

Monastic Scribe XLIV: February 6, 2023

HAVING A RULE OF LIFE

It has frequently happened that individuals have expressed to me their regret that they never got into the spirit of Lent (or Advent or any other time). It had been their intention to pray more, do something for their spiritual life or whatever. But busy lives demand time and persistent involvement. Good intentions, yes, but the practicalities of life did not allow the time and space to implement their good intentions. Do you ever feel that way?

So it was that, recently, I was intrigued by an op-ed column in the New York Times. Tish Harrison Warren is the author and she writes occasionally for the Times. I think she is an Anglican priest but, what is more significant for my purpose, is the fact that she is the mother of three small children. This column was titled, "This year, try organizing your life like a monk." Now, if I had said that, I would get rightful criticism for speaking from my ivory tower of the monastery where I supposedly have lots of time to live a disciplined, regular life. But this is a busy mother, wife and person working in the world. She says that "The lives of monks and nuns have taught me, a non-Catholic mother, who sleeps late whenever possible and binges Netflix how to better live."

The author discovered the Rule of Saint Benedict, written around 520 in Italy. She found it advocating a balanced life of work, prayer, study and leisure. She found it practical in paying attention to food, drink, sleep and living with others. It impressed Tish as an overarching plan governing one's daily practices, habits and routines. Now, don't get scared off! A "Rule" (Latin Regula) is not a legal work of rules. It has been better translated or explained as a "trellis," a framework of the vine of your life growing in some direction. It can change and adapt.

Benedict sets out eight times of daily prayer. Her rule of life starts with a very short time of prayer but done daily. She has worked it up to get up earlier and now spends an hour in prayer. Benedict encourages "stability;" she seeks to impose stability by limiting travel for work to no more than four times a year. He lays out long hours of daily silence. She has three lovely but noisy kids so she has short times of silence in her rule. On a family level, they practice sabbath together. The whole 24 hour period, they put all of their phones away. They gather around the table with close friends, celebrate a huge meal. They practice gratitude, rest; they include sleep and play.

So, she asks, how does one begin? How do you design a rule of life?

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The first step is to clarify in your mind and heart a vision of the kind of person you want to be and the kind of life you want to live, what you most deeply value. Then work backward and very slowly. The second step is to make a kind of habit audit. See if you connect between all of your habits and relationships and who they are forming you into. Thirdly, start with a fresh scrap of paper and begin to design a habit architecture that is more congruent with your vision and values. Yes, write it down and don't leave it to good intentions. She adds the advice of starting really, really, really small. Start with joyful things that you love and want to do. And, then do it preferably with other people.

If you are religious, I would add that you practice your faith in the home. Celebrate feasts and fasts. Know you are connected to the bigger body of Christ. A rule of life, Tish says, will force you to face your mortality, your limitations, your emotional limitations, and it will force you to say no. On the other hand, it is a life where you are integrated and living at a pace that you can walk until you die and be joyful and become more loving, kind and peaceful. Her final line is "But there is no way to do this without a willingness to live unlike how most people around you are living." Ouch!

A spiritual life, growth in the Spirit, cannot be left as a vague desire. This reminds me of the Buddhist-Catholic dialogue that has taken place in this country and Asia. Buddhist monks and Benedictine monks share how they live. Buddhists have been happy to find Christians who live a life with practices of regular prayer, community, social actions, etc.

I hope I have gotten you to review how you live and not think you have to take on some big burden or impractical way of life. Be specific, have a program, have a life! You can let me know how you are doing at: joycet@glastonburyabbey.org

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Please note that I do not speak on behalf of Glastonbury Abbey, the Archdiocese of Boston or the Catholic Church, though I hope my faith is in harmony with all these. Any error in judgment should be credited to me and not anyone else.