

## St Antony's Priory: A Rule of Life

In 1935 Dietrich Bonhoeffer said: 'the restoration of the church will surely come only from a new type of monasticism which has nothing in common with the old but a complete lack of compromise in a life lived in accordance with the Sermon on the Mount in the discipleship of Christ.' Echoing this, Alasdair MacIntyre ended his book *After Virtue*, by voicing a longing for 'another – doubtless very different – St Benedict.'<sup>1</sup>

The community of St Antony's Priory is one response to this call for a 'new monasticism'. In answering it, we commit to sharing a common life of daily prayer and work to sustain the life of the community and to support the ministry of the Priory. In addition, this community has a particular emphasis on the discernment of vocation, however that may be understood in the life of each person.

St Antony's Priory was originally established in 1985 by the Society of the Sacred Mission, which in turn was founded by Fr Herbert Kelley in 1893. The Constitution of the Society lists its objectives as increasing the numbers of those offering themselves for the Divine Service, the conversion and perfection of souls and the cultivation of the Divine Science:

*Since its inception the aims of the Society have been first, to increase the number of those who give their lives to the divine service, especially by training those of whom at present use cannot be or is not made, whether through their lack of means or of education or through other causes, and to deepen the wholeness of sacrifice in them, where the vocation exists, by building them into the organisation of the religious life; next, to labour for the conversion and perfection of souls, especially among the heathen and in the Church abroad; thirdly, to have regard for the cultivation of divine science.*

Today, we seek to realise these principles by promoting vocation, nurturing spirituality, and encouraging theological learning. These principles infuse both the work of the Priory and also the life of the Community; hence our strapline: prayer, study and community.

### Why a Rule?

It is sometimes said that the monastic life is simply 'life according to the gospel'. The first pioneers of this way of life followed the example of Jesus by retreating to the deserts of 2<sup>nd</sup> century Egypt, Syria and Palestine, in order to devote their lives to seeking God. They did this not in order to escape from the world, but to engage more deeply with the reality of being human. We are not trying to be different, or special; on the contrary, we are just trying to be *normal*.

The word 'rule', from the Latin *regula*, literally means a 'straight stick'. A rule is not simply a list of do's and don'ts arbitrarily designed to curtail our natural freedom, but a pattern or structure that gives a life its distinctive shape and which enables us to grow in faith and understanding. The religious life is characterised by its discipline – not in the sense of punishment, but learning. We are disciples. And a shared discipline is what enables us to live and learn together.

Therefore, a rule of life is the framework that allows the genuine seeker to go deeper, to discover, to be challenged and, ultimately, transformed. It is what enables that total self-offering to God by means of which we may grow in what the scriptures describe as godliness,<sup>2</sup> and experience life in all its fullness.<sup>3</sup> That is, life based on the model of Christ, who in his incarnation shows us God in a human form.

### Our Rule of Life

Joining the community at St Antony's is not the same as joining a traditional religious order. For a start, it is not a lifelong commitment, but a stage on the journey. That said, our way of life is closely based on models

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<sup>1</sup> 'What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us.' MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p.263

<sup>2</sup> Cf. 1 Timothy, 2 Peter

<sup>3</sup> John 10.10

and examples drawn from the Christian monastic tradition, including the discipline of a rule of life, which in turn rests on the fundamental monastic principle: the total self-offering to God.

Traditionally, religious communities have been defined by vows, often entered into for life. The *Rule of St Benedict*, for example, one of the principle foundations of the western monastic tradition, requires novices seeking to join the monastery to promise ‘stability, fidelity to the monastic life, and obedience.’<sup>4</sup> Many other religious orders – including the Society of the Sacred Mission – have adopted rules based on the so-called evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience, which provide a solid basis for the religious life, inspired as they are by the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>5</sup>

But let’s be under no illusions that this life is an easy option, ‘for the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few’.<sup>6</sup> The spiritual life presents challenges. Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, and we can expect the same. Those temptations, to the sins of greed, avarice and vanity, are the antithesis of the virtues of poverty, chastity and obedience. Moreover, they are rampant in contemporary society, dominated as it is by consumerism and individualism. And we can expect to encounter these temptations ourselves, in the form of distracting thoughts, which may sometimes feel overwhelming. Our Rule of Life will help us maintain the discipline necessary to learn and grow, even – or especially – in the face of adversity.

