

THE RULE OF ST AUGUSTINE

A MODERN RENDERING

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OUR chief concern, brethren (sisters), is the love of God; and after this the love of our neighbour, for these are the two greatest commandments. To these ends we give the following directions for the regulation of monastic life.

The first aim of community life is the ideal of unity in community—all our thoughts and desires united and centred on God.

I POVERTY

Religious poverty means that each of us owns nothing, but that everything belongs to the community. It is the task of the Superior to provide everyone with what is necessary in the way of food and clothing, as was done in the days of the Apostles, when 'all the faithful . . . shared all they had . . . so as to distribute to all, as each had need' (Acts 2, 44-45, Knox). Of course some people are stronger than others, and the Superior will take this into account in the distribution of material goods. Furthermore, some people were more prosperous than others before they entered the cloister, and just as these are glad to see their wealth distributed, so others are not going to expect to enjoy wealth and comforts in the cloister which their poverty previously denied to them, but the same treatment is given to all, from whatever circumstances they came.

Socially, too, there will be differences, but the important thing here is that simple folk should not come to boast of living under one roof with the well-born, any more than that the well-born should resent the presence of simple folk in their midst. They should rather regard their company as a privilege. Yet we should take care that in the cloister the roles are not simply reversed, so that while some renounce their station in life, others are merely seeking idle social advancement. In a word, there is to be no snobbery in the cloister, no pride in breeding, no arrogance about any wealth

we may have brought in, for it would have been better to enjoy it licitly in the world than to pride ourselves on having given it up. That is the odd thing about pride: most sin is committed by wrongdoing, but pride can find its way into a perfectly good deed and bring about its ruin.

Let us remember, then, unity in community; and since each of us has set out to provide a dwelling-place for God, let us try to recognise his presence in one another.

II PRAYER

Our office, or prayer in common, is a duty we should be always ready to perform carefully and punctually, striving to keep our minds on what we are saying, and in the sung liturgy keeping to the chants which are appointed for us and avoiding any unauthorised music.

The chapel or oratory (this word comes from the Latin *orare* 'to pray') should be reserved for prayer, and sometimes people may have time between their duties to drop in and say a prayer. This they should be able to do without being distracted by any other activities that might take place there.

III DISCIPLINE

One obvious discipline of the body is that of fasting and abstinence. Some people have not got the health to fast, but then they should renounce eating between meals, unless they are invalids. In the refectory we have reading during the whole meal, and we should listen intelligently and try thus to give holy nourishment to the spirit while we refresh the body.

Allowance sometimes has to be made in matters of food and clothing for people who either have not got a strong constitution, or were not accustomed to as frugal a life as we lead in the cloister. The more robust among us, however, should never be jealous of any special concession made to another's weakness, but rather should be glad that they have the strength to lead the hard life themselves. It would be a preposterous situation if while some exchanged the luxuries of the world for the penance of the cloister, others after a hard life in the world came to the cloister in search of luxury. Nevertheless, invalids, whatever their previous

habits, should receive every treatment that is necessary for rapid recovery, and during convalescence allowance must be made, as it is for those who never can fast. But when they are restored to health, they should return to that happy frugality which so befits a servant of God. It is a good thing in itself to be able to do without things, and we should not wish to continue concessions made to *infirmity*, when we can once again rejoice in our strength to withstand the rigours of the life we have chosen.

But there are other means of disciplining ourselves. There is dress, for instance; we should not be too particular about our dress—after all, it is our mode of life and not our mode of dress that is going to count with people. Then there is travel: religious ought to go about together, and stay together. And in general our behaviour in public should never shock anyone, but should bespeak holiness of life.

And what of custody of the eyes? Nobody can forbid us to see womenfolk (menfolk), but it would be a serious offence against religious chastity if we were to stare at them in such a way as to inflame our own passions, or theirs. The chaste person keeps the eyes chaste, for trouble with chastity can begin with a mere glance. And whatever we are doing, let us remember that unseen eyes may be watching us, and that anyhow nothing escapes the all-seeing eye of God. Sometimes God seems not to notice what we do, yet we know it is only that his wisdom makes him so patient with us. The thought of offending him will help a holy person to keep due custody of the eyes, and the old saying will come to mind, 'Lewd looks lead to hell'.

