‘servant’ leader and his peers are one; he/she is one of them. Everyone is on the same team. The sign of a healthy leader is that he has raised up other leaders and can step aside within a prescribed period of time when a cell is ready to multiply, or when he/she may need to move into another role. Somewhere along the way, the leader has empowered others to grow.

The origin of the word ‘authority’ from the Greek, *augere* or Latin *augeo*, means to grow. So ‘authority’ is really about *helping others to grow*. We grow in love and in truth as individuals and as community when those who lead encourage others to exercise their own unique gifts *for the good of the whole*.

- An obedient leader **is an ambassador for Christ** in good times and in difficult times.

“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name, Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Matthew 6:9

The definition of ambassador is an authorized representative or messenger and I would like to add for our purpose, a **truth-speaker**.

Taking a leadership role in cells means you are an ambassador for Christ: messenger and truth-speaker. People will always be watching you and yes, there will sometimes be unfair criticism or misunderstandings, but that is part of life, and especially ‘parish life!’ A leader must always be ready to turn on a light in a dark situation, or build a bridge to reconciliation where there was once a wall. The leader keeps peace, for the good of the whole and has no duplicity.

This particular gift of leading can only be accomplished by a person who is willing to die to self—not just once, but again and again. They can admit when they are wrong, they do not try to cover up their mistakes at the expense of others. They have no problem saying the three words that Pope Francis thinks are so essential in every family interaction: ‘Please’, ‘Thank you’, and ‘Sorry’! (*Amoris Laetitia* p. 100, 19 March, 2016 & *Address to the Pilgrimage of Families during the Year of Faith*, 26 October, 2013)

This cell leader lives humbly with others and they delight in allowing others’ good gifts to shine and be recognized.

Being Christ’s ambassador is also being a truth-speaker; someone who “speaks the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15).

Edith Stein (St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross), having once been a leader for women in education before becoming a Carmelite nun said, “Do not accept anything as truth that lacks love and do not accept anything as love that lacks truth.” As cell leaders we have the great privilege of bringing others close to Christ and forming close and lasting relationships. We know that our foundation is truth. And Truth is a Person!

- Finally, an obedient cell leader “**leans not on his own understanding**” (Prov.3:6) or abilities or strengths. A cell leader finds all that he or she needs under the pastoral care of the pastor; in the sacramental life of the church; and in a robust and steady prayer life.

St. Joseph, the person we are honoring today, listened intently to the Lord, and in holy obedience, he took action. Wherever St. Joseph went, he created the space and

environment where the Holy Spirit was present and active; an environment where the Holy Family could pray, worship, learn, work, welcome others and ultimately grow closer to God. As cell leaders, let us re-commit ourselves to creating holy spaces, perhaps on Zoom for the time being, but eventually in our homes again, where we can welcome others to experience the presence of God, and to grow closer to Him.

St. Joseph, pray for us.

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