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BOOK: "SOUL FEAST: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life"

Putting It All Together *Developing a Rule of Life*

As our lives and faith progress, the heart expands and with the sweetness of love we move down the paths of God's commandments. Never departing from His guidance . . . we patiently share in Christ's passion, so we may eventually enter into the Kingdom of God.

The Rule of Saint Benedict

Certain kinds of plants need support in order to grow properly. Tomatoes need stakes, and beans must attach themselves to suspended strings. Creeping vines like clematis and wisteria will grow on any structure they can find. Rambling roses take kindly to garden walls, archways, and trellises. Without support, these plants would collapse in a heap on the ground. Their blossoms would not have the space and sun they need to flourish, and their fruits would rot in contact with the soil. We would be unable to enjoy their beauty and sustenance.

When it comes to spiritual growth, human beings are much like these plants. We need structure and support. Otherwise our spirituality grows only in a confused and disorderly way. The fruit of the Spirit in us gets tangled and is susceptible to corruption, and the beauty of our lives is diminished. We need structure in order to have enough space, air, and light to flourish. Structure gives us the freedom to grow as we are meant to.

There is a name in Christian tradition for the kind of structure that supports our spiritual growth. It is called a *rule of life*. Without a rule of

It is unlikely that we will deepen our relationship with God in a casual or haphazard manner. There will be a need for some intentional commitment and some reorganization in our own lives.

William O. Paulsell

life, very little of what you have been reading and exploring in this book will prove to be of lasting value to you. This final chapter is an opportunity for you to begin putting together what you have learned. It is time to make some choices concerning the spiritual practices you feel called to engage in.

What Is a Rule of Life?

A rule of life is a pattern of spiritual disciplines that provides structure and direction for growth in holiness. When we speak of *patterns* in our life, we mean attitudes, behaviors, or elements that are routine, repeated, regular. Indeed, the Latin term for “rule” is *regula*, from which our words *regular* and *regulate* derive. A rule of life is not meant to be restrictive, although it certainly asks for genuine commitment. It is meant to help us establish a rhythm of daily living, a basic order within which new freedoms can grow. A rule of life, like a trellis, curbs our tendency to wander and supports our frail efforts to grow spiritually.

Throughout Christian history, those who have been serious about maturing in the spiritual life have embraced discipline. Remember that discipline means training and practice. Author William Paulsell notes that while we tend to resist the whole idea of discipline, we have to admit that it allows us to make the most of our God-given gifts:

Athletes, musicians, writers, scientists, and others progress in their fields because they are well-disciplined people. Unfortunately, there is a tendency to think that in matters of faith we should pray, meditate, and engage in other spiritual disciplines only when we feel like it.¹

Finally, the purpose of a rule is to help us grow into holiness. God calls us to be holy as God is holy, to grow into greater intimacy with the One we are created to resemble: “Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). A rule of life allows us to cultivate and deepen this growing likeness. It fosters gifts of the Spirit in personal life and human community, helping to form us into the persons God intends us to be.

Yet this gradual transformation into the full image and likeness of

God does not happen automatically. It is not a process of natural growth, like that of a sapling into a fully mature tree. It is a process that requires the death of much that seems natural to us, in order to allow a deeper mystery of our life in God to rise up. Maturation in faith is like the metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a moth. The caterpillar must yield up the life it knows and submit to the mystery of interior transformation. It emerges from this process transfigured, with wings that give it freedom to fly. It is naturally attracted to light, although still vulnerable to ruin if deceived by artificial light. A rule of life gives us a way to enter the lifelong process of personal transformation. Its disciplines help us to shed the familiar but constricting “old self” and allow our “new self” in Christ to be formed—the true self that is naturally attracted to the light of God.

