

LIFE WITH CHRIST SERIES

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# A RULE OF LIFE

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FOR DAILY CHRISTIAN LIVING



*Fr Michael Woodgate*

**Catholic Truth Society Publications**  
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# **A Rule of Life**

**for Daily Christian Living**

by

Fr Michael Woodgate

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## Reasons for a Rule of Life

### Everyday living

“Holiness is not an optional extra to the process of creation, but rather the whole point of it.” This quotation comes from Donald Nicholl in a remarkable book entitled *Holiness*, published in 1981. “Rule of Life” is an expression we don’t often hear nowadays and even religious congregations tend not to use it though, of course, they still live their lives according to a rule. Some readers may remember that television series called *Bless me, Father* in which the Mother Superior’s favourite saying would be: “But it’s our Rule, Father”, spoken to the parish priest to reject any suggestion he might make. But a Rule of Life (or whatever we want to call it) can be an enormous help to ordinary Catholics and Christians who really do want to follow Christ. In recent years the Rule of St Benedict (which is still a basis for many religious orders) has been re-interpreted for lay Christians by a number of different writers.

### Value of a Rule of Life

When we think of holiness, we tend to think of saints and immediately dissociate ourselves from it and them, admiring both from a distance. But if we have been

baptized, we are already “saints-in-the-making”, as someone has called us and St Paul addresses all Christians as saints. So how do we become holy, how do we encourage our Christian life to grow and mature into holiness? Yes, by prayer, by taking our part in the Mass, by receiving Holy Communion, by good works and so on. The list is easy to make, not so easy to practise. Our wills are often weak; we allow so many other things to get in the way and take priority. This is where a personal Rule of Life can be invaluable. “But surely,” you may say, “we don’t want to reduce our living faith, our love for God, our discipleship of Christ, to a list of rules?” No, of course not; but remember that the word “rule” really means “regular” and so a Rule of Life is something to help us live our lives in regular contact with God, welcoming each new day, week, month or Church’s season as a new opportunity to love and serve Our Lord and our fellow men and women. Because of human frailty we need reminders, we need practical help, we need guidance in doing this. Above all, we need to acquire good habits to live out the Christian life. It was St Bernard who said, “Take care of order and order will take care of you”. The word “disciple” and the word “discipline” both come from the same Latin word meaning “to learn”. So our personal discipline helps and encourages our discipleship.

## **Domestic Church**

A Rule of Life is usually regarded as a very personal aid to Christian living, but there is no reason why it should not be drawn up for a married couple or even a whole family. After all, we are used to “Family Fast Days”, and monastic rules (cf. the Rule of St Benedict) are always for a religious family. A family rule needs the consultation of all the members of the family if old enough to contribute. Primary (and possibly even a little older) school-aged children will probably enjoy feeling part of such decision-making. Individual members of the family may want to make some personal resolutions of their own, of course. It may prove a means of bringing married couples closer to one another and indeed whole families. To know that others in the family are all making that special effort can give real support to each individual. After all, every family, every household is what is sometimes called “the domestic Church”. It is always a joy when one sees a whole family come not only to Mass, but also to the sacrament of reconciliation and some of us are old enough to remember the slogan made popular many years ago by Fr Peyton and his rosary crusade: “The family that prays together stays together”. A family or married couple’s Rule of Life can help to do the same thing.

What we must not do is to allow our Rule to become our master. It should always be a good servant, never ruling our lives and never becoming an end in itself. The

“end” or purpose is our loving service of God and neighbour and therefore we must always allow room for the Holy Spirit to be our ultimate guide, our ultimate leader on the pilgrim way to holiness and so to heaven. As we know from the Gospels, Our Lord had harsh words for those who put rules before their love for God and their fellows.

Having said that, perhaps we could think of our Rule as a good companion, adaptable when necessary, helpful at all times, and ready to keep us going when we tend to flag. When we draw it up, we need to avoid fussiness, over-much detail, anything impractical or complicated. The Church herself of course, has given us some very basic rules for our Christian lives such as: Mass on all Sundays and Holydays of Obligation, the need to make a sacramental confession and receive Holy Communion at least once a year; abstinence of some kind on a Friday, fasting on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. These, however, are minimal and if we did nothing more, our love for Our Lord would seem rather cold and almost formal.

### **Preparing to make our Rule**

Before making a Rule of Life we need to pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit and for His wisdom. It should never be so demanding that we often fail to keep it, nor so undemanding that it is hardly worth having. We could take our guide from St Benedict who advocates

moderation so far as his monks are concerned. Some other religious orders would have much tougher Rules. It is true that some lay Christians are called to make what seem heroic efforts in their daily living out of the Christian life and all of us might be called to these from time to time, but for the great majority this is not so. So what should we include? One thing we need to watch is our use of time, so we need to keep that in mind and guard against the wasting of time in our daily lives.

