

# Martin Thornton on the Meaning of "Rule"

This is based on *Christian Proficiency* by Martin Thornton, 1959

"Rule is the literal translation of the Latin word *regula*- rule, pattern, model, example-from which we derive "regular" as both noun and adjective. Both words are technical terms of ascetical theology... their meaning is not quite the same as that of common use. Rule, like pattern, model, or system, is an essentially *singular* word, in some ways directly opposite to a list of "rules," and a "regular" Christian is one who "lives to rule." ...a regular soldier in the regular army-not so much one who keeps a lot of rules or who is strictly disciplined, but an efficient full-time professional. If we may stretch the analogy a little, a regular layman is one who embraces the Christian life as opposed to the keen "draftee" who goes to Church fairly often and tries to say his prayers now and again. It implies status more than quality, efficiency more than keenness or brilliance; volunteers and conscripts *might* prove to be braver and more zealous than regular soldiers but they are unlikely to be more generally proficient. So it must be admitted that rule is not absolutely essential to creative and progressive Christian life. There is minority, I think a very small one, of people temperamentally unsuited to embrace rule -- but in general to be a regular and to be a proficient comes to much the same thing."

"*Rule is "embraced" not "promised.* It would be Pharisaical, legalistic and quite unChristian solemnly to promise to "keep" a rule; and it would involve the sin of pride and the heresy of Pelagianism at least. In any case you can "keep" only a lot of little rules. A Christian regular is one who chooses to undertake his common obligations and duties, and to develop his personal spirituality, by acknowledging, accepting or "embracing" some total scheme, system, pattern or "rule" of prayer."

"*Breach of rule is not sin.* ...a breach of rule --technically a "fault" --is strictly amoral; thus the *cause* of a fault might be sinful, negative, or virtuous. If a man misses Church when his rule prescribes it, by plain downright laziness, then he has committed both a fault and a sin, but his sin is not "rule-breaking" -- there is no such thing-- but sloth. If he misses Church through oversleeping (assuming it was not a drunken stupor, which would involve gluttony) or by missing the bus or having a puncture; then he has made a fault but there is no sin. Or he may miss Church because, while walking to Church, he stops to rescue someone trapped in a burning house, or assists the victims of an accident. He has still made a fault, but rather than sinning, he has gained the virtue ..."

"*Rule is, and must always remain variable.* The idea persists that once you have embraced rule you must "stick it out" at all costs for ever! Rule may be *relaxed*, as for example during holidays or in sickness, or it may be *modified*, if say, work or charitable duties become temporarily overwhelming ... Rule is also variable-necessarily so-according to our progress through life, and as we advance, or as our circumstances change, it will probably need revision every two or three years."

"*Rule should be, or should soon become, unobtrusive.* It should "fit," and the soul should "grow into it," so that by habitual use prayer fully becomes a solidly established part of life and personality-and this is the real meaning of the word regular: a Christian who has no need to worry over much about duty, or about what he ought to do next, because an orderly integrated prayer-life has become part of himself."

"*A good personal Rule should demand creative discipline without burden.* ... Quite simply rule should be neither too difficult nor too easy; but here temperament should be considered... In general, therefore, I think rule should be such that it is invariably kept without strain but *occasionally* makes a definite demand on the will. It should normally be kept with no fault occasionally, a few faults frequently, and if it goes all to pieces very rarely there is little to worry about."

# On the Threefold Rule of Prayer

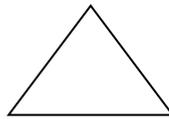
From *Power from on High* by Robert Gallagher, 1982

## WORSHIP

"...Continue in the breaking of the bread and the prayers." (BCP p.304)

### HOLY EUCHARIST

"The Gifts of God for the people of God." (BCP p. 354)



### DAILY OFFICE

"Day by day we bless you; We praise your name forever." (BCP p. 98)

### PERSONAL DEVOTIONS

"That in all the cares and occupations of our life we may not forget you, but may remember .." (BCP p.100)

Our worship tradition as Episcopalians is based on a three-part structure. Michael Ramsey, the one-hundredth Archbishop of Canterbury, refers to it as the Benedictine triangle. The three elements, Eucharist, Daily Office, and personal devotion, comprise the fundamentals of a disciplined Christian spirituality in the Anglican tradition.

The use of the Rule is a movement away from a series of unintegrated devotions and unrelated religious "rules" toward an integrated Rule grounded in the worship and prayer life of the Holy Catholic Church as expressed in the Book of Common Prayer. The Rule is a system which holds together transcendence and immanence, discipline and freedom, common prayer and personal devotions, objective and subjective, reason and emotion.

Through the Rule the parish joins in the tradition and practice of the larger Church and so avails itself of and participates in that grace-filled life. It simply makes good spiritual sense to base the parish discipline on what the Church has developed and lived through the ages.

The basic shape and particular expressions of the Rule have been handed on to us in the Prayer Book. The Prayer Book is largely concerned with the Eucharist and the Office as the forms of prayer we share in common. It assumes that the individual Christian is engaged in personal forms of devotion as well. The norm of the Prayer Book and of Catholic tradition is the Holy Eucharist as the principal Sunday act of worship and the Divine Office as our daily offering of common praise to God the Father.

The parish's prayer life needs balance, discipline, and order. It also needs experimentation. The Threefold Rule is designed to meet these needs. It provides a system that people may learn, in which they may come to rest and grow in maturity. The Rule recognizes the uniqueness of each parish's and person's spiritual life and the paradox that this uniqueness is finally known only from within the Body of Christ. How the essential elements are to be expressed will vary from parish to parish. How they are enriched with additional practices will depend on each parish's particular needs and traditions. Testing and experimentation are necessary in each parish.