There are both corporate and personal rules of life in Christian tradition. Perhaps the best known of all corporate rules is that of Saint Benedict, attractive and practical because of its moderate tone and commonsense wisdom. The Rule of Saint Benedict describes both attitudes and specific practices to guide monks in their common life. Personal rules are formulated by individuals to help them receive and express more fully the gifts of the Spirit. They are very diverse, reflecting the needs and spiritual aspirations of those who devise them. Some focus more on developing inner attitudes, values, and habits such as humility, charity, faith, and gentleness. Others emphasize specific practices such as prayer, fasting, and self-examination. These, of course, are meant to lead us toward the inner attitudes mentioned, as well as to their outward expression in human community.

Examples of Personal Rules

When Pope John XXIII was a seminary student, he included the following elements in his rule:

Fifteen minutes of silent prayer upon rising in the morning

Fifteen minutes of spiritual reading

Before bed, a general examination of conscience followed by confession; then identifying issues for the next morning’s prayer

Arranging the hours of the day to make this rule possible; setting aside specific time for prayer, study, recreation, and sleep

Making a habit of turning the mind to God in prayer

A very different style of rule was developed by Catherine de Hueck Doherty, the Russian baroness who founded Madonna House in Ontario, Canada. Drawing on the Russian hermit tradition, she recommends a monthly retreat into silence and solitude for a twenty-four-hour period. A hermitage (*poustinia* in Russian) is a simple cottage isolated from human traffic that allows for fasting, prayer, and immersion in scripture.

Dorothy Day, who began a ministry called “houses of hospitality” for the poor in New York, had another kind of personal rule. She received the Eucharist daily, read the Bible daily, and kept a journal that was, for her, a form of prayer. She saw Christ in the faces of the poor.

Martin Luther King Jr. developed a rule to guide the nonviolent protests of the civil rights movement. His rule emphasized the spiritual principles and inner attitudes undergirding one’s actions, although it also included specific practices like meditation, prayer, and service. Every demonstrator had to agree to this rule:

Meditate daily on the teachings and life of Jesus.

Remember always that the nonviolent movement in Birmingham seeks justice and reconciliation, not victory.

Walk and talk in the manner of love, for God is love.

Pray daily to be used by God in order that all might be free.

Sacrifice personal wishes in order that all might be free.

Observe with both friend and foe the ordinary rules of courtesy.

Seek to perform regular service for others and the world.

Refrain from violence of fist, tongue, or heart.

Strive to be in good spiritual and bodily health.

Follow the directions of the movement and the captains of a demonstration.²

It should be clear from these few examples that there can be great latitude in a personal rule of life. Your rule will be unique to your per-

sonality, circumstances, and needs, yet in harmony with the basic historic practices of Christian life and faith through the centuries. Developing a personal rule is a matter of discernment.

Making Choices

If you are like me, you will by this time either be very excited by all these possibilities for spiritual growth or you will feel overwhelmed. I am typically tempted to think that I must do everything, all at once! But this is humanly impossible, unless you are a monk or solitary who has intentionally devoted your entire life to the practice of spiritual disciplines. As people who live in a world of families and work commitments, we must choose what seems most central and what is genuinely feasible for us. How do we go about making such choices, especially if they all seem good?

The first thing to do is pay close attention to what you feel most attracted to. Go back over the chapter headings in this book. Look at the “Invitations to Explore” sections in chapters 2, 3, 5, and 6 and the practical suggestions in each chapter. Are there certain suggestions you feel especially drawn to? Is there anything that seems to “have your name on it”? Write down what comes to mind.

Next, ask yourself why you are attracted to a given discipline. Does it seem suited to your personality? Does it represent an area of growth you feel in need of at this point in your life? Does it promise a measure of balance in your life you do not currently enjoy? Are you simply attracted inwardly for reasons that are not apparent at the moment?

We are often attracted to spiritual practices that seem natural to our personality. For example, a more introverted person might be drawn to the more inward disciplines of contemplative prayer and self-examination. An extrovert might be attracted to communal expressions of worship and hospitality that suit a more interactive nature. There is nothing wrong with choosing spiritual practices because they feel congruent with who you are. They are likely to be the disciplines you engage in with the greatest consistency and satisfaction. They may not, however, be the practices that will stretch you toward the greatest growth or the ones you most need. Still, they are probably a good place to get started,

especially if you have little spiritual discipline in your life at the moment.