We often hear that expression “quality time” these days, and a good parent knows how he or she must make quality time for their children. Each spouse (whether parents or not) must do the same for the other. Likewise with our friends - we need to ensure that we make time for them and not always expect them to make the time for us. Relationships and friendships are not intended to be static. Indeed, they cannot be, for they will either grow or deteriorate depending upon how each party manages them. Our relationship with God is - or should be - a very close one and therefore we need to set aside quality time for Him every day as well as make special times during the week, month or year. This is what we are setting out in our Rule of Life, well aware of how our relationship with Him can either grow or deteriorate.

Inevitably, there is something very personal about a Rule of Life and it could give the impression that it is all about “me and my God” with concern for neighbour

thrown in as an afterthought. If this is how it seems, then let us remind ourselves that we are members of the Body of Christ and if one member suffers then all the other members suffer with it, as St Paul puts it. It is also true that if one member is weak through lack of perseverance, then all the other members are weakened. By trying to give God our very best and doing so in a disciplined and loving way, we are strengthening the whole Body, as our fellow-Christians, we trust, are doing the same thing.

It should go without saying that the Rule of the single person living alone is going to be somewhat different from that of those who live as members of a household. Indeed, some parts of a Rule can be undertaken by a family together. One still sees families, if not so common as at one time, coming to confession at regular intervals and many undertake a family practice on Fridays - some shared act of self-denial or even fasting. Of course, a Rule of Life is personal but it helps greatly when we know others are keeping or trying to keep theirs too. One reason why we usually manage to do something special or extra during Lent is because we know we are not alone. Christians all over the world are trying to do something special too and that is both encouraging and supportive, as we were suggesting in the previous paragraph. Here, then, are some suggestions with comments which might help in drawing up our personal Rule of Life.

## **Elements of a Rule of Life**

### **Mass**

All Catholics are expected to join in the celebration of Mass every Sunday of the year and every Holyday of Obligation unless prevented by sickness, infirmity or some urgent duty. It should, of course, be our joy and delight to join with fellow Catholics in offering the Holy Sacrifice of Christ to His Father, and receiving the wonderful gift of Himself. Somebody once said that when it comes to the Eucharist (and this is equally true of our prayer generally) absence makes the heart grow colder. Our Blessed Lord said “Do this...” and if we don’t, then surely our love for Him is waning. If we allow tiredness or bad weather or a late night or even that voice that comes straight from the Evil One saying “You’re not worthy, after doing so and so...” It’s amazing how clever the Evil One is at finding us excuses which sound so reasonable and even pious!

It is good to attend Mass also on weekdays and so in working out our Rule, we should see how and when this is possible. We might in particular attend on such days as Ash Wednesday, our parish’s feast of title, the anniversaries of loved ones and All Souls’ Day,

Solemnities and the more important feast days. Unlike Sunday Mass, which can often be a busy and even noisy or distracted time for the best of reasons, an ordinary weekday Mass usually offers an opportunity for a more prayerful celebration.

Why not aim for a mid-week Mass, or perhaps one on Friday which, as we are reminded later, has a special character, being the day when we remember Christ's sacrificial death for us? Some parishes find their Saturday morning Mass well-attended because it is for many a non-working day.

If we are sick, especially if for more than a week, we should ensure that our parish priest knows so that we can be brought the Blessed Sacrament at home or in hospital. When we go on holiday, we need to seek out the Sunday and Holy Day Mass times as soon as possible.

### **Prayer**

You do not have to read far into the Gospels to discover that Jesus was a man of prayer; it was an essential part of his daily life. He would rise early in the morning and go to a place where he could be as solitary as possible, perhaps into the hills behind the Lake of Galilee.

We have a few precious glimpses of Jesus at prayer, when he would open his heart to the Father and converse with him. The most poignant of these occasions, of course, is that time on Holy Thursday in the Garden of

Gethsemane when his prayer was so intense that sweat poured down his face like drops of blood. St John in his wonderful chapter seventeen lets us hear Our Lord's high priestly prayer (as it is called) when, amongst other things, he prayed for his apostles. Earlier on, it was as a result of seeing their Master at prayer that the apostles asked him to teach them to pray and so he taught them the *Our Father*. So it goes without saying that prayer will have a key place in our Rule of Life.

