

Growing a Rule of Life

by Sylvia Maddox

The Christian life is a Way of Life. Thomas Merton said, “The spiritual life is first of all a life.” A rule of Life is a light on the way – a balance, a holding together, a pattern, a form, a foundation, a way of living consciously.

A Rule of Life becomes an environment in which we live, struggle, and survive. It is like the trellis that supports a vine, guiding it in the direction it is meant to grow.

A Rule starts from a commitment, a desire for conversion, a longing to follow a deeper call of discipleship, a “school for conversion.” The call is to one’s true self, to the high calling, to union with Christ. First we need an inner Rule. First should be a desire for the goal, the crown, the quest – not a desire for a Rule, but a commitment to Jesus Christ, much like the Baptismal Covenant.

Why keep a Rule? Because no matter how deep our desires, how much fire we feel at times in our faith, we are all susceptible to our culture, our personalities, our abilities, and the unforeseen circumstances of life. We need something that will hold us together in the dry times, in the chaos, and in tandem with our own emotions and plans.

A Rule of Life should contain our intention. Areas of concern should be our prayer life (both public and private), communal worship, study, service, relationships, and our body.

In this way we start to see the sacramentality of our time and always having before us a holy purpose. We don’t look at things as obligations but as part of the working out of our own salvation consciously. Knowing that our failure is the last word. As the monks said, “We fall down, and we get up.”

My own Rule of Life came into being in the late 1970s in a time of spiritual exploration. Faith Alive, the Char-



ismatic Experience, Cursillo were all active movements of the time. I started reading great spiritual writers like William Temple, Henri Nouwen, Agnes Sanford, Thomas Merton, and Teresa of Avila. I was ready to make a deeper commitment, having made

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a vow in 1975 “to be true” to what I really believed. A friend talked to me about the Order of the Holy Cross. I knew nothing then about orders or St. Benedict or Rules. These worlds did not come up as they do today.

I began a year’s practice to be an Associate of the Order of the Holy Cross. This was a big commitment as most of my friends were still 60s leftovers, ambivalent about the church and especially those who seemed overly religious. The Rule of the Order called me to do things I had never done before. I went on my first private retreat in 1980. I fasted during Lent. I found a spiritual director; I opened each day with short morning prayers. At the end of the year, my desire to be close to Christ was strengthened. And so it has been every year I have been on this path.

Every year I renew my vows and offer a special prayer on the Feast of the Holy Cross. It is not the Order of the Holy Cross that means so much to me, however; it is the way that it has provided for me to go deeper into the Christian life.

My rule is this:

Prayer: Daily Office, journaling, blessing prayers, intercession. Two retreats a year. Setting aside time to be in God’s creation.

Study: not regulated because my work teaching spiritual formation is so much study.

Family: Attention to my husband, sons, and extended family. I try to be present to their physical and emotional needs as well as create times of celebration.

Worship: Eucharist every Sunday and mid-week at University of the Incarnate Word where I teach. Special intentions at Oblate Seminary grotto. A deeper asceticism during Lent. Designated time with a prayer partner.

Community: Ministry in my church as a lector, Lay Eucharistic Minister, and intercessor. Ministry to the community through the boards of Santa Rosa Children’s Hospital and United Communities of San Antonio. Ministry to the needy through serving breakfast monthly at the SAMM Shelter and serving as chaplain to The Visitation House.

Hospitality: Offering our home and guesthouse for those who need retreats, seminary students, and out-of-town guests. Hosting celebrations and gatherings for family, friends, and those who do not have access to a large home.

Stewardship: Tithing 20 percent of our income. Taking care of my body by exercise, nutrition, music, and fun.

Mission: Focusing on those on the margins of faith as students at UIW. Ministry of encouragement in teaching in various churches and ecumenical settings.

This is not unlike my childhood Rule which I have come to realize shaped my desire and understanding of a Rule of Life. I am grateful for the Girls’ Auxiliary in the Baptist Church where I learned the value of dedication in ways that gave my life purpose and means to live out that purpose:

Abide in Him in through prayer
Advance in Wisdom by Bible study
Acknowledge my stewardship
Adorn myself with Good Works
Accept the challenge of the Great Commission.

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