

The Rule of Life In the light of the Word of God



Brothers of Christian Instruction
On-going formation 2006-2007

Booklet 1

*The Rule of Life in the light
of the Word of God*

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The Chapter of 2006 wished to remind each one of the importance that the Word of God and the Rule of Life have for us all.

“Brothers, communities and Provinces, convinced of the importance given by our Founders to the Word of God and the Rule of Life, seek inspiration from them and try to find ways and means to place them at the very heart of their life”. (Chapter 2006)

For us, Brothers, the Rule of Life cannot be understood without its being rooted in the Word of God, and the Word cannot be put into practice without following the dispositions expressed in the Rule, a faithful reflection of the gift of the Spirit given to our Founders. *“The Rule of Life, inspired by the Gospel and the intuition of the Founders is for each Brother a sure guide along the way he has chosen It is the application of the Gospel to his own particular state and mission The Brother makes it an integral part of his life because he knows that by being faithful to his Rule he is following and serving Jesus Christ himself.” (D 196)*

We love our Rule of Life as we love our vocation in following Christ. In order to better understand its meaning and beauty, so as to inspire our mission, we read it and meditate on it in the light of the Word of God which is its foundation. At least that is what is expected of us.

The Rule is *“the expression of the will of God ... tells us Fr. de la Mennais, if such and such an article appears less important to you, watch your judgment nothing is small in the service of God, and*

your perfection does not consist in big things which rarely come to you, but in the small ones which take place everyday.” (Rule of 1825)

With the hope of helping each one to understand this text, the General Council has decided to offer to the communities some materials which will assist in rediscovering the Rule of Life by bringing to it the enlightenment of the Word of God, that is to say of Christ, the Word incarnate”. *“The Rule of Life is nothing else but the Gospel as we have to live it today”*, wrote Brother Bernard Gaudeul as he presented it to the Brothers on February 11, 1984, *“it puts us in the presence of Christ chaste, poor, obedient It invites us to live as children of God, to the image of the Beloved Son consecrated to the Father.”*

We wish that the Provinces and communities will find in these series of publications an itinerary for opening the book of the Rule of Life and to draw from it new strengths to respond to the call of God today and to witness to Christ, the light of the world. *“The taking into consideration of the Rule will not deprive the consecrated people of the sure criteria in the search for the appropriate forms of a witness that responds to the needs of the times without running away from the initial inspiration”* (VC 37).

This journey of formation will be presented under the form of seven leaflets: a general introduction, which will be part of this first publication, followed by six chapters: These leaflets will be sent throughout the year and, to be used according to the guidance of the Brother Provincial or the Brother Vice-Provincial. They will allow each one, in the community, to “start afresh from Christ” inspired by the Spirit, in fidelity to the Charism received.

May the Virgin Mary, who meditated all these things in her heart, reveal in us this love of the Rule of Life, and may she support us in our willingness to follow Jesus and to witness to him to the children with a love more and more pure.

How to use

1.- The **Superior** distributes sheets to each and outlines the aims to be reached.

2.- **Time on your own.**

A generous personal time is given (the length of a community meeting perhaps, if it coincides with a community meeting) in order to:

- Read what relates to the theme of consecration in the constitutions and directory.
- Personal response to the questions regarding individuals and communities
- Read the text for reflection distributed to each

3.- **Community meeting** during which:

- In the first instance, share the responses to personal and community questions, on the given topic
- Through sharing, bring together ideas from the text arising from questions retained
- We do the work indicated remembering we are the “image of Jesus Christ”: feelings, beliefs, wishes, choice

4 - **Personal reading of the section** :

To continue deepening (p. 14)

If one wishes, sharing the following theme is possible.

- What does the Rule mean to me ?
- What, for me and my community, is the most important feature from those underlined par Father de la Mennais ?

