

Holly Pierlot

A Mother's Rule of Life

How to Bring Order to Your Home
and Peace to Your Soul

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*Dedicated to the Most Holy
and Immaculate Mother of God*

Heartfelt gratitude to my husband, Philip, for a very special marriage, for his wisdom and his never-ending patience with me, both with this book and with my life.

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Introduction

What does it mean to seek Christian perfection? A long time ago, I thought it meant perfect behavior — that if I just did what I was told, strictly followed all the rules, fervently prayed all the prayers, and spent a lot of time on aching knees in a quiet chapel somewhere, then I'd be “perfect.” I'd *deserve* Heaven, really, because I was so good!

But the Pharisees thought this, too, and Jesus had some harsh words for those who merely conform to a set of external regulations and religious practices. No, Christian perfection is not about outward adherence to certain norms and laws. This has its place within the Christian life, and even an important place, but it's not the heart of perfection.

Later I developed a totally new concept of Christian perfection. It meant being a “saint” — someone who was engulfed in ecstasies, levitating high above the ground during prayer, receiving regular visions and apparitions. I was disappointed finally to learn this isn't the normal Christian calling! Such experiences are extraordinary phenomena, determined by God and given to select people at select times and places. So, no, Christian perfection is not about out-of-the-ordinary mystical experiences, although it can include these.

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At another point, I thought Christian perfection meant being a nun, and so one day I shut the book *The Interior Castle* by St. Teresa of Avila, and I left it closed for a number of years, because her life and my life didn't have much in common. To be a wife and mother didn't seem synonymous with the holiness I was reading about there.

But somewhere along the way, I realized Christian perfection had to mean something else. It *had* to be something just anybody could do, because Jesus said, "You . . . must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect,"¹ and he addressed this to all of us.

In my study, I came across a definition of *perfection* that finally made sense to me. Perfection is "union with God, which is possible in this world, consisting in and proportional to the degree of charity possessed and exercised. . . . When a [person] loves God with his whole heart, soul, mind, and strength, and his neighbor as himself for God's sake, then he is perfect."²

To seek perfection in this life is really *to seek union with God through love*.

Thus, Christian perfection can truly be the goal of *every* Christian life — not reserved to a few, nor tied up with an unrealistic view of what it means to be a saint. It doesn't mean you have to be a nun or a priest, a founder of some great congregation, or a silent contemplative in a hidden mountain retreat house. You don't have to be a miracle worker or someone in the public eye.

Perfection is for all of us, even for busy mothers stuck inside four walls, because all of us are called to love. We are *all* called to be saints, (although we are not all called to be canonized). We are

¹ Matt. 5:48.

² Donald Attwater, ed., *A Catholic Dictionary* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1943), 399.

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all called to holiness, which is nothing more than the perfection of love within us. And as mothers, there are lots of people we can love!

We don't have to wait until we get to Heaven to be united with God. Although eternity in Heaven is the *fulfillment* of our Christian life, that life is meant to be a process of steady growth in relationship with God. We're meant to know him *now*, to be in contact with him *now*, not at some point after Purgatory!

This goes for mothers, too. There isn't something inherent in our vocation that excludes us from a deep, intimate relationship with God. In fact, it's really quite the opposite. Since our lives as wives and mothers are a true *vocation* — a calling from God to us — God must want us to find him *within* our family life.

So although all is grace, a free gift of God, there is still much we can do to seek Christian perfection, no less than religious and priests and saints of the past and present. We can make ourselves available to God as best we can — to find ways to foster and dispose ourselves to God's presence in our lives, right now, amid the diapers, the bills, and the stomach flu.

And *this* is the purpose of a Mother's Rule of Life.

Chapter 2



A Rule of Life

A complete and proper ordering of my whole life? That's a tall order! Just how was I to go about it? I found my answer in the concept of a Rule of Life.

A Rule of Life is a traditional Christian tool for ordering one's vocation. Found most often in religious community life, a Rule can also be used by laypeople — whose state in life is no less a calling from God. It consists primarily in the examination of one's vocation and the duties it entails, and the development of a schedule for fulfilling these responsibilities in a consistent and orderly way.

