

## The Need for a Rule

From the Central Province of Lay Dominicans, U.S.A.

Throughout religious history, from earliest times, spiritual masters have devised rules for their followers. It is so easy to backslide and leave our good intentions behind (pavement of Hell). We are like the Jews of the Hebrew Scriptures, who without the guidance of the Judges, e.g. Othniel, Ehud and Deborah, would lapse and return to their old ways:

“Whenever the Lord raised up judges for them, he would be with the judge and save them from the power of their enemies as long as the judge lived; it was thus the Lord took pity on their distressful cries of affliction under their oppressors. But when the judge died, they would relapse and do worse than their fathers, following other gods in service and worship, relinquishing none of their evil practices or stubborn conduct.” (Judg. 2: 18-19)

## THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

From the early Middle Ages rules, guides, have been recommended for the serious follower of Jesus. Why reinvent the wheel, when it is already offered to you?

“St. Jerome writes to Rusticus: ‘Do not be your own master and do not set out upon a way that is entirely new for you without a guide; otherwise you will soon go astray.’ St. Augustine also says: ‘As a blind man cannot follow the good road without a leader, no one can walk without a guide.’ No one is a good judge in his own cause by reason of secret pride which may make him deviate from the right path.

“In his conferences, Cassian says that anyone who relies on his own judgment will never reach perfection and will not be able to avoid the snares of the devil. He concludes that the best means to triumph over the most dangerous temptations is to make them known to a wise counselor who has the grace of state to enlighten us. In reality, to manifest them to one who has a right to hear them often suffices to make them disappear.” (The Three Ages of the Interior Life, ch. 17, Spiritual Direction, by Reginald Garrigou-Lagrangé OP)

## ST. AUGUSTINE

One of the earliest Rules was put together by St. Augustine (+430), the Bishop of Hippo. This is the rule chosen by St. Dominic and others to govern their Orders:

“The letter written by St. Augustine to the nuns at Hippo (423), for the purpose of restoring harmony in their community, deals with the reform of certain phases of monasticism as it is understood by him. This document, to be sure, contains no such clear, minute prescriptions as are found in the Benedictine Rule, because no complete rule was ever written prior to the time of St. Benedict; nevertheless, the Bishop of Hippo is a law-giver and his letter is to be read weekly, that the nuns may guard against or repent any infringement of it.” (New Advent Catholic Encyclopedia, Rule of St. Augustine)

St. Augustine's Rule was to be read every week; the regular reading of the Dominican Rule in common is encouraged today. Here is the ending of St. Augustine's Rule:

"May the Lord grant that as lovers of the beauty of the spiritual life and breathing forth the sweet odor of Christ in the holiness of your ways you may faithfully observe these things, not like slaves under the law, but like freemen established under grace. Let this rule be read to you once every week so that in it you can see yourselves reflected as in a mirror lest anything be forgotten and, therefore, neglected. And when you find that you are doing what is here written, thank the Lord, the giver of all good things. But if, on the contrary, anyone perceives that he has fallen into defects, let him mourn over the past, take heed for the future, pray that his faults may be forgiven, and that he may not be led into temptation."

## DOMINICANS AND THE RULE

With this in mind you can see why there was such a backlash to the rise of the mendicant orders 800 Years later. What saved these new Orders was that they adopted a Rule and assiduously observed it. The reason that these new gyrovagues remained faithful to the ideals of St. Dominic was that he had devised a rule that was democratic and reasonable. In his *Defense of the Mendicants* Thomas of Cantimpre OP wrote:

"Well, my brethren, you need not be ashamed to be called or to be gyrovagues. You are in the company of Paul, the teacher of the nations, who completed the preaching of the gospel all the way from Spain to Illyria." (Early Dominicans, p. 134)

From the very beginning The Primitive Constitutions of the Order of Friars Preachers (Chapter of 1228), which were a reflection of Dominic's direct influence, established the beneficial need for a rule:

"Because a precept of our Rule commands us to have one heart and one mind in the Lord, it is fitting that we, who live under one rule and one profession, be found uniform in the observance of canonical religious life, in order that the uniformity maintained in our external conduct may foster and indicate the unity which should be present interiorly in our hearts." (Prologue)

Witnesses at St. Dominic's canonization process (1233) attest to his observance of the Rule:

"He was enthusiastic for regular life and was a great observer of the Rule of the Order." (Early Dominicans, Brother Stephen, p. 80)

"He wanted the Rule to be observed strictly by himself and by the others. He reprimanded offenders justly and so affectionately that no one was ever upset by his correction and punishment." (ibid., Brother Paul, p. 83)

In modern times Fr. William Hinnebusch OP captures the significance of observing the Rule in his *Dominican Spirituality: Principles and Practices*, especially in Chapter VII: Dominican Life is Sacrificial. A meditation could be made simply on the value and need spiritually of sacrifice in our lives:

“Our holy Order of Preachers prescribes the laws by which the Dominican must live the religious life in the Rule of St. Augustine, in the Constitutions, in our customs. These regulations are the rubrics by which the religious sacrifices himself to God. The victim offered is self, sacrificed by daily living according to the laws of the Order. This is what the Dominican promised to do when he knelt before his prior at profession and pronounced his vows. He promised to obey ‘according to the Rule of St. Augustine and the Institutions of the Friars Preachers.’

