

THE RULE OF ST. COLUMBANUS*

(Regula Monachorum)

Thus begins the Rule for Monks of Saint Columban Abbot.

First of all we are taught to love God with our whole heart and with our whole mind and with all our strength, and our neighbor as ourselves; then {come} works:

I. Obedience

1. At the first command of the senior, all who hear him must stand up to obey, because obedience is shown to God,
2. as our Lord Jesus Christ said, "Whoever listens to you, listens to me" [Luke 10:16].
3. So if anyone hears the command but does not immediately rise up, he is to be considered disobedient.
4. But if someone contradicts {the superior}, he is guilty of insubordination,
5. and therefore he is not only guilty of disobedience but is to be reckoned the destroyer of many because he opened the door of contradiction to others.
6. If anyone murmurs, but obeys grudgingly, he is to be held disobedient.
7. Thus his work is to be rejected until he manifests good will.
8. On the other hand, what is the limit of obedience?
9. It is certainly commanded to the point of death, for Christ obeyed the Father for us unto death.
10. He himself recommended this to us when he said through the apostle, "Have this mind in you that was also in Christ Jesus.
11. Although he was in divine form, he did not think he should cling jealously to his equality with God.
12. No, he abased himself by accepting the role of a slave.
13. Not only did he behave like an ordinary person, but he humbled himself, becoming obedient to the Father unto death, death on a cross" [Phil 2:5-8].
14. Therefore truly obedient disciples of Christ ought not refuse anything, no matter how hard and strenuous it is. It should rather be welcomed with the warmest joy,
15. for unless obedience is of that sort, it will not be acceptable to the Lord. For he said, "Whoever does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me" [Matt 16:24].
16. Therefore he says of a worthy disciple, "Wherever I am, there my servant will be with me" [John 12:26].

* Translation by Terrence G. Kardong, "St. Columban: His life, rule, and legacy"

II. Silence

1. It is decreed that the rule of silence is to be carefully observed, for it is written, “But the fruit of righteousness is silence and peace” [Isa 32:17].
2. Therefore, so as not to be accused of verbosity, one must maintain silence except for useful and necessary matters. For according to Scripture, “In much talking there will be sin” [Prov 10:19].
3. Therefore the Savior says, “You will be justified on the basis of your words, and you will also be condemned on the basis of your words” [Matt 12:37].
4. They will be rightly condemned who, when they could have spoken justly if they wished,
5. instead preferred to speak evil, unjust, impious, silly, injurious, dubious, false, hostile, disparaging, wicked, outlandish, blasphemous, harsh, and devious words, and with extreme verbosity.
6. Therefore, we should avoid these and like words, and speak cautiously and reasonably. Otherwise, detractions or loud arguments may erupt in a vicious flood of words.

III. Food and Drink

1. Let the food of the monks be plain, and taken in the evening. Their food should [help them] avoid gluttony and their drink inebriation; it should sustain and not harm them. They should eat vegetables, beans, and flour cooked in water accompanied by a small loaf of bread. Thus the stomach will not be overloaded nor the spirit stifled.
2. Those who desire an eternal reward should only consider how such things are useful and compatible with their lifestyle.
3. Therefore, their lifestyle ought to be moderate, and so should their manner of working. True moderation consists in maintaining the possibility of spiritual progress along with an abstinence that mortifies the body,
4. for if abstinence goes too far, it is a vice and not a virtue. Virtue sustains and contains many good things.
5. So we should fast every day, just as we should eat every day.
6. Since we must eat daily, we should feed the body with simple food, and not much of it. We need to eat every day because we need to make daily progress by praying, working, and reading.

IV. Poverty or Conquering Greed

1. Monks ought to avoid avarice, “for the world is crucified to them and they to the world” for Christ. It is damnable for them not only to possess, but even to wish to do so.
2. It is their will that counts, not their bank account. They have left everything and followed Christ the Lord daily with the cross of fear, so they will have treasure in heaven [Matt 19:21].

3. For this reason, since they will possess much in heaven, they ought to be content on earth with just enough to stay alive.
4. They know that cupidity is leprosy for monks who are imitators of the sons of the prophets. For a disciple of Christ it is treason and ruin, and it is death for the doubting followers of the apostles.
5. Therefore, nakedness and disdain for riches are the first perfection of monks. The second is the cleansing away of vice. Third is the most perfect, continuous love for God, and also of the divine law. This comes after the forgetfulness of earthly things.
6. This being the case, according to the saying of the Lord, we need few things. Indeed, we need only one.
7. There are very few true necessities without which we cannot live, or even one thing, like food, literally speaking.
8. But we require purity of understanding by the grace of God, so as to understand spiritually the few things of love suggested to Martha by the Lord.