When a woman has been called to become a nun, in addition to taking vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, she agrees to follow the Rule of the community. There are set norms and routines for community and private prayer, meals, chores, recreation, dress, house rules, and the exercise of the specific apostolate of the order. These are all essential to the smooth flow of daily life. It simply wouldn't do to have nuns bickering over who has to wash the bathroom floor or who has to make supper that night!

The Rule brings order: “a happy disposition of things . . . a multitude reduced in some wise to unity.”⁴ That was just what I

⁴ Attwater, *Catholic Dictionary*, 376.

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wanted: a “happy disposition,” and to reduce all the overwhelming tasks of motherhood into a nice, single unit of work I could handle. And in my mind, I couldn't see any extreme difference between a religious community and a family community: there's still the mother abbess (the mom), and the postulants and novices (the little ones the mom needs to raise), and the professed sisters (the older children who can help out). The nuns all need to eat and sleep and dress and pray and do their work. So do all of us in the family!

But there was something else I found intriguing about the whole notion of a Rule of Life: that it was also supposed to lead me to *holiness*.

Hmmm . . . wouldn't that be something? A happy home *and* getting closer to God all at the same time! The reasoning is that since our vocation is a specific call of God — a particular mission we have been given on earth — living out this mission is to do God's will in our lives. To do God's will because he asks it of us, out of love for him, is to advance on the road to holiness, to seek perfection. And so I realized that a mother's Rule of Life would, ideally, serve as a tool for getting my life pulled together as well as a means to achieve holiness through my vocation as a wife and mother.

The Practical Aspect of a Rule

A Rule of Life is not just a schedule, not just a collection of activities organized into a set pattern for efficient repetition. A Rule is *an organization of everything that has to do with your vocation*, based on a hierarchy of the priorities that define the vocation and done with the intent to please God. It deals with the *essential responsibilities* of your state of life, organized to ensure their fulfillment. The activities worked into the Rule are determined by the specific

calling, charism, and apostolate of the person living the Rule. This is the practical aspect of a Rule.

For an example from religious life, let's look at Bl. Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity. The daily schedule of the sisters is quite simple:

4:30-5:00	<i>Rise and get cleaned up</i>
5:00-6:30	<i>Prayers and Mass</i>
6:30-8:00	<i>Breakfast and clean-up</i>
8:00-12:30	<i>Work for the poor</i>
12:30-2:30	<i>Lunch and rest period</i>
2:30-3:00	<i>Spiritual reading and meditation</i>
3:00-3:15	<i>Tea break</i>
3:15-4:30	<i>Adoration</i>
4:30-7:30	<i>Work for the poor</i>
7:30-9:00	<i>Dinner and clean-up</i>
9:00-9:45	<i>Night prayers</i>
9:45	<i>Bedtime</i>

This basic schedule is consistent day by day, week by week. The two primary goals of the Missionaries of Charity are love of God and love of neighbor, as found in the poorest of the poor. Their time is allotted to fulfill these two aims. Note how the schedule covers a full seven hours for work with the poor and four hours of prayer every day. In addition, all their meals, chores, study, recreation, and even rest are accounted for.

I couldn't see why this wouldn't work for me as an at-home mom, or for one who might work outside the home, for that matter. We all share the same need for sleep and rest, meals, prayers, and work every day. Why couldn't I just write in my specific family and vocational duties in place of the sisters' work for the poor, since so much else was the same?

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It struck me that many people already incorporate the schedule element of a Rule in their daily routines. Adults at work have schedules (whether they're aware of the routine or not) of work time, coffee breaks, travel time, and so on. Children in school follow class schedules, with set times for recess, meals, free time, and bus waits. Surely I, as an at-home mom, was not in an impossible situation if even school kids could follow a basic schedule.

There was hope! The question now was not, "Can I do this?" as once seemed perfectly reasonable to me, but "How will I do this?"

There Are Reasons Behind a Rule

Let's look again to Mother Teresa and her sisters. We noted that their vocation is to love God and love their neighbor, as found in the poorest of the poor. Therefore, their Rule is an examination of what this means, and their schedule is a reflection of their calling. Time is allotted according to what is important and specific to their charism.

