Introduction to the Commentary on the Rule of Life

by

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Introduction to the Commentary

In 2004 twenty years had passed since our Rule of Life was granted official approval by the Holy See. As the anniversary came and went, the lack of a substantial commentary to help our religious explore its riches was felt with increasing concern.

Some materials, it is true, had been published in Together in the years following the approbation. They included guides for reading, schemas, and short commentaries on sections of the Rule; moreover, Father Nestor Grégoire, at the time General Secretary, also prepared several loose-leaf booklets containing the outlines of a history of the final version and other historical notes on the text together with numerous extracts from various theologians and spiritual writers, that were intended to provide background material on certain key-concepts or themes found in the Rule.

These valuable aids were meant to be of assistance to our communities in assimilating the definitive text of the Rule as well as offering material to individual religious for personal reflection and prayer. Most of all, it was hoped that they would serve as a resource for formators in their demanding task of introducing candidates to the Rule of Life.

In answer to a need

All of these initiatives have been useful, but they have still not been able to meet the need, felt above all by formators, for a detailed and comprehensive commentary. It was in this context that I mentioned some time ago to our Superior General, Father Fiorenzo Salvi, a rather vague project of mine of one day taking up the challenge. He seized the opportunity at once, urging me to go ahead with it - indeed, to begin without delay.

He pointed out that, for the moment, I was probably the religious best placed to address the task, since I had had an active role both in the preparation of the text of the Rule for approval by the Holy See and in introducing and explaining it on many occasions during my visits to communities in many countries and at chapters, study days, workshops and meetings of various kinds.

The time seemed particularly opportune in view of the 150th anniversary of the founding of the congregation in Paris in 1856. It did not seem unreasonable at the time to hope for the publication of a Commentary on the Rule of Life in the jubilee year of 2006-7, a publication that would serve to remind us that with the Rule we had entered upon the second major phase of the congregation’s history while at the same time it helped us to appreciate the riches of our vocation. In fact, the task has taken rather longer than that, but I am happy at long last to be able to present the finished product to you all, my brothers in the Lord.

The project was facilitated by my work at the service of the Center Eucharistia which gave me the opportunity of doing much more reading and research than had ever been possible for me in the preceding years, while the numerous retreats, courses, workshops, and conferences I was invited to give over those years have enabled me to put together a great deal of material suitable for inclusion in a commentary.

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1 These are now happily available at the Congregation's web-site: http://www.curiasss.net.
In opening the pages of this book the reader will have a number of questions in mind. What kind of Commentary is it? For whom is it intended? What use is envisaged for it?

Nature of the Commentary

As even the most cursory perusal will at once make clear, I have undertaken a full-scale Commentary on the Rule, dealing with all the numbers in a consecutive way. Every section of the Rule is prefaced by a short general introduction, followed by a detailed commentary on each number. In the commentaries I offer an exegesis of the text, explaining the key terms and providing information about the history or presuppositions of the text that I believe may be useful for a better understanding of it.

The Commentary is, in a sense, a personal one, in so far as it has no kind of “official” status; it does not attempt to represent the views of the general council, for example, nor does it claim any authority other than my own. In character, it is reflective, in the sense that not only have I frequently gone beyond or (more accurately perhaps) behind the text to develop what I believe are its biblical, theological and spiritual presuppositions or foundations, even if these are, generally speaking, neither expressly stated nor always explicitly referred to, but also have sought to draw out its implications. That, I believe, is both justified and necessary having in mind especially our younger men, particularly in the field of formation. Without some understanding of the unique situation in which the text came to birth it is difficult for readers of a later generation to gain a full appreciation of its meaning. Moreover, the text, of its nature, is very concise, and not all have the requisite background knowledge without which its considerable riches may not be perceived.

In principle, the commentary on each number takes the form of a brief essay, variable in length, which seeks to unfold something of the wealth of meaning condensed in the brevity of the text. I usually expound its biblical background in some detail, as well as offering material, according to the context, of a theological, liturgical, and spiritual nature which seeks to explore the background and implications of the number. I have sought to enrich my remarks with appropriate texts of our holy Founder and references to our own SSS history, together with extracts from official teaching, the writings of church fathers, saints, spiritual writers, and theologians of different epochs. Reference has also been made to socio-political and cultural developments proper to our time and, in particular, to the human sciences where it seemed helpful and appropriate.