“...amazement is expressed when people hear that Pope John XXII is said to have remarked when he was canonizing St. Thomas Aquinas: ‘Prove to me that a Friar Preacher has kept his rule perfectly, and I will canonize him forthwith without any further proof of sanctity.’ This remark may be legendary, but, if so, it contains a kernel of truth. Sound theology lies behind John's words. It is axiomatic that when the Church stamps a religious Order or Congregation with her approval, its members have a guarantee that its Rule and Constitutions, its way of living the religious life, is a safe spiritual way, a road that leads to sanctity. During seven centuries, eighteen canonized saints and at least 285 beati have lived ‘according to the Rule of St. Augustine, and the Constitutions of the Friars Preachers.’ They belonged to all three branches of the Order, to the First, to the Second, to the Third. Some of the members of the Third Order lived as sisters in community; others as secular tertiaries. Each branch of the Order leads its members to sanctity.”

What greater proof of the sanctifying nature of the Rule is there than the sancti et beati of our Order. They serve as an example of the possibilities for ourselves. Let us take them to heart.

## THE PURPOSE OF A RULE

The proximate purpose of a rule is to enable different men and women to live in harmony. With all observing the same rules there should be less friction which is bound to arise.

“Without a stable rule of life regulating procedures, order and obligations, it would be impossible for men (or women) to live in religious peace.” (The Place of Study in the Ideal of St. Dominic, by James A. Weisheipel OP)

There is also an ultimate purpose of a rule of life which goes to the heart of Christianity. It is the desire of our spiritual life to be united to God while a pilgrim in the Kingdom. Sometimes the difficulty is that we aim too low. We do have many teachers in the spiritual life who can guide us on our journey.

“What then is the true interior life? The great spiritual writers reply: The interior life is a life of intimate union with God, achieved by perfect self-denial and by constant recollection and prayer. This doctrine, taught and developed by St. Augustine, St. Anselm, St. Bernard, St. Thomas, the Imitation of Christ, St. John of the Cross, St. Francis de Sales, has strong scriptural foundation, in particular these words of St. Paul: "Therefore if you be risen with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God. Mind the things that are above, not the things that are upon the earth. For you are dead and your life is hid with Christ in God." ( The Priesthood and Perfection, ch. 9, Interior Life of the Priest, by Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange)

The Catholic Catechism of the Catholic Church speaks of 'Christian Holiness' in that "Spiritual progress tends toward ever more intimate union with Christ." (#2104)

"Keeping the same rule of life, believers share the 'blessed hope' of those whom the divine mercy gathers into the 'holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.'" (# 2016)

The CS Lewis Institute Blog nicely lays out a description of a Rule of Life:

"A Rule of Life is an intentional pattern of spiritual disciplines that provides structure and direction for growth in holiness. A Rule establishes a rhythm for life which is helpful for being formed by the Spirit, a rhythm that reflects a love for God and respect for how he has made us. The disciplines which we build into our rhythm of life help us to shed the 'old self' and allow our 'new self' in Christ to be formed. Spiritual disciplines are means of grace by which God can nourish us. Ultimately a Rule should help you to love God more." (Instructions for Developing a Personal Rule of Life)

So we are seeking by means of our Rule of Life no less than a total transformation of ourselves so that we can echo St. Paul: "Yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me." (Gal. 2: 20) This is admittedly a tall order but what a goal! It has been done by Lay Dominicans.

## KEEPING A RULE OF LIFE

Now that we have examined the need and the purpose of a Rule of Life, we must ask how are we to observe it? We know that blessed Father Dominic kept the Rule completely. It is a fact that our Rule does not bind us under sin but, rather, binds under love no less demandingly.

"[The Rule] must be observed in its entirety, that is to say, fully, in all its parts, and with punctuality. If we pick and choose among the various points of our rule, and this without reasonable cause, we shall carry out those that cost us less and omit those that are more difficult. We should then lose the chief advantages to be derived from the exact observance of a rule...The rule, then, must be kept in its totality and to the letter, as far as possible. (#569)...The rule must be observed in a Christian manner, that is to say, with supernatural motives, in order to do the will of God, and thus give Him the most genuine proof of our love. (#572) (The Spiritual Life: A Treatise on Ascetical and Mystical Theology, by Adolphe Tanqueray SS)

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