Research Article

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"He Who Obeys Does Not Err": Examining Residual Violence in the Practice of Obedience Within the Catholic Church Through a Case Study of the Capuchin Order

Abstract: The Capuchin Order, a key Franciscan reform of the Tridentine Counter-Reformation, has historically emphasized strict, literal obedience to the Rule of Saint Francis. This article critically explores the lived experience of the vow of obedience within the Capuchin framework, focusing on how it can foster forms of "cadaveric obedience," which may lead to abuse, regression, and depersonalization. Using an interdisciplinary approach, the study examines how these power dynamics persist in the order's practices and structures. Despite contemporary shifts toward individual autonomy, the Capuchin Constitutions maintain a rigid interpretation of obedience, reinforcing a hierarchical system that demands both material and spiritual renunciation, thus reinforcing dependence on authority. By combining autoethnography with anthropological insights into violence, this article contributes to broader discussions on power, control, and abuse prevention within contemporary religious institutions and analogous frameworks.

Keywords: violence and religion, abuse(s) within the Catholic Church, Church History, Capuchin Order

Among the numerous emblematic episodes recounted in the late fourteenth-century treatise *De conformitate*, friar Bartholomew of Pisa presented an account in which St. Francis of Assisi commanded two novices to plant vegetables with their roots facing upward and their leaves buried beneath the soil. One novice complied exactly as directed, while the other, guided by conventional reasoning, planted the vegetables in the usual manner. Upon learning of their actions, St Francis dismissed the latter, remarking that, while he might make an excellent farmer, what he sought was a true friar (1885 [c. 1399], p. 141). This seemingly anecdotal tale encapsulates the radical essence of religious obedience within Franciscan spirituality. It presents obedience as an exalted virtue, one so radical that it could even demand the suspension of personal judgment, as emphasized by Francis of Assisi in the third of his *Admonitions*, where he warned against "returning to the vomit of one's own will" (2001 [c. 1223], p. 100). As this article examines, such an extreme conception of obedience, although rooted in a profound mysticism, carries inherent risks. When wielded by superiors prone to excess or deviance, and lacking safeguards or a solid spiritual foundation, it risks undermining its spiritual purpose within hierarchical contexts, such as religious communities, and becoming a tool of manipulation and violence.

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1 Beyond the Hagiographies: The Perils of Obedience in Franciscan Spirituality

The Capuchin Order, established in the early sixteenth century, represents a pivotal reformist movement within the Franciscan tradition. Founded in 1528 by Matteo da Bascio, the Capuchins sought to recover the original ideals of Francis of Assisi, emphasizing radical poverty, simplicity, and an unwavering commitment to the evangelical life. This reform responded to the perceived dilution of the Franciscan charism, which, by the late Middle Ages, had become entangled in institutionalization and material wealth. The Capuchins called for a stricter observance of the Franciscan Rule, arguing that it had been compromised over time. Their fervour not only revitalized their order but also contributed significantly to broader ecclesiastical renewal, particularly during the Counter-Reformation.

Central to Capuchin identity is the Rule of Saint Francis, established in the early thirteenth century. This Rule emphasizes evangelical obedience, poverty, and chastity as core principles, reflecting Francis of Assisi's radical commitment to living in imitation of Christ. A defining feature is the principle of *sine glossa* – "without gloss" – which demands a literal adherence to its precepts. This principle was central to the Capuchin reform, serving both as a critique of laxity within the broader Franciscan tradition and as a reaffirmation of Francis's vision. By embracing *sine glossa*, the Capuchins sought to preserve the rigor and purity of the Rule, resisting any accommodations that might dilute its transformative power.

Despite these reforms, tensions remain in the Order, particularly regarding the interpretation of obedience. While the Capuchin Constitutions, especially after the Second Vatican Council, encourage discernment and moderation (Order of Friars Minor Capuchin, 2017, 22, 2–3), the enduring legacy of *cadaveric obedience* – a concept explored in the following – continues to shape the Order's dynamics. This notion, rooted in the historical rigor of Franciscan discipline, reflects an uncritical submission to authority that can stifle autonomy. Although the revised Constitutions emphasize balance, deeply ingrained traditions of hierarchical control persist within Capuchin communities. These practices reveal the weight of centuries of spiritual rigor and institutional authority, highlighting the challenges of reconciling historical identity with contemporary values of personal dignity and freedom.

This dynamic is not uniform across all Capuchin circumscriptions, as the implementation of reforms varies widely, shaped by distinct cultural contexts and the boundaries they impose (Reitsma & van Nes-Visscher, 2023, p. 298). While some regions embrace progressive approaches, others maintain ultraconservative traditions. The General Chapter's 2012 revisions, approved by the Holy See in 2013, replaced the 1986 Constitutions but failed to fully displace strict adherence to authority, often justified as vital to preserving Franciscan spirituality.

The enduring severity within the Capuchin Order is deeply entrenched, reinforced by its material culture. Iconography and religious art, prominently displayed in convents and churches, perpetuate ideals of self-denial and mortality, such as Saint Francis meditating on a skull – a memento mori symbolizing life's transience. This imagery underscores a spiritual ideal of submission and renunciation of personal will, framing obedience as integral to sanctity. However, this traditional emphasis on asceticism and submission may not always align with contemporary theological sensibilities. For novices, especially those new to the Order, the emphasis on silence and ascetic practices can at times feel burdensome, potentially hindering their capacity for personal discernment and spiritual development. While silence is traditionally viewed as a means of fostering reflection and deeper prayer, its rigorous imposition in the initial stages of formation might be challenging for some, limiting their ability to engage with their inner spiritual journey.