In addition I have from time to time interspersed some short essays on specific themes that provide background for, or throw light upon, some of the more important concepts underlying the text of the Rule. These are called “Supplementary Explorations.” This method allows me to keep the comments on each number within manageable proportions, while offering interested readers, but especially formators, further information and references.

Finally, I have provided a number of practical aids. First, each section concludes with some questions for reflection or for community discussion as well as some suggestions for further research. Then there is a concordance (as mentioned earlier), a glossary of the most important terms found in the Rule, and an index of subjects treated in the Commentary.

A pioneering effort

I am conscious that the Commentary is a pioneering effort, but I hope that as such it may open the way eventually for something better in the future. I have made no attempt at all to write any kind of “definitive” or “timeless” document, but have sought rather to take account of the circumstances and challenges of the present reality of our world and to offer some responses to it from the standpoint of our mission. It is, therefore, quite deliberately “situated” in a given moment of our history.
I am also aware of another set of limits, this time of a cultural nature. The Asian, African or Latin American reader may find, on occasion, that the Commentary does not take sufficiently into account his cultural perspectives or certain of his burning concerns. Although I have tried constantly to keep in mind the world of those who will be making use of the Commentary, I am aware of my own limits, nonetheless, in attempting to address their needs. Inevitably, I write out of my own necessarily circumscribed cultural presuppositions, experience, and concerns.

If the effort is found worthwhile, it might be possible to envisage a future edition prepared this time in collaboration with religious from different cultures. Such a solution would certainly contribute to giving the Commentary a much more universal character.

For whom is it written? Possible uses

Whilst my primary target audience is in the field of formation, first of all the formators themselves but also our young men in training, it is my hope that other religious and communities may also find the Commentary helpful to consult. Keeping in mind the variety of needs, particularly those of beginners, I have tried to make the text as accessible as possible, though without sacrificing richness of content. Nonetheless, some parts of the text do necessarily presuppose a certain amount of theological background and they may, on occasion, prove somewhat demanding for some readers.

Closely connected to the readers I have in mind are the uses I hope the Commentary might serve.

The first aim of the Commentary is to help readers understand our Rule. To this end, I have sought to provide information, explanations and background material that will assist anyone seeking to know better what the Rule is really telling us.

But the Rule is not simply a book about the spirituality of the consecrated life or even about the Eymardian way of life; it is above all a “measure” or guide for living that form of consecrated life. As such, it achieves its purpose only when it is translated by its readers into the experience of living an actual form of life and behavior. Hence my second aim has been to encourage readers to want to live what the Rule is proposing. I have tried, therefore, to inspire a love for the Rule, but above all for the lifestyle and mission it expresses, as well as to offer on occasion some practical suggestions for living it.

In the third place, I hope it may serve as a useful starting point for anyone who wishes to study the Rule in greater depth, pursuing the ramifications of one or another issue beyond what the text of the Rule immediately states.

In the fourth place, I would hope that the Commentary might supply helpful materials for meditation as well as provide both a stimulus and some constructive suggestions for praying the Rule, especially in the presence of the Lord in the sanctified bread of the eucharist.

Finally, I dare to hope that it might also prove useful for communities, especially on a study day or during a time of recollection, to consult the Commentary or to use it as a starting point for discussion of some aspect of our way of living or our mission.

A “Rule” for living

Just as a ruler is an instrument that enables one to draw a perfectly straight line, so a “Rule of Life” provides a guide for living a specific mission in the church in line with a certain set of
principles and values.\textsuperscript{2} Though it draws upon church documents and many sources, spiritual, theological, and liturgical, the Rule is not primarily a theoretical document. Like a blueprint, its value is in what will be built according to its specifications; it can be understood fully only when it is translated into lived experience.