V. Conquering Vanity

1. The peril of vanity may be shown from a few words of our Savior. When his disciples were crowing with vanity, he said to them, "I have observed Satan fall from lightning from the sky" [Luke 10:18].
2. And when some Jews justified themselves, he told them, "What men esteem as high is abominable in God's eyes" [Luke 16:15].
3. From these examples, and from the most famous one of the Pharisee who justified himself, we gather that vanity and self-importance destroy all good deeds. For the good deeds the Pharisee bragged about perished, but the sins confessed by the tax collector vanished.
4. So let's have no big talk from monks lest their big efforts be in vain.

VI. Regarding Chastity

1. The chastity of a monk is judged by his thoughts, and he was doubtless the target of the Lord's words to the disciples when they gathered to listen to him: "Whoever ogles a woman is guilty of defiling her in his heart" [Matt 5:28].
2. When the One to whom {the monk} is consecrated scrutinizes his vow, he should be afraid that the One might find something abominable.
3. {Then he would fall under} the judgment of Saint Peter: "They have eyes full of sensuality and adultery" [2 Pet 2:14].
4. What good is it to be a physical virgin if one is not a spiritual one?
5. For "God is spirit" [John 4:24], who dwells in the spirit and mind that he sees is pure, in which there is no adulterous thought, no stain of an impure spirit, no blemish of sin.

VII. The Divine Office

1. Regarding the synaxis, that is, the Office of psalms and prayers in the canonical form, certain distinctions must be made because the thing has been handed on to us in various ways by different authors.
2. Therefore, I must also arrange things variously to suit our way of life and the succession of seasons.
3. Because of the changing of seasons, it should not be a uniform program.
4. When the nights are long, the Office should be long; when the nights are short, the Office should be likewise.
5. So, with the custom of our elders, from June 24, when the nights grow appreciably longer, the Office begins to grow from twelve chora, the smallest number allowed for Saturday night and Sunday, until the beginning of winter, that is, November 1.
6. Of these, they sing twenty-five antiphonal psalms, which always follow two psalms, that is, twice the same number, in the third place. Thus they sing the whole psalter on the aforementioned two nights. But for the other nights in winter, they limit themselves to twelve chora (thirty-six psalms).
7. At the end of winter, throughout spring, they drop three psalms each week, so that twelve antiphonal psalms remain on only the holy nights (Saturday and Sunday). This applies to the thirty-six psalms of the daily Office in winter.
8. But there are twenty-four psalms for the whole of spring and summer up to the autumn equinox, that is, September 24.
9. So the manner of the synaxis is like the spring equinox, that is, March 24, seeing that the Office gradually increases and decreases by mutual changes.
10. Thus we must proportion our vigils to our strength, especially since we are commanded by the author of our salvation to watch and “pray at all times” [Luke 21:36]. And Paul orders us to “pray ceaselessly” [1 Thess 5:17].
11. But we need to know the measure 37 of the canonical prayers, at which all come together at set hours to pray together, after which each one should pray in his room [Matt 6:6].
12. Therefore, our ancestors have decided that three psalms should be said at the Day Hours, taking into account the work to be done in the intervals.
13. {We should add} versicles that intercede first for our sins, then for the whole Christian people, then for priests and the other orders of the holy people that are consecrated to God. Next [we should pray] for those who give alms and for peace among kings.
14. Last {let us pray} for our enemies, lest God hold it as sin [Acts 7:60] when they persecute and slander us, “for they do not know what they are doing” [Luke 23:34].
15. At the beginning of the night twelve psalms are chanted, and the same thing is done at midnight.

16. At Morning Office, twice ten plus twice two {= twenty-four psalms} are set down. This is when the nights are short, as I have said. But more are always set down for Sunday and Saturday nights, at which seventy-five psalms are sung one after the other at a single Office.

17. These things have been said regarding the common Office.

18. However, as I have said, the true tradition of prayer varies so that the capacity of the person devoted to it should be able to endure without undermining his vow. It also depends on whether one can actually do it and whether one's mental capacity allows for it, considering the necessities of one's life.

19. It should also be varied as the fervor of each one requires, according to whether he is free or alone, to how much learning he has, to how much leisure he has, to how much zeal he has, or at what age he arrived at the monastery.

20. And so the realization of this one ideal should be variously valued, for the demands of work and place must be taken into account.

21. So although the length of standing or singing may be varied, a person will achieve equal perfection in prayer of the heart and continual attention to God.