THE WORD OF GOD AND THE RULE OF LIFE

1.- AIMS

- To give the Rule of Life a central place ,which it should have in our personal life and community life.
- To make the Rule of Life an instrument of animation at personal and community level.
- To discover the deep relationship that exists between the Word of God and the Rule of Life and to get used to reading one in the light of the other.
- Become accustomed to focusing the light of the Rule on our life and on community events.

2.- TO BEGIN WITH

Personal discernment

- What is the Rule of Life for me? What meaning has it in my life?
- How often do I read it, meditate upon it, pray with it?
- Can I say that the Rule holds a central place in my life? Can I say that I know it?
- What consequences are there for my life coming from the above replies?

Community discernment

Bro. Bernard Gaudeul wrote, in his presentation of the Rule: “Let us not hesitate to study it in community. Let us live it. Let us respect its spirit without neglecting the letter of it. It will then be for each of us ‘ a friend who does not deceive and a guide who never leads astray.’”

- Do we read and meditate upon the Rule of Life periodically in community?

- Do we read and enlighten the community events in the light of the Rule of Life: changing community, the death of a brother, the welcome we give to visitors, apostolic events.....?

- What does the Rule of Life signify for our community?

- What are the consequences for community life coming from the above replies?

3.- FOR COMMUNITY REFLECTION AND SHARING

1 – The Rule and the following of Christ

The supreme standard of all Christian life, including religious life, is the following of Christ, such as the Gospel proposes to us.

“ The ultimate standard of religious life is to follow Christ according to the Gospel teaching and this should be held up by all Institutes as their supreme rule”¹

“ One should never forget, as founder, that the basic Rule, the only Rule of religious life is this one: the Gospel, the “sequela Jesu”²

There is a human principle, followed and respected by the Church which goes “ The general is perceived only through the particular.” The following of Christ takes on specific and characteristic forms for each charism. It is such characteristic form which is proposed in our Rule of Life. “ *The purpose and ultimate meaning of Rules and Constitutions consists in nothing more than to determine a way of acting in harmony with a chosen ideal or, better still, with the principle that our Founder saw himself acting through the Holy Spirit by means of his founding charism. He did not forget that Rules as much as life style, should be serving a higher value: the fundamental value of following Christ.*”³

Each charism personifies and explains a determined way to follow Christ: “ *In every founding charism, the very fact that a deep desire is shown to base it on Christ as witnessing to a specific part of his mystery**”⁴ “ *Feeling myself called to follow Jesus, I find an appropriate way to follow Him to-day through the charism which takes its shape in the Rule*”⁵

¹ P.C. n° 2, n° 30.

² José Cristo Rey : *Theology of Religious Life*, BAC 2002, p. 232.

³ Jésus Alvarez, « Charismatic dimension of the following of Christ ».

⁴ V.C. n° 36

⁵ *Dictionnaire of theology of consecrated life* (Spanish edition, p. 1548).

2.- The Rule as an expression of charism which is alive

According to “*Dei Verbum*” Tradition forms part of the deposit of the Word of God. “*Holy tradition and Sacred Scripture constitute the sole deposit of faith of the Word of God which is confided to the Church.*”⁶

Tradition is the way forward offered by the Spirit to the Church to deepen and render more active the Word of God in history. “*It is through this same Tradition that the Sacred Books become known in their totality to the Church. It is through her that Sacred Scripture is understood in a more profound way and is made so much more alive in the Church.*”⁷

Every charism, by the fact that it provokes within the Church through the Spirit, based on scripture, and approved by the magisterium, is part of the living tradition of the Church.