The Church's official movement toward a more pastoral and mission-oriented interpretation of obedience, as highlighted by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (1990), emphasizes that religious obedience should emulate Christ's mission in the world, without compromising personal discernment or being used as a tool of coercion. The 1990 directives state that "whether one has authority in an institute or not, one cannot either command or obey without reference to mission" (n. 15), rejecting obedience driven by pressure or diplomacy. Yet, despite these exhortations, many within the Capuchin Order continue to align their practices more closely with the older model of submission as the path to

sanctity. In this context, the traditional practices and iconography, while fostering piety and a spiritual atmosphere, may inadvertently perpetuate a form of submission that is less conducive to the personal growth and autonomy of novices. The challenge lies in balancing the rich spiritual heritage of the Capuchin tradition with the evolving needs and sensibilities of contemporary religious life.

The tradition of maintaining silence during communal meals in many Capuchin formation houses – particularly on Fridays in remembrance of the Lord's Passion or during the Lenten season – stands as a compelling expression of ascetic discipline. This silence transcends mere ritual, fostering deep introspection and enabling candidates to internalize their daily experiences, reflect on the significance of shared meals, and heighten their spiritual vigilance through sensory mortification. During these meals, candidates take turns reading aloud from foundational texts of the Order, such as the Rule and Testament of St. Francis, the Constitutions, papal encyclicals, and hagiographies.

These readings highlight examples of a radical commitment to the religious vows that candidates will 1 day profess. While each targets a distinct aspect of the self, all aim to limit personal autonomy. The Capuchins portrayed in these accounts possess few material belongings, reject worldly recognition, and share what little they have with the poor, demonstrating profound humility and meekness as followers of the poor and naked Christ: *nihil habentes, omnia possidentes* (Simmel, 2004 [1900], p. 255). As disciples of Christ in chastity, they mortify their gaze to avoid looking at women, battling or fleeing from temptations and occasions of sin, relying on prayer to maintain purity of heart (Piccone Camere, 2017, pp. 377–421). As imitators of Christ's obedience unto death, they relinquish their wills without hesitation or exception (Röhrkasten, 2015, p. 111). These narratives inspire the candidates, offering vivid models of sanctity and reinforcing the discipline of communal silence as a space for both reflection and spiritual formation.

To explore the significance and broader implications of these practices, this article employs a multi-methodological approach, combining autoethnography, documentary analysis, and critical theological reflection, while also drawing insights from the anthropological scholarship on violence. One co-author's extensive experience, spanning two decades as a Capuchin friar and priest, including service as Vicar Provincial – a role encompassing leadership, governance, and pastoral oversight – offers an invaluable insider perspective. During his tenure, he contributed to the development of a revised formation plan, a protocol for safeguarding minors and vulnerable individuals, and a provincial pastoral strategy informed by a theology responsive to the signs of the times. Although no longer a member of the Order, his reflections as a layperson, married and a father, bridge significant gaps in understanding the lived experiences and subtle dynamics of Capuchin life.

The analysis acknowledges the dual nature of these practices, which, while fostering spiritual depth, can also perpetuate non-physical forms of violence with significant emotional costs, such as self-doubt and self-blame (Hanson & Richards, 2019, pp. 127–129). Drawing on Butler's concept of "stylized repetition of acts" (1988, p. 519), it highlights how ecclesiastical patterns often reinforce social structures through sacralization, rendering critique and systemic change particularly challenging. Enriched by a critical evaluation of Magisterial documents, the study seeks to address these tensions by contributing to the refinement of Capuchin formation practices, balancing the preservation of spiritual traditions with their adaptation to contemporary realities.

The Capuchin Order's spiritual tradition of obedience epitomizes ascetic practices, present in other reformed congregations of the sixteenth century. Without implying an anachronistic judgment of past practices, this radical observance of obedience is exemplified in the lives of various saints and figures within the Order, whose stories have been compiled by Iriarte and Toppi. To name but a few, Felix of Cantalice, the first canonised saint of the Order, and Felix of Nicosia both embodied this radical submission, awaiting their superiors' permission to pass away, with the latter's death delayed by the compassion of his superior (1993, p. 46; 1997, p. 54). Similarly, Seraphin of Montegranaro, despite performing numerous miracles, was forbidden by his superior from continuing such acts (1993, p. 54). Lawrence of Brindisi, the Minister General of the Order, astonished his contemporaries by submitting even to brothers of lesser rank (1993, p. 153). Other figures, such as Conrad of Parzham and Innocent of Berzo, adhered scrupulously to their resolutions, even seeking permission for minor actions (1997, p. 179; 1997, p. 224). Francisco of Orihuela relinquished his former bishopric to embrace the strict obedience of a simple friar (1997, p. 241). Leopold Mandić, despite his desire to be a missionary, devoted himself to his confessional in Padua, spending up to 14 h daily in service (1997, p. 308).

Even Pio of Pietrelcina, under Vatican scrutiny for his stigmata, lived a life marked by "patience and heroic obedience" (1997, p. 347).

While these narratives are often celebrated as examples of extraordinary sanctity, they also reflect a deeper, unsettling dynamic: the institutionalized practice of obedience functions as a mechanism of effacing individual agency. Acts such as drawing water with a basket or planting seeds with roots facing upward were often hailed as demonstrations of unwavering submission, even as they defied common sense, occasionally bordering on the absurd. This tension was not lost on contemporaries, particularly during the early modern period, when such expressions of obedience often elicited discomfort and concern. In the twenty-first century, however, advancements in psychology, pedagogy, and a greater emphasis on human dignity have prompted a revaluation of these practices.