The Rule re-proposes the Eymardian vision and mission in a new epoch of the church’s life. It is the final product of a number of years of discernment on the part of the members of the congregation called by the church to bring up to date the tradition of the Founder in the new context created by the Second Vatican Council.

Religious Rules have been defined as

the constitutional law of the different religious families, whether orders or religious congregations, as well as of secular institutes. As constitutional law they are limited to establishing that which is fundamental, leaving secondary elements called for by the evolution of contingent matters to other code books.\textsuperscript{3}

In antiquity, the term rule meant, “above all, a manner of living, and then a text that handed down the memory” [of it], that is to say, a document that gathered the “traditions of the fathers;” hence such texts were sometimes given a title that said precisely that: “the Rule of the Fathers.”

Our older religious were more familiar with the term Constitutions, but the vocabulary referring to the basic code of a religious body is, in fact, a remarkably extensive one. Recourse has been had over the ages to a considerable variety of names, for example: institutions, institutes, order, book of order, rules of the holy fathers, ordinances, declarations, directory, traditions, customs, observances. As a matter of fact, the term “rule” took some time to establish itself, since many of these alternative expressions were in use in the early centuries. Today, we have returned to it once again.

From ancient “Rule” to modern “Rule of Life”

A rule was, in the beginning, “simply a short code of asceticism, with such directions as were necessary for the organization of common life; and in the orders properly so called, there were added to this code the regulations required by the special objects of each institute.”\textsuperscript{4} The course of evolution of the religious rule is marked by certain important stages.

Canonists are accustomed to distinguish three major periods in the development of the legislation of consecrated life. The first is that of the “Rule” (typical of monastic, canonical, and mendicant orders), the second that of the “Institute” (typical of certain clerics regular), and the third that of the “Constitutions” (typical of modern foundations like our own). Since the 13\textsuperscript{th} century – the time of the Fourth Lateran Council, and more familiarly, of Saint Francis – such books have required the approbation of the Roman Curia.

Emergence of the great Rules

The aim of all the early founders was to assist christians who, like themselves, had heard the call to live the gospel in a more radical way by providing an institutional form designed to translate that desire into a stable pattern of life. They approached the question on the basis of their personal


experience and in the light of previous efforts in the same line. This entailed not only providing inspirational encouragement to support and renew motivation but also meant codifying a common or shared way of life with its prescriptions, rules and prohibitions intended to ensure order and to foster interior discipline.

Many factors conditioned such an endeavor. Although founders have always drawn inspiration from the gospel, each one has been guided in this by his own spiritual gift. Each founding figure, in consequence, has tended to give special emphasis to certain features or passages of the gospel rather than to others, thus giving rise to a rich variety of spiritualities. Previous life experience too, as well as cultural and personal characteristics, have also had their part to play in giving concrete form to their plans. Eventually three great rules emerged that were destined to become valued sources or models for all later attempts to devise a monastic or religious rule, that of Pachomius in Egypt, of Saint Basil in Caesarea and of Saint Augustine in North Africa. Each of them establishes a different balance between inspirational and institutional elements.

At one extreme we find the so-called rule of Pachomius (in reality it was not composed by him at all but consisted of a collection of regulations concerning the life of the community put together by his disciples after his death from legislation and practice in his monastery). It is presupposed that the monks will already be familiar with the spiritual writings of Pachomius and his disciples; hence biblical and spiritual motivation is almost entirely absent from the document.

At the opposite extreme stands the rule of Saint Basil. The principal emphasis is not on regulation at all but on the gospel and on spiritual counsel. The theology is profound and the regulations laid down are shown very clearly to flow from the scriptures. For that reason, Benedict would later advise his monks to read and meditate deeply upon Basil’s rule.

Somewhere between the two stands the rule of Saint Augustine in as much as it adroitly combines concrete regulations with spiritual reflection. Augustine gives particular prominence to the idea of a community of brothers who share resources in common and are of “one heart and soul, nobody calling any of his possessions their own” (cf. Acts 2,44; 4,32),

Of the three generations that were to follow these great pioneers, the first is represented by Cassian in Gaul, the second is the anonymous ‘Master’ on whom Saint Benedict drew so heavily (although he also read Cassian and Basil very attentively), while the third is the great Benedict himself, the most influential source of the western monastic tradition. In terms of the balance of spiritual and institutional elements, Benedict follows Augustine while showing a clear affinity also for Basil.

