

GUIDELINES FOR A RULE OF LIFE

within the Oriental Orthodox Order in the West

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Following a Rule of Life is an important part of the spiritual path and a traditional aspect of Christian monasticism. By using a Rule an individual becomes an intentional pilgrim on a sacred journey through space and time, seeking wisdom, and the Rule acts as a guide or a template by which one can maintain balance, equilibrium and discipline on the Path. It is also a means by which an individual might measure the progress of his or her spiritual pilgrimage and practice accountability to a higher power or authority. Historically, a Rule of Life was imposed by some external authority with little or no input from the seeker. However, this custom is as perilous as trying to construct a Rule without any guidance whatsoever. The purpose of these guidelines is to assist you so that you can construct a Rule consistent with your own spiritual needs and unique life-circumstances.

A Rule of Life is about spiritual awakening, healing, and the development of the central organ of your being—the heart. It is not about suppressing your ego or putting yourself under tight control. It is not meant to make your life miserable. Its focus instead is on the core of what it means to be a fully formed (or completed) human being, open and alive to God as your Source of existence and as an inner Presence which guides you. However, because a Rule is grounded in something greater than yourself, it will indeed challenge your agendas and narrow interests—the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain—in favor of a life open to something greater and more universal than your ego.

Because the central concern of a Rule of Life is the heart, there are certain conditions necessary for its awakening so that it stays open to the flow of wisdom. Just as your physical and psychological being have certain requirements for health and proper functioning, so too, the life of the heart has its own needs and requirements. With these in balance, you can begin to live within a wider range of faculties and conditions, which assist in your completion. You will need, however, to establish your own unique relationship to a Rule, one that reflects this balance within the particular circumstances of your personal life.

THE GUIDELINES

I

Spiritual Parentage and Direction:

Every human being exists because of parents. This obvious fact applies as well to the realm of spiritual birth and growth where there may be many more than two individuals involved in "spiritual parenting." As one grows guidance is necessary though it need not create excessive dependency. Indeed we must learn to reach beyond external human support and receive direction that can come from many transcendent sources both beyond and within ourselves.

- **Taking Personal Responsibility:** You are the architect of one solitary life—your own. You should look, therefore, at your span of life on earth as the unique opportunity to build and create a being of great value, dignity, and worth. If you do not accept this responsibility for your own development, you give up your freedom and allow others to make choices for you as to what sort of being you will become. God has ordained that you become a "co-creator" in the work of personal transformation.

1. *Who has responsibility for your becoming? How have you given it away to someone or something else?*
2. *Make a "mission statement" of what you want your life to become.*

- **Making Contact with the Master of Wisdom:** Yeshua a Wisdom teacher of extraordinary power. He continues to play an irreplaceable role in the wisdom tradition of the Christian path. Knowing him personally as a living Master and Guide is an essential beginning point. Everyone has a unique relationship to him so it is not possible to say exactly what yours will be. Establishing that relationship through help from the Tradition and the Order, and tracking it through journaling and prayer is a way of grounding your heart in the Presence of the Master who said he would be with us until the end of the ages.
 1. *Read one of the Gospels and write your impression of Yeshua*
 2. *Spend time with an icon of the Pantocrator (Image of the Christ) and establish a relationship with it.*
 3. *Take time to be with the Master and listen to his inner Voice.*
 4. *Write your reflections on these experiences.*
- **Affiliating with a Community:** Humans are communal beings and do not live well without the companionship of others. This is a fundamental fact of physical, social, and spiritual life. Finding and affiliating with a community of fellow pilgrims who share the same desire for journey as you do is essential to your well being. It may not always be possible to have such a group in immediate proximity, but one can establish even distant links to a spiritual community of fellow pilgrims through deliberate associations with churches, orders, and communities of seekers. Making regular and repeated contact with fellow pilgrims is crucial. When you do, it is important to determine the level of spiritual development and authenticity (ability to assist in the process of transformation) of that community. One may need guidance from a spiritual director in making these determinations.
 1. *Who and where is your circle of fellow pilgrims? Be specific.*
 2. *How often do you need contact with that circle?*
 3. *Is there a priory nearby, or might you establish one of your own?*
- **Finding a Mentor or Spiritual Director:** Guidance from other human beings gives us stability on the spiritual path. A spiritual director or mentor acts as a guide and often as corrective to any state of imbalance. He or she plays a vital role helping to maintain perspective needed for both growth and progress on the path. In finding a suitable individual look for someone who manifests a strong degree of spiritual maturity. Determine whether this person is willing to assume the responsibilities of giving spiritual guidance and direction in your life. If so, then work together to form an agreement of understanding about the kind of relationship to be developed and the time involved. Establish a relationship which is neither so restrictive that you become overly dependent, nor so libertarian that you have no accountability. Be open to any thoughtful direction without becoming blindly obedient or uncritically passive.
 1. *Who is your spiritual mentor or director? If you do not have one get referrals and talk personally to potential mentors.*
 2. *In consultation with that mentor or director, how often do you need to meet?*
 3. *Do you have a close spiritual friend with whom you share your journey? This can provide another form of spiritual direction.*
 4. *Keep a journal of your learning in direction.*

