

is not above his master.' This should finish our grumbles, and we should be *glad*—at any rate accept, and one day, if we try to be faithful, he will lead us to the greatest things, and teach us to meet life not only with patience but even with joy.

A RULE OF LIFE

BY

CONRAD PEPLER, O.P.



HE first conversion has been accomplished and grace begins its gradual work of supernaturalizing the whole man. In this way a man begins to lead an upright life, upright because directed at last towards his true and last end; his life is now straightened out. This is what Scripture means by the word 'righteousness'. The righteous man is the upright man; he is not bent away from God. He is 'plumb'. This plumbness begins with the spiritual life of grace. But to build 'plumb', a man must have a plumb-line; he must have a measure. Rightness, rectitude, demands a rule, and the righteous man is a man who lives according to rule. St Thomas contrasts this rectitude of moral life with that of justice which deals with external goods, and he says, 'This type of rectitude which implies the order towards a fitting end and the divine law which is the rule of the human will is common to every virtue' (I-II, lv, 4 ad 4). To live uprightly is to live virtuously, according to rule, the straight rule of reason coming out from the divine Reason and the divine law. And St Thomas has another magnificent phrase on this rule of right reason. He is commenting on Psalm 4, verses 6 and 7: *Quis ostendit nobis bona? Signatum est super nos lumen vultus tui, Domine.* 'It is as though the Psalmist says: the light of reason which is in us can only show us good things and regulate our will in so far as it is the light of your (God's) countenance, i.e. derived from your countenance' (I-II, xix, 4). 'The Lord hath led the just by straight paths—*per vias rectas*', says the Psalmist again. A man cannot lead an upright life unless he measure himself by the very countenance of the Almighty. An instrument is 'just' when it is accurately alined with its true measure. The just man must be alined with the mind of God. And this mind of God is interpreted to him in many ways through the human reason. So the just man lives according to rule—the one fact which the Stoics saw clearly.

The author of the *Ancren Riwe* thus sets out to interpret the divine mind for the regulation of his recluses, and so his first task is

to justify the idea of a Rule for people who might seem to live above law.

'The upright love thee, O Lord', saith God's bride to her beloved bridegroom, those who love thee rightly, those are upright; those who live by a rule (p. 1).

A rule of life is necessary for all the just, but a special one needs to be written for those who adopt a special kind of life. This needs to be understood. It may seem like imposing a straight jacket from outside to force the will into shape and thus rob it of freedom. The beginner must adopt a rule but he must not regard it as slavery. He must penetrate its inner meaning.

The Introduction to the *Riule* clarifies the issue by distinguishing two types of regulation. Both are to be made principles of action, but they are of unequal importance:

There are many kinds of rules; but among them all there are two of which, with God's help, I will speak by your request. The one rules the heart, and makes it even and smooth without knot or wound-mark of evil or accusing conscience. . . . This rule is always within you, and directs the heart. And this is that charity . . . [of those] who regulate all their wishes by the rule of the divine will: such persons are rightly called good . . . all whom that supreme law hath directed aright which directs all things rightly. . . .

The other rule is outward, and ruleth the body and the deeds of the body. It teaches how men should in all respects bear themselves outwardly; how they should eat and drink, dress, take rest, sleep and walk. And this is bodily exercise, which according to the Apostle profiteth little, and is, as it were, a rule of the science of mechanics, which is a branch of geometry; and this rule is only to serve the other. . . . The inward rule is always alike, the outward is various . . . (pp. 1-3).

The profound wisdom of these remarks is continued for several pages. The understanding of this passage will place the way of the beginner in true perspective and disclose it essentially as *in via* to the further stages. St Thomas has the same doctrine where he speaks of the vows of religious life (II-II clxxxvi) and his distinction between the end or purpose of a rule and its external exercise is applicable to every Christian rule of life.