When Mother Teresa began writing her Rule, she didn't begin with the schedule. Instead she began writing out the "principles and spiritual goals" that defined the mission of the Missionary of Charity. "Our aim is to quench the great thirst of the love of Jesus Christ by our evangelical vows, to dedicate ourselves freely to serving the poorest of the poor according to the example and teaching of our Lord, and thus to proclaim in a special way the Kingdom of God," she said. "Our specific mission is to work for the salvation and the sanctification of the poorest of the poor."⁵

It was only after Mother Teresa had first defined specifically what she was doing and why she was going to do it, that she next

⁵ Lush Gjergji, *Mother Teresa: Her Life, Her Works* (Hyde Park, New York: New City Press, 1991), 49.

drew up a simple schedule based on that mission — a schedule in which the bulk of the sisters’ time would be spent in prayer and service to the poor. We see, then, that the practical element of a Rule is a *reflection of the aims and mission of our vocation*, which should determine how we spend our time.

Now, I had tried schedules before and had failed. Was that because I was trying to order my life according to goals that didn’t reflect what my calling as a Christian, a wife, and a mother demanded? Was the stress I had been experiencing the result of an imbalance in my priorities? Seeing how I was so often confused about everything, did I even know what my primary daily duties were supposed to be? After all, a Rule of Life deals primarily with *essential responsibilities*. How could I know whether I was giving these the primacy they deserve?

The Five Priorities of the Married Vocation

With all my research, I never found an example of a Rule of Life written by a layperson. Most Rules I came across were of religious orders. So I had to ask myself: what was it about my vocation that was unique to married life? Where could I turn for help in defining and developing a Rule specifically for mothers? I remembered a wise old priest telling me, early on in my marriage, about the Five “Ps” of Married Life — the five priorities of the married vocation:

First P = Prayer

Second P = Person

Third P = Partner

Fourth P = Parent

Fifth P = Provider

The priest said that every woman called to be a wife and mother has certain obligations that must be fulfilled; true “duties” in that they can’t be ignored nor neglected. They’re not optional

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for a married woman, regardless of her other involvements. A mother trying to forgo any of these five priorities would be like a doctor abandoning his office to go down the street and practice law. Whether or not we knew what we were signing up for when we said, "I do," these obligations are ours by virtue of our married vocation.

The priest explained that these must be ranked according to importance, and that many marriages can get "out of order" when a lesser P is given priority over a higher P. For example, he said, in his experience, husbands tend to place their provider role above all else, often spending too much time (in mind as well as in body) at the office, while women tend to place their parenting role above all else, often not leaving enough time for their own needs, or their husbands'.

Now, given that the five Ps are often interrelated, we don't have to differentiate between them with mathematical precision. I shouldn't ignore a wounded child just because I'm saying my Rosary, which is a higher P. On the other hand, ordinarily speaking, I wasn't to let the demands of housework and child-raising lead me to neglect my prayer life. As a general guide, the five Ps are an indication of what God wants us to concern ourselves with as mothers, and he expects a conscious effort to include all the priorities and work them out in a reasonable fashion.

So, I began to order my life according to the proper hierarchy of priorities.

- ♦ *The First P: Prayer.* God was calling to me get my personal life in order by establishing, as top priority, the care of my soul and body. The use of my time was to reflect the importance of these activities.

This meant that I had to put first things first, and the very first thing was God. Instead of never finding enough time for God in

the midst of everything else, I had to work everything else around God. This meant that I determined which prayers and practices I thought were basic to Christian living and worked out a basic schedule for them. I also created a set program for Christian study and spiritual reading, Mass, Adoration and Confession, days for silence in retreat, and meeting with my spiritual director. I also drew up a basic family prayer routine to help my children put God first, too.

- ♦ *The Second P: Person.* Next, I needed to ensure that I was caring for my basic physical needs. So I set about determining how much sleep I felt my body needed to keep me refreshed, how much exercise I needed, what types of foods and vitamin supplements I needed, and so on. I likewise considered my mental and emotional health.

- ♦ *The Third P: Partner.* Now, Philip is a grown man and capable of taking care of himself! But I understood that a solid, loving marriage is the bedrock of family life, and so the next allotment of my time and energy had to be directed at my partner, my husband. So I set aside my evenings to be available to him first and foremost, before all other activities.

- ♦ *The Fourth P: Parent.* I had considered my children's physical and spiritual needs when I worked out my own, but now I needed to focus on how to love them in a conscious, consistent way. I tried to be more available to them throughout the day, and soon discovered that it wasn't just my physical availability that was called for; my children also needed me to be *mentally* available to them — to be fully attentive to them when I was with them. I had to tone down thoughts of all the projects that filled my head and make more casual time to talk and laugh and simply *be* with them.