‘Absence makes the heart grow...colder?’ With regard to our prayer, yes it does! The less we pray, the less we want to pray and so our love for God cools. This is why regular, daily prayer is so important. We need to decide when and how long to pray each day. We need to decide what we are going to do during that time of prayer. For some, may be for many people, the traditional practice of praying soon after they get up in the morning and then just before they go to bed still works; for others lunch time is a good opportunity, especially if they work near a church that is open at that time (as in many of our bigger towns and cities) or if they are at home and the rest of the family is out. Some, whether at home or in the office, visit one of the internet sites which display a theme for prayer that day.

It is also good practice to spend a longer time of prayer each week at least, perhaps with a passage of Scripture, e.g. the Sunday readings. This may also be a good way of

preparing for Holy Communion. What we do in prayer will vary from person to person. Some may want to combine meditation and intercession by using the rosary, not necessarily confining oneself to the (now) four traditional mysteries. Others may want to take just a verse or a word from Scripture and repeat it in a contemplative way, perhaps letting it lead to a time of silence. One very useful practice is to review the past day (or 24 hours) and see where and how we have responded to God; to notice what He has been saying to us through others and in all kinds of ways. A growing number of Christians find it helpful to say one or more of the Offices from the official Prayer of the Church or an adaptation of one of these. CTS publish a number of very helpful little books about prayer and different ways of prayer, including one with an Office. You may also want to ask help from your priest or a religious, or someone you know who is experienced in leading a prayerful life, and there is bound to be such a person in your own parish. Prayer needs to be balanced, which is why the older books used to advocate a structure of prayer based on the mnemonic ACTS - Adoration, Contrition, Thanksgiving and Supplication.

Of course, our prayer should grow and change as our relationship with God deepens and this is where having someone to whom we can turn for advice or encouragement can be very valuable. There will be times in our lives when prayer becomes (as we would put it)

difficult, dry or even boring. These are often the times when our relationship with God is deepening and so we need to change our way of prayer. On the other hand, it could indicate exactly the opposite. Again, a guide or spiritual director can help.

Intercession is an important part of prayer and is greatly needed by the Church and the world. Some people have a scheme for this; others may simply take the daily paper or radio and TV news and pick out items for prayer. This can also be a challenging part of our prayer, because we should never pray for someone or something without being prepared to do something about it, should God ask us.

### **Where to start in prayer**

For those who are new to prayer, perhaps having just been received into the Church, it is best to begin with a simple, structured approach. You may well have been given a prayer book such as *A Simple Prayer Book* (published by CTS) and there you will find prayers for morning and evening. Using these, and certainly the structure of these, will help ground you in the habit of prayer. But don't recite them like a parrot! Say them slowly and thoughtfully - a little done well is better than rushing through. Always give yourself time to settle into prayer, being aware of your body, your feelings, any little aches and pains, and any noises you can hear and then

gradually let them go. Always begin with the sign of the cross - the greatest Christian symbol. Find a time at least each week, (better each day) in which to pray the rosary and there are plenty of little books to help you (e.g. *Praying the Rosary with the Saints* and *A New Rosary Book* both from CTS). Gradually, you will develop your own style of prayer, and discover what helps most. A great teacher of prayer, the Benedictine monk Dom John Chapman, once said: "Pray as you best can pray and not as you can't".

### **Devotions**

The Catholic Church has a rich store of devotional practices, some of which may well be incorporated into a Rule of Life. The most obvious, perhaps, because it springs directly from the Mass, is Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and Benediction. Many parishes provide an opportunity for this each week, but if you cannot be present for whatever reason Our Blessed Lord is always present in the tabernacle and we can adore him and pray to him there. It is sometimes simply called "A Visit to the Blessed Sacrament" and so we might make a commitment to visit at least once a week, making sure that the church will be open.

Almost every Catholic church has, around its walls, the Stations of the Cross and many Catholics make a point of following Our Lord in his journey to the Cross

during Lent, but you might like to do this at other times as well, perhaps as a Friday devotion.

A film which made quite an impact recently is *Into the Great Silence* which comes from the great Carthusian mother house “La Grande Chartreuse” in France. One of the features of the monks’ life is to pray as a community in church in the middle of the night. You may be one of those people who tend to wake during the night and find it difficult to get to sleep again. Rather than tossing and turning, why not have a period of prayer? It could be the rosary, a litany (someone once composed a special night litany for such occasions), or a short office and there are one or two in existence, or you could use all or part of the Office of Readings in the Divine Office. If you fall asleep before completing your prayer, so much the better! Of course, you may be a good sleeper, but actually want to get up for some nocturnal prayer as a special offering to God.

### **Confession or Reconciliation**

The Church expects us to make our confession at least during the period of Eastertide (Ash Wednesday to Trinity Sunday), but any Catholic who really loves God will want to do this more often. Of course, we must always celebrate the sacrament if we have done something seriously wrong, but every sin spoils our friendship with the Lord and the grace we receive from the sacrament

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