

All About...

A RULE OF LIFE

Saint John's in the Village

INTRODUCTION. Computers have programs, businesses have strategic plans, sport teams have winning strategies, and anyone with skill has a method. But in the face of the obvious, the world is still full of people who fritter away their talents, opportunities, time, and essentially, their lives by living without direction. The Church doesn't want that to happen to you! The Church has long recognized and taught that a healthy *spiritual* life is the foundation upon which the real fulfilment of all the rest of life is built.

Before tackling the issues of what to make of the rest of life, the Church urges us to get the foundation right. Its answer to how to do this is classic simplicity. The Church provides for everyone a pattern of living which, when pursued in spirit and truth, is guaranteed to succeed. Traditionally, it has been called a 'Rule of Life'. Don't let that scare you.

A Rule of Life is not an arbitrary set of rules imposed by some self-righteous ecclesiastical authority to make someone else prove him or herself worthy of 'salvation' by keeping it. A Rule of Life is, ideally, a well-considered set of *guides* for the focus and enrichment of an individual's spiritual life. It is crafted in dialogue with someone skilled in living in the Spirit of life, and is tailored to the personality and needs of the individual. It's a custom fit! Its purpose is to get the most out of life through developing closer union with God, with each other, with creation, and in a wholesome integrity for oneself. To modern ears religious concepts with the word 'Rule' in them can be off-putting. Why wouldn't they be, when it is the practice of some religious leaders and even religious systems, to reduce the spiritual side of life to little more than a set of obligatory rules to be kept on pain of some dire sin and the fear of hell? This is precisely the kind of religion Jesus did away with and which is alien to the Catholic faith. A Christian Rule of Life is not a set of rules, the keeping of which assures heaven and the failure at which assures hell. It is a *program* for healthy *spiritual living*, much like a regimen of healthy eating and exercise for the body.

EVERYONE NEEDS A 'RULE'. Each of us can acknowledge the need for a guide like this in his or her life. At best, many of us sustain ourselves through the week on a life of spiritual junk food, relying on bits and pieces from Hallmark cards or something vaguely spiritual on television, as the substance of our spirituality. If we go to church, we begin our week by trying to force into an hour and a half on Sunday the spiritual food that we need for the whole week. We impose upon the Liturgy and sermons a burden and function they were never intended to bear. When the experience on Sunday doesn't then meet our need, we find church "out of touch", "irrelevant", or not spiritually "deep" enough! Without a simple regimen for keeping our spiritual life and values in front of us it is easy to lose ourselves in the pursuit of peripheral and ephemeral concerns. The

purpose of a Rule is to give shape and focus to the spiritual dialogue we have with God so that we may be ever more aware and glad that he dwells in us and we in him.

Everyone's spiritual needs are different, just as everyone's physical needs are different. Nevertheless, just as there are some basic elements of nutrition common to all human life, equally there are some generic essentials for everyone seeking to develop the spiritual nature we all share, remembering that it is this spiritual nature which infuses and undergirds the physical.

SOME COMMON ELEMENTS OF THE SPIRITUAL LIFE. It has been the experience of ordinary Christians for well over nineteen hundred years that there are common elements to their spiritual needs. Examples of these common elements would include periods of silence, of reflection, of recollection, and of a holy communion with God. There is also a common need for some discipline in the ordering of our lives to best suit our gifts, to make the most of our lives. It is out of these common elements, matched with individual peculiarities and gifts, that we forge patterns for *individual* growth and heightened spiritual awareness. This is what the Church means by a Rule of Life. Perhaps first among the common elements is a time for *silence*. How obvious must it be that all the spiritual life flows from being still and knowing that God alone is God. Out of silence, being still with the Lord God, flows all of the ability of the spiritual life. Silence is the well of essential water in the diet of the spiritual life. Then, out of the silence comes *reflection*- upon the nature of God; of humanity; upon our place in family and society and upon their legitimate needs of us; upon the Bible; the saints; upon nature; upon the course of our lives; upon their end. Out of this reflection comes *recollection*- a holy remembering, or calling to mind of who we are; of what we are; of how we are; of *whose* we are; of the place of God in our lives; the place of family, friends, and work. And if these are among the nutritional elements in the food of the spiritual life, then surely **Holy Communion** is its meat. Holy Communion means not only the ritual act that takes place in church, but the whole range of experience which that act symbolizes, embodies, and brings into a present accessible reality in the moment of the ritual action. The act of communing with God in various forms of prayer, of listening for his promptings, is at the core of discovering ourselves and our best options in Life. The act itself of the sacrament of Holy Communion pulls all that prayer and discovery into a holy experience of acceptance and self-offering, as a genuine Holy Communion. The daily communion in prayer and the regular communion in the Sacrament are the supporting spine and pumping heart of day to day spirituality. All these things combined are the very essence of a healthy Christian spiritual life. A Rule of Life helps keep these elements present and balanced. It serves to make life simply more alive. It sustains the on-going conversation and dialogue with the Divine which is at our core. It gives us a true foundation out of which to act with those about us and with all God's creation.