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Regarding my call to educate my children, I realized prayer and Mass and faith discussion and good stories of saints and virtue were at least as important as their daily math lesson. As such, I began to work on developing their faith life a little more regularly and encouraging prayer and more frequent reception of the sacraments.

♦ *The Fifth P: Provider.* Both my husband and I are called to provide for our family. Philip provides in his way by going to work and earning a paycheck. I provide in my way by caring for, maintaining, and repairing (as much as possible) our home and our resources, and if time permits, in earning a little extra income on a casual basis to help out financially. For working women, the duties of their jobs would figure in here as well.

I decided to get the house in order and set out to create housework routines that took care of the basic daily, weekly, and monthly needs of the home. It's amazing how housework diminishes, and cleaning time lessens, when the home is regularly maintained instead of allowing things to pile up!

I also made room for home and garden projects and a few income-producing projects. And after all this, I found I still had hours a day of free time, which I could spend in volunteer work, in family time, or in some other service to my church or community.

My Initial Mother's Rule

So how did my Rule look, once I got everything organized? It was really quite simple. It had both a daily and a weekly format.

From Monday to Friday, I rose at 6:45, fed the cats, put on the coffee, and spent the remaining time until the children got up, at 7:30, with Scripture.

From 7:30 to 9:00, we dressed and cleaned up, tidied the upstairs, prepared and ate breakfast, cleaned the kitchen, put on

laundry, dispensed vitamins, changed the baby, and brushed our teeth.

From 9:00 to 10:15, we prayed and did schoolwork. (Two to three mornings a week, we now attend Mass.)

At 10:15, I sent the kids out for a recess, and I threw on another load of laundry, grabbed a cup of coffee, and said mid-morning prayers, usually psalms or a chaplet.

At 10:45, the kids came back in, and we did more schoolwork. The littlest ones played with toys or watched a video at this time.

From 11:45 to 12:30, the kids tidied up, each child taking a downstairs room while I made lunch; we ate and cleaned the kitchen. I put on another laundry load.

From 12:30 to 1:30, the children had a quiet reading/play time in their rooms while I said my Rosary or did some spiritual reading or reflection.

At 1:30, I attended to housework or projects, finished any homeschooling, scheduled visits and appointments, worked in the garden, or sewed, depending on the day. The kids usually spent some time in an independent school project, then played with the little ones, did computer work, watched an educational video of some kind, sewed or painted or built Lego creations.

At 3:30, I sent the children out for another recess, and I had a coffee/recreation break.

At 4:00, I entered the kitchen. Until supper was on the table at 5:30, I spent my time doing meal prep and any baking for the next day, folding laundry, unloading the dishwasher, setting the table, making Philip's lunch for the next day, and setting up the coffee maker for the next morning. The older kids had free time with their little brother and sister. At 5:15, they each tidied a room once more and took all the family laundry up to the right rooms before sitting down for supper.

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After supper, we followed a little policy: no one leaves the kitchen until it's clean — including my husband. And so usually within five or ten minutes, it was finished. (Later on, I switched to itemized chore charts in the kitchen for each person. Over time, we found this took too long, so while they're still posted and can be done independently by the children if the need arises, we all usually just do it together nice and quickly.)

After that, I was free to go for a walk, visit the Blessed Sacrament, and come back and play a little piano. The kids, meanwhile, put their clothes away, had some free time, or bathed and got ready for bed.

At 7:30, we had family prayer, and by 8:00, it was bedtime for the kids. I've since developed a staggered bedtime to accommodate the various ages of the children.

For the remainder of the evening I was available to Philip, or I worked on sewing projects or other interests. I also took some time here for any faith or vocation study. I'd occasionally watch a show.

Somewhere around 10:00 on most evenings, I prepped for the next day. I emptied the dishwasher, quickly tidied up what was left to do downstairs, put away my laundry if Philip hadn't already done it, and took care of personal hygiene. I'd spend a few minutes in prayer and reading before bed at 10:30.