The balance between these two elements will vary greatly throughout subsequent ages, inclining now to one side, now to the other. The story of the Franciscan rules is a particularly interesting source of reflection.

Tension between gospel and law, charism and institution

Though new rules continued to be written as time went on, they were usually derivative in character, simply copying the venerable ancient rules or re-ordering certain of their features in new combinations. For the first millennium of the religious life, in fact, new rules or ancient ones survived or were adapted simply in accordance with their proven capacity for producing fruits of holiness; those that proved less viable were simply discarded. By the time of the high Middle Ages, however, church authorities were demanding that all new rules be submitted to the Roman Curia for approbation.

The reason for this change is to be found in the new social factors that were now entering into the picture, especially the multiplication of dissident movements. Though often religious in origin, these movements had a tendency to become radical and sometimes revolutionary, born as they were
out of protest, in the name of a return to the gospel, against the state of a church ruled by ostentatiously wealthy aristocrats and great land-owning monasteries. Church authorities became alarmed and felt the need to exert greater control over all new religious movements.

It is in this socially conflictual context that the latent tension between charism and institution came to the surface in a new way, nowhere more so than in the case of the Franciscan movement.

The case of Saint Francis

Francis, it seems, was reluctant at first to write a rule at all. Like the great founders before him, his interest was in returning to the gospel in all its radical implications. Of the three rules he eventually wrote, the first is lost, but has been plausibly reconstructed. The other two rules from Francis’ hand are markedly different from the first one. It seems that his first attempt at writing a rule consisted in little more than assembling a collection of gospel references. The later rules, written with the help of canonists, are a very different matter; they contain many more structural and juridical elements that brought the way of life much more into line with established forms.

It is not only that the spiritual intensity is attenuated; what emerges is a quite different style of life compared to the itinerant spontaneity of the early times. The three vows, being considered at the time the essential element of the consecrated life, now occupy a central position, replacing Francis’ focus on the “apostolic life” that he was hoping to bring back into the church of his day – that is, the itinerant life of the apostles sent to announce the gospel without care for provisions or reliance on human support. Institutional realism and church needs now make their presence felt, as well the increasing influence of earlier styles of consecrated life, above all the monastic model. With Bonaventure, studies and priesthood will be given a place as well and the order will become increasingly clerical, something that Francis certainly did not want.

The tension between charism and institution will be accentuated with time, especially where women’s foundations are concerned. Time and again, inspired foundresses will attempt to bring into being groups of dedicated laywomen eager to respond to the unmet needs of the society of their time, only to find themselves constrained by male authorities to adopt a life-style practically incompatible with their goals. Forced to live apart from society in convents, more often than not under a rule of enclosure that not only had no part in the foundress’ original conception but was diametrically opposed to it, and to wear a religious habit they did not want, their position as women meant that they were usually obliged to succumb. The suffering this could give rise to was often very acute and sometimes, as in the case of women like Mary Ward, dramatic.5

From the Constitutions to the Rule of Life

From the time of our Founder through to Vatican II, the policy of the church was to give the constitutions a predominantly juridical character, largely excluding theological and spiritual elements. The subsequent legalistic mentality that had come increasingly to characterize the religious life over those years led the Council fathers to reverse this policy. The Holy See, therefore, now demanded that the rules and constitutions of all institutes of consecrated life be revised in order to facilitate their response to the call to evangelical renewal mandated by the Council. The theological and spiritual principles upon which the way of life was based, where these were lacking,

5 Convinced that Catholics, commonly regarded in England at the time with suspicion, could best be served by women who could move about society freely and unrecognized by authorities, Mary Ward (1586–1646) believed it was not helpful in such circumstances to live in a cloister or wear a distinctive habit. In consequence, she proposed what was considered at the time a quite radical rule for women who desired to live a new form of vowed life, but one that contrasted with the declaration of Pope Pius V to the effect that solemn vows and strict papal enclosure were essential to all communities of religious women. Though the foundation did receive papal approval in 1616, and enjoyed the sympathies of three Popes, the approval was later withdrawn and the institute suppressed by Urban VII in 1630, following the recommendation of a commission of Cardinals appointed by him to adjudicate the matter.
were to be inserted into the legislative texts or their formulation was to be brought into line with the teaching of the Council in cases where they were already present in the texts.