This is the very deep reason why the charism must be recognised by the Church and the approved Rule. In a certain way, charism and rule are both a part of the Word of God as living tradition within the Church. “*Truly, consecrated life is alive in the way it is and acts towards Jesus as Word Incarnate before the Father and before men. It is a living tradition of the life and message of the Saviour.*”⁸

But a charism takes shape in the Rule. Thus wrote Brother Bernard Gaudeul: “*The Rule of Life explains clearly the very charism of our Institute*”⁹

The charism, as lived and demonstrated by the Founder is crystallized in the Rule. “*By its very nature, the Rule endeavours to give shape to the charism that its author lived, demonstrated and which he*

⁶ D.V. n° 10

⁷ D.V. n° 8

⁸ V.C. n° 22

⁹ Br. Bernard Gaudeul, Presentation of the Rule, 11 Feb. 1984.

wanted to transmit to his followers. *It is a practical way of following Christ.*”¹⁰

The Rule, as a charism, is the Word of God written for us, a manifestation of the will of God for us. “*Institutes thus possess their written Word of God, to which they want to turn regularly, in as much as the Rule is the expression of the founding charism to discover God’s will in every situation.*”¹¹

The Rule presents for us the true interpretation of the Gospel, a very efficacious and living understanding of it. “*Different forms of religious life are a form of living exegesis of the Gospel which helps towards a better understanding of this gospel across the ages. Each one among them, in their own different way, lives and clarifies in a characteristic way, one aspect of the Gospel.*”¹²

The Rule shows us the Face of Jesus that we are called to embody and make visible.

3. The Rule and the Gospel

Brother Bernard Gaudeul said “*The Rule is the Gospel such as we should live it to-day.*” The Rule shows us how we should read and live the Gospel to-day. “*The Constitutions are one path of the Gospel, that is to say, they are the application of the Gospel to daily life. They are the expression of the characteristic way the Founder read the Gospel, guided by the Spirit*”¹³

“*The Constitutions are a second reading of the Gospel made by the Founder and his followers in the special light shed on them by the Spirit. It is not a supplement to the Gospel, but rather an interpretation of the Gospel. It is so important for religious to have very clear ideas as to how their Institute reads the Word of God.*”¹⁴

¹⁰ Dictionary of theology of consecrated life (Spanish edition, p. 1438)

¹¹ Dictionary of theology of consecrated life (Spanish edition, p. 447).

¹² Jesús Alvarez: The History of charism.

¹³ Dictionary of theology of consecrated life (Spanish edition, p. 448)

¹⁴ Dictionary of theology of consecrated life (Spanish edition, p. 451)

“ Rules and Constitutions have no other aim but to be the direction in which a particular Institute sees the Gospel matching the life of communion and mission”. ¹⁵

Every charism is a particular expression of the Mystery of Christ as shown through the Rule. The charism that the Spirit spreads to a Founder always includes a particular way of understanding the Gospel, a characteristic manner of interpreting. Founders are themselves a living performance of the Gospel. Following the urgency that The Spirit reveals to them, they make their individual study of the entire Gospel and translate this, not so much through words but more through existential attitudes and action

“ Thus, one can say that every new form of religious life that has appeared in the church has contributed to the spread and understanding of the Gospel” ¹⁶

The Rule is the Word of God for a Brother, so Jean Marie de La Mennais says. *“ Be persuaded that every time you read (the book of the Rule), you will become a better person, because this word is for you coming from God, in the sense that the advice and orders given by your superiors are His, and because in the end a particular grace is attached.”* ¹⁷ *“ Regard the Rule as the expression of God’s will, and its strict observance as the most sure way of pleasing Him and becoming holy.”* ¹⁸

4.- The Rule as the Word of God created and bestowed on the community

“ Scripture grows on those who read it” (Gregory the Great).

¹⁵ José Cristo Rey : Theology of religious life, BAC 2002, p. 238.

¹⁶ Jesús Alvarez, Charismatic dimension of “Sequela Christi”.

¹⁷ Sermons VII, 2354-2355.

¹⁸ Rule of 1825 (See Rule of Life 1983, p. 189).

The community has been stirred by the Holy Spirit to bring to life the charismatic Word. The charism calls together, and at the same time, forms the nucleus of his identity.

The community is the means created by the Spirit to personify the Word to-day. The Word as included in the Rule, to make up the nucleus of the identity of the community.