- **Receiving Guidance from Beyond:** Wisdom has accumulated through the centuries, and there are guides available to us beyond the veil of death in the communion of saints. The Abrahamic traditions recognize that at the center of historical reality is the Divine Immanence which is active and alive on the "inside" of things. The pilgrim is always, therefore, "inside" that Presence and the speaking of the Eternal Word. We can become alert to that teaching first by learning to "listen" to that interior Word spoken in the depths of the heart, and then to walk according to its instruction. Identifying how that Word is spoken to you is part of your spiritual practice. This is an issue to discuss at length with a mentor or spiritual director.
 1. *Can you name the saints and spiritual beings that mentor you from beyond time-space?*
 2. *Find an icon of at least one of them.*
 3. *Be intentional in your journal about instruction that you receive from beyond.*
 4. *Selectively share that learning with your circle of spiritual pilgrims, friends,, directors, and mentors.*

II

Study and Ingestion of Sacred Texts as Spiritual Food:

There is a proverb which says, "you are what you eat." This statement is also spiritually true. What we become inwardly is determined by the nutrition we receive. So much depends upon nourishment. It is easy to become spiritually undernourished or malnourished in life. A spiritual pilgrim must feed on a balanced diet of essential foods. Each of the great sacred traditions have preserved a rich variety of sacred texts and Scriptures which are of immense value because of their nutritive qualities. On their surface they may sometimes appear forbidding, but they are known carriers of divine light. They bring revelation and truth.

- **Divine Qualities:** The first question you must ask is, what sustains and nourishes your heart? The answer is complex, but it involves, foremost, Truth or Reality which is the manifestation of the divine Qualities, Names and Essence of God into our world. This is the heart's food, which we come to "taste" in our world as beauty, goodness, and truth. These feed us at a very deep level. There exist vast treasuries of nourishment and great underground reserves of spiritual water that refresh the heart. These "sources" are dynamic, transmitted horizontally both across time and history, and also descend vertically by means of intuitive understanding and visionary insight. Opening yourself to those sources is crucial.
 1. *List the truths and realities which continue to feed your heart.*
 2. *Can you link these to divine Names and Qualities? What is that link?*
 3. *Share your insights with your inner circle of spiritual pilgrims and mentors.*
- **Regular Intake of Truth as Light:** The heart receives Truth and the divine Quality very differently from the mind. Although the means is typically through word and symbol, the essence is the light of wisdom carried in that "vehicle" which the heart learns to "read" or grasp intuitively. It is important, therefore, to fully enter the transmission of wisdom so that sacred texts become a vehicle of wisdom's light. Much can be gained by studying these texts in the context of a gathered community who share their insights and experiences with the readings.
 1. *Where, from what or whom do you experience truth as light?*
 2. *Describe that light?*
 3. *Have you learned to read texts "from the heart?" If not, you need some practice and discussion with mentors and spiritual friends.*
 4. *List the texts or sources that you find to be light. Add to that list as time progresses.*