All are bound to tend to perfection; that is the one interior law, the law of charity common to all upright men. But there are many exterior exercises, the ascetic practices whereby the end is to be achieved. They are means and make up the exterior part of the rule. And these vary from individual to individual or from group to group. Means are so varied and temperaments so inconstant that the out-

ward rule must differ according to circumstances of time, place and person. 'Wherefore this rule', says the author in laying down these principles, 'may be changed and varied according to everyone's state and circumstances' (p. 4).

The outward rule, the author insists, is valuable only in so far as it serves the internal law. So St Thomas says that the New Law consists essentially in the grace of the Holy Spirit, and the written rules of doctrine and behaviour are only *dispositions* to that grace; they are secondary.¹ Naturally therefore the more remote the rule of charity the more predominant is the external rule of conduct so that at the beginning of the spiritual life the Rule takes pride of place. As the Old Law was the pedagogue to the New, so these multifarious rules of external behaviour should lead on to the inner rule of love. These external rules are the handmaid to love, serving the law of charity, according to the *Rivle*.

This handmaid or pedagogue comes first; and the beginner has an impression of the commandments of God, the rules of his new life, as a complex framework imposed upon him from without. He feels it as a constraint limiting his freedom of action like the walls of an anchorhold and its closely guarded windows. At every step he meets a fresh regulation checking or directing him. Life seems full of many things to be done or to be avoided. Such a state is inevitable in the beginner. A man learning to play a game is harassed by a seemingly unending code of rules. The deacon preparing for priesthood practises his 'dry Masses' over and over again. The rubrics are innumerable and only by long exercise can they become part of a man, spontaneous actions needing no thought and leaving him free to dwell on the mystery which they comprise. Or again, the philosopher must first learn logic; but then he learns to forget it—he learns to reason faultlessly without being distracted with the processes of his reasoning. So the beginner in the spiritual life is first imperfect and his imperfection demands restraint. But the further he progresses towards the goal of his *rectitudo*, perfection, the more internal and spontaneous becomes the rule. In proportion as the soul conforms itself to the divine countenance so the 'pressure' from outside decreases and the actions of the will spring from a new desire within. The will begins to act according to the law of love. Loving the divine will, the human will desires only what God desires. An internal impetus has been acquired and there is no longer a sense of pressure from outside the soul. A new freedom is present. The game is learnt; the rules are forgotten because they have become part of the player; being habitual they do not require reflection.

¹ Cf. I-II, cvi, 1; cvii, 1 ad 3.

In this way the external rule is gradually absorbed into the internal: the many commandments of the Old Testament become the one unique commandment of the New. 'The commands of any law', says St Thomas, 'are given concerning virtuous actions. But in exercising acts of virtue the imperfect, who do not yet possess the habit of the virtue, are directed in a different way from those who by the habit of the virtue are perfect. For those still without the habit of the virtue are moved to exercise the works of virtue by some *extrinsic* cause, from the threat of penalties or the promise of some external reward such as honour, riches or the like. . . . But those having the habit of virtue are moved to the exercise of virtue through love of virtue' (I-II, cvii, 1 ad 2). So the perfect come to realise that there is only one law, the law of love—*Dilige et quod vis fac*.

In the Introduction the author of this rule does not reduce the internal law to its simplest and most unified form. He regards as sufficiently fundamental and internal the rule of reason, according to its measurement by the divine countenance, the ten commandments and all that must of necessity be fulfilled by the perfect.

'But charity or love, and meekness and patience, truthfulness, and keeping the ten old commandments, confession and penitence, these and such others, some of which are of the old law, some of the new, are not of man's invention nor a rule established by man, but they are the commandments of God, and therefore every man is bound and obliged to keep them, and you most of all—for they govern the heart' (p. 6).

We must look further into the *Ancren Riwele* to find how the one law of love 'fulfils all the law and the prophets'. At the end of his description of the inward rule, the author shows that love is the supreme measure and that everything else is eventually reducible to that final simplification which was made by our Lord himself. 'This love is the rule which regulates the heart. This rule is the lady or mistress. *All the others serve her*, and for her sake alone they ought to be loved' (p. 311).