*“ Through the Word of God, lived out in a radical way and taken seriously, is born the community. In this the Word of God realises this miracle, or can realise this miracle, that of giving birth to a visible community”.*¹⁹ The Word needs the community which reads it, transmits it, remembers it and records it.

Charism, like Scripture, speaks of Christ, but also of the community. The life of the community contributes to revealing and deepening the various characteristics of Christ, special to charismatic reading.

The mission of the community is to continue, in time, to unite Scripture with the signs of the times to maintain the vitality of the charism.

¹⁹ F. Ciardi: The Word makes the church (Italian version : “Unità e carismi”, n° 5, 2001).

4. – Sharing

After having thought about the texts above and if, truly, I do not want, we do not want, the status-quo,

- three things never to forget
- concrete tasks I must do
- concrete aims I have heard

Some proposals:

- Devote spiritual reading on Saturdays to an ongoing reading of the Rule. For that, read the numbers of the Rule, one number after another, leaving a pause after each to take it in or to discuss together a particular number.
- Get into the habit of examining our life in the light of the Rule of Life: apostolic events, community visits, illness of a confrere, mission given....

5.- CONTINUE TO DEVELOP

The Rule and the Founder

When we read the writings of the Founder we must take care to distinguish between the rough and rugged cover of the language of tasty fruit and deep intuitions which surround this skin. These are intuitions we should welcome and bear fruit. Each of us is a child of our time, tastes, style and expressions. But behind all this, we should discover the deep values which this moment lives and proclaims. We would now like to present the broad intuitions of the Founder when he speaks of the Rule and their topical importance for us.

The Rule, our motto

Our Founder loved to repeat: “God alone, God, there is our maxim”. He says the same when he refers to the Rule and he reaches the same conclusion: the Rule, there is your motto. Live the Rule is as if you live out the motto “ God alone”, given that the Rule, as he said, is the expression of the will of God for the Brother. *“ My children, do you want to avoid this trap, then love your rules; re-read them often, do not allow yourself to transgress the least of them willingly. The Rule, always the Rule and nothing but the Rule, let this be your motto ”.*²⁰

The Rule – Congregation

The vitality, fidelity and the future of a Congregation depend upon, for the Founder, on our fidelity to keep the Rule. In him this was a theological conviction, underlined by history. *“ I do not fear telling you: the progress, the very existence of the congregation depends on our faithfulness in keeping it (the Rule): it will be the same for us as for every other orders, without exception; these have flourished as long as the rules were*

²⁰ Sermons 73 FR 542 (Volume II, 576).

*observed rigorously; they have perished or become extinct as soon as the authority of the rules is weakened.”*²¹

The history of religious life is there to endorse this. That is why the Founder said this, after reflection, since experience shows this. “

Before taking up engagements, you must examine if you have the courage and the strength to keep them in all detail. Now you cannot fail them without it being a loss to you, and without contributing, as much as this is in you, to the ruin of the congregation of which you are members.

*“ I say to the ruin of the congregation and I say this after reflection; why? It is because experience has taught us that religious orders, as long as their first rules have remained alive and faithfully observed, have been the glory of the Church, but they become a scandal when they lose the esteem the love of the rule which was prescribed for them by their holy founders; as soon as the spirit of fervour is extinguished, and disorders introduced into their very being, then it is true that the humble practices that are despised and which one allows to be neglected, and who keep and uphold order within congregations and discipline, without which they cannot subsist.”*²²

For a congregation the Rule is the cornerstone, the keystone which holds the edifice up. Remove the keystone and the whole building crumbles. The most formidable enemy for a congregation is laxity which is introduced when the Rule is no longer kept. “ *But, in the same way as a congregation grows and houses increase, we must fear laxity, and in order to avoid this each one must attach himself more closely than ever to the Rule. And there, that is why I have given you this year a new edition of Reueuil. In the same way, when the keystone, that is to say, the stone which supports all others, is missing, then the whole arch collapses, just as in a congregation, when the rule is broken, the whole congregation falls piece by piece*”.²³

²¹ Sermons p. 573 5 (Volume II, p. 629).

