

## REFLECTION - NOVEMBER 2021

- Sr. M. Liceria A.C.

**Theme:** Doing God's will in everything / I desire nothing but the will of God

“Good Father, I recommend myself to your ardent prayers during my retreat, for these two intentions:

1. That I may do God's will in everything;
2. That Jesus may give me his love, until he takes me when he wills, to love him up there in the Fatherland, for that is what I desire and for which I languish with all my soul”:  
Mother Veronica to Father Lazare. (A Life in Letters, Vol. II, P. 606)

In today's complex world abounding in individualism, materialism and secularism and dominated by technology and mass media, people no longer feel the need of God and for values eternal. There seems to be very little or no room at all for life in the spirit. In such a scenario, Mother Veronica's life of single-minded devotion to God and his will, which enabled her to let go of everything in life so as to possess God alone as her only treasure, serves as a powerful inspiration, to live our consecrated life in total inner freedom and joy. As we prepare ourselves to celebrate the 116<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her death and the 152<sup>nd</sup> year of the Establishment of the Apostolic Carmel in India, we have every reason to thank God for our Saintly foundress Ven. Mother Veronica who has shown us the way to the Father by doing His will at all times as the single purpose of our lives.

Obedience was the ruling passion of Jesus who kept saying: “My food is to do the will of Him who sent me”. So also Mother Veronica's entire life was a constant search for and a ready response to God's will, which led her to say, “Obedience is my life”.

Mother Veronica had a profound devotion to the will of God and Obedience was the expression of that will. However, her temperament was far from being naturally submissive and hence, her heroism in practicing this virtue to an extreme directly to God Himself through human superiors. Throughout her life her outstanding quality was obedience as she surrendered her will to God in love. It sprang from her deep spirit of faith and from her conviction that He had called her and was actively working in her. She was always attentive to His voice directing her life through the promptings of His Spirit. She could recognize God's voice deep within her, as is evident from her Easter Tuesday 1840 experience when she heard the music of angels and the words, “Peace I leave with you ... do I give unto you”. She knew who had spoken these words and she treasured them in her heart, without telling anyone. (God Alone Suffices, P. 15)

Hers was a continuous and generous “yes” to the many calls of God in her life. The death of her loving father Rev. Henry Daniel Leeves in 1845 at Beirut, was the first sorrow that struck the Leeves family. It left Sophie lonely and restless in spirit and she needed a tremendous faith to accept God's will in the loss of her father whom she loved very much.

Obedience to God led her to break off her engagement to the fiancé whom she loved dearly, because God wanted her undivided heart. In doing so, she had to bear the angry reproaches of her mother as well as accusations from those around her, that she had brought sufferings to the young man and illness on herself.

Her relentless search for Truth, faith in the ‘Real Presence’, and attraction to the Catholic faith led her to the conviction that God was calling her to enter the Church. This meant a heroic sacrifice of all that was near and dear to her. “It seemed to me like being in the agony of death. Chaos was going to intrude between me and all that I held dear in this world. I was going to leave the known, to plunge myself into the unknown. My mind was convinced, but my heart was broken. My God, what anguish! It is necessary to have passed through it to understand it. So I have very often said that when a soul has passed through the tortures of conversion, God can indeed make it endure all other anguishes (God Alone Suffices, P. 27). It was a very painful “yes”.

Mother Veronica’s inner urge to give herself to God in the consecrated life and her mother’s refusal to grant her the permission saying that she would not like to see her in the religious dress even on her deathbed, was yet another challenge she had to face. But she was of age now to decide for herself. Furthermore, while making the decision, she sacrificed her own desire to be a contemplative, and obeyed God, who directed her to the Congregation of St. Joseph of the Apparition, which she joined on 19 March 1851.

As a religious, Mother Veronica accepted every assignment as an opportunity to serve God’s people in the place to which she was sent. From Syros to Athens, from Athens to Piraeus as a superior, from Piraeus to Rome, and then to Tremorel, from Tremorel to Calicut, from Calicut to Rangoon, all in a span of thirteen years, gave her the heartaches and detachment that transfers often cause within a religious. To her superior general Mother Emilie Julien she writes, “You know, dear Mother, your least wishes are for me orders from God. I knelt down immediately and offered to do his will in everything, whatever be the sacrifice awaiting me ... Fiat!” (A Life in Letters, Vol. I, P.262)

Her commitment to Obedience involved also availability – going where she was sent and staying there cheerfully, however difficult the conditions. Several times, she was appointed superior in difficult situations. But she refrained from complaining. From Rangoon she writes, “I believe Mother, that Our Lord permits that you should send me to places where our sisters have difficulties, and where order has to be restored before anything can be done.” (A Life in Letters, Vol. I, P. 263) and to Father Syndique, “I have no other desire than to do God’s will ... I do not flee from obedience or suffering.” (Ibid., p. 267)

Her response to God’s will was not automatic. Though she was independent by nature, she was a discerning person and always sought counsel from wise directors. “I kept close to a spiritual guide, who discerned the will of God for me, and without his advice I did nothing ...” (Ibid., P. 258)

Once she had a problem regarding spiritual direction. As a remedy, her spiritual director had suggested that she ask for a transfer so as to make it easier for her to meet him. Writing to her superior general she says: "... nothing could happen to me ... unless it were God's will, which alone I wished to do, and that I was indifferent to all else. But to you, Mother, I say that I would not move from the place where you have sent me without an order from you, yourself" (Ibid., P. 71).