On Saturdays, I dropped the time schedule, made sure I got morning, afternoon, and evening prayer in, and maintained the tidiness and kitchen and laundry. The children got to Confession on these Saturdays, either once or twice a month. The rest of the time was mine. Every other Saturday, I had my Mother's Day Out. For Sundays, on the advice of my spiritual director, I was to have only three goals: lots of God, lots of family, and lots of rest! That was easy! On Sunday night, we all quickly tidied up before family prayer.

That was the daily schedule. There were weekly things as well. Monday and Friday, I had a Holy Hour in the perpetual-Adoration chapel in our community. Fridays we cleaned the downstairs — dusted, vacuumed, and mopped — which was always followed by Movie Night with soda and chips. Every other Saturday morning, when I wasn't on my day out, we cleaned the upstairs, including changing the sheets. Philip and I had a biweekly cenacle at that time. Confession was every other week on my day out. I met with my spiritual director once a month. Thursday evenings I balanced the checkbook and paid the bills, and Wednesdays before the bi-weekly payday, I defrosted and cleaned our aging fridge and freezer, making shopping lists as I went. I arranged with other homeschooling friends to “swap” kids one or two afternoons a week. On those days when my children were out, I'd do errands, keep appointments, or work on special home projects. Anything that I could routinize I did. It saved me having to arrange everything all the time.

I also allowed for emergencies and other realities to interfere. I'd move into “maintenance mode” on days when a child was sick or I had been up all night or company came unexpectedly. Then, I'd simply ensure that the essentials got done, even if it cut into my free time. To me, the essentials were prayer, meals, laundry and tidy-up, and for the children to do their math and spelling if they weren't sick. Also, if the whole family got stressed and developed cabin fever, as can happen when you homeschool, I included as part of my Rule the ability to drop everything, and spend the day doing interesting science experiments or getting out of the house for a change of pace. My family's personal needs came first.

After all, *the Rule is a tool, not a tyrant*. The schedule is made for the family, not the family for the schedule. The only thing I watched out for was that this bare-bones schedule did not become

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the norm. I had to learn to be flexible, but not so flexible that I reasoned myself right out of a schedule again!

These basic time frames, which met all the needs of our daily life, have been more or less a constant ever since I began my Rule. The actual times are pretty consistent, although I'm not as rigid about starting lunch at exactly 12:00 now that I'm used to my Rule and know how long things take. One thing became very important: I had to allow plenty of time for the accomplishment of the various tasks; otherwise I'd get too stressed.

In the beginning, I spent a good deal of time adjusting and assessing what was working and what wasn't, and every autumn, I adjust the Rule to meet the growing needs and abilities of my children. As they've grown, they now help out in the kitchen, preparing meals. Where once I did all the cooking, Anna is now perfectly capable with instructions to make the family supper a couple of evenings a week. She and the others also help with lunch prep. I assign them the work that any of us can do, and I do the work that only I can do. That way, I'm freer to fulfill other, more detailed tasks such as making doctor's appointments or marking math schoolwork.

A Time for Every Task

Over the course of many months, I worked out the practicalities of my Mother's Rule and, step by step, implemented them in my life. I remember that first summer, as Philip began his vacation and we were discussing how he'd spend his time. I had things in such order that I could honestly look at him and say, "Aside from bathing the little ones after supper, there's no real housework for you to do. Perhaps you might like to focus on other things around the house, or build that veranda." Imagine — can you think of any woman in her right mind who would tell her husband

that she didn't need any help around the house? But it was true. Things were running so smoothly that I didn't really need any extra help.

The very first thing I noticed was there was *order* in my home. (The very first thing Philip noticed was that the laundry was put away in the drawers everyday, and he didn't have to hunt for socks!) The house was clean. There was a place for everything. There was a time for everything.

As a result, it *freed my mind from a thousand cares and concerns*. Whereas before I would stare around the house, wondering which task to tackle first, and as I worked on one, a hundred new ones would come in to worry me, now I knew exactly when every task in my home was going to be done. Knowing that tidy-up came just before supper made me stop tidying up constantly throughout the day. Knowing that the laundry was going to be done in the morning stopped the pressure of seeing dirty laundry in the basket every evening. Knowing that the floor was to be mopped on Friday made me not so concerned with a messy floor on Thursday night. Because there was a time and place for all, the moments I didn't have scheduled for chores became "free." I stopped thinking about all the responsibilities I had weighing on me and was able to concentrate on the present moment, fully and freely.