- **Daily Ingestion of Spiritual Food:** As we have noted, there is the need for daily “bread (or light) from above.” What we ingest will certainly be different from person to person, but that we take in spiritual energy through the reading, study, and the remembrance of sacred texts and their teachings is crucial. Among the things that constitute a spiritual diet are sacred Scriptures, spiritual and sapiential teachings, biography, metaphorical wisdom through poetry, aphorism, and parable. These are brought to us by both ancient and modern streams. Of particular importance to Christian monastics throughout the centuries has been the daily recitation of the Psalms. Learning to “read” this and other sacred literature as a spiritual diet requires the use of *Lectio Divina*, the traditional form of Christian meditation.
 1. *What is the time and place for your daily ingestion of spiritual food?*
 2. *List the texts you are using.*
 3. *Is there enough variety?*
 4. *What is your practice of **Lectio Divina**?*

- **The Development of Spiritual Consciousness:** In order to receive Truth from the vertical axis we must experience the growth of spiritual consciousness, or as St. Paul says, “the renewing of the Mind.” Such growth means the development of a form of consciousness beyond the rational and analytical levels. The intuitive levels of awareness which supersede discursive thought and work with the “iconic nature of Truth” (or Truth which is expressed symbolically and saturated with a “surplus of meaning”). Such work involves struggling with the metaphorical tensions and paradoxical contradictions which are always present at the literal level of understanding but which can be engaged as a coherency by intuitive consciousness. The symbolic, metaphorical and paradoxical nature of sacred Scripture and its teaching must therefore be explored in such a way that the surface structure is transcended and the specific modes of assimilation from the literal level to the non-literal level are learned.
 1. *Describe spiritual consciousness and the intuitive levels of awareness as you experience them. Share that insight with your spiritual friends and mentors.*
 2. *Put on your list of spiritual fare a book of poetry, parables, or some other form of metaphoric text, for example, the writings Rumi, Hafez, St. Thomas, or Mary Oliver.*
 3. *Journal your awareness of metaphors and paradoxes as you would journal dreams.*

III

Establishing Rhythms of Contemplative Practice

Just as one needs regular rhythms of breathing, eating, and sleeping, etc., so spiritual equilibrium is maintained by the establishment of daily, weekly, monthly, yearly, and life-long rhythms of practice that sustain health and balance in spiritual life. Practice (or *praxis* as it is also called in the early tradition) is a complex set of activities and attitudes of body, soul, and spirit that are sustained rhythmically over periods of time. This complexity (sometimes called *orthopraxis*, or a complete practice) includes the following:

- **The Sacrament of Silence and Centering Practice:** Regular rhythms of silence, rest, and order are necessary if we are to maintain spiritual balance, sanity, and an inner alignment with the vertical axis in the midst of a confused and confusing, “horizontal” world. At its heart this practice involves a continuous “return to the Center” (or the core of our being) where we daily align ourselves with the vertical axis and its many dimensions which is the great magnetic pole at the center of Existence. This vertical alignment opens us not only to the entire cosmos of transcendent

reality, but, more importantly, to the divine Heart itself. Properly aligned to the Heart-of-All-Things, we are able to sustain our awareness of the divine Presence. Finding silence, becoming centered, and establishing order, therefore, is crucial if we are to know and experience inner alignment to the vertical axis. It means that we must make room for regular times of inner and outer contemplative silence, spiritual rest, and the regular ordering our lives. Eventually this must become a part of our continuous practice so that the two axes meet at our own center. Find time in your life daily, weekly, monthly and yearly life to practice a rhythm of rest, silence, and spiritual centering at various levels of intensity.

