

Preparing a Personal Rule of Life

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Why a Personal Rule of Life?

The purpose of preparing a personal Rule of Life is to provide focus and direction to the life lived in response to God's love. As such, it is a very useful form of spiritual exercise.

The great religious orders of the past (the Benedictines, the Franciscans, the Jesuits etc) each had a common Rule. This defined for the members the particular Gospel vision of their Christian life-style which was seen to be appropriate in their time and culture for their members. In our day there are still groups of people who share a common commitment to serving God in a particular way. Such groups are able to nurture and encourage one another, with the more mature members being role models and serving as spiritual directors for the newer members.

In the absence of such a group, we can nevertheless develop our own personal Rule to remind ourselves constantly of God's claim and calling on our lives and to prevent ourselves from being pulled in so many different directions that we feel frustrated and unfulfilled and perhaps deny ourselves (as well as God and others) the opportunity to do those things to which God calls us.

The preparation of a personal Rule of Life needs to be done in a spirit of prayer and openness to God. It can not be done in a hurried or careless way. A time of quiet retreat over a weekend or longer is ideal. If family responsibilities do not allow for this in the near future, take a block of time each day over a week or so. It needs to be a top priority. If this is not a key task for you at this time, then it is better to leave it for a time when you are ready for it.

Preparation

When you are working on your Rule of Life, make sure you are in a place where you will not be disturbed. Make yourself reasonably comfortable and give yourself time to relax and let the busyness of your routine fade. Become aware that you are constantly in God's loving presence. God as Creator, as the Risen Christ, as the nurturing spirit, is always with you. It is not a matter of trying to imagine God or working hard to put yourself in God's presence, but of simply being aware that God's loving presence always surrounds you and holds you in being in this present moment.

Step 1 God's personal love for you

Reflect back over your life and identify where you can now, as you look back, see God caring for you, guiding you, using circumstances or people to love you. There are many ways to do this. One way is to simply write down in summary form the events, or the circumstances, or people, or places that come to mind. Another way is to draw pictures or cartoons (eg draw your life as a road or a river from conception to the present and indicate some significant places). Some people prefer to go back from the present in five year blocks and identify some key things in each block. Others simply reflect back without doing any writing, but lingering on key moments, reliving them and savouring them. Do it in a way that suits your personality.

After a while, allow yourself to begin expressing your gratitude to God. As you do this, do not hurry it. In spirituality, less is more. Doing one or two things slowly, carefully, meditatively, is of much more benefit than trying to cram lots of things into a short time.

Step 2 Your response to God's love

In this next step, begin to consider what your response will be. Note the word 'response'. Our lives are lived in answer to God who loves us first. We cannot earn God's love, it is freely given. We do not have to pay God with good deeds or worthy lives. God's love is unconditional. All we ever do is let God's love flood our lives and then let it overflow back to God and to God's people and the whole creation. As Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) said,

If you are wise, you will show yourself rather as a reservoir than as a canal. For a canal spreads abroad the water it receives, but a reservoir waits until it is filled before overflowing and thus communicates without loss to itself its superabundant water. (*Song of songs* xviii.6)

In this step, the key question is "What, in my deepest innermost being, my heart of hearts, do I believe God wants to do with my life?" You begin to identify your vocation or calling or ministry. What is God asking you to focus on? At this stage you can afford to be fairly general. It is the broad area of ministry you are identifying. For some, it may be befriending young people with problems at home. For others it may be planting trees. Or someone else sees her ministry as teaching. For another it is visiting in a local aged care residence.

Try to sum it up in a sentence your call to ministry over the foreseeable future. Note that your ministry may be in the home, in a church community, in a workplace or in a community agency. It may be paid or unpaid.

If you have difficulty discerning your ministry, ask yourself what gifts God has given you. Also ask what really brings deep satisfaction and joy to you. These will help you to discern and affirm your vocation.

Step 3 A life lived for God

Now is the time to get specific. Bearing in mind all you've considered in the first two steps, begin to bring focus and order to your life. Take a sheet of paper and head it "My Personal Rule of Life". Begin with a statement such as: "In thanksgiving to God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in recognition that God alone has the ultimate claim on my worship and obedience, and with God being my helper and strength, I will..." Then complete the "I will..." using most or all of the following headings:

- Worship
- Personal prayer
- Self-denial
- Retreat
- Study
- Simplicity
- Relationships
- Work
- Obedience

You may list one or more points under each heading, but I suggest no more than three or four at the most. Don't worry if you are not able to use each of the headings at this stage. Use as many as you can.

After you've completed this task, you may like to leave it a few days and then consider it again until you are entirely comfortable with it.

Then put it into practice and review it after a week or two and perhaps amend it again.

Two words of caution: first, don't make impossible demands on yourself. This only leads to frustration and despair. Be entirely realistic.

Secondly, after you've prepared your personal Rule of Life, don't fiddle with it too often. A review once a year with possible slight changes is more than enough. (I've only amended my Rule once in sixteen years.)

Step 4 Using your Rule

Your personal Rule of Life can now be used to help shape your weekly program and routine. Use it as a basis for decision what you will do and what you will say 'no' to. It can also be used to do a regular 'stock take', possibly once each month. (Write this task in your diary as a priority activity.) Affirm where it has been helpful and accept God's forgiveness where you have fallen short. Seek God's strength in doing better.

So far I have not said anything about spiritual direction. It is helpful to work with a trusted Christian friend as you develop your Rule. It is even more helpful if this person has been trained and is skilled in the art of spiritual direction. Then, possibly monthly, meet with your spiritual director to talk over your spiritual growth. Your Rule will serve as a good basis for these discussions.

Conclusion

Finally, in the words of Clare of Assisi (1193/4-1253):

May the Lord be with you always
And, wherever you are,
May you be with him always.

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