The beginner after his conversion, therefore, has to adopt some kind of rule of life, at first external, irksome and cramping. This is part of the initial *ascesis*. As he progresses, the multifarious external regulations are gradually modified into a single internal law; constraint presses the soul into unity, it acquires the habit of love which embraces all the desires of God. At length the soul does not have to be pressed into God's service, but yearns to fulfil his every wish from an internal impetus. The *Riwele* even dissuades the young anchorites from taking a vow to keep these external rules: 'You should not vow it, but keep it in your heart, and perform it as though

you had vowed it' (p. 7). The outward rule is not transcended, it is transformed. The inward is not an antinomian principle pretending that no rules are necessary. The will is trained and disciplined until it is united to God and instinctively follows his least command—'For your will and the will of God shall be in such unison that ye shall wish whatsoever he will, and he whatsoever ye wish' (p. 141). It would be not only ridiculous, but criminal, to maintain that the more perfect the soul becomes the less it is bound by the general rules for the good life. These rules remain in force throughout, from the first stirrings of reason to the highest stages of the spiritual life; but when they become consciously informed by a fervent charity they become spontaneous desires of the soul. The priest is bound by the rubrics of the Mass even when he is so well versed in the spirit of the Holy Sacrifice that they have become almost instinctive in him.

So the Introduction concludes its teaching on the meaning of a rule of life:

Do good and deem thyself ever weak, and with fear and love walk with God thy Lord. Wherever these things are there is true religion and there is right order; and to do all the other things and leave this undone is mere trickery and deceit. All that a good recluse does or thinks, according to the external rule, is altogether for this end; it is only as an instrument to promote this true religion; it is only a slave to help the lady to rule the heart (p. 10).

When a man first turns towards God and seeks his own perfection he can maintain himself on that narrow way only by many exterior and irksome helps. But as he gains inward strength and vitality he no longer rests on such supports. Now there is a living love within him forcing him onwards and upwards. He sees only his goal, the possession of God; and his desire urges him joyously to search for all that may bring him nearer to the fulfilment of this one need. A complex rule of life becomes simplified into the one single rule.

The type of rule here recommended is typical of the English school as contrasted with the more violent and spectacular forms found on the Continent. It is more gentle, more considerate of human frailty than its counterparts of more southerly climes. The northern air preaches moderation in penance and attention to the general needs of the body. The phlegmatic Englishman has never been enthusiastic about external rules, for he does not willingly reveal his interior ambitions any more than his internal emotions. The warm blood of the south seems to him excessive in all things, excessive in sanctity as in sinning. We may find a gentle human element in all the mystics of 14th-century England; but it goes further back than that. St Aelred of Rievaulx shows it in his writings of the 12th century. He is in fact

one of the only spiritual writers who has gone out of his way to justify human friendship as part of the spiritual life, and far from being against the rule.² 'I began to wonder', he writes, 'whether Scripture had any blessing to give to friendship, or was it only a thing that paganism had praised? However I had found that the letters of the Saints were full of references to friendship' (*The English Way*, p. 88.) Thus he set out on the quest for a human love within the embrace of the divine. 'Particular friendships' have often been condemned on account of their abuse in religious life; but there is something of this same sympathetic approach in some of Richard Rolle's work, while the *Ancoren Riwle* takes it for granted that the recluse will have special friends. The author condemns one type of friendship, 'for no enmity is so bad as false friendship' (p. 73), but that is because it is false. True friendship may justify breaking into the routine of the external rule. 'Silence always at meals . . . and if any one hath a guest whom she holds dear, she may cause her maid, as in her stead, to entertain her friend with glad cheer; and she shall have leave to open her window once or twice, and make signs to her of gladness at seeing her' (p. 54). The thought of the death of a dear friend will often prove efficacious in driving away temptation (p. 183, cf. pp. 313-314).