1. *Specifically, when and where are your daily or weekly times of silence and silent listening?*
2. *What do you need to let go of in order to create the necessary silence in and around you?*
3. *What other aspects of this sacred time-space "altar" do you need to add?*
4. *To understand the pattern better, read Cynthia Bourgeault's book on Centering Prayer*

- **Learning the Language of Contemplative Prayer and Worship:** Contemplative prayer and worship can be thought of as a language. As you would learn some other language not your mother tongue, you may need to study the vocabulary and grammar of contemplative prayer "spoken" or prayed by Christians throughout the centuries. The totality of that language belongs to you. At its heart is the Silence of God – a language so subtle it is beyond mind, speech, or image, and yet it is the Word eternally spoken at the depths of the cosmos and in the depths of you. Your aim is eventually to live in the silent flow of that language. Surrounding and supporting it, however, are many other forms of contemplative prayer which lead you to its Center. For example, human prayer in the language of Scripture and the prayer anthologies of the Church are available to you, as is symbolic language of all kinds which inform the heart. In addition there are numerous forms of prayer which draw you to your own center through chant, body prayer, mantric prayer, icons, rosaries and most importantly remembrance through Eucharistic and liturgical celebration. Remembrance or Prayer of the Heart is central to the inner attention we bring to the divine Presence within us until there is a silent falling into the Abyss of the divine Consciousness itself. Inevitably we will return to the world of ordinary reality full of its gift. All these are aspects of that complex language.

1. *Where are you in your learning of the language of contemplative prayer and worship? With what forms are you familiar and what is new to you? What do you need to learn and from whom?*
2. *In your periods of meditation alone what is your practice? What do you practice with your circle of friends? Where and how do you worship?*
3. *Specifically, what is the rhythm of your contemplative prayer practice using the full compliment of its language?*
4. *Where in your contemplative prayer is there opportunity for Christian worship? Does the form of worship you practice satisfy your heart's need and longing?*
5. *If you have not already, read Metropolitan Anthony Bloom's book **Beginning to Pray**. Increase your vocabulary by learning new forms of prayer from many sources.*

- **Awareness of the Living Presence:** The Abrahamic traditions affirm that you are surrounded by the divine Presence. Inside that Presence are many entities and beings held in communion by the fullness of divine Consciousness itself. To rest in that awareness means first of all to enter and remain in the presence of your Master-Teacher. To be there is often "just to sit" as one would with a dear and intimate friend without speech, without premeditated purpose, in the darkness without discursive thought, in mindful absorption. To "be" in the Eternal Presence with the Word who speaks in silence is to begin to hear with the inner ear. That silence is a womb pregnant with fecundity out of which something transformative is born. To go deliberately into that darkness is to come at last to the place

of profoundest healing, growth, and transformation. One must be prepared to remain in the darkness before the Presence with attention and hope, where time is not a factor where Wisdom can "build herself a home."

1. *What is your practice of Remembrance before the Presence?*
2. *How often do you go to "be with" your interior Master? What happens when you do?*
3. *How are you being instructed and guided? Write your reflections and share this with your spiritual companions and friends.*
4. *How comfortable are you with discursive darkness (being aware, in silence, without formal image or thought?).*

- **Taking Time for Retreat:** The life of a monk includes taking time during the month or the year taken for serious spiritual retreat. As with other aspects of practice within the Order, participation in spiritual retreat requires regular periods of withdrawal from the normal world of activity. Retreat opportunities are provided by the Order and may be self-guided or done under the direction of a mentor or guide. For centuries men and women have withdrawn from the world in order to listen and receive wisdom for themselves. This has sometimes been called "vision quest" and is a venerable part of mystical tradition. Retreat from the normal activities of life allows you to go deeply inward and seek a vision from the sacred.

1. *As a monk of the interior tradition what is your rhythmic need for retreat from normal activity?*
2. *Develop a retreat plan for a year.*
3. *Make contact with a retreat center and someone who can provide you guidance during retreat as you need it.*
4. *Have you ever made a retreat for the purpose of "vision quest?" Prepare for one under the guidance of an Abbot or Prior.*

IV

Spiritual Work and the Vocation of the Heart

Following the model of Yeshua, while we live on earth we not only begin an inner journey to our homeland in God, we also embark on an outer path of service in the cosmos for the life of all. This means, of course, that we must fully engage the world as the arena of our practice, allowing the divine Presence in the world to be the school of learning which teaches and continually forms us. We are called by the Master in a life of intensive practice and service to the world. Part of our heart's vocation, our "calling," is to an exterior vocation that expresses the essence of who we are formed in the image and likeness of God.