At times, Obedience was contrary to her natural inclinations and she had to struggle a lot, but she obeyed with faith, knowing that it was God's will for her. She represented regarding the situation, as she did when she got the difficult transfer from Calicut to Rangoon. She was all set to make a foundation at Cochin where Archbishop Bernadino of Verapoly, had kept a house ready for her and was awaiting the approval of her Superior General. So she writes to Mother Emilie Julien: "I believe that you already know from experience that when you give orders or even just desire something of me I hasten, nay, I fly in obedience and that promptly. But I admit to you that in this case (although I shall carry it out) obedience is painful". (Ibid., P. 262)

The real test to Mother Veronica's obedience came from her persistent call, "I want you in Carmel", which she repeatedly heard in her heart. She rejected it at first and detested any change as she loved her congregation and hoped to live and die as a Sister of St. Joseph. Gradually, the inner voice became more and more convincing that it was God's will for her. Since she was a discerning person, she sought counsel from wise spiritual directors, opening her heart first to Father Marie Ephrem and then to the Carmelite superiors of the missions, to Cardinal Howard and finally to Father Villefort S.J. After the authenticity of this call had been confirmed, she courageously surrendered to its demands and placing all her trust in Him, took the leap into the unknown. She found great joy when she entered the Carmel of Pau.

After her religious Profession as a Carmelite, she went through a real struggle to leave the Carmel of Pau, to find a place to begin her congregation. Mother Elias denied her the permission to celebrate Christmas with her sisters and told her to leave immediately. The Bishop of Annecy did not want her to begin the foundation in his diocese but finally, sent her to La Roche which was like a barren desert with no hope of getting any candidates. Only her faith and trust in a loving God, made her persevere there for five months in the face of utter poverty and loneliness, suspicion that she was a runaway nun and an imposter. She even felt abandoned by her superiors, when she needed their support. In spite of all the struggles, she did not leave the place but kept repeating, "It is Obedience that brought me here and I shall leave only through Obedience." (Ibid., Vol. II, P.311)

In all the details concerning the foundation, Mother Veronica always fell in line with the directions of those placed above her, regarding the place for the foundation, the enclosure, finances and other details. She was particular that the constitutions drawn up by her as directed by Bishop Marie Ephrem were approved by the Carmelite Superior General Father Dominic OCD and Msgr. La Croix, the Bishop of Bayonne.

However, the very first visit of Bishop Marie Ephrem to the Little Carmel of Bayonne, proved to be a very painful experience for Mother Veronica as he was not satisfied with whatever she had done for the foundation. He even accused her of disobedience and disloyalty. So she wrote to him saying, “In everything I have no other intention than to act under Holy Obedience, and since I can, despite all my miseries and sins give proof of having obeyed in whatever concerns this foundation, from the smallest to the greatest detail, I soon felt consoled”. (Ibid., P. 352)

With deep conviction that Obedience is the chief cornerstone of Religious life, she encouraged her daughters in India to always walk along the path of Obedience. In one of her letters she tells them, “Certainly a life of Obedience is the happiest”. (Letter, 1 June 1902)

A severe blow to Mother Veronica’s dreams and aspirations was dealt when Bishop La Croix took the decision that he would never more send sisters from Bayonne to the Diocese of Bishop Marie Ephrem. Mother Veronica was broken hearted. She had all the time surrendered by letting go one thing after another, even what was dearest to her heart in order to carry out God’s plans in her regard. Now she was left with nothing, but failure. All her hopes of achieving her life’s dreams for her congregation, she let go and returned to the Carmel of Pau to begin life again, in obscurity, as a Cloistered Carmel Sister.

It was, however, at the Carmel of Bethlehem that she practiced obedience to a heroic degree. Interior trials, unjust accusations, humiliations and severe penances were imposed on her. She had to fall in line with the arbitrary mitigations of the Rule and had to obey what seemed unreasonable and unjust. In her hopelessness and misery, she opened her heart to the Patriarch to whom she owed Religious Obedience and with his consent returned to the Carmel of Pau, where she spent the rest of her life in peace and tranquility. She remained there as a prayerful and surrendered person, accepting the infirmities of old age, in a spirit of humble Obedience.

Mother Veronica obeyed, even though most of the time it was a struggle, as Obedience was not natural to her. A woman with superior education and high intellectual capabilities, she could often see better ways of acting and there were situations that were intensely demanding and called for true heroism. But she went resolutely forward and practiced Obedience in the varied events of her life, whatever the cost to self. Hers was a spirit of faith. She beckons us today to be ever attentive to God’s voice deep within us, to be attuned to His will, and obey at all times, whatever the cost to self, surrendering ourselves in the hands of a loving father in a spirit of faith and love.

1. What does it mean “To own our foundress?” Mention some of the concrete ways of showing that “We own our foundress”?
2. How can we incarnate the virtue of obedience as was practiced by Mother Veronica whose strength consisted in obeying God’s will made known to her through her Superiors at every phase of her religious life?
3. Do I seek to be faithful in fulfilling my daily duties knowing that they are a God-given assignment?