Perhaps you are drawn to a practice because it promises to bring greater balance to your life. You need to be whole to be healthy. The Christian spiritual life expresses our entire being, for the Spirit is concerned with every dimension of human life, individually and in community. Perhaps precisely because you are an introvert, God is calling you to open yourself to a community spiritual practice. You need to develop the relational side of your spirituality because it is too easy for you to sink comfortably into inward and private reflection. Or precisely because you are an extrovert, God is inviting you to look inward, and you should pay attention to the motives and needs behind your desire to constantly interact with others.

Look closely at the practices described in this book that do *not* appeal to you, or may even repulse you. Bring the matter into your prayer. Why do you feel such resistance to this particular discipline? Does God have anything to say to you about it? A strong negative reaction to a practice such as fasting or self-examination may reveal that you are resisting paying attention to a part of your life in need of healing. Ask God to show you what spiritual disciplines you need in your life right now. You may be surprised by the response!

The Rule of Saint Benedict views balance in human life very seriously. Times of common and private prayer are balanced. The daily rhythm of monastic life provides a balance of exercise for spirit, mind, and body: prayer, study, and manual labor. We need to consider such balance as we choose disciplines to structure into our daily lives. Each of us needs a balance between personal and corporate disciplines; each of us need practices that help us look to our own hearts, and practices that help us forget ourselves in meeting the needs of others. When the Spirit is freed to do its work, these disciplines work together in a mutually sustaining way.

To summarize, there are three basic questions to reflect on in choosing disciplines for your rule of life:

What am I deeply attracted to, and why?

Where do I feel God is calling me to stretch and grow?

What kind of balance do I need in my life?

When, after thinking about these questions, you are clear about your priorities, you need to ask what is realistic for you to commit to. This is a matter of honoring personal limitations. Far better to commit to a single practice and stick with it than to take on five and quit altogether because you cannot keep up. The spiritual life is not a heroic achievement. It is a matter of gradual growth in faithfulness. Realistic commitment is an expression of humility.

Take account of your personal character. Some of us respond well to clear structure, while others of us flourish best with more flexibility. Some of us wake up filled with energy at five in the morning; some of us are wide-eyed and alert at midnight; some of us find our peak energies somewhere in the middle of the day. God deserves our best energy, not the dregs. Choose times for spiritual reading and prayer with this in mind.

Take account of your personal circumstances at this point in your life. If you are a parent staying at home with preschool children or an adult child now tending aging parents, an hour of concentrated spiritual practice daily is probably unrealistic. You may want to try short periods of reflection on a scripture verse throughout the day, or a breath prayer carried into your routines. You might find it helpful to practice a simple self-examination before bedtime, observing where you have felt God's presence in your family life and how you have responded to this grace.

If you have a demanding job with long hours of work, it may make sense to consider what forms of hospitality you can offer to God and to others in that setting. Prayers of the heart are a good way to remember the divine presence through your day. You may need to schedule a personal retreat several times a year for more in-depth opportunities in prayer and meditation.

If you are retired, perhaps you have more freedom to choose how much time you devote to spiritual practices. Thirty to sixty minutes of spiritual reading and prayer might be quite feasible. If your health is good, you could practice a weekly fast. Opportunities to offer hospitality may abound.

A chronic illness or disability can be either an opportunity or an impediment to prayer, depending on its nature and degree. If you are very sick, your capacity for concentration will be diminished. It is best to stick with short, simple phrases of prayer, and perhaps invite others

to read short portions of scripture to you. If you are not too sick, your limited mobility gives you a real opportunity to spend time in spiritual reading, prayer, and self-examination. You can exercise a genuine ministry of intercession, and offer hospitality of heart in many ways, including writing letters to those who would appreciate a word of encouragement or friendship.