The issue is not necessarily the continued use of these hagiographies in Capuchin formation houses but rather the manner in which they are presented: often devoid of sufficient critical context, historical reflection, or opportunities for open dialogue. Novices, who are still in the process of developing their own spiritual and intellectual frameworks, may be unable to critically engage with the examples set by saints who embody the highest ideals of obedience. To voice doubt could risk undermining the very virtue that these narratives exalt as essential to holiness. If the great spiritual exemplars of the Capuchin tradition practiced such radical submission, how could a novice dare to question their example?

In this context, Brother Leopold of Alpandeire's maxim: "he who obeys does not err" (Iriarte & Toppi, 1997, p. 286), epitomizes a problematic view of obedience. While this phrase was not unfamiliar to contemporary Capuchin movements, particularly within the Jesuit and Discalced Carmelite spiritual traditions, its roots likely trace back to the spirituality of the Desert Fathers of Early Christianity. This reductionist logic frames obedience as a simple equation of unquestioned submission with success, overlooking the complex moral and ethical dimensions of decision-making. By promoting a binary view of obedience – where submission equates to success – this perspective fails to account for the possibility that unquestioning obedience could lead to moral error, especially when authority figures may fail or issue questionable commands.

This perspective on strict and unquestioned obedience lies at the core of governance structures in various religious congregations and is particularly relevant for understanding the challenges – and at times grave abuses – found in several New Religious Movements. The prestige attached to the historical and spiritual origins of these principles has rendered them acceptable, even appealing, to many young and well-educated individuals. However, recent scandals involving power and sexual abuse within newly founded communities have exposed the profound harm that blind obedience can cause, especially when exploited by self-appointed leaders lacking accountability.

The Peruvian congregation *Sodalitium Vitae Christianae* – recently suppressed by Pope Francis due to the absence of authentic charism and its sectarian orientation – serves as a stark example. Young members were effectively turned into subservient followers, subjected to the will of founder Luis Figari and his inner circle. Beyond documented cases of sexual abuse, daily humiliations – officially framed as exercises in self-mastery – were routine. One former member recalls being forced to sleep on a marble staircase for a month, undergoing prolonged fasting to the point of serious health risk, and being punished for any perceived act of "disobedience" by having to swim several kilometres in the cold waters of the Pacific Ocean (Figueroa & Tombs, 2024, p. 188).

2 Reinterpreting Obedience: Vatican II and the Renewal of Religious Life

The examples outlined earlier, while not exhaustive, illustrate a distinctive model of sanctity that has profoundly shaped the imagination of many young candidates entering religious life. Grounded in an uncompromising and literal adherence to the three evangelical counsels, this model has been reinforced through life narratives that, in today's context, may appear outdated, inadequate, or even detrimental to the formation of

responsible, autonomous, and critically engaged adults. The emphasis on absolute compliance stands in stark contrast to contemporary values of personal freedom and moral discernment. While stories of blind obedience and radical asceticism may have inspired previous generations, they now risk reproducing forms of institutional violence that hinder the development of conscience and engagement with the world, favoring instead a culture of uncritical conformity.

Awareness of the need for reform – particularly regarding the vow of obedience – was notably sharpened during the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), which marked a turning point in the Church's self-understanding in relation to modernity. A key outcome was *Perfectae Caritatis*, the conciliar decree on the renewal of religious life, which called for religious orders and congregations to align their structures and practices more closely with evolving conceptions of human dignity, autonomy, and the Church's pastoral mission in the contemporary world. Obedience was no longer defined as blind subjugation, but as a mature and conscious orientation toward God's will. Far from diminishing the dignity of the person, this reinterpreted obedience was presented as an expression of authentic freedom – one that enables spiritual growth and personal flourishing within the divine plan.

Building on this conciliar foundation, subsequent magisterial documents such as Pope Paul VI's *Evangelica Testificatio* (1971), John Paul II's *Vita Consecrata* (1996), and the Instruction *The Service of Authority and Obedience* (2008) further developed the theological vision of obedience. Referencing foundational figures such as Benedict, Ignatius, Augustine, and Francis, these texts explore the enduring tension between traditional ideals of total submission and the growing emphasis on personal conscience and relational authority. This evolving understanding poses an unresolved challenge: how to reconcile the demand for complete obedience to superiors, as codified in Canon Law (CIC, 1983, n. 601), with the primacy of personal moral responsibility emphasized by *Gaudium et Spes* (n. 16). While obedience remains central to religious life, its contemporary articulation must negotiate these competing imperatives.

Despite the theological depth of these developments, implementation has been uneven. During the Year of Consecrated Life (2014–2015), Pope Francis reaffirmed the urgency of reform through repeated calls for reflection and renewal of the evangelical counsels. Yet, as his homilies on the Feast of Consecrated Life suggest, the tension between radical obedience and personal autonomy continues to surface as a structural and spiritual challenge. This ambivalence is perhaps best captured in the contrasting paradigms of obedience that continue to inform both ecclesial norms and formation practices today (Table 1).

3 Cadaveric Obedience in the Franciscan Tradition

Obedience has been a cornerstone of consecrated life in the Catholic Church, particularly within the Order of Friars Minor Capuchin, which, in its origins, emphasized a radical form known as "cadaveric obedience." Rooted in the early writings of Saint Francis of Assisi, this concept reflects a life of humility and submission to God's will, mediated through the authority of superiors. The term "obedience" appears 87 times in his writings, along with related terms like "observance," encompassing relationships with God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, Mary, the Church, the Pope, prelates, fellow brothers, and one's conscience. His *Admonitions* highlight obedience as a central virtue: in the Second Admonition, Francis warns against self-will, stressing that true discipleship requires renouncing personal desires (2001 [c. 1223], p. 99), while in the Third, he defines "perfect obedience" as the total surrender of one's will to a superior, provided the command aligns with goodness and God's will (2001 [c. 1223], p. 100).