²² Sermons 73 FR 542 (Volume II, p. 574-575).

²³ Sermons 73 FR 542 (Volume II, p. 536)

The Rule is the foundation upon which the congregation should be built, given that it is the expression of God's will for us, as our Founder has told us. In St Matthew 7, 24-27 we read: “ *Therefore, everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them, will be like a sensible man who built his house on rock.*” The Congregation which lives the Rule, which listens to these words and puts them into practice, is like a house built on rock who has no fear of storms. Whoever abandons his Rule is like the house built on sand which collapses under pressure.

“ If this happens to communities fervent to start with, because they have not kept the rules they had received in all fidelity and which were in some way, the foundation on which these were based, have I not grounds to fear even more for our small congregation the same misfortune, if you do not attach yourself strongly to the exact observance of all that is recommended or prescribed by statute. “ ²⁴

All members of the Congregation have a great responsibility to ensure fidelity to our charism. The Founder stressed to all Brothers to take account of this responsibility. “ *In effect, the very existence of a congregation, like that of any religious body, relies on the fidelity of its members to keep the rule; any violation of the rule is a wound inflicted on the congregation, which, if it received numerous others, would be immediately destroyed, whereas it can only increase and flourish if each member does not allow himself to do what is forbidden by our constitutions and is faithful always to what they prescribe.*” ²⁵²⁵

Fidelity to the rule is always a source of hope for a congregation. “ *What impresses me above all, what gives me confidence for a future full of high hopes, is that you be strengthened in the practice and in the love of your holy Rule*”. ²⁶²⁶

Every charism is a goal towards salvation coming from the Spirit in the Church. To live the Rule is to support God's plan and the designs of God for the Congregation. Not to live it is to place obstacles in God's plan of salvation.

²⁴ Sermons 73 FR 542 (Volume II, p. 575)

²⁵ Sermons 73 FR 541 (Volume II, p. 572)

²⁶ Sermons 73 FR 543 (Volume II, p. 577)

*“Yesterday, I placed before your eyes the plan that God has for the Congregation, to hasten its development and to strengthen it; I exhorted you at the same time, to support, in so far as you are able, the merciful designs of Providence, by the faithful observance of your Rule.”*²⁷

What is the Rule for a Brother?

The Rule is the expression of God’s will for a Brother

The Rule is the expression of God’s will; it is a present from heaven for the Brother, a revelation. *“Do not forget, my children, that this rule so simple in appearance, is, however, the safest way to salvation that we could receive from God’s goodness! By fulfilling all that the rule prescribes, by avoiding all that it prohibits, we are certain to be doing God’s will, and thereby never going astray.”*²⁸

The Brother must engrave it deep in his heart. The Rule constitutes the code of union with the Lord. And he must obey this code. This latter should be the subject of his meditation, become a nourishing food for him, a true guide. The Brother could well recite Psalm 119 while thinking of his rule. *“Keeping the Rule is the path to walk towards the Lord.”* It is a light for our path, a light to brighten the way.” *“May he meditate long on these words!”* *“Inscribe it deep in your heart; meditate on it constantly; may it be your delight and guide; obey it meticulously and with love in its smallest detail as in its greater demands, convinced that just as it is true, it does not reaffirm anything that is not the faithful expression of God’s will; and that God, following his promise, will not extend his hand to save us, because you have chosen his commandments as your lot.”*²⁹

²⁷ Sermons 73 FR 531 (Volume II, p. 560)

²⁸ Sermons 74 FR 573 (Volume II, p. 629)

²⁹ Sermon VII, 2359-2364 (Marcel Doucet, Anthology, p. 267)

When a Brother lives his rule he discovers what it means by being led by the hand of God. The Founder has recourse to the image of the child who walks, confident in his father who is holding his hand. Not to observe the rule would be to let go of the father's hand and to risk danger. God leads us by the hand through the rule. “ *What is it to break a single point of the rule, however small it might be? . It is to take the first step away from the straight road; it is in some way to pull away from the hand of God who chose to lead us, in order to walk towards our own leanings; now who will stop us on this slippery slope?*”³⁰

Expression of the will of God, the rule is the source of holiness

God alone is the source of holiness for the Brother. God alone, as source of total love and link to obedience, is the sanctifying grace for the Brother. The attraction of God's will is the saving grace for us once we accept it as source of holiness. It is the bond which **makes me holy**, while at the same time **separates me** from the bonds which are not the source of life and grace.

