

Rule of St. Augustine

The basic principles of the Augustinian spirituality of religious community life can be found in Augustine's Rule. This brief document presents Augustine's vision of the values that underlie the life of a vibrant and holy religious community.

The Rule of St. Augustine was written around the year 400. It is the oldest monastic rule that we have today. The Rule of St. Benedict came approximately 120 years later. The Rule of St. Francis of Assisi was composed more than 800 years later.

In spite of its ancient origin, the Rule of St. Augustine endures because it expresses enduring principles and manifests an understanding of the human condition. It is not concerned with regulating small details such as the daily schedule, the arrangement of furniture or the kinds of food that may or may not be consumed at meals. Rather, Augustine's Rule outlines what is essential for a religious life in community which is guided by the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In reading the Rule, one must occasionally make allowance for references to certain time-bound customs of Augustine's fifth-century culture. These include, for example, attitudes about bathing in the public baths of Roman Africa (which, in Augustine's time, had become centers of immoral activities), and the "one-size-fits-all" clothing style that was the norm (see Chapter Five).

Preface

1. Before all else, beloved, love God and then your neighbor, for these are the chief commandments given to us. (cf. Matthew 22:36-40; Mark 12:28-34)

Chapter One

2. The following are the precepts we order you living in the monastery to observe.

3. The main purpose for your having come together is to live harmoniously in your house, intent upon God, with one heart and one soul (Acts 4:32).

4. Therefore call nothing your own, but let everything be yours in common. Food and clothing shall be distributed to each of you by your superior, not equally to all, for all do not enjoy equal health, but rather according to each one's need. For so you read in the Acts of the Apostles that "they had all things in common, and each was given what he needed" (Acts 4:32, 35).

5. Those who owned something in the world should be cheerful in wanting to share it in common once they have entered the monastery.

6. But they who owned nothing should not look for those things in the monastery that they were unable to have in the world. Nevertheless, they are to be given all that their health requires even if, during their time in the world, poverty made it impossible for them to find the very necessities of life. And these should not consider themselves fortunate because they have found the kind of food and clothing which they were unable to find in the world.

7. And let them [those who possessed nothing while in the world] not hold their heads high because they associate with people whom they did not dare to approach in the world, but let them rather lift up their hearts and not seek after what is vain and earthly. Otherwise, monasteries will come to serve a useful purpose for the rich and not for the poor, if the rich are made humble there and the poor are puffed up with pride.

8. The rich, for their part, who seemed important in the world must not look down upon their brothers or sisters who have come into this holy brotherhood or sisterhood from a condition of poverty. They should seek to glory in the fellowship of poor brothers or sisters rather than in the high rank of rich parents and relatives. They should neither be elated if they have contributed a part of their wealth to the common life, nor take more pride in sharing their riches with the monastery than if they were to enjoy them in the world. Indeed, every other kind of sin has to do with the commission of evil deeds, whereas pride lurks even in good works in order to destroy them. And what good is it to scatter one's wealth abroad by giving to the poor, even to become poor oneself, when the unhappy soul is thereby more given to pride in despising riches than it had been in possessing them?

9. Let all of you then live together in oneness of mind and heart, mutually honoring in yourselves the God whose temples you have become.

Chapter Two

10. Be assiduous in prayer at the hours and times appointed.

11. In the oratory no one should do anything other than that for which it was intended and from which it also takes its name. Consequently, if there are some who might wish to pray there during their free time, even outside the hours appointed, they are not to be hindered by those who think something else should be done there.

12. When you pray to God in psalms and hymns, think over in your hearts the words that come from your lips.

13. Chant only what is prescribed for chant; moreover, let nothing be chanted unless it is prescribed.

Chapter Three

14. Subdue the flesh, so far as your health permits, by fasting and abstinence from food and drink. However, when some are unable to fast they should still take no food outside mealtime unless they are ill.

15. When you come to table, listen until you leave to what it is the custom to read, without disturbance or strife. Let not your mouths alone take nourishment but let your hearts too hunger for the word of God.

16. If those in more delicate health from their former way of life are treated differently in the matter of food, this should not be a source of annoyance to others or appear unjust in the eyes of those who owe their stronger health to different habits of life. Nor should the healthier brothers or sisters deem them more fortunate for having food which they do not have, but rather consider themselves fortunate for having the good health which the others do not enjoy.

17. And if something in the way of food, clothing, and bedding is given to those coming to the monastery from a more genteel way of life, which is not given to those who are stronger, and therefore happier, then these latter ought to consider how far these others have come in passing from their life in the world down to this life of ours, though they have been unable to reach the level of frugality common to the stronger brothers and sisters.