I found my Mother's Rule brought greater *balance* to my life. Whereas before there seemed to be a never-ending list of chores to get done, now I found I had ample time for quiet or reading or a card game with the kids. Since the five Ps each had significant needs to balance, no particular aspect of life outweighed the other. Each need in my vocation and my personal life was given its fair share of my time. Hence, I found a greater variety of pursuits in my daily life as well as the discovery of *real* free time. Life was not *all* work or *all* play, but a healthy interweaving of both. This reduced

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my stress level significantly and led to greater personal satisfaction with being at home.

And the children? The children were thriving. They stopped living what I call the “TV Sitcom Syndrome,” wherein, having no set plan for the evening, they were tempted to watch aimlessly one sitcom after another for lack of anything more meaningful to do. Now, instead, they had a plan for their days. High-quality home-schooling, housework, leisure, prayer, and personal time were all really happening. Nicki, my oldest son, would come to me and say things like, “You know, Mummy, I really feel good when I do my work!” and, “You know, Mummy, if we just *keep* it tidy, there’s less work to do on cleaning day. Why don’t we just do that?” Yes, my six-year-old genius!

There was another benefit to the Rule that I never would have predicted: it *cut down on bickering and arguments* with the children. Because there was a time for everything now, I wasn’t constantly interfering with their free time to call them to do chores. Free time really meant free time, and the groans of annoyance (for the most part) ended, because they knew what was expected of them and when it was expected. The Rule and its flow of work and rest, play and prayer was a *motivator* for them to finish their work; and they had the time they needed to do it well.

Also, to know that chore time would be done in fifteen minutes was to be able to put it into perspective. They knew there was a limit to the nasty stuff Mummy was going to assign — for suffering is always lessened when you realize it isn’t going to be eternal!

Spiritual Benefits of a Mother's Rule

So often in life I’ve wondered what God’s will for me was. Through the use of my Rule, I’ve learned that God’s will isn’t so mysterious. I believe there are three main things he wants from

each of us: first, to love him and obey his commands; second, to do our daily duties according to the state of life we've been called to; and third, to be open to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit in our daily lives.

As I began to live my Rule, I became excited by the very fact that day by day, and moment by moment, I was trying to fulfill God's will in my life. As a nun vows obedience to her superiors, I was practicing obedience to the demands of my vocation as reflected in my daily duties. I was obeying God with each and every action I performed, right down to loading the dishwasher and feeding the cats.

The freedom of spirit I experienced was astonishing. Oftentimes, when things had gone wrong in the past, I would rack my brain, trying to figure out whether I had done something wrong, or whether I was somehow displeasing God. But now, knowing that I was doing my best to live out His plan for me, I found a sense of peace in the face of trials. I was aware that if problems occurred, it wasn't because I was just being slack!

This also helped me tolerate any dryness I experienced in my prayer as well. To know that I was doing all I could to spend time in prayer, I began to understand that spiritual dryness was not something I could do much about, that it rested in the hands of the Lord. It became easier to trust that, if I needed it, God would indeed send some consolation.

In addition, a Mother's Rule is sanctifying, because by it *we do what we ought to do*. It's a great means of mortification.

What is mortification? Due to Original Sin and compounded by our own sinful acts, our natures are out of whack. We have disordered passions and desires for things that aren't good for us, and tendencies to sin rather than to virtue. Hence, while God is always acting through grace to restore order to our disordered souls

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and bodies, we must cooperate with him.⁶ We respond to this grace through mortification, by dying to our disordered selves; by doing our part to tame our selfishness and sinfulness and choose the real good that God puts before us.

Now, you may have a pretty tainted view of what mortification entails, as I once did. I remember reading about how St. Francis ran and threw himself into a thorn bush to conquer a temptation. I read about St. Rose of Lima, who slept on a bed of broken glass. Many medieval saints wore hairshirts that constantly irritated their skin. But such forms of mortification are extraordinary and not even desirable for the average Christian.

Following our Rule, doing what we ought for God and our families, provides more than enough mortification to help God purify us! It is just as difficult, because of our own sinful nature, to do what we ought — to get out of bed on time, to eat healthful meals, to exercise, or even to clean that gross little area behind the toilet. Even these mundane efforts to do what is good and true and to oppose our disordered tendencies and attractions is true mortification. It's also known by many other names: self-control, self-discipline, or as St. John of the Cross calls it, the Active Night. It is our wills, acting in sacrificial love, doing all because God asks it of us, that enable God to change our hearts to love in a deeper way.