In *Admonition* 3, Francis asserts that true obedience entails abandoning one's own judgment, even if the religious believes they perceive a better or more useful path for their spiritual well-being than what is commanded by the superior. This, according to Francis, constitutes true and charitable obedience, pleasing to both God and neighbor. However, if a superior orders something harmful to the subject's soul, disobedience is permissible, though the subject must not abandon the superior or the community. In enduring persecution for the sake of obedience, a brother demonstrates the highest form of obedience, as it signifies the ultimate sacrifice for the community's welfare. However, Francis's understanding of obedience was not one of blind

Table 1: Models of obedience in religious life: comparative diagram illustrating shifts in theological and institutional understandings of obedience. Developed by the authors

Dimension	Traditional model of obedience	Emerging perspective on obedience
Source of authority	Authority is mediated through the hierarchical structure of the Church. Superiors are seen as legitimate representatives of God's will within the community, drawing from the founder's charism and the Rule	Authority remains rooted in service and mission but is exercised in a more dialogical and participatory way. It emphasizes discernment, collegiality, and a shared search for God's will in community
View of autonomy	Autonomy is offered up freely as part of the religious commitment. Personal will is subordinated in favor of communal direction, viewed as a path to spiritual freedom	Autonomy is seen as a dimension to be integrated with obedience, not suppressed. Respect for conscience and mature personal responsibility is emphasized within the framework of communal life
Meaning of obedience	Obedience is understood as the offering of one's will to God through submission to legitimate authority. It is a path of self-denial and spiritual formation modeled on Christ's own obedience	Obedience is reimagined as attentive and discerning listening to God's will, often mediated through dialogue, community needs, and mission. It values inner conviction and co-responsibility
Logic of formation	Formation emphasizes discipline, humility, and the interiorization of the Rule and the community's spirituality. Novices learn through imitation and trust in their formators	Formation encourages personal integration, critical reflection, and active engagement with the charism. Structures remain, but greater emphasis is placed on dialogue and personal discernment
Normative references and guiding principles	Rooted in Scripture, the Rule of the founder, and long-standing spiritual traditions. Practices are reinforced by ecclesial norms and canonical structures	Grounded in the teachings of Vatican II, recent magisterial documents, and the evolving understanding of charisms, mission, and human dignity. Emphasizes the value of freedom in communion

The Second Vatican Council introduced a renewed theological vision of consecrated life, centered on human dignity, spiritual maturity, and communal discernment. While maintaining continuity with earlier models rooted in Scripture and tradition, it encouraged a shift from strictly vertical and juridical understandings of obedience toward a more dialogical, relational, and mission-oriented approach. Obedience is no longer viewed merely as external submission but as a free and responsible response to God's will – discerned within the community and guided by grace, conscience, and fidelity to the charism. Documents such as *Gaudium et Spes* and *Perfectae Caritatis* underscore this development, inviting religious communities to reimagine obedience in light of contemporary challenges while remaining faithful to their foundational inspiration.

submission. As noted in *Admonition 3*, there is room for discernment: if a command contradicts a brother's conscience or spiritual well-being, he may disobey. Nevertheless, Francis exhorts that such disobedience must be conducted in a spirit of love and without severing ties with the superior or the community. Thus, Francis acknowledges the tension between obedience and personal freedom, but insists that genuine obedience is rooted in love and is willing to endure suffering for the greater good.

During the sixteenth-century Capuchin reform – a movement aimed at restoring the ascetic ideals of Francis – the notion of obedience became central. The Capuchins' strict adherence to the Franciscan Rule, *sine glossa* and *ad litteram*, was grounded in the founder's *Testament*: "I, through obedience, strictly command all my brothers, cleric and lay, not to place glosses on the Rule or on these words." (Francis of Assisi, 2001 [1226], p. 91). This uncompromising directive shaped the Capuchin reform's identity, emphasizing a literal observance of the Rule that left little room for individual interpretation.

Hagiographical sources from the early Franciscan tradition, such as those written by Thomas of Celano, reinforce this ideal of obedience. In his *Second Life*, he recounts an episode in which Francis declared that, by divine grace, he would "readily obey a novice of 1 h, if he were given to me as my guardian, as carefully as I would obey the oldest and most discerning," adding that "a subject should not consider his prelate a human being, but rather the One for love of whom he is subject" (Celano, 2000 [c. 1247], p. 317). Such accounts reflect the Franciscan emphasis on humility and self-abnegation. However, they also risk idealizing a form of submission that, while spiritually inspiring, could entrench rigid hierarchies and suppress personal discernment and agency. Other hagiographical texts offer interpretations of obedience shaped more by the monastic traditions of the time, emphasizing hierarchical submission and institutional governance.

Bonaventure's impact on the Franciscan Order was not limited to his portrayal of Francis in hagiography. At the General Chapter held in Narbonne in 1260, Bonaventure oversaw the ratification of a set of legal statutes, later known as the *Constitutions of Narbonne*, which provided the Order with a more formalized structure. This codification marked a significant shift, as it sought to balance the spiritual ideals of the early Franciscans with practical governance (Le Goff, 2004, pp. 16–17). The following year, Bonaventure composed the *Major Legend* – a definitive "official" biography of Francis. Together, these works guided the Franciscan movement onto a more institutionalized and regulated path that endured for centuries. For his role in shaping this legacy, Bonaventure is often referred to as the "second founder" of the Franciscans (Hughes, 2014, p. 510; cf. Monti, 2014, p. 576). However, while Bonaventure's reforms helped stabilize the Order, they also fostered a more rigid understanding of obedience – emphasizing conformity and hierarchical authority, often at the cost of the personal discernment and spiritual freedom that were central to Francis's original vision, as evidenced below:

> "Take a lifeless corpse," Francis said, "and place it wherever you want! You will see that it does not resist being moved, nor complain about location, nor protest if left. Sit it on a throne, and it will look down, not up; dress it in purple, and it looks twice as pale. This," he continued, "is someone truly obedient, who doesn't argue about why he's being moved; he doesn't care where he's placed, he doesn't pester you to transfer him. When raised to an office, he keeps his usual humility; the more he's honoured, the more he considers himself unworthy" (Bonaventure, 1999 [c. 1263], p. 571).