22. There are, however, some Catholics for whom the same number of psalms is canonical, whether the nights are short or long.

23. But they celebrate this canon four times a night: at the beginning of night, at midnight, at cockcrow, and at morning.

24. This Office seems rather little to some people in winter, but in summer they find it a heavy burden, for the frequent celebrations in the short night cause not just weariness but downright exhaustion.

25. But on the holiest nights, namely, Sunday and Saturday, the same number is repeated in the morning three times, that is, thirty-six psalms.

26. The great number and holy lifestyle of these people have led many others to experience the sweetness of this canonical number. And that also applies to the rest of their observance, for no one has found their Rule wearisome.

27. Yet though they are such a great throng that a thousand monks are said to live under one archimandrite, no quarrel between monks is reported to have taken place since the founding of the cenobium.

28. It is clear that this would not be possible if God did not dwell there, for he says, "I will dwell among them, and I will walk among them. I will be their God and they will be my people" [2 Cor 6:16].

29. Thus they have deservedly grown and continue to grow, thanks be to God, since God dwells in their midst. And may we merit salvation from our Lord through their merits.

VIII. Discretion

1. How necessary discretion is for monks is shown by the error of many and the ruin of some. Because they started out without discretion and did not acquire moderating knowledge, they have not been able to come to a praiseworthy end.
2. For just as those who proceed without a map fall into error, those who live indiscreetly soon end up in excess. Excess is contrary to those virtues located in the middle between both extremes.
3. It is very dangerous to do things in excess, for our adversaries place stumbling blocks of wickedness and pitfalls of various errors along the straight path of discretion.
4. Therefore we pray continually to God that he will bestow on us the light of true discretion to illuminate this earthly path surrounded on both sides by inky darkness. Then his true adorers can avoid these shadows without error on the way to him.
5. Discretion gets its name from discernere, because by means of it we distinguish between good and evil, and also between means and ends.
6. For both good and evil have been divided from the beginning like light and darkness after evil was begun by the devil by the deprivation of good, but God first accomplished the separation by creating light.
7. So holy Abel chose the good, but wicked Cain fell into evil.
8. God made all he created to be good, but the devil sowed bad things over them by sly craftiness and crafty persuasion to dangerous ambition [Matt 13:24-30].
9. What then are these good things? They are those that are whole and incorrupt and that have remained as they were created. "God alone created and prepared them," according to the apostle, "that we might walk in them. These are the good works in which we were created in Christ Jesus."
10. Good, integrity, piety, justice, truth, mercy, charity, healthy peace, spiritual joy with fruit of the Spirit—all these, with their fruits, are the good things.
11. But here are the evils that are contrary to them: wickedness, perversion, impiety, crookedness, lying, avarice, hatred, discord, and bitterness, with the many effects that arise from them.
12. The offspring of these two contraries, that is, good and evil, are innumerable.
13. The first evil that departs from the goodness and integrity of creation is pride, the primeval wickedness.
14. Contrary to this is the humble attitude of a pious and good person who acknowledges and glorifies his Creator, which is the primary good of the rational creature.
15. So it is that the rest of the vices and virtues have gradually developed into a vast forest of names in two parts.
16. This being the case, we must hold firmly to the good we receive by God's help, which we should pray for in good times and bad. Otherwise, we may be puffed up with vanity in our prosperity or driven to despair by adversity.

17. Therefore we must avoid both dangers, that is, from all excess by illustrious temperance and true discretion, which holds to Christian humility and opens the way of perfection to soldiers of Christ.
18. This is accomplished by always discerning rightly in doubtful cases and by everywhere dividing justly among the good and the evil. This means judging external matters, either between flesh and spirit in the inner life, or between acts and habits, or between action and contemplation, or finally between the public and the private.
19. So then evils should also be avoided: pride, envy, lying, seduction, heresy, evil transgression of morals, gluttony, fornication, avarice, wrath, sadness, flightiness, vanity, bragging, slander.
20. The goods of the virtues are also to be sought after: humility, kindness, purity, obedience, abstinence, chastity, generosity, patience, joy, stability, fervor, energy in work, watchfulness, silence.
21. These virtues are to be carried out with suffering courage and moderating temperance, as if placed on some scale of discretion. This we do in order to weigh our habitual acts according to the possibilities of our efforts, for we try to measure up in all things.
22. There is no doubt that the person for whom sufficiency is not enough has exceeded the measure. And it is obvious as well that whatever exceeds the measure is a vice.
23. Therefore, the rational mean between too little and too much lies in the middle. It always calls us back from excess on one side or the other. When the rational mean is applied in all cases, it obtains what is really necessary but shies away from the unreasonable demands of rampant desire.
24. And this mean of true discretion, by weighing in the scales of justice all our acts, never allows us to deviate from the just norm. Nor does it let us fall into error if we always follow it closely as our leader.
25. For we must always keep away from both extremes, according to that saying, “Keep away from both the right and the left” [Deut 5:32]. Discretion means we must always hold to the straight course, that is, by the light of God.
26. We should often repeat and chant the verse of the victorious psalmist: “My God, light my darkness, for in you I will be snatched from temptation” [Ps 17:29-30].
27. “For life on earth is temptation” [Job 7:1].