- **Simplifying Your Life:** You live in an age of incessant noise and ceaseless activity, the levels of which are an assault upon spiritual life and your inner world. Find a life-style and pace that will support your inner work. Practically this will mean establishing priorities and letting go of many things that only clutter your life in order to live as a world Christian. No one but you can make the critical decisions about how to simply your life. Many of these must be made through trial and error. You can find and use guidelines to experiment with a simple and environmentally balanced life.

1. *Is your life-style conducive to or destructive of your spiritual practice.*
2. *Make a list of your priorities. What from the bottom of that list can be dropped away?*
3. *What do you need to negotiate? Talk this out with your mentor or director.*
4. *Begin to outline your response to and responsibilities as a world Christian using the "Pledge."*

- **Practicing the Presence of God in the Midst of Daily Life:** Becoming aware of the divine Presence and staying awake to it through a practice of “double awareness” (yourself as a actor and yourself as a watcher of the action) begins the “practice of Presence” in the midst of daily life. Staying aware of that Presence surrounding you (and in which you live and move and have your being) is the ideal life-principle that makes learning and living with Wisdom possible along the horizontal axis. As Actor and as Watcher you are constantly held in the divine Presence and you can continually use this as your practice.

 1. *What is your experience and practice of double awareness. Talk this over with a mentor or spiritual director.*
 2. *Using Logion 6 in the Gospel of Thomas, explore the issue of Presence and how you can enter it more fully.*
 3. *Be intentional in your practice and journal your experiences.*

- **Living the Principles of Spiritual Life:** The sacred traditions are rich in resources that will assist you in the applying the principles of spiritual life to your everyday experience. These principles cannot remain ideas or concepts learned through study, reflection and inward meditation alone. Even those fully understood and accepted by the heart must gain ground through practical application. What one learns inwardly must be applied outwardly in practice. How to do the work of spiritual practice is something that we learn again through trial and error assisted by mentors, guides, directors, and the support of a community of fellow pilgrims that understand life as a sacred pilgrimage – a journey undertaken to the Center.

 1. *Using the treasury of traditional wisdom to assist you, begin to read and apply texts in our bibliography on this topic one at a time.*
 2. *Make a possible list of texts that you want to read in the order you believe would be helpful to you. Share that list with your spiritual director.*
 3. *Be willing to read beyond the Christian tradition.*

- **Finding Your Heart’s True Vocation:** Following the Christ, we are each carry the work of reconciling the cosmos into the particulars of our own world. How we accomplish that, however, is unique to the imprint of the divine image and energies upon our own being. There have, however, been four traditional ways of understanding that work described as the Way of the Teacher, the Way of the Warrior, the Way of the Healer, and the Way of the Visionary expressed in the four-Gospel Tradition. Learning about these pathways and your heart’s vocation is an active part of the Order’s work. At the center of your vocation you hold an axial or microcosmic position in the created world from which you can begin the fulfillment of your sacred task as mediator and reconciler, reuniting and reintegrating the cosmos back God. Once order has begun to be established in your own life, you can begin your sacramental function in the world through the work of love and reconciliation by which all are ultimately restored to God. Your sacred work involves you as a “logothete,” that is a “word” sent into the cosmos after the pattern of the divine Logos to manifest the invisible realm through “visible mathematics” of the Glory of God. It is in you where time and eternity intersect and the world is opened to mystery. It is from there that you work as a site for the ultimate reconciliation of all things, the bearing of burdens and the transposition of energies.

 1. *What are you being drawn to do in the world? What is your heart’s vocation? Explore these questions with your spiritual director.*
 2. *Each of the four-fold paths authentically expresses the work of a “logothete,” restoring the universal order. Sketch out your understanding about what one of these means for you, and how you see yourself contributing to its work.*
 3. *Begin to explore your heart-vocation with a prior or abbot of the Order.*