

THE RULE OF LIFE

WRITERS have more than once pointed out that the 'Ancren Riwle' * is far from being a mere set of austere regulations for a unique and now obsolete type of contemplative life. They have shown that during the later middle ages this Rule was regarded in England as a spiritual classic for every type of Christian, for it is in fact chiefly concerned with the principles of a good Christian life which it sets forth with great charm and ability. But it is perhaps not so often realized that this fact follows from the very definite conception of the meaning and value of any rule, which the author outlines in his Prologue. All those who are resolved to fulfil their lives as good Christians should study this concise and attractive treatment of the meaning of rule in a good life. The 'Ancren Riwle' was written half a century before St. Thomas wrote his *Summa Theologica*, but the fundamental truths of this Prologue are endorsed by him. Thus those three sisters for whom the Riwle was written, and all those of every station in life who have since read it, have been inspired by truly Thomistic principles. It may, therefore, be of value to set forth the ideas contained in the Prologue of this Rule of Anchoresses.

In the spiritual life, after the first conversion has been completed and grace has begun its process of spiritualizing the whole man, the Christian is understood to have passed from a 'crooked' to an upright life. This new life is upright because now it is directed in a straight line towards its last end; its course is straightened out. Uprightness in the spiritual life is very nearly synonymous with the

* All references are to *The Nun's Rule—the Ancren Riwle*. Modernised by James Morton, with a preface by Cardinal Gasquet. (Chatto and Windus, 1926.) Vol. XVIII of 'The Medieval Library.'

Biblical term righteousness. The righteous man is an upright man, a man who has at least begun a good life with the direct intention of persevering to the end. If we consider this righteousness, uprightness or rectitude we see at once that it signifies living according to rule. St. Thomas compares the rightness or rectitude of life in general with that of justice, which deals with external goods alone. He says that 'that type of rectitude is common to every virtue which implies an order towards a right end and towards the divine law which is the rule of the human will' (1^a 2^{ae}, 55, iv ad 4). To live uprightly means to live according to rule, according to that straight rule of the human reason which comes ultimately from the divine *ratio* and the divine law. Of the words of the Psalmist, 'Quis ostendit nobis bona? Signatum est super los lumen vultus tui, Domine,' St. Thomas has this illuminating interpretation: 'It is as though David said: 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 countenance, O Lord, i.e. derived from your countenance' (1^a 2^{ae}, 19, iv). Thus the righteous are the just—'Justum deduxit Dominus per vias rectas'—as an instrument is 'just' when truly aligned to its ideal measure. So the ultimate measure of the good life is the mind of God, which is interpreted to us by human reason. It is thus that the just man lives according to rule; the one truth that the Stoics clearly discerned.

With these ideas the 'Ancren Riwle' begins its special reading of the divine mind. "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' (page 1). A rule of life is necessary for every just man or woman; and there are many rules adapted to the many different types of Christian life. Yet if we are to avoid thinking of them as something imposed on the will from outside, as an enforced slavery of the will, then we must have a clear understanding of the purpose

of any exterior rule. And this is especially true for the beginner.

The Prologue proceeds at once to throw light on the subject by distinguishing two types of rule. They will both later be described at length in the 'Riwle,' although they are not both of equal importance.

There are many kinds of rules; but among them all there are two of which, with God's help, I will speak. 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 respect 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. (Compression of the first three pages.)

All good Christians, but especially beginners, must grasp the relative importance of these two rules, the inward and the outward. St. Thomas explains the doctrine at the end of the second part of the *Summa* (2^a 2^{ae} 186). He is there speaking of the vows of religion, but his distinction between the end and purpose of the rule and its external exercise is applicable to every Christian rule of life. All are bound to tend to perfection, and that is the one interior law, the law of charity common to all men who are upright. But there are many exterior exercises and ascetic practices by which the end is to be attained. The means to the end make up the exterior part of the rule; and they vary for both individual and group. Indeed, the means are so varied and temperaments are so different that the outward rule varies according to the circumstances of time, place, and person. Thus the author of the 'Riwle,'

although allowing a great variety of exterior rules, insists that the interior principle must be the same for all Christians, since they must all seek that purity of heart which is the object of the whole of religion. For the body must seek in each case the best way of serving the soul, and in that lies the external and variable rule.