IX. Mortification

1. The main element of the rule of monks is mortification, since they are told by Scripture, “Do nothing without counsel” [Sir 32:24].
2. Thus if nothing should be done without counsel, counsel is to be sought in all matters.
3. And Moses also commands us, “Ask your father and he will tell you; your elders and they will instruct you” [Deut 32:7].

4. This discipline may seem hard to the hard-headed, namely, that a person should always be subject to the word of another. Yet those who fear God will find it a source of enjoyment and security, if they keep it fully and not just in part.
5. For nothing is sweeter than a more certain conscience, and nothing more certain than a soul without fear of punishment. No one can bestow this on himself because it belongs strictly to the judgment of others.
6. What defends us from the fear of Judgment is that we have already been subjected to the scrutiny of a judge. For the latter bears the weight of his client's burden, and he bears the whole responsibility he has undertaken.
7. As it is written, "The responsibility of the one judging is greater than that of the one who is judged."
8. Therefore, whoever seeks counsel will never go astray if he carries it out. For if the response of another person sometimes goes astray, the faith of the believer and the effort of the one who obeys never will. Those who seek counsel will not lack a reward.
9. Now if someone decides for himself what he should have consulted about, he is guilty of having erred. He presumed to judge when he ought to have submitted to judgment. Even if his resulting act is correct, it will be held against him, for he has gone astray in this matter.
10. The person whose role is only to obey will not dare to judge anything for himself.
11. Since this is the case, monks must everywhere avoid a proud independence. The obedient must learn true humility "without grumbling and hesitation."
12. That way they will experience the truth of the Lord's saying that the "yoke of Christ is sweet and his burden light" [Matt 11:30].
13. Otherwise, until they learn the humility of Christ, they will not experience the sweetness of his yoke and the lightness of his burden.
14. For humility of heart is the rest of a soul weighed down with vices and troubles and its only refuge from so many evils.
15. The more the soul is drawn to this consideration from so many external vain and erroneous interests, the more it rests within itself and is refreshed.
16. The result is that what was bitter to it becomes sweet, and what it previously considered harsh it now finds level and easy.
17. Moreover, mortification, which is intolerable to the proud and hard-hearted, is actually a consolation to the person who is only pleased with what is lowly and mild. The monk should know, however, that he will not be able perfectly to accomplish this happy martyrdom, nor cope with unforeseen situations, if he has not devoted himself single-mindedly to this quest. Otherwise, he may be found unprepared.
18. For if, in addition to this quest, a person wishes to pursue and foster his desires, he will immediately be absorbed and troubled by these preoccupations. He will not be able to follow wholeheartedly where the commandment leads. Nor will he be able to fulfill it as he ought, precisely because he is upset and ungrateful.

19. Thus there are three levels of mortification: not to disagree mentally, not to blab freely, not to wander about.
20. Although the superior commands vexing things, the mortified monk says to him, “Not as I will, but as you wish” [Matt 26:39],
21. according to the example of our Lord and Savior, who said, “I came from heaven, not to do as I please, but to follow the will of him who sent me, that is, the Father” [John 6:38].

X. The Perfection of the Monk

1. The monk should live in a monastery under the discipline of a single Father and the communion of many.
2. The purpose is to learn humility from the one and patience from the other. The first should teach him silence and the second mildness.
3. The monk should not do whatever he wants. Rather, let him eat what he is told and have only what he receives.
4. He should do the work assigned him and submit to what he does not wish.
5. Let him come to bed exhausted and fall asleep on his feet. He must be forced to rise before sleep has been completed.
6. When he has suffered some wrong, he should say nothing. Let him fear the superior of the monastery as a master but also love him as a father.
7. He should believe that whatever the superior commands is in his best interests. He must not second guess the decision of the elder. His job is to obey and carry out what he has been ordered to do.
8. As Moses says, “Hear, O Israel,” etc. The Rule ends here.