The same spirit which some might even call humanist is manifest in the insistence on the interior law of love, which we have already discussed, and the elastic attitude to external regulations—religion is 'not in the wide hood, nor in the black, nor in the white, nor in the grey cowl' (pp. 9-10). The anchoress devotes her life to prayer and meditation, yet she is not to force herself into this occupation. 'Often dear sisters ye ought to pray less, that ye may read more. Reading is good prayer. Reading teacheth how, and for what we ought to pray' (p. 215). The full sum of the prayers enjoined by the rule is not obligatory in any strict sense: 'And whoso cannot say these five prayers, should say always one: and whoso thinketh them too long may omit the psalms' (p. 30). Infirmary of course may excuse wholly or in part from the recitation of Office which is otherwise the mainstay of their lives (pp. 37-38). The attitude at prayer should be restful rather than strained; and Rolle's suggestion that he found it easier to pray in a sitting position finds its parallel in this direction for morning prayers: 'Begin directly *Creator Spirit, come*, with your eyes and your hands raised up towards heaven, bending forward on your knees upon the bed, and thus say the whole hymn' (p. 13) which sounds very like a modern lad at prayer. The recluse may often please herself as to the

² Cf. Bede Jarrett's study in *The English Way*; and Hugh Talbot's translation, with Introduction, *Christian Friendship*. (Catholic Book Club.)

number of prayers she should say and the position in which she says them: 'Whoso will may stand up immediately after the first prayer' (p. 34, cf. p. 27).

In spite of his Platonic-Augustinian idea of the soul's relation to the body, the author of the *Rivle* lays great stress on moderation in penances:

Though the flesh be our foe, we are yet commanded to sustain it. We must, however, afflict it, as it often well deserves; but not withal to destroy it; for, how weak soever it be, still it is so coupled, and so firmly united to our precious soul, God's own image, that we might soon kill the one with the other. And this is one of the greatest wonders on earth, that the highest thing under God, which is the soul of man, as S. Austin testifieth, should be so firmly joined to the flesh, which is only mud and dirty earth. (p. 105).

It is, therefore, a natural prudence or discretion rather than any Aristotelian conception of the physico-spiritual unity of man that makes the author preach moderation. Although the true religious will take as little as possible of any worldly thing, yet the anchoress may without sin live in comfortable sufficiency: 'All that man or woman desireth more than is sufficient for leading life comfortably, according to their station, is covetousness' (p. 153). Nor should she disdain human consolations, talking with her maids and diverting herself with instructive tales when she feels low or dispirited, especially after the quarterly blood-letting and in times of sickness. Sickness is to be accepted gladly when it comes, but it would be foolhardiness to court it in any way and it 'displeaseth God' to do so. The devil uses such folly to draw the soul away from God: 'he incites her to so much abstinence that she is rendered the less able to endure fatigue in the service of God, and leads so hard a life, and so torments the body, that the soul dieth' (p. 168). He endeavours to make some one so zealous to flee from the things that make the life of man agreeable, that she falls into the deadly evil of sloth' (p. 170). These are words of sound wisdom to the beginner seeking a new way of life and often tempted to excess in the penitential and external practices of the ascetic life.

When the anchoress retires to bed she should sleep: 'In bed, as far as you can, neither do anything nor think, but sleep' (p. 37). She may wash as often as she pleases, and may on no account wear hair-cloth or irons or chains without the special and express leave of her director. The same holds for fasting. All this may be considered sound common sense, but a de Rancé would surely frown at the permission to keep a pet, even though the permission is strictly limited to one cat! (p. 316).

The *Rivle* shows considerable understanding of the human character, especially in its first assault on the castle of the spiritual life when over-exertion disheartens the beginner and may cause him to fall back into his old ways. But judged by modern standards it establishes a very austere form of living, and in no sense does it pander to human weakness. The life here described has no trace of a false, over-tolerant humanism; it does not attempt to water down the Christian spirit. It does not set forth a merely natural and man-centred ideal, nor preach mediocrity under a cloak of holy moderation. Mediocrity has indeed typified English spirituality for a long time, but the tepid Anglo-Saxon could not persevere for many days under this *Rivle*. The author insists that the life must be hard and austere; he outlines a mode of existence which many today, even of the devout, would regard as imprudent if not unnatural. On the subject of penance, he preaches—as he admits—pure St Bernard, and he was no meddler with the joys of this world.