Thus we are told that the outward rule is only valuable in so far as it serves the internal, just as St. Thomas says that the New Law essentially consists in the grace of the Holy Spirit, and that the written rules of doctrine and behaviour are only *dispositions* to that grace; they are only secondary (1^a 2^{ae}, 106, i; 107, i, ad 3). The external rule is tending towards the rule of charity, and in the beginning of the spiritual life the external must predominate. As the Old Law prepared the way for the New, so the many rules of exterior conduct should lead eventually to the one interior rule of charity. The 'Ancren Riwle' calls the external rule the handmaid of the internal, for its whole *raison d'être* is to serve the law of charity. If we look at the spiritual life from the point of view of time and progress, of the generation of the deeper Christian graces, the external rule must come first. At first the beginner will feel that all the commands of God and all the rules of his life are many and various, and that they are imposed on him from outside. He can hardly restrain an instinctive shrinking from these outward rules that constrain him. They seem to limit his freedom, like the walls of the anchorite's cell. At every step he meets one regulation after another checking him and forbidding him continuing in this and that direction. He becomes almost overwhelmed by the complexity and multiplicity of life.

In the beginner this state is inevitable. It is the same in the learning of any new thing. The deacon who prepares for his ordination to the priesthood begins early to practise the many and at first sight complicated rubrics. It seems to him then that he will never be able to participate fully in the Holy Sacrifice because of their distracting

multiplicity. For the beginner is necessarily imperfect, and so has to be guided. But the nearer he comes to that perfection which is both the purpose of his self-discipline and the fulfilment of the union between God's will and his, the more internal becomes his rule. As the soul becomes more conformed to the divine countenance, so the less pressure is exerted from outside, since the action of the will has become more spontaneous. Now the human will begins to act according to the law of love, and, loving the divine will, it desires only what God desires. Thus the outward rule is gradually absorbed into the inward, as the many commandments of the Old Testament become the one and unique commandment of love in the New. 'The commandments of any law are given for the sake of virtuous action. 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 are moved to exercise the works of virtue by some *extrinsic* cause, from the threat of penalties or the promise of some external remuneration such as honour, riches, or the like. But those having the habit of the virtue are moved to its exercise through love of virtue' (1^a 2^{ae}, 107, i, ad 2). So it is that the perfect come to live by but one law, the law of love—*Dilige et quod vis fac*.

However, in his Prologue, the author of the 'Rule' does not reduce the inward law to its simplest and most unified form. The universal internal rule here includes the rule of reason according to the mind of God, the ten Commandments, and all that is of necessity for the perfect life. '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, for they govern the heart'

(page 6). We must look further into the 'Ancren Riwle' 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' (page 311).

Yet the outward rule is not transcended, it is transformed. The inward rule can be used as no antinomian principle, since the will is now united to God and 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' (page 141). It would be not only ridiculous but criminal to maintain that the more perfect the soul becomes the less is it 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 are made 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 entirely instinctive to him.

The beginner in the spiritual life, then, must needs adopt a rule of life, external at first, and cramping—for that is part of the initial 'asceticism'; but as he progresses this rule changes its tone. The many melt into the one, the constraint presses the soul into a unity, the external exercise generates the habit of love which embraces all the desires of God. It is for this reason that the author of the 'Riwle,' as though writing for the ordinary Christian in the world, suggests that no vows should be taken to keep the external rule. 'You should not vow it, but *keep it in your heart*, and perform it as though you had vowed it' (page 7). And so the Prologue 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 ' (page 10).

So it is that when a man first turns towards God and his own perfection, he can only maintain himself on that narrow way by many exterior and irksome helps. But as he gradually gains inward strength and vitality he no longer needs such supports. Now there is a living love within him, forcing him onwards. 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 his one great need. A complex rule of life has been simplified into the one single rule of life.

CONRAD PEPLER, O.P.