“ *Let us sanctify ourselves more and more, my dear child: God alone! God alone!*”³¹

“ *All our actions should be sanctified through obedience.*” “ *In union with God, the principle of all light, of all wisdom, of all life, we find our consolation, our joy and our strength. When I add that we be filled with the spirit of faith, deep down, I am saying no more than what I have just said for it is not faith alone which can lift us continually towards God*”³²

The rule as an expression of the will of God is the source of holiness of a Brother in all that he is and all that he does.

³⁰ Sermon 73 FR 542

³¹ « Father de la La Mennais puts the question to me » 1.13

³² Anthology, p. 136.

Obedience to the rule is the carrying out of the sacrifice of one's own life to the Lord. The Brother who obeys the rule fulfils the spiritual sacrifice of his life to God, since he is seeking good in all things and what pleases him. *“ In the second place, your most indifferent actions, eating, sleeping, walking, take on an infinite value when you perform them in accordance with the rule and with the intention of obeying Him; why? Because you offer to God the most beautiful, the most meritorious, the most holy of all sacrifices, that of obedience; in your actions it is not a natural force that directs you, but that of spirit of faith, and by it making godly, in a certain way, the most common of actions*.* It is no longer following one's own will; which is sacrificed entirely; one is not limited doing what is good; but one does it as the saints do the will of God in heaven, since by the rule this adorable will is shown to us as well known so to say as they are.”³³ *“ Of all the graces that God has given to religious, the greatest perhaps is to have given them the rules in which their obligations are continually before them, each one of which is a means of holiness and perfection.”*³⁴

The Rule is the Word of God for a Brother.

The rule is the word of God addressed to each brother; it is the charismatic word which he should integrate into his own life. The rule is the “canonical” reading of the Word of God applied to the practicalities of his life. *“ Be convinced that every time you read it (the book of the rule) in its context, you will be the better for it, for this word is from God himself, in the sense that advice and commands from superiors are his very own, and because in the end a particular grace is attached to it.”*³⁵

The practice of the evangelical counsels is clarified in the rule. It is the expression of a particular way for the Founder to read the Gospel, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The specific way the Brother should follow to live and bring to life the Gospel is found in the rule. *“ Christians living in the world are deprived of this support, and though they can come to understand the gospel maxims, their practice is so much more difficult for them, because they lack clear explanations and each one is left to apply*

³³ Sermons 73 FR 542 (Volume II, p. 573)

³⁴ Sermons 73 FR 542 (Volume II, p. 574)

³⁵ Sermons 73 FR 542 (Volume II, p. 572)

*them according to individual lights. For you, on the other hand, all is foreseen even in its minutest detail, so much so that you have no need to examine or discuss or judge; you are always sure to act in accordance with the will of God and to do what is more perfect whenever you follow in close detail what is written in your rules.”*³⁶

The rule is the expression of the very spirit of a congregation. In the text a spirit comes through. It is by this that the rule should be read in the light of the Spirit. And not solely keeping to the letter or standard norms. He should use it for a true spiritual reading, in the strict meaning of the word. “*In such a way that none of your actions be contrary not only to such and such an article but also to the spirit.*”³⁷ “*Often remind yourself of what is said in the Rule, that your obedience should not be confined to an obedience of action, but it should be rather an obedience of mind and heart*”³⁸

The rule frees us.