18. And just as the sick must take less food to avoid discomfort, so too, after their illness, they are to receive the kind of treatment that will quickly restore their strength, even though they came from a life of extreme poverty. Their more recent illness has, as it were, afforded them what accrued to the rich as part of their former way of life. But when they have recovered their former strength, they should go back to their happier way of life which, because their needs are fewer, is more in keeping with God's servants. Once in good health, they must not become slaves to the enjoyment of food which was necessary to sustain them in their illness. Those who are better able to endure want should think of themselves as richer on that account; for it is better to need little than to have much.

Chapter Four

19. There should be nothing about your behavior to attract attention. Besides, you should not seek to please by your apparel, but by a good life.

20. Whenever you go out, walk together, and when you reach your destination, stay together.

21. In your walking, standing, and every movement, let nothing occur to give offense to anyone who sees you, but only what becomes your holy state of life.

22. Although your eyes may chance to rest upon persons of the other sex, you must not fix your gaze on them. Seeing them when you go out is not forbidden, but it is sinful to desire them or to wish them to desire you, for it is not by touch or passionate feeling alone but by one's gaze as well that lustful desires mutually arise. And do not say that your hearts are pure if there is immodesty of the eye, because the unchaste eye carries the message of an impure heart. And when such hearts disclose their unchaste desires in a mutual gaze, even without saying a word, then it is that chastity itself suddenly goes out of their life, even though their bodies remain unsullied by unchaste acts.

23. And whoever fix their gaze upon a person of the other sex and like to have that person's gaze fixed upon them, must not suppose that others do not see what they are doing. They are very much seen, even by those they think do not see them. But suppose that all this escapes the notice of human beings - what will they do about God who sees from on high and from whom nothing is hidden? Or are you to imagine that he does not see because he sees with a patience as great as his wisdom? Let religious, then, have such fear of God that they will not want to be an occasion of sinful pleasure to those of the other sex. Ever mindful that God sees all things, let them not desire to look at such persons lustfully. For it is on this point that fear of the Lord is recommended, where it is written: An abomination to the Lord is he who fixes his gaze (Proverbs 27:20).

24. So when you are together in church and anywhere else where persons of the other sex are present, exercise a mutual care over purity of life. Thus, by mutual vigilance over one another will God, who dwells in you, grant you his protection.

25. If you notice in any of your brothers or sisters this wantonness of the eye, of which I am speaking, admonish them at once so that the beginning of evil will not grow more serious, but will be promptly corrected.

26. But if you see them doing the same thing again on some other day, even after admonition, then whoever had occasion to discover this must report them as they would a wounded person in need of treatment. But let the offense first be pointed out to two or three so that the persons can be proven guilty on the testimony of these two or three and be punished with due severity. And do not charge yourselves with ill-will when you bring this offense to light. Indeed, yours is the greater blame if you allow your brothers or sisters to be lost through your silence when you are able to bring about their correction by your disclosure. If your brothers or sisters, for example, were suffering a bodily wound

that they wanted to hide for fear of undergoing treatment, would it not be cruel of you to remain silent and a mercy on your part to make this known? How much greater then is your obligation to make their condition known lest they continue to suffer a more deadly wound of the soul.

27. But if they fail to correct the fault despite this admonition, they should first be brought to the attention of the superior before the offense is made known to the others who will have to prove their guilt, in the event that they deny the charge. Thus, corrected in private, their fault can perhaps be kept from the others. But should they feign ignorance, the others are to be summoned so that in the presence of all they can be proven guilty, rather than stand accused on the word of one alone. Once proven guilty, they must undergo salutary punishment according to the judgment of the superior or priest having the proper authority. If they refuse to submit to punishment, they shall be expelled from your brotherhood or sisterhood even if they do not withdraw of their own accord. For this too is not done out of cruelty, but from a sense of compassion, so that many others may not be lost through their bad example.

28. And let everything I have said about not fixing one's gaze be also observed carefully and faithfully with regard to other offenses: to find them out, to ward them off, to make them known, to prove and punish them -- all out of love for our fellows and a hatred of sin.

29. But if any should go so far in wrongdoing as to receive letters in secret from a person of the other sex, or small gifts of any kind, you ought to show mercy and pray for them if they confess this of their own accord. But if the offense is detected and they are found guilty, they must be more severely chastised according to the judgment of the priest or superior.

Chapter Five

30. Keep your clothing in one place in charge of one or two, or of as many as are needed to care for them and to prevent damage from moths. And just as you have your food from one pantry, so, too, you are to receive your clothing from a single wardrobe. If possible, do not be concerned about what you are to wear at the change of the seasons, whether all get back what they had put away or something different, provided none are denied what they need. If, however, disputes and murmuring arise on this account because some complain that they received poorer clothing than they had before, and think it is beneath them to wear the kind of clothing worn by others, you may judge from this how lacking you are in that holy and inner garment of the heart when you quarrel over garments for the body. But if allowance is made for your weakness and you do receive the same clothing you had put away, you must still keep it in one place under the common charge.