By promoting total submission, Bonaventure sought to strengthen the order's cohesion and authority, particularly during a time of internal divisions. The obedient friar, who "doesn't argue about why he's being moved" and "considers himself unworthy" even when honored (Bonaventure, *The Major Legend of Saint Francis*, 571), embodied the disciplined unity Bonaventure needed to restore order. His emphasis on cadaveric obedience became a tool to navigate factionalism, ensuring that the rule was both a spiritual guide and a means of consolidating institutional control. This model of obedience transcended personal piety, serving as a mechanism to align the friars under unquestioning adherence to authority. From the perspective of political anthropology, this reflects a preference for alienating personal freedom to preserve a homogenizing unity (Clastres, 1980, p. 192).

4 Embodied Obedience and Institutional Violence: An Anthropological Inquiry

Michel Foucault's analysis of power dynamics offers a profound lens through which to examine obedience within the Capuchin Order. His concept of the panopticon – a design facilitating constant surveillance – serves as a metaphor for a form of disciplinary power that operates through internalized control rather than overt coercion. In the context of religious life, where obedience to superiors is paramount, this panoptic structure manifests as a pervasive mechanism of self-regulation. Foucault describes such environments as spaces "where individuals are inserted in a fixed place, where the slightest movements are controlled, where all events are recorded" (Foucault, 1975, p. 199). He further notes that "the minutiae of regulations, the meticulous gaze of inspections, and the control of the smallest aspects of life and body" contribute to a system of oversight that shapes individual behaviour (Foucault, 1975, p. 142).

Within the Capuchin Order, the lived experience of the vow of obedience may not merely reflect a spiritual ideal but also function as a mechanism of institutional control and, potentially, a form of resistance. Cadaveric obedience, in particular, embodies a material enactment of hierarchical authority, embedding power within the disciplined practices of religious life. Drawing on Foucault's theorization of power as "omnipresent and omniscient" (Foucault, 1975, p. 199), this form of obedience exemplifies disciplinary power, where the subject is constituted through a network of surveillance, enforced conformity, and ritualized submission.

Foucault's analysis reveals that power does not merely repress but actively produces subjects by embedding authority into the body and mind. Within the Capuchin Order, this dynamic is especially potent: obedience operates not through overt coercion but through the internalization of hierarchical values, where individuals participate in their own subjugation. The body becomes a locus of control, meticulously shaped by repeated acts of compliance, yet it is also the medium through which institutional norms are reproduced. This interplay situates obedience as both a personal discipline and a collective mechanism for perpetuating the Order's authority. More crucially, Foucault's insights challenge simplistic notions of obedience as a one-directional process of domination. Power, in this context, is not only constraining but also generative, enabling the subject to navigate and negotiate their position within the system. The disciplined body is not merely passive; it actively performs and sustains the norms of the institution, thereby blurring the lines between agency and subjugation. The lived experience of obedience, then, is an ongoing negotiation – a site where authority is simultaneously affirmed and contested.

Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of performativity, the vow of obedience is not simply an act of acquiescence to hierarchical authority but rather a ritualized process through which power is continuously reproduced. Each act of obedience, rather than merely reflecting the existing power structure, serves to sustain and reinforce it, embedding institutional control within the embodied practices of the members. In this sense, obedience functions both as a means of perpetuating institutional authority and a mechanism through which the individual is shaped by, and complicit in, their own subjugation. Butler argues that constraint does not merely limit performativity; rather, it impels and sustains it. As she asserts, "constraint is, rather, that which impels and sustains performativity" (Butler, 1993, p. 95). This iterative repetition of norms, underpinned by prohibitions and the threat of ostracism or death, shapes the subject over time, compelling the enactment of authority through ritual acts. These constraints do not fully determine the subject but instead guide and structure the repetition through which identity is formed.

In this context, the practice of *obedientia cadaverica* can be understood as a ritualized enactment, where obedience becomes both the means and site of power's enactment. Repeated acts of submission, embedded within a highly structured daily routine, not only reinforce the Capuchin hierarchy but also diminish personal autonomy and desire. Each act of obedience is like a drop of water on stone – seemingly insignificant in isolation, but cumulatively carving out a deep, indelible mark on the friar's body and mind. Through the disciplined repetition of these rituals, the body becomes a site where institutional control is internalized and enacted. Thus, the performative nature of obedience paradoxically introduces a potential for reinterpretation or resistance, albeit in a limited and constrained space.

Much like the cyclical schedule of the friars, which is dictated by the liturgical year and the daily rhythm of the Liturgy of the Hours, the vow of obedience becomes a ritualized practice that, over time, shapes the individual's very being. Just as the repetitive recitation of psalms – often memorized in their entirety – gradually engraves these prayers into the consciousness of the friars, so too does the ritual of obedience leave its imprint on the friar's subjectivity. The daily rituals of prayer, work, and community life continuously reaffirm the hierarchical order, embedding it deep within the body and the psyche of the religious individual.