In a good number of cases this revision has entailed the composition of an entirely new text since, in most cases, it was found to be practically impossible to re-touch the earlier text without creating an intolerable pastiche. The language, theology and general way of understanding Christian life, worship, and spirituality in the wake of Vatican II differed so greatly from that of the preceding period as to preclude any possibility of arriving at a simple harmonizing of the two distinct visions.

Something similar had happened before, especially in relation to the need to update more ancient rules, such as those of Augustine and Benedict; but the difference between the earlier and the later texts in those periods was probably not nearly as profound as it had become in the middle of the twentieth century. In these earlier periods, the most common solution was to keep the original rule as a document of historical reference, known as the first book, followed by a new text that adapted the earlier rule to the changed historical circumstances of the day.

In the case of many religious institutes, the new document drawn up in the wake of the Second Vatican Council was commonly referred to as a “Rule of Life,” thus harking back to the ancient conception of the fundamental code of an institute as a “method of life” or “system of life.”

What the Rule means for us today

Precisely because we have given our very lives to the congregation, the Rule is hardly a document that we will regard with an attitude of impersonal detachment or peruse out of mere curiosity. For it represents a new stage of a living heritage that is dear to us and, as such, concerns us in the most direct and personal of ways, since it traces out for us in some detail the identikit we are called to realize in the service of the Lord in our time.

While it constitutes a valuable source of inspiration for our spiritual journey, it also lays serious obligations upon us, obligations that we accept as binding in consequence of the act of religious profession we have made publicly before the church. It is a document that gives shape to our life, then, and that in a most comprehensive way.

Certainly, it remains true that the Rule is a document that we ourselves, for the most part, have written. Yet it is also in a very real sense something more. For it has been taken up by church authority in the act of official approbation, and by this fact is proposed to us, and to anyone desirous of joining us, as a path of holiness and service recommended and validated by the church. For one who has faith, it is therefore a document through which God speaks to us.

To affirm this is not to idealize it or confer upon it the status of a sacred and immutable monument. For it is a human document, composed in a given historical moment, and like any other, according to the incarnational principle so central to Christianity, is not free of limitations and flaws. Indeed, I will have occasion at times to point out some of them in the course of the present Commentary. Yet, beyond these inevitable limits, it is a document that we welcome in faith and cherish with esteem and affection.

For one who loves his vocation, the Rule of Life appears as a gift that the Lord makes to us at this moment of our history. Just as the bread used at eucharist loses nothing of its flaws or defects by being incorporated into the celebration of the mystery, and yet serves as a vehicle of divine life for us when we receive it in communion, so our Rule is meant to become for us, if we ‘receive’ it, a privileged place for discovering the will of the Lord and for living according to it.

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6 This statement is nuanced since certain elements contained in the Rule have been mandated by the church authorities or were inserted as a condition for approval.
In this sense we may describe the Rule as embodying, at its most fundamental level, God's perennial appeal for conversion. It repeats in a new key and for later times the first and primary summons of the gospel of Jesus: "Be converted and believe the good news." That is its bottom line.

But it does more. It also points out to us the concrete shape such life-long conversion must take for those of us who acknowledge the call to follow Christ in the Eymardian tradition and to "be eucharistic," as Paul once put it in writing to the community of Thessalonica. Its ultimate goal, in other words, is to lead us, as persons and communities, to a state of "being in love with God," as the great theologian Bernard Lonergan liked to express it, a state of being in love that energizes the whole personality and gives rise to a specific form of service offered gratuitously to the ecclesial community and, indeed, to humanity at large, in line with the charismatic gift that has been given to us.

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7 See Col 3,15, where *eucharistoi ghinesthe*, "show yourselves eucharistic," is usually translated as "be thankful."