The usual arguments against mortification have to be silenced:

'My dear sir', someone may say, 'is it wisdom now for a man or woman thus to afflict themselves? . . . Who is there who is not sick of sin? For our sickness God drank a poisonous drink upon the Cross. And will not we taste any bitter remedy for ourselves? It must not be so. It is not so. His followers must surely follow him in his suffering with bodily pain' (p. 275).

Then the same moderating voice is heard again: "'Will God avenge himself so severely upon sin?' Yes, o man or woman, for consider now how greatly he hateth it' (p. 276). And finally come the popular attacks on voluntary penance: 'What is God profited though I afflict myself for his love?' and 'Sir, does God sell his grace? Is not grace a free gift?' To the first the author replies: 'Dear man or woman, God is pleased with our good. Our good is that we do what we ought . . .' And to the second: 'Although purity is not bought of God, but given freely, ingratitude resisteth it, and renders those unworthy to possess so excellent a thing who will not cheerfully submit to work for it' (p. 277). He here deals with the arguments against mortification in the right order; but we will consider them in detail when we come to deal with the purgations of the purgative way.

There is little softness about this rule of life; the beginner must lead a rugged life. After the first conversion, indeed, purgation plays the central part; the purgative way means that the Cross must have greater prominence now than in the further stages. This applies particularly to the physical penances of the beginner.

Let not anyone handle herself too gently, lest she deceive herself. She will not be able for her life to keep herself pure, nor to maintain herself aright in chastity without two things, as Saint Ailred

wrote to his sister. The one is, giving pain to the flesh by fasting, by watching, by flagellations, by wearing coarse garments, by a hard bed, with sickness, with much labour. The other is the moral qualities of the heart (p. 278).

And yet the author concludes his treatise on penance by saying that what he has written about austerity and hardship is not for those to whom he is directly addressing himself, as they seem to him often to suffer too much, but for others inclined to laxity.

This gentleness must not be confounded with a spirit of naturalism. Such a confusion has often occurred in modern times since pragmatism has sunk deeply into the spirit and a practice is regarded as valueless and even harmful unless it serve a humanitarian or social purpose. Contemplation is at a discount because it is useless to humanity; mortification finds no place in the utility scheme, for an emaciated body is an affront to the happiness and welfare of mankind. This may be stating it crudely and there are many subtleties to justify this false humanism: Christ by his Incarnation has sanctified the natural man, nature has been perfected by grace, the pleasures and comforts of this life should be raised into an integrated supernatural state of wholeness, life rather than death is the characteristically Christian word. . . . Such specious reasoning might obscure the constant Christian insistence on subduing the body, overcoming the effects of original sin and making satisfaction for past evils by means of severe and voluntary mortifications. Severity and sharp suffering should not be mistaken for harshness or manichean hatred of the flesh. We shall see that these anchoresses were well schooled in the practice of mortification and a profound understanding of the meaning of the Cross. Modern thinkers sometimes forget that St Thomas speaks as a philosopher of nature as such, of the passions as such, and that fallen human nature with all the wounds of original sin and its unruly and disorganised passions call down on themselves the death penalty of mortification. They tend to forget the gravity of mortal sin, for they look rather at man than at God. They tend to forget the meaning of the Cross and the infinite distance that separates the supernatural order of grace from the purely natural order.³ Our Lord taught the need for mortification and St Paul followed him in this. We shall see how the *Ancren Riwle* insists on it. The gentleness of the *Riwle* is not naturalism.

³ Cf. Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., *Les Trois Ages*, i, pp. 376 sqq.