

# THE THEME OF OBEDIENCE IN THE MIRACLES OF SAINTE FOY

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Obedience is an important theme within the miracles of *The Book of Sainte Foy*. Sainte Foy requires not only obedience to her specific wishes but also obedience to the Church and to its needs. Foy is the creator and facilitator of a community beyond that of the monastery: a community that requires a level of obedience to survive. People must understand their personal responsibility to the community and be invested in its success, such that the community can have the authority to bring stability to its environs.

The most clear calls to obedience within *The Book of Sainte Foy* are found in the “jokes” that Foy plays upon her followers to demand wealth for her monastery. Although the monastery had accumulated great wealth through the acquisition of lands and from donations, the monks wished to construct a great golden altarpiece for the monastery (1.17). With such a piece the monastery would gain considerable prestige in the region and within France, attract further pilgrims and display their authority in an unmistakable manner.

Yet, the jokes were not merely about wealth, they were also about more intangible matters. When Sainte Foy demanded something specific, she expected that item to be donated, such as in the miracle of the golden doves (1.16) or the miracle of Countess Richarde’s golden clasp (2.10). In both cases, the donors initially gave gold of the value of the item to the monastery, but did not give the item. This was not enough for Sainte Foy, and she compelled both to obey and to donate what she had demanded. Their obedience was important to Foy, as were the tales of the miracles that forced such obedience. Sainte Foy demanded obedience from her followers not only when she demanded items, but also when the followers pledged something to her in return for aid. It was important that followers knew that they could not try to avoid payment after Foy had given the aid. If even a cleric such as Peter (2.3) would try

to go back on his promises, then conceivably, anyone might, and it was important to show that Foy saw everything, allowed no-one to break a promise; there were to be no compromises, no avoiding her wishes. Even when a recipient of a miracle did not pledge anything specific, she required a future obedience to the wishes of the church: in the miracle of Guibert (1.1) after Foy restored his eyes, he returned to wicked ways: not specifically disobeying Foy, but rather disobeying the underlying rules of community, and Foy punished him for doing so. In each case, Sainte Foy reinforced the individual’s responsibility to the Church and to her.

Foy was not just gathering money but creating a community. In any community, there must be rules lest chaos erupt: the miracles enforced such order and their dissemination made clear the effect of disobedience to the rest of the community. The people claimed many miracles from Sainte Foy and she was clearly beloved in her region and an important figure in her community. Yet, familiarity could breed a lackadaisical attitude to her and to her monastery if she required only love or devotion. The monastery could not live on love alone, the monks could not buy an altarpiece with devotion. Her firmness, her insistence upon obedience, decisively placed the monastery in a position of authority in the community and helped bring stability to a region that was frequently dangerous and unpredictable. In addition, through her insistence, Foy had created a real bond between church and donor, drawing the latter into the community: Countess Richarde would always see her clasp whenever she visited the monastery, and this bond might prove useful to the safety of the church in difficult times. That Foy creates these bonds especially between the church and nobility is significant.

The strain between the monastery at Conques and the nobility of the surrounding area is a recurring theme in

*The Book of Sainte Foy*. Frequently, it is the local nobility who create the greatest threat to the stability and prosperity of the monastery; they who are best placed to challenge its authority. If the miracles could reinforce to these people the importance of obedience to the monastery then it would be of great benefit to the community at large. However, apart from the small number of Sainte Foy's jokes, most of the nobility require punishment by Sainte Foy to enforce even a limited obedience. The nobility have a natural authority in the High Medieval period: they are used to being obeyed, not to being obedient, and this theme reflects the situation not only in the local area but also throughout France and Europe as secular and religious authority clashed. Frequently, in the tales of the miracles, the nobility reject obedience to the Church – and by extension to Sainte Foy – in furtherance of their own greed or desire for power. Grassenda makes claim against the property of the monastery (1.12); Count Raymond II plans to build a castle and undermine the authority of the monastery (2.5) or Hadigar captures and imprisons a

pilgrim (3.24). If Sainte Foy were to ignore these acts, she would give free rein to the nobility to do as they wanted: ultimately, this would not only directly reduce the authority and power of the church but lead to an increase in violence and instability in the region. This would indirectly harm the monastery: fewer pilgrims could make the journey, the people would have less wealth to donate and the monastery's own lands would bear less fruit.

Even when a miracle does not specifically address obedience to Sainte Foy, the theme still underlies much of *The Book of Sainte Foy* as it bears so much importance to the Saint and to her community. Foy is the focus of a community both within and beyond the monastery that requires stability, order and wealth to flourish, and authority to maintain its place in a greater society, especially against the threats posed by the local nobility. Thus, obedience to her wishes and the church is vital. She uses obedience to enforce personal responsibility and bonds to the church and makes it clear that there is no negotiation with her, and by extension with God.