Turn obedience around and it's act of freedom

By JAMES K. HEALY

Your kids have begun to raise questions about why you're in charge and they aren't. Tease them with a Lenten exercise. Tell them to check out this really neat conversation between Yahweh and Moses in Deuteronomy (18:15-20): Moses tells Yahweh the people feel overwhelmed by the fire and thunder that accompany their direct encounters with God.

So Yahweh agrees to "back off." He says he'll appoint ordinary humans to speak with his authority but in ordinary human ways. He still insists that people listen and obey all who will hold authority from him.

Be patient. Your kids will almost certainly come to accept the popular understanding of that biblical passage: that societies — from family to country — function effectively only when people cooperate with authority and obey laws. Eventually they are likely to believe that because all authority comes from God, obedience is not only pragmatic, it is a virtue. And, almost certainly, they will teach their children that obedience to lawful authority is a matter of conscience, a moral responsibility.

But be careful about this scripture passage. It's a two-edged sword. As soon as Yahweh puts his authority in human hands, he warns that those who abuse it will die. Some creative young people might find here a rationale for dissent when they see authority abused. And once into the Bible, they might meet Jesus, at once perfect obedience and ultimate confronter and challenger to all who misuse power and abuse authority.

Many parents who hope and pray their kids will practice the virtue of obedience discourage them from that critical frame of mind that questions and challenges those in authority. They

teach their offspring, "You gotta go along to get along." They know challenges to authority are never wellreceived and those in power tend to view acts of conscientious dissent as personal threats.

Not to worry. Eventually, most folks "go along" and remain silent, even when they witness abuses of authority and nower example, when a prophet shares a personal conviction, as did St. Paul, naming virginity holier than marriage.

Paul said clearly it was his opinion, but when an apostle speaks it's pretty tough for another viewpoint to get an equal hearing, and so, to this day, Paul's view underlies the institutional church's requirement of celibacy for priests.

Have to be celibate to be holy? Paul might have changed his mind had he known more people like my parents (who loved and married and raised 13 kids). And how holy were some of the stern and humorless celibates who

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Those who dare search further for meaning in Jesus will find in him the perfect expression of both authority and obedience. In him they will see the authority that never controls or compels through harsh law and threat of punishment, but always explains, persuades and invites a response, conscientious and fully free. In Jesus they will see obedience as self-affirmation.

If, among the elders, many still cling to a notion of obedience that calls for blind submission to the authority figures of both church and state, it's hardly surprising. Both have crushed countless dissenters.

And any religious who took a vow of obedience before Vatican II can tell of religious superiors who nurtured a spirit of obedience in their "subjects" by commanding absurd and humiliating behavior. Many will recall a distinguished cardinal who sought to quiet Catholic dissent against the Vietnam War by quoting not a prophet but a patriot, Stephen Decatur: "Right or wrong, my country!"

Even sincere and legitimate authority figures can be a problem, as, for scrupulously followed Paul's advice through the years?

Yahweh kept his word. Inviting obedience to his plan, he expressed his authority through ordinary people. At last he sent Jesus, not in thunder and lightning, but in our fragile flesh. And Jesus used authority to liberate and lift up, not to put down; to empower and encourage, not to intimidate and oppress. Forever his rightful claim to authority would be his utter surrender as servant of God's people and his challenge to oppressors. And his perfect act of obedience to God's will would be the ultimate act of freedom.

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