La Règle libère notre liberté pour qu’elle soit une liberté pour aimer, pour Dieu seul. “*In keeping our rule, we will be freed from those dangers, which are all the greater as they terrify us less. Freed from earthly concerns and cares, we can concentrate on the things that pertain to God. We give ourselves entirely to God, and the world is warned, so to speak, that we have made a break with it, that we only want to see it so as to fight it; it will hate us, it is true, but it will also despair of not being able to lead us astray, and it will not even try*”³⁹.

The rule, source of peace.

“*Quicumque hanc regulam secuti fuerint, pax super illos et misericordia*”. = *Whoever follows this rule, peace and mercy will*

³⁶ Sermons 73 FR 542 (Volume II, p. 574)

³⁷ Letter 1160 for the retreat

³⁸ Letter 1152 to Brother Agathange Noury

³⁹ Sermons 74 P 561 (Volume II, p. 605)

be theirs. “Peace and mercy to all those who observe this rule” (Letter to the Galatians, 6:16) ⁴⁰ Sermons VII, 2358.

“You will no more be drawn to dispense yourself from the observance of any of your duties; it will be a great consolation for you if you keep to all of them” ⁴¹.

The rule is the anchor that gives security to the Brother in the midst of trials and difficulties.

The Founder uses the image of the boat and anchor to express the meaning of the rule in the Brother’s life. The Brother who observes the rule is likened to the boat with the anchor attached to it; the waves will have little effect on it; it will remain secure in the midst of the storms that buffet it. “On the contrary, in whatever trouble or temptation the Brother is faced with, provided that he holds fast to his rule like a ship to the anchor which makes it secure in the midst of storms, nothing can really disturb him” ⁴²

“Don’t consider, I beg you, as something indifferent to neglect, some point of the rule, however small it may appear to be. Once again, and I cannot repeat it enough, keep to your rule, as the rule says so itself, as faithfully as a ship to the anchor that gives it security in the midst of the storms that come its way” ⁴³

The rule is like a fence that protects the vine planted by the Lord.

For the Founder, the vocation is the vine that the Lord has planted. To protect that vine he has surrounded it with a fence. Not to keep to the rule is to get rid of that fence and so allow wild beasts

⁴⁰ Sermons 73 FR 542 (Volume II, 574)

⁴¹ Sermons 73 FR 507 (Volume II, 515)

⁴² Sermons 73 FR 542 (Volume II, 576)

⁴³ Sermons 73 FR 507 (Volume II, 515)

to destroy the vine. Quoting Psalm 80, he says we should ask the Lord to visit his vine and so care for it, and prevent the wild boar from devouring it.

“ A soul which is thus protected, if I can express myself in such a way, by the rule, is perfectly secure. It is such a vine that we read about in the Gospel, that the father of the family has surrounded with a hedge, for fear that it be ravaged and destroyed by wild animals. You will be more circumspect in your words, if you are used to keeping the rule of silence; you will not even have the thought of over-eating and drinking, if you take no alcoholic drinks between meals, if you leave the table at the time dessert is served; in a word, if you practice mortification on a daily basis... The rule is then like a barrier which keeps the enemy of your salvation at bay, and which guarantees you from his impending attacks”⁴⁴.

The rule is the Brother’s strength.

Another image that the Founder uses in speaking of the rule is that of Samson, whose strength resided in his hair. For John de la Mennais, the rule is the place where the Brother’s strength resides. The spiritual strength of the Brother is to be found in each one of the numbers of the rule and in all of them. To fail in respect to any one of them would weaken his strength.

“ Remind yourself of the story of Samson, whose strength was to be found in his hair; as long as he kept it, he was the strongest of men, and he became the weakest when he lost it. A point of the rule can be likened to one hair of your head, but that hair is the source of your strength, of your spiritual life; to break a point of the rule is to expose yourself to danger. And if you consider this point of the rule as of little importance, why then do you dispense with it? Are you not then all the more culpable? Don’t you deserve

⁴⁴ Sermons VII, 2355

all the more to be punished by God, since you are refusing him what is so easy in itself, what costs so little? ⁴⁵

The rule keeps the Brother faithful.