Butler's insights further illuminate how institutional power is not only externally imposed but also internally reiterated through the continuous performance of obedience. In her work, she emphasizes that "internalization does not have to take the form of a mercilessly violent conscience, and certain kinds of internalization, which are not always incorporations, are necessary for survival" (Butler, 1997, p. 195). The process of subjectivation, through the ritual repetition of obedience, reveals the complex interplay between agency and subjugation. The friar, while ostensibly free to choose their actions, is shaped by and complicit in the performance of authority. In this view, obedience becomes more than a static condition of submission; it is a dynamic negotiation of power, where the disciplined body perpetuates institutional authority, yet also holds the potential for subtle subversion.

Achille Mbembe's (2019) concept of *necropolitics* offers a provocative yet illuminating framework for interpreting *cadaveric obedience* within religious orders – not as the literal exercise of sovereign power over life and death, but as a symbolic configuration that approximates a form of self-annihilation. Originally developed to examine how sovereign regimes determine who may live and who must die – especially in colonial and postcolonial contexts – Mbembe's notion is invoked here in a strictly metaphorical and analogical

sense. The aim is not to conflate theological discipline with state violence, but rather to illuminate how regimes of total obedience can gradually erode personal autonomy. In this light, obedience in the Capuchin Order emerges not merely as a spiritual ideal or hierarchical necessity, but as a ritualized mechanism of control that disciplines the body and constrains the will. In its most extreme expression, the vow of obedience may function as a form of symbolic death: the surrender of desire, critical agency, and self-determination to the imperatives of the institution.

Mbembe's distinction between *force* – which imposes order – and *violence* – which seeks to dismantle or destroy it (2019, p. 22) – helps clarify the affective and performative dimensions of obedience in this context. While the Capuchin system does not enact physical violence, it cultivates a subtle, internalized form of violence that operates through ritual repetition, surveillance, and the spiritualization of submission. The reference to *necropolitics* thus underscores the existential cost of obedience when it becomes absolute: a logic that stifles vitality, forecloses creativity, and subordinates freedom in the name of institutional cohesion and transcendental ideals. By highlighting the tension between spiritual aspiration and the institutional mechanisms that can, paradoxically, hollow out the very humanity they claim to sanctify, this reading reveals the fragility of subjectivity under the weight of sacrificial discipline.

Georges Didi-Huberman's reflections on disobedience and desire offer a compelling counterpoint to the dynamics of obedience discussed earlier. Disobedience, for Didi-Huberman, is not merely a refusal of authority but an affirmation of the human drive for autonomy, knowledge, and self-expression. As he notes, *"Désobéir, voilà un verbe qui rime assez bien avec désirer"* (Didi-Huberman, 2019, p. 172) – to disobey is intrinsically linked to desire, a vital and irreducible force. Mythological figures such as Eve and Antigone exemplify this connection. Eve's decision to eat the forbidden fruit, despite its consequences, signifies a profound assertion of her longing for knowledge, while Antigone's defiance of Creon reflects a resistance to authority that seeks to suppress justice and familial loyalty. For Didi-Huberman, disobedience is not only a refusal but also a political act, a gesture meant to inspire others to challenge the fears imposed by power and to reclaim the public space as a site of shared resistance.

In contrast, the Capuchin ideal of *cadaveric obedience* seeks to suppress this desire entirely, demanding an absolute submission that silences individual autonomy. Such obedience, in its most extreme form, operates as a mechanism of institutional control, aiming to eliminate independent thought and will. Where disobedience affirms the human capacity to seek meaning beyond imposed constraints, absolute obedience confines the individual to a ritualized existence, subordinating desire to institutional dictates. Didi-Huberman's assertion that *"Il ne suffit pas de désobéir"* – it is not enough to disobey – underscores the urgency of transmitting acts of refusal into collective gestures of defiance (2019, p. 189). Thus, the tension between disobedience and obedience reveals a fundamental conflict: the human drive for autonomy and the institutional imperative to regulate it. Figures like Eve and Antigone embody the transformative power of disobedience, standing in stark contrast to the stifling silence imposed by absolute obedience.

In sum, *cadaveric obedience* within the Capuchin order exemplifies a nuanced interplay of power, violence, and resistance. Drawing on the insights of Foucault, Butler, Mbembe, and Didi-Huberman, the obedience demanded – particularly in formative houses where postulants, often driven by idealism and naivety, aspire to emulate hagiographic portrayals of sanctity without the critical tools to discern their genre – functions not merely as a spiritual discipline but as a mechanism for consolidating institutional authority, silencing personal autonomy, and perpetuating symbolic violence. This form of obedience raises profound questions about the intersection of authority, individual agency, and societal values, as it oscillates between subjugation and a perceived path to spiritual liberation. Critically engaging with these theoretical perspectives illuminates the dual nature of obedience within the Capuchin context: as a vehicle of submission that curtails the individual's capacity for independent thought and as a potential site of resistance where desire and autonomy might yet assert themselves. The persistent tension between these dimensions reveals deeper conflicts at the heart of religious and institutional life – between the institutional imperative to regulate and the irrepressible human drive for freedom, dignity, and self-expression. This analysis underscores how the dynamics of power, desire, and authority continue to shape, and be shaped by, the practices and ideologies of obedience in religious orders.