This inevitably leads to virtue for, as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us, “human virtues [are] acquired by . . . deliberate acts and by a perseverance ever renewed in repeated efforts [that] are purified and elevated by divine grace. With God's help, they forge character and give facility in the practice of the good. The virtuous man is happy to practice them.”⁷ The very action of

⁶ Cf. Col. 1:24.

⁷ Par. 1810.

doing our duties and following our Rule sanctifies us, or makes us holy. It even makes doing good *easier*, for as we develop good habits, the work we do ceases to be so arduous. I remember, at one point, not even being sure I was following my Rule because it seemed to have become so natural. I would go to my schedule and check to see whether I was forgetting something!

I realized, too, that my Mother's Rule also helps my children in this regard. Not only does it bring physical order and the practice of good daily habits to their lives, but also, they witness Mummy's good example. As Pope Paul VI stated, the most effective form of evangelization is the witness of our lives, and only secondly, the words we use to explain the reason for our hope.

A Rule Is More than a Schedule

It's easy to see the practical benefits of a Rule of Life. Things are in order, and life can be lived very efficiently. But if we stop there, focusing on the schedule and seeking *only* efficiency, we miss the point of a Rule. Take, for example, a high-powered business executive who may very well have a truly rigorous schedule, balanced in most ways, and who may follow it religiously. Perhaps he meets with his advisors at exactly 9:00 a.m., schedules financial conferences for 10:30 sharp, meets a prospective client for lunch at noon, and assesses the daily profits at 1:00 p.m. every day, like clockwork. Could we truly say that he was following a Rule of Life?

No, there's a deeper and more fundamental level to a Rule of Life that distinguishes it from a mere schedule: the intent and aim of following the Rule. A Rule followed for the practical benefits alone is not a Rule of Life; it is a schedule. Duties attended to grudgingly or with reluctance do not make a Rule, for a Rule of Life must be lived *as a response to the call of God*.

A Mother's Rule of Life

In a Mother's Rule, all that we do is done because God asks it of us. It is to accept and embrace my vocation because God wants me to, whether out of an initial sense of obedience to him or, later, simply because I love him, and to suffer the possibly ongoing struggle to adjust my attitudes and outlook toward his vision for my life, is the very heart of the Rule. *It is to do all that he asks, because he asks it, out of love for him.*

And so, to bring God into every part of my day, every time I looked at the schedule to see what was next, I simply said a little prayer and asked him to be with me and bless the next allotment of time. This, as well as my scheduled prayer times, made me much more aware of his ongoing presence throughout my day. And soon, I began to be able to do things with him, and for him, like folding that baby sleeper just so.

The Time to Start Your Rule Is Now

Now, seeing as how I was already about ten years into my married life, I didn't have the leisure to spend a couple of years examining my vocation so thoroughly that I could write up a perfect Rule that would launch me into perfect order and perfect holiness immediately. So, I decided I had to just *start*, anywhere, and study as I went. I established the initial schedule, which brought about balance and order and which then left me open to study my vocation with more depth as I went.

Interestingly, I later found out that this is what nuns do anyway! When a novice enters a community, she immediately begins to follow the schedule of the Rule to align her activity with that of the rest of the sisters. But, for the next few years, she also studies the Rule and its principles and aims in order more fully to spiritualize her daily routine and enhance the meaning of the sometimes mundane things she might find herself doing.

And as Mother Teresa once said when teaching her sisters about their Rule, it was the *spirit* of the Rule that was to be stressed. And so, while I had the basic schedule in order, I began to call to mind what I had learned over the years about the five Ps and began consciously to work on them. I needed to understand better the spirit of *my* Mother's Rule, to grasp the significance of why I was doing all this.

I'd like to share with you, then, some of what I have learned about my vocation as a Christian wife and mother, in the events and circumstances of my own life. Along the way, I'll offer some basic advice on how you can develop your own Mother's Rule. And as the Church has always stressed the importance of the spiritual dimension of the Rule, its very heart, I'd like to show you how I have come to understand the goal of holiness as it can be sought and lived in the married vocation.