Whatever your circumstances, it is always possible to include some form of spiritual discipline in your daily priorities. If you want to become and remain physically healthy, you eat sensibly and exercise regularly. If you want to become spiritually healthy and remain replenished, you practice spiritual disciplines regularly. It is that simple.

Keeping Ourselves Accountable

Once you have decided on a rule of life you can realistically give yourself to, write it down. Commit yourself in print. Remember, this is not a once-for-all-time decision, but a rule of life that is practical for this time in your life. Put a copy of your rule in a place where you can review it frequently, perhaps near your place of prayer.

Choose one person you love and trust to share your rule with. Ask that person to pray for you, and to help hold you accountable to faithfulness in your practice. If you have a spiritual friend, or decide that you will seek a spiritual director, this is the natural person to share your rule with. But a prayer partner or other friend in faith could also serve in this role. A small group seeking spiritual growth together can be an excellent help in this regard. Spouses and other family members should know enough of your rule to be able to encourage, or at least not interfere needlessly with, your practice. The better part of wisdom suggests that you *not* expect your spouse to be the primary person holding you accountable in your spiritual life.

It is very important to seek support from your faith community when you decide to become serious about developing your spirituality. The Christian life is dangerous terrain to travel alone. We get easily discouraged when our disciplines become boring or difficult. We become distraught when they do not produce the results we expected. We are subject to confusion in our practices in part because we are just learning them, and in part because of our own distorted perceptions

and personal limitations. Any spiritual discipline can be manipulated for our own ends rather than offered as a means of God's transforming grace in us.

We need the wider community of faith to help us stay on track. That community comes to us through corporate worship, study, and service, and through the grace of individuals whose experience and wisdom can guide our own. We will find only loneliness and illusion if we insist on forging the path alone. The Body of Christ is given to us for mutual encouragement, support, clarity, guidance, and love. To receive that gift in all humility is an experience of grace.

I hope it is very clear by now that the spiritual life in Christian practice is a joint intention. It joins the personal and the corporate: our individual disciplines need to be practiced in the context of a community of believers if they are to glorify Christ. It joins the inner and the outer: the disciplines that search and speak to our own hearts must be balanced by disciplines that engage us in self-forgetful service to others if they are to bear fruit in God's kingdom.

Finally, the Christian spiritual life joins the divine intent for us with our own intent to love and serve God more completely. Our desire to know the Lover of Souls more intimately is far outweighed by a divine passion to draw us into the eternal, tender embrace of holy love that is our created destiny. Because our God is patient and faithful, we can offer our stumbling, inconsistent efforts at a rule of life and know they will be accepted. As long as our desire is true and we are willing to persist despite many stalls, detours, and breakdowns, God's grace will strengthen us to persevere. The goal is infinitely worth all the effort, confusion, and pain along the path:

For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

2 Cor. 4:17–18

It is my prayer that you will have found something in these pages to encourage and guide your spiritual quest. The practices described are means of grace, paths to the food and drink we crave in our inmost being. God can use them to nourish us. Together they offer a true soul feast. Since you cannot indulge in a feast all at once, but only in courses

O, Begin! Fix some part of every day for private exercises. . . . Whether you like it or not, read and pray daily. It is for your life; there is no other way: else you will be a trifler all your days. . . . Do justice to your own soul; give it time and means to grow. Do not starve yourself any longer.

John Wesley

and over time, I trust you will choose and savor each food for the unique nourishment and delight it can give. Resist the temptation to be greedy at this table. Its bounty will not be depleted by many hungry seekers. Indeed, the more the children at this table, the greater the abundance of supply. God's economy is not based on scarcity. The richest sources of spiritual nurture are permanently set upon the table of our lives. While it would be folly to ignore or refuse them, there is no need to rush or grab. Take and receive as you have need. Enjoy each to the full.

Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good!
Happy are those who take refuge in God!
(Ps. 34:8)³