5 Navigating Tradition and Reform: The Capuchin Order's Approach to Obedience

The Capuchin Order, much like the wider Catholic Church, reflects the intricate balance between reform and tradition. The introduction of the *Ratio Formationis* in 2018 sought to redefine obedience, emphasizing a more holistic and relational understanding that counteracts the tendency to reduce obedience to mere psychological submission or individualism (Order of Friars Minor Capuchin, 2018, n. 94). The *Ratio* calls for spaces where brothers can express mutual reliance, thus fostering a sense of community aligned with the Franciscan ideal. Nevertheless, despite the reformative aspirations embedded in this newly document, certain communities continue to be influenced by older, more rigid interpretations of obedience, especially where traditions and spiritual practices are invoked as justifications for maintaining hierarchical structures. This tension encapsulates the broader challenge within the Capuchin Order: reconciling historical frameworks of obedience with the contemporary Church's calls for greater flexibility and mission-driven spirituality. While reforms have shifted the official stance on obedience, the legacy of *cadaveric obedience* – reinforced by centuries of visual and devotional culture – continues to resonate in certain contexts, albeit variably across different regions and communities.

Complicating this dynamic is the ad fontes movement, catalysed by Vatican II, which called for a profound re-examination of theological principles and the practices of consecrated life. The Council's emphasis on resisting theological inertia and fostering what John Paul II termed "creative fidelity" (1996, n. 37) prompted substantial revisions in the Capuchin Constitutions. The Order no longer insists on an uncompromising *sine glossa* observance of the Rule, adopting a more adaptable approach, particularly in matters such as economics, travel, and the management of goods, in line with the evolving "signs of the times." Yet, this new openness to interpretation has not been uniformly applied across all aspects of religious life. Obedience, in particular, has remained resistant to the same degree of flexibility. The persistent emphasis on obedience continues to uphold entrenched structures of hierarchical authority that prioritize conformity and submission, often eclipsing the more dynamic, mission-driven understanding of obedience envisaged by contemporary Church documents. This tension, underscored by Caputo's observation, reflects a deeper conflict between religious authority and secular autonomy, where both realms, when misinterpreted, can lead to eruptions of conflict. Caputo (2022, pp. 214–215) notes that such misinterpretations of foundational principles often provoke violent clashes, not just within religious contexts, but in the broader struggle for autonomy and self-expression.

The hierarchical structure of the Capuchin Order, designed to enforce doctrinal and behavioral conformity, is upheld through mechanisms such as visitations, confessions, and spiritual direction, fostering a tightly regulated environment. Paraphrasing Marcuse, social structures are shaped by both oppressive and resistant forces (1965, pp. 103–107). The tensions within the Order underscore the challenge of reconciling spiritual integrity with institutional control, where obedience can, paradoxically, act as a form of resistance to entrenched authority. In this regard, Moore (1979, p. 18) observes that the relationship between rulers and subjects is an ongoing negotiation, highlighting the fluid interplay between obedience and disobedience. This dynamic is particularly evident in the practice of cadaveric obedience, which limits friars' autonomy within a rigid hierarchical framework.

6 When Obedience Fuels Abuse: Cadaveric Obedience and the Clerical Culture of Silence

The psychological and social effects of cadaveric obedience in the Capuchin Order are complex, deeply rooted in its structural and spiritual framework. Psychologically, the demand for absolute submission suppresses personal autonomy, leading to emotional strain. Friars often struggle with aligning their individual desires with the strict expectations of the order, which can result in chronic stress, anxiety, and diminished self-

esteem. The renunciation of personal will creates identity conflicts, especially when friars find it difficult to reconcile their inner inclinations with communal pressures.

Socially, cadaveric obedience fosters a hierarchical culture where authority trumps open dialogue. This power imbalance suppresses dissent and stifles genuine communication, prioritizing deference over mutual respect. Friars navigate a life where conformity is privileged, and personal expression is limited, fostering a culture of *omertà* – a code of silence that prevents transparency and accountability. Moreover, the competitive nature of hierarchical favor pressures friars to perform obedience for approval, undermining solidarity and communal harmony. Instead of cooperation, this environment breeds self-regulation, where friars monitor their actions to align with the order's ideals.

The lack of open dialogue also has consequences beyond the immediate community. As friars advance to positions such as parish priests, the ingrained submission to authority makes it difficult to engage in meaningful dialogue with the laity, especially women. This dynamic fosters clericalism, where clerics feel entitled to command authority and view laypeople as subordinate. This mindset further entrenches the *omertà*, where the actions and failures of clergy are shielded from scrutiny, perpetuating a culture of silence and reinforcing hierarchical control.

Clericalism, rooted in rigid obedience and lack of dialogue, is a key factor behind serious issues in the Church, including abuse of power and conscience (Schickendantz, 2019, pp. 26–28). The belief in clerical superiority, coupled with unchecked authority, creates an environment ripe for abuse (Duhau, 2021, p. 52). Priests often function as monarchs or local caciques (Lecaros, 2024, p. 92), and the absence of accountability allows power to be misused with devastating consequences.

In this context, cadaveric obedience is more than a spiritual practice; it contributes to systemic issues within the Church by fostering an atmosphere where authority is rarely questioned. This dynamic not only perpetuates clericalism but also obstructs healthier, more equitable relationships between clergy and laity. The urgent need for reform in how authority and obedience are understood within religious institutions is clear.

