

Go slowly. Our chances of success are better if we add one thing at a time, learn to live with it, and fully integrate it into our life. Adding too much at once can be overwhelming and burn us out. Think in terms of making it for the longer haul. Recognise that as our circumstances change or our spiritual life changes, our Rule may have to change also.

### ***3. Our Rule as Associates should probably come to include:***

- Attendance at the Eucharist
- Observance of at least one of the Hours of Prayer in some form
- Lectio Divina
- Time apart for meditation/contemplation, including an annual Retreat
- Usual times for going to bed and rising
- Self-denial and self-examination
- Almsgiving
- [Participation in regional Associate groups](#)
- Service to others in some specific continuing way
- Prayer for our Associate Community and for the Monastic Community

It's wise to have some regular input from outside us. Perhaps the best ways of ensuring this are periodic reading of the Rule of Benedict, other spiritual reading, and discussions [with other Associates](#) or a spiritual director.

**Let's keep our personal Rule simple; keep it specific; keep it flexible; keep it brief**

#### **Footnote**

At the 2005 International Lay Cistercian Encounter at Clairvaux in France, one Associate earnestly asked the then OCSO Abbot-General, Dom Bernardo Olivera, to 'give to us Associates an instrument of holiness'. Dom Bernardo looked quizzical, and then with a twinkle in his eye replied, 'Every morning when you get up, bow deeply, make the sign of the Cross, and say "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit"'. Wise words.

## **ASSOCIATES OF SOUTHERN STAR ABBEY**

### ***Some notes about shaping and living a Rule of Life***

#### **The idea of a Rule**

We each usually have some more or less regular patterns in the way we live our religion, patterns which give some underlying structure to our spiritual life, whether we've chosen these, or simply fallen into them. For example, we may join with others each Sunday for worship, we may regularly open our Bibles, we may daily repeat the prayers we've been taught.

A personal Rule of Life is simply the sum of these patterns brought fully into the open, examined, adapted, and consciously adopted. Its purpose is to strengthen our abiding in Christ by bringing balance, rhythm, discipline, and order to our discipleship.

Such a Rule frees us to offer the whole of ourselves to God each day, keeping us open to God's love and will for us. The right motive for keeping our Rule is our love for God: we keep it lovingly, and it frees us to love God and God's children.

Having a Rule is not a way of earning merit in the eyes of God - or in the eyes of anyone else (including our own).

Neither should it be a rod for our back. Keeping our Rule should be achievable within our ordinary circumstances. It may stretch us somewhat, but not exhaust or discourage us.

Nor is there any such sin as 'breaking one's Rule of Life'. Our sins may indeed cause us to break it, but there are also times when it would be sinful *not* to break it. ('I'm sorry I can't bind up that wound for you just now, it's my set time for lectio'.)

Often a personal Rule of Life can protect us from our worst selves, and keep our lives pointing towards God.

Simplicity is of the essence, simplicity and earthy particularity. (Not ‘I will always be loving to everyone I meet’, but ‘I will pray Night Prayer before I go to bed’.)

### **Personality and Rule**

We’re all different. Some people thrive on living and working by rules; others thrive on spontaneity. The extreme of each group has a downside: for the first, legalism, inflexibility and narrowness of vision, and failure to recognise the surprises of God; for the second, ineffectiveness and self-deception, and surrender to instinct and whim.

### **Benedictine Rule and Cistercian spirituality**

‘Balance’ is one of the heart values of Benedictine/Cistercian spirituality. A Rule of Life is there to embody and safeguard that balance. Trisha Day’s words about her experience of the ordered life of Cistercian nuns can apply to those of us seeking to live out the Cistercian charism beyond enclosure:

*‘Their structured life-style helps keep work in perspective and gives them a way to avoid being consumed by tasks and projects that could easily overwhelm them otherwise...[T]he order and consistency of their life is actually quite liberating because it provides them with the freedom to balance work, prayer, the responsibilities of communal life, and the joys of living in harmony with the rhythm of the seasons and the beauty of the natural world.’*

St Benedict’s Rule for living in monastic community is flexible, making allowance for circumstances and human nature. However, because it’s a Rule for *living in community*, it’s detailed in a way which is often not appropriate for those of us living outside enclosure. Our circumstances as individual Associates are more varied and changeable, and, moreover, not all of those who share our daily lives are committed to our spirituality.

Our personal Rule as Associates will therefore be less detailed. Cistercian simplicity encourages us to pare things down to essentials.

Certain elements should be common to both monastic Rule and the personal Rule of Associates. It’s this commonality which will bind us to our mother Abbey and to one another. And many elements are common to Christian spirituality in general, and will bind us to the wider Church.

And there are some Cistercian values (such as hospitality) which are not easily expressed in a Rule.

### **How to put together a Rule of Life**

#### ***1. Start with clarifying what spiritual practices we observe more or less regularly: daily, weekly, monthly, yearly.***

Take a sheet of paper. Under *Daily* write in any spiritual practice we do daily. Follow suit with each of the other headings. Most practising Christians will have ‘Eucharist’ or ‘Mass’ under *Weekly*. If we do something three times a week, write it under *Weekly* and put ‘3X’ behind it. Something we do twice a month, would be under *Monthly* with ‘2X’ behind it. Under *Yearly* could be ‘Renewal of Baptismal vows’. (Yes, it’s part of the Easter service, but those vows are central to the Faith.)

Be inclusive; we can always edit this later. And just because things are routine doesn’t mean they’re not important.

What we’ve now got on our sheet is our ‘Rule’ as it currently exists. If we think it ‘fits’ our circumstances and our hopes and what we sense God is calling us to be, we’re done. If not, read on.

#### ***2. Expanding or improving our Rule***

If we believe God is leading us to do more, or do things differently, then look around for what will work for us. This is an interesting process, but it takes time.

- Look at ‘*Our Rule as Associates should probably come to include*’ [see below].
- Perhaps consult Trisha Day’s book ‘*Inside the school of charity*’ where she explores translating into her life at home what she learned from living temporarily in a Cistercian convent.
- There are resource books about personality and spirituality (especially on Myers Briggs or the Enneagram) which can help us become more truly ourselves in our spiritual journeys.
- A spiritual director may also help us to shape our personal Rule.

Let’s be patient with ourselves, remembering that this isn’t an athletic contest. True progress will only happen with God’s grace, and that will be given to us in His time, not ours. It’s important we feel comfortable with what we add on.