

Things to Consider

- ▶ If you do not have a *Rule* and want to develop one, then the first essential thing is to set aside some time so that you can quietly begin that task on your own. You will find it best if you write down your intentions. Prior to this, you may even find it helpful to jot down a few things as they occur to you.
- ▶ As you begin this task you may like to ask God the Holy Spirit to lead you and when you have finished, offer another prayer of thanks.
- ▶ Next, see this effort of yours as the first draft. Over the following week or two you may like to re-visit what you have written, make necessary changes and additions, and generally refine your efforts until a point is reached where you are satisfied.
- ▶ You may then like to share your proposed *Rule* with a spiritual friend whose judgements you trust. What do they think? Do they have any suggestions? Your parish priest could be of support in this.
- ▶ As you develop your *Rule*, a very important point for you to remember is that you must not make a 'god' of your *Rule*. It is not. Nor is it a Law. It is a guide, a framework, something that you believe will help you in your relationship with God and your daily life with its cares and responsibilities. (Later, adapt it where necessary so that it becomes a useful tool and don't feel guilty about changes.)
- ▶ When you are finally satisfied (possibly for the time being), offer it to God in some way – might this be during your own quiet time with God or silently at a Eucharist? Or is there some other way?
- ▶ Decide then to review your *Rule* in three or six months just to see how it is going and whether or not it needs to be revised in some new way. You might find it helpful making a note in your diary for that appropriate week. After, why not review your *Rule* annually, writing the time into your diary. Again, your priest could be helpful.
- ▶ So what will you include in your *Rule*?
 - There is that which relates specifically to God: your quiet times of prayer, meditation, receiving the Eucharist, reading your Bible and any other religious books. How often, when? Anything else?
 - There is your time with your spouse, family and friends: what is generous in an appropriate and loving way so their needs, as well as yours, are met?
 - Time for yourself: what will you do and for how long?
 - There is your work, whether paid or voluntary: how might that be life-giving both for you and those with whom you work?
 - How will you wisely, responsibly and generously use your income?
- ▶ In the end it comes down to stewardship; the wise and responsible use of our time and talents in God's service.

ATG/B18/MBH

Attending to God 'A Rule of Life'



The topic I want to explore in this brochure has been traditionally called 'A Rule of Life', but I hesitate to call it that since numbers of people would view that phrase negatively. The reason is twofold: many of us already lead busy lives and don't need a new layer of busyness and complexity, and secondly, it all sounds legalistic.

Rest assured, this is not my intention. Rather, I hope you will come to see that a *Rule of Life* is a useful tool that can be an important aid as we live out all aspects of our daily life. It is not just to do with those areas that we might wish to call 'spiritual', for that would be to compartmentalise our life, whereas our relationship with God should inform all areas.

A Rule is not an end in itself nor a Law. Rather the Latin word from which it derives refers to a trellis. And so a *Rule of Life* is there to provide a framework to help us live out our relationship with God and others in a way that is life-enhancing.

In his book *Holiness*, Donald Nicholl tells the wonderful story of a Jewish merchant who piled so much merchandise for sale on his wagon so that when he hitched the horse to it, it could not be pulled. Something had to go. Pondering his problem he saw all these goods as absolutely essential to his livelihood. Still, something had to go, so off came the wheels!

Nicholl's point is that we do exactly the same to our lives when we don't keep the Sabbath as he calls it, which is true, but I would like to broaden that. For many of us our lives have ended up looking like that over-loaded wagon and when we don't give adequate time to God, our families, ourselves and whatever else that needs to be done, we end up taking the wheels off of our lives. In order to keep the wheels on, I believe we need to develop a *Rule of Life*.

Rules of Life seem to have originated in the Egyptian desert when monks came together to live in community. Pachomius, who died in 346 A.D., developed the first monastic Rule. Through John Cassian it came to the West and a variation was used at Marseilles in France. Probably the best known concept of a Rule was that developed by St Benedict (480-547) in Italy. He felt a Rule was needed to cover every aspect of the monks' lives and its aim was simple – to bring balance – and so there was time for sleeping, praying, studying and working. As said, its intention was to bring a sense of discipline by making sure life was kept in balance. We also need that balance to our life.

Balance is essential and it speaks of life having certain rhythms. There is the rhythm of nature with trees growing and shedding their leaves in the different seasons; there is the natural rhythm of night and day and so on. Life lived properly, whether it be trees or humans has a natural rhythm to it, and nature tends to smack our fingers when we play around with it. The same is true of humans.

A story tells of a game keeper who, to make a point, placed a carp in a pond with a stone at its centre and another in a pond of the same size, but without that central stone. In the pond with the stone the carp swam repeatedly around its marker in an orderly and circular fashion growing fat and healthy with a definite pattern to its movements. In the other pond, this carp, not having a central stone as a reference point, swam in erratic circles and became emaciated in the process.

If you like, God is our central reference point and our *Rule of Life* enables us to circle Him in an orderly fashion, all the time deepening that relationship because we have a framework to live by.

As we develop our Rule we will appreciate its uniqueness to us. We are all different, at particular stages on our journey, and of varying age. Someone just beginning their Christian journey as a young adult will have different needs than one who has been faithfully seeking God for 60 years. A young mother or father is in a different position to someone whose family has now left home. Some of us like framework whereas others can feel somewhat indifferent. Some, to use Harold Miller's phrases are 'Desert Christians' while others are 'Market-place Christians'. The former he sees as being people who like to get away from the busyness of life to be alone with God. The latter he sees as being those people who would see their life as being active and a kind of prayer or act of worship. Each of these factors will mean that our *Rule* will have a particular emphasis. As we look at it we will notice whether there is an appropriate balance, what is missing, and what is realistic for us.

What is important is that we slowly develop a *Rule* that is appropriate for us. We should not overestimate what is possible and nor should we underestimate. A regular review can be useful, at least on an annual basis and certainly when our life circumstances change. It is much easier to add a further dimension to our *Rule* than to remove something because we have been too ambitious. A sense of failure may come with the latter. In all this we are to be 'gently firm' with ourselves.

We will never get it completely right and that is not the point. It is like the automatic pilot that has been activated on an aircraft. Most of the time it is 'off course' but is constantly correcting itself and ultimately reaching its destination. It is the same with us and our *Rule of Life*. Circumstances may mean at times that greater focus is occurring on one aspect of our *Rule* but we will be aware of this and refocus our efforts.

Jesus' life was always full and busy – He taught, He healed, He prayed (particularly in the early morning), He went to the synagogue or Temple on the Sabbath. He relaxed, He was attentive to others. More than likely He did not have a *Rule of Life* as such but He was focused on God in ways that we are not. This gave Him the balance and direction He needed in life and it is this we need as well. Our *Rule* can be invaluable in this.