The tension between historical obedience and contemporary expectations of autonomy is particularly evident in orders like the Capuchins. As Simonutti notes, the duality of obedience to both the temporal world and the heavenly kingdom can lead to tragic outcomes (2014, p. 17). When political power encroaches on religious life, believers may resort to martyrdom as resistance, highlighting the necessity of a state that limits oppressive powers, whether religious or political. The most recent Synod of the Catholic Church has focused on synodality, urging a shift toward collective discernment, inclusive participation, and shared responsibility in ecclesiastical leadership. This renewal challenges traditional models of governance entrenched in obedience as submission, advocating for a paradigm to dismantle the entrenched culture of top-down control and replace it with a truly participatory approach that demands the active engagement of all members in decision-making processes, fostering an ecclesial environment of equal responsibility and shared leadership (Synod of Bishops, 2024, n. 33). This shift, essential for fostering an ecclesial culture of shared leadership, aligns with the view that only a Church practicing full participatory justice internally can authentically proclaim the justice of the Kingdom of God externally (Eggensperger & Engel, 2024, p. 96). As synodality emerges as a new ecclesial culture, it calls for a profound rethinking of authority, moving away from hierarchical control toward a model rooted in mutual respect and shared discernment.

This broader transformation acquires particular urgency when viewed through the lens of lived experience. A paradigmatic example of how obedience can be misinterpreted in certain religious contexts arises from formation practices recounted in autoethnographic research. In one such instance, a brother in initial formation was discouraged from reading any material beyond the Bible and the Liturgy of the Hours throughout an entire year of postulancy. The justification, couched in spiritual language, suggested that academic reading could foster intellectual pride or a sense of superiority over less formally educated peers. This approach promoted a notion of humility that equated simplicity with ignorance, as if self-effacement required the suppression of one's intellectual gifts. Rather than enabling a path of spiritual and personal integration, such measures illustrate a form of deformation where formation becomes standardization, and individuality is subordinated to an idealized uniformity. Cases like this, grounded in a mistaken view of obedience as passive conformity, point to the necessity of reconfiguring formation models in light of a synodal

vision – one that affirms the dignity of personal vocation and fosters the responsible development of each person's gifts in service to the community.

7 By Way of Conclusion: Rethinking Authority and Autonomy to Prevent Violence

The practice of cadaveric obedience within the Capuchin Order serves as a powerful exemplar of the complex dynamics between hierarchical authority and personal autonomy. Embedded within the Order's legal texts and hagiographic traditions, it emerges as a doctrinal imperative that demands absolute submission to superiors. This unyielding obedience not only shapes the internal structure of the Order, creating a tightly controlled environment where conformity is paramount, but also highlights the tension between institutional goals and the psychological costs borne by its members. While the rigid framework fosters collective discipline and uniformity in spiritual practice, it also diminishes individual agency, often resulting in emotional strain, stress, and social fragmentation as friars grapple with reconciling their personal identities with the overwhelming demands of institutional authority. The deeply ingrained culture of unquestioning obedience is also implicated in more troubling consequences, including the systemic cover-up of sexual abuse within the Church. This abuse of power, protected by the very structures that demand cadaveric obedience, underscores the need to critically examine these practices and their implications for the future of religious institutions.

The above reveals a deep entanglement between institutional authority and the suppression of individual autonomy, shaping a structure where unquestioning submission is both expected and enforced. This study has exposed how such hierarchical mechanisms, far from merely enforcing discipline, can create environments ripe for abuses, including the sexual harassment that has come to light within the Church. The tension between obedience and personal agency thus serves as a stark reminder of the broader societal challenges surrounding power, control, and resistance. While the ecclesiastical field has traditionally remained resistant to such critical scrutiny, this research underscores the necessity of addressing the subtle and explicit forms of violence inherent in these dynamics. It calls for an urgent re-evaluation of Canon Law and religious authority, advocating for reforms that would eliminate the potential for abuse and manipulation, particularly in light of the shifting demographic realities of religious vocations in post-industrial societies.

At the heart of these reflections lies the question of where to draw the line between obedience and personal autonomy in religious settings. While some may argue that individuals increasingly seek autonomy, as evidenced by trends in post-industrial societies, it is also true that more restrictive religious orders are seeing growth. The Capuchin experience offers a fitting case study in the tension between institutional demands for submission and the individual's need for freedom. This dynamic calls for a broader examination of how religious institutions can respect individual autonomy while maintaining doctrinal and communal integrity. Perspectives on change within Canon Law are crucial in this context; religious orders must take responsibility for eliminating any remnants of violence – whether physical, psychological, sexual, or of conscience – that may be inherent in their structures.

Religious congregations, such as the Capuchins, facing declining vocations in post-industrial societies while experiencing growth in less developed countries, must ensure they do not exploit the aspirations of vulnerable youth. Reform is not only an ethical imperative but also vital for the survival of religious communities, which must reassess their relationship with disciplinary methods. This reform should go beyond transparency and accountability, calling for a renewed spirituality that emphasizes empowerment, shared responsibility, and the holistic well-being of all members. The coming years will be crucial for translating this visionary framework into the complex realities of ecclesial practice, a task that, given the Church's history, invites cautious optimism but also demands a deliberate, proactive effort to ensure true transformation. Without losing sight of their charismatic essence and their commitment to the spiritual growth of their members, religious institutions must also ensure that power, authority, and discipline are exercised ethically

– in ways that never depersonalize, harm, or involve any form of violence against freedom, pillar of the infinite dignity of every human being.

Author contributions: Dr. Piccone-Camere took the lead in the conceptualization and drafting of the manuscript, contributing substantially to the historical, theological, and analytical sections of the paper. He was also responsible for the overall structure and final revisions of the text. Dr. Lecaros provided key contributions to the anthropological and critical interpretation of obedience and institutional culture, particularly enriching sections that explore embodied practices and contemporary ecclesial dynamics. She also reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript. Both authors discussed the main arguments and collaborated in shaping the conclusions.

Conflict of interest: One of the coauthors was a member of the Capuchin Order and left in good standing due to substantial conscientious disagreements. This context may offer insight into the coauthor's perspective but does not present a conflict of interest in relation to the subject matter discussed.

Data availability statement: Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

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