31. In this way, none shall perform any task for their own benefit but all your work shall be done for the community with greater zeal and more dispatch than if each one of you were to work for yourself alone.

For love, as it is written, “is not self-seeking” (1 Corinthians 13:5), meaning that it places the common good before its own, not its own before the common good. Know, then, that the more you devote yourselves to the community rather than to your private interests, the more you have advanced. Thus, let love, which remains forever, prevail in all things that minister to the fleeting necessities of life.

32. It follows, therefore, that if persons bring something for a son or daughter or other relative living in the monastery, whether a garment or anything else they think is needed, this must not be accepted secretly as one’s own but must be placed at the disposal of the superior so that, as common property, it can be given to whomever needs it. But if any secretly kept something given to them, they shall be judge guilty of theft.

33. Your clothing should be cleaned either by yourselves or by those who perform this service, as the superior shall determine, so that too great a desire for clean clothing may not be the source of interior stains on the soul.

34. As for bodily cleanliness too, none must ever deny themselves use of the bath when their health requires it. But this should be done on medical advice, without complaining, so that even though unwilling, they shall do what has to be done for their health when the superior orders it. However, if they wish it when it might not be good for them, you must not comply with their desire, for sometimes we think something is beneficial because it is pleasurable, even though it may prove harmful.

35. Finally, in the case of internal bodily pain, you must unhesitatingly take the word of God’s servants when they indicate what is giving them pain. But if it remains uncertain whether the remedy they find pleasing is also good for them, a doctor should be consulted.

36. When there is need to frequent the public baths or any other place, no fewer than two or three should go together, and those who have to go somewhere must not go with those of their own choice but with those designated by the superior.

37. The care of the sick, whether those in convalescence or others suffering from some indisposition, even though free of fever, shall be assigned to brothers or sisters who can personally obtain from the pantry what they see is necessary for each one.

38. Those in charge of the pantry, or of clothing and books, should serve their brothers and sisters without grumbling.

39. Books are to be requested at a fixed hour each day, and anyone coming outside that hour is not to receive them.

40. Those in charge of clothing and shoes shall not delay in giving them whenever they are required by those in need of them.

Chapter Six

41. You should avoid quarrels altogether or else put an end to them as quickly as possible; otherwise, anger may grow into hatred, making a plank out of a splinter, and turn the soul into a murderer. For so you read: "Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer" (1 John 3:15).

42. Any who have injured others by open insult, or by abusive or even incriminating language, must be mindful to repair the injury as quickly as possible by an apology, and those who have suffered the injury must also forgive, without further wrangling. But if they have offended one another, they must forgive one another's trespasses for the sake of your prayers which should be recited with greater sincerity each time you repeat them. Those who are often tempted to anger but are prompt to ask pardon from those they admit to having offended are better than others who, though less given to anger, find it quite difficult to ask forgiveness. Those who are never willing to ask pardon or do not do so from the heart have no reason to be in the monastery, even if they are not expelled. Therefore, avoid overly harsh words, and if they escape your lips let those same lips not be ashamed to heal the wounds they have caused.

43. But whenever the need of maintaining discipline forces you to use harsh words in imposing order on younger members, then, even if you think you have been unduly harsh in your language, you are not required to ask forgiveness; for too great a humility on your part may undermine the authority of your office in the eyes of those who must be subject to you. But you should still ask forgiveness from the Lord of all who knows the warm love you have even for those whom you might happen to correct with undue severity. However, you are to love one another with a spiritual rather than a fleshly love.

Chapter Seven

44. You should obey superiors as fathers or mothers with the respect due them so as not to offend God in their persons. Much more should you obey the priest who bears responsibility for all of you.

45. It shall pertain chiefly to superiors to see that these precepts are all observed and, if any point has been neglected, to take care that the transgression is not carelessly overlooked but is punished and corrected. In doing so, they must refer whatever exceeds the limit and power of their office to the priest who enjoys greater authority among you.

46. Your superiors, for their part, must think themselves fortunate not because they rule in virtue of their office, but because they serve in love. In your eyes they shall hold the first place among you by the dignity of their office, but in God's sight let them lie beneath your feet in fear. They must be a model of good works for all. Let them admonish the unruly, cheer the faint-hearted, support the weak, and be patient toward all (1 Thessalonians 5:14). Let them love discipline and instill respect for it. And though both are necessary, they should strive to be loved by you rather than feared, ever mindful that they must give an account of you to God.

47. It is by willing obedience, therefore, that you show mercy not only toward yourselves, but also toward superiors, whose higher rank among you exposes them all the more to greater peril.

Chapter Eight

48. The Lord grant that you may observe all these precepts in a spirit of charity, as lovers of spiritual beauty, and may spread abroad the sweet odor of Christ by a good life, not as slaves living under the law but as men and women living in freedom under grace.

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