The essence of the Religious Life is summed up in the ‘great commandment’: ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself.’<sup>7</sup> This maxim shall be our principle guide, and our Rule of Life will inform the context in which we live it out.

### **‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven’**

Members of the community are expected to commit fully to this life for the duration of their time at the Priory. The Benedictine principle of stability provides a good foundation for this commitment, which should be entered into with serious intent and firm resolve.

Stability is not about putting up with things that shouldn’t be endured, but learning that sometimes we have to do things we don’t want to do, and also that sometimes we shouldn’t do things we do want to do. It is learning to be truly present, engaging fully with the situation at hand, and persevering in the face of obstacles and in spite of what might appear to be more appealing prospects. Stability is about remaining focused and un-distracted. It is to realise and accept that wherever we are, we are where we should be, and doing what needs to be done. It is to learn true contentment.

The notion of stability is closely related to the virtue of poverty. We generally think of poverty in terms of lack of money and, for many, this is not something to be celebrated. In the religious life, however, poverty has more to do with freeing ourselves from the worldly attachments that may distract us from focussing solely on God. These are often characterised in terms of material wealth, but the concept of attachment also applies to the many other ‘things’ with which we identify or think we ‘own’, such our opinions or achievements: in short, everything we consider to be I, me or mine.

### **‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God’**

The Aims of the Society of the Sacred Mission enjoin us to ‘labour for the conversion and perfection of souls’. Starting with ourselves, this conversion of life means turning away from self-centredness and towards God-centredness. It means being open to the possibility of becoming someone new, the person God intends us to be, and embracing a new life in which we strive to become more fully who and what we really are.

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<sup>4</sup> RB 58.17

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 5.3-12

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 7.14

<sup>7</sup> Luke 10.27

Conversion is therefore about transformation. Benedict sometimes describes conversion as fidelity to the monastic life. The monastic life – as the name suggests – is characterised by singleness. Single in terms of one’s status, single-minded in terms of seeking God. It is this notion of singleness, together with the idea of fidelity, that links the principle of conversion with the virtue of chastity.

Chastity is not so much about the total renunciation of desire, but the discipline of learning to moderate and purify the ‘cravings that are at war within you’.<sup>8</sup> Paul describes how salvation depends on renouncing ‘impiety and worldly passions’ in order to ‘live lives that are self-controlled, upright and godly’.<sup>9</sup> We tend to think of chastity in terms of sexual abstinence, and indeed, we expect single members of the community to remain single for the duration of their time at the Priory. All relationships are built on commitment, and those who join the community are expected to commit themselves fully to this life, without being conflicted by other commitments.<sup>10</sup>

### **‘Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth’**

The notion of obedience can be associated with servility, but in the monastic tradition, obedience has more to do with cultivating the true self-awareness that only arises when we listen deeply to others. This inevitably requires us to renounce the illusions of control and autonomy that characterise ‘the life of the world’. The Constitution of the Society of the Sacred Mission describes obedience as ‘the virtue by which the whole being is made over to God through the concentration of every power upon the doing of his will.’<sup>11</sup>

Obedience is not about slavish adherence to rules and regulations, or being compelled to do things we don’t want to do. True obedience is an act of will, freely chosen, not grudgingly given. For Benedict, obedience willingly given is love; and love, under obedience, is freedom. He stresses the importance of mutual obedience within the monastic community, since ‘it is by this way of obedience that we go to God.’<sup>12</sup> Obedience means listening attentively and responding appropriately, letting go of all that comes between ourselves and others, and ultimately God. It is to open ourselves to the possibility of loving and of being loved in return.

### **Conclusion**

Jesus says to those who would be his disciples: If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.<sup>13</sup>

Members of the community at St Antony’s will commit to this life, inspired as it is by the community of the first Christians described in the Acts of the Apostles.<sup>14</sup> It is a life marked by simplicity, single-mindedness and total self-offering to God; it is a life in which we may give ourselves fully to the adventure of seeking God and striving to do his will, in prayer and in service to one another.

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<sup>8</sup> James 4.1; Cf. James 1.14–15; Ephesians 2.1–3; Galatians 6.8

<sup>9</sup> Titus 2.11–12

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 6.24

<sup>11</sup> The Constitution of the Society of the Sacred Mission

<sup>12</sup> RB 71.1-2

<sup>13</sup> Matthew 16.24-25

<sup>14</sup> Acts 2.42-47