HOW DOES ONE DEVELOP A RULE OF LIFE? A personal Rule of Life is as intimate and varied as are individuals. There is no set formula or "one size fits all" design. It is best to sit down with someone whom you recognize as being trained and skilled in living spiritually, and who, to some extent, also knows your personality. This person need not be a priest or member of a religious order, though they will often have

more time, by the nature of their vocation, to develop their own skills and to give time to help you. What is important is that the person know about the elements of spiritual life and know about you, or be willing to get to know you, and to assist you in making choices- not make choices for you. There is, actually, a sort of basic 'Rule of the Church' to get everyone started in the spiritual dialogue we all need, and which is common to all who accept the discipline of the Church. In its Anglican heritage, it is this:

1. Worship, including Holy Communion, with and in the local church on Sundays, feast-days of our Lord, and the major festivals. Understanding the communal setting of our spiritual nature is essential.
2. Daily prayer, morning and evening, in concert with the Church, either at the local church or at home.
3. A simple scheme of various personal devotions, which includes acts of concern for others, and observance, along with the rest of the Church, of the Fasts of Ash Wednesday and Good Friday.

This is the basic Rule all in the Church follow. If there *is* a "one-size-fits-all" rule this might be it. But even this most simple Rule of the Church is adapted to meet personal needs and circumstance. There are as many methods for making this basic common Rule a reality as there are individuals. It can be added to or adapted as needed by personality or circumstance. A Rule should neither be too hard, nor too easy. It should fit the spiritual needs of the person. Where one might be prone to taking on too much, another might be prone to not enough. The second person involved with us as a guide in the shaping and keeping of our Rule helps keep us honest in our endeavor. Sometimes, and ideally, this takes the form of what has been classically called "spiritual direction". This is an ongoing relationship with the skilled person who then helps you with your Rule, keeps you honest, suggests alternatives, and when needed, reins one in from wrong-headed or obsessive compulsions. It isn't so much "direction" as guidance after a bit, but being given the odd direction can be a great help when one is just a wee bit lost! This is where personal perception and self-awareness are invaluable, and where a "director" or "spiritual friend" is most helpful.

LETTING GO VERSUS GIVING UP. The purpose of a Rule is not to put you in a spiritual straight-jacket. It is to enable your maturity and growth in real life. The Rule is to facilitate your finding God and finding your true self in him. People often get all worked up about "breaking" their Rule, once they set out on it. Now, having worked out a Rule for yourself, your Rule is not "broken" if, for example, you miss Church on a Sunday, or neglect a planned devotion at some time. *It is broken when you give it up.* Again the analogy of healthy eating is apt. There is usually no harm in the occasional deviation when our *regular* (from the Latin word for 'rule') diet is sound. Sometimes we do let go of our Rule for necessary reasons, for example to aid an accident victim, thereby missing Sunday worship. Not to aid the person would make a lie of our religion. Then sometimes we are simply lazy, which is not to be confused with being blamelessly dog-tired and needing appropriate rest. We rightly let go of the Rule for the one, and wrongly for the other. In any event, the Rule we have set ourselves is not broken until we give it up entirely. Nor is the Rule broken when we adapt it. Should we discover that we have

made unreasonable expectations of ourselves, either for greater or lesser endeavor, it is appropriate, even necessary, that we adapt the Rule. When we have done just that, adapted our Rule, even if radically so, we have not broken it.

PROGRESS WITH A RULE. The measure of your progress using a Rule of Life is how your life is changed. Do you exhibit the good fruits of the Spirit of God in your life more with or without your Rule? The goal of a Rule, of any genuine striving in the spiritual life, is abundant, rich living through personal holiness- full communion with God, with our neighbor, and with God's creation, which when achieved makes us as whole and happy as God created us to be. It's not about anxious and compulsive rule keeping, or about taking the joy out of life. The sadness of a Christian life comes mostly from seeing people, or oneself, reject the very ways, truths, and lives which might have made them whole and happy. It is then that the Church's ministry of Reconciliation is so very important and helpful to us in restoring right attitudes and relationships. The Good News is that you *can* begin again, and without penalty! To have a Rule is, in some ways, to begin anew every day, as you see afresh where it and God are leading you.

CONCLUSION. As stated at the outset, a 'Rule of Life' is, ideally, a well-considered set of guides for the focus, enrichment and deepening of an individual's spiritual life, the goal of which is living whole-ly with God, our neighbor, and creation itself. It is taking responsibility for our own spiritual lives and our relationship to God, our neighbor, and the world. It is a means to an end: personal holiness, described as union with God, "that He may dwell in us, and we in Him", spilling out into all aspects of our lives. It should not be undertaken for any other purpose than this, which is our life, our salvation, and our hope. If you want to learn more about this, speak to the Rector, another member of the clergy, someone in the religious life, or anyone you believe to be skilled in the ways of the heart of the Spirit. Explore a rule and guide for life. It's your life to live; live it best!