This matter of custody of the eyes can be taken as an example of the working of fraternal correction, when God in our midst will help us to guard each other's virtue. If, for instance, in some public place, such a wandering eye is detected in one of the community, a warning should be given at once, so that a bad habit is not formed. But if it happens again, the person should be regarded as a sufferer in need of healing, and one or two others should be consulted. This is a kindly act indeed, for who would care to be responsible for the loss of one of our number, through timidity in offering correction? If it were some secret bodily ailment,

would we remain silent? How much more would we try to cure an ailment of the heart! If the first warning has had no effect, the Superior should be told, so that the second correction may also be made in private. If, after this, the charge is still denied, then the other persons consulted should be called in, and the offender even publicly accused by two or three witnesses. It is then for the Superior to appoint a salutary punishment. If the offender will not submit, and has not already departed, there remains only the remedy of expulsion—an act not of cruelty but of mercy, since the community is thereby saved from the contagious plague of bad example. The method of fraternal correction, springing from a love of our neighbour together with a hatred of sin, should be applied when dealing with any other faults: someone, for instance, may be secretly receiving letters or even presents, and if the charge is admitted let us judge mercifully and pray for that person, though the Superior's punishment would be necessary if the matter had been formally brought up.

IV COMMON LIFE

The common life should extend not only to a common board, but also to a common wardrobe. One or two vestiarians should be appointed to take care of the clothes, to keep them free from moths, and to provide each person with what is necessary. We should not be particular about having clothes suited to the seasons, or always having the same garments back, nor should we resent having something less good than we had before or think it beneath our dignity to wear what another has worn. Such complaints would show a lack of that inner garment which is sanctity. Even, however, if it is granted to us to use always the same garments, they should be kept in the common wardrobe, so that we may learn to be ever more ready to work for the common good than for our own interests. 'Charity', says St Paul, 'does not claim its rights' (1 Cor. 13, 5, Knox), and this means putting the common good before our own. We can easily judge our progress by the degree of our concern for the common good, so that charity, which remains for ever,

may direct our day-to-day dealings with things that pass away.

The common life, therefore, means that any gift we may receive, even from parents or friends, must be placed at the disposal of the Superior to be put into the common stock and to be given to those who need it. Failure to hand over something amounts to theft.

V DETACHMENT

We must not be too particular about the laundry arrangements—that will be seen to by the Superior—nor similarly about baths, nor about medical treatment. We do not always know what is best for us in these matters, and it is the Superior's duty to take every care of the health of the community, and to listen patiently to what they have to report about their ailments.

When we have to go out, we should go two or three together, with the companions the Superior has given us.

An infirmarian should be appointed to look after the sick, whether they are seriously ill or not, or already convalescent, and the storekeeper should provide what is requested for them. These officials, including also the librarian and vestiarian, should serve the community willingly, and provide books at the stated times, and clothes and shoes when they are needed.

VI PEACE

Let us try to avoid quarrels altogether, or at any rate to make an end of them quickly. It is only too easily that anger turns to hatred, a mote becomes a beam, and then we are near to murder. After all, St John says that 'a man cannot hate his brother without being a murderer' (1 John 3, 15, Knox). A cruel word may cause grave injury; let healing and forgiveness follow quickly. Both parties may be guilty; let them forgive one another, if only because of all the prayers we say; and indeed, the more frequently we pray, the better we ought to pray. Quick to anger, quick to ask forgiveness: this is a better state than to be slow to anger and tardy in request for pardon, or worse still, making no heartfelt request at all—such a person has no place in the cloister. But the wisest course is to avoid all harsh words;

yet, should they occur, let healing words quickly overtake them.

Sometimes a Superior must speak severely. He (she) may even on occasion speak too severely, but then humility in asking pardon should not be allowed to stand in the way of authority, and he (she) can simply ask pardon of God, who knows how much he (she) loves the subjects, whom he (she) has perhaps reproved too sharply, for between all of us there should be a spiritual love that is not of this earth at all.

VII OBEDIENCE

The Superior should be obeyed as a father (mother), and still more the priest who has charge of us all. It is the Superior's business to see that the rules are kept and offenders corrected, and to refer to higher authority any matter that is beyond his (her) competence.

The Superior should set out to serve the community, and not merely to command. High in honour but humble before God and his (her) community, he (she) should always set a good example, be ready to give correction, consolation and comfort where needed, be infinitely patient. A lover of discipline for himself (herself), he (she) should administer it firmly, hoping to be loved rather than feared (though both are necessary), and remembering that he (she) will have to give an account of his (her) stewardship at the end. A high station is a place of danger, and subjects must bear in mind that their obedience is an act of mercy, not only to themselves, but also to their Superior.

God grant that these things may be observed. Religious people love the spirit of beauty, and the goodness of their lives will mount to Christ like a sweet fragrance, for we are not his slaves, but friends who have freely entered his service.

Let this Rule be read out once a week, so that we may see ourselves in it as in a mirror and not forget our obligations. When we find that we keep the rule, let us thank God for it; when we fail, let us turn over a new leaf and pray to God, the giver of all good things, that he 'forgive us our trespasses, and lead us not into temptation'.