The Brother's fidelity to his vocation is assured by his fidelity to the rule.

“ My dear Brother, if you want to be faithful to your vocation, there are two things that are necessary: they are vigilance over yourself and love for your rule. Be faithful to it in all its demands, and I can vouch for your fidelity” ⁴⁶.

“ Keep the rule, my dear Brothers, keep it so that it keeps you” ⁴⁷.

“ Besides, a single word sums up all I want to tell you: keep your rule and it will keep you” ⁴⁸.

“ There is no other way of keeping temptation at bay than to take your rule, meditate upon its words, and to follow more exactly than ever the advice it gives you. If we act in such a way, we will certainly triumph, whilst on the contrary, a Brother that the rule does not keep and guard against the attacks of the evil one, will soon be overcome” ⁴⁹.

Attitudes towards the rule.

The rule should be observed exactly in all its points. *“ I cannot do more than recommend the strict observance of your holy rule; it is the only way to achieve one's objective”*. ⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Sermons 73 FR 541 (Volume II, p. 573)

⁴⁶ Letter 5068 to Brother Emmerand Prat

⁴⁷ Letter 4981 to Brother Laurent Haudry

⁴⁸ Letter 3987 to Brother Liguori-Marie Langlumé

⁴⁹ Sermons 73 FR 528 (Volume II, p. 556)

⁵⁰ Letter 1299 to Brother Marcel Deschamps

We should be guided by sentiments of love and respect for it. *“ Before concluding our retreat, it is the right time, it seems to me, to read over our holy rule, so that we be penetrated more and more with respect and love for it, at the moment when in God’s presence we will renew the promise to observe it in all it demands”*⁵¹.

The rule should be consulted, meditated upon, and observed. *“ It has given me great pleasure that nearly everyone this year has done all that they could to keep to what is prescribed in our statutes, to consult when in doubt, and to accept whatever decisions I made. I hope that in the future you will be still more attentive in meditating upon the rule, and that none of you will transgress it deliberately”*⁵²

*“ I ask all of you to pray for me, your old father. Before dying, I wanted to give you a new edition of your holy rule. Several copies will be sent to you. Love this small book, and give serious thought to all that is written in it”*⁵³.

It should be read often with respect and with the same attitude of humility and obedience as when we read the Word of God. *“ You should read it often, and always with great respect, and in a spirit of humility and obedience”*⁵⁴.

The rule should be studied and observed. *“ To encourage you more and more, not only to study the rule, but to observe it in all its points, consider the precious advantages that will be yours by your perfect fidelity in keeping it”*⁵⁵.

We should love it with all our heart. *“ Let us use it to rekindle deep down in our hearts great love for the rule. Without it, and*

⁵¹ Sermons 74 P 573 (Volume II, p. 629)

⁵² Sermons 73 FR 541 (Volume II, p. 572)

⁵³ A travers la correspondance IV, p. 173

⁵⁴ Sermons 73 FR 541 (Volume II, p. 572)

⁵⁵ Sermons 73 FR 541 (Volume II, p. 573)

when its spirit there is lost the spirit of humility, of abandonment to God and obedience, then there is as a result, in every congregation, confusion, dissension, disorder and ruin; look around you and you will see how true it is” ⁵⁶.

The rule should be above all the rule of our sentiments and of our actions. Our life should be at all times in conformity with the rule. It gradually gets rid of all incoherence in our lives and helps us to live in sincerity and in truth. “ *At the feet of Jesus Christ, the model of humility and of zeal, take the sincere and firm resolution to observe still better than you have done up to now, all that your holy rule asks of you so as to make progress in the perfection of the virtues proper to your state of life, and especially in the perfection of humility and religious obedience. I want this retreat to be different from all the others, in that the Brothers who have taken part will decide to accept the rule as the rule of their sentiments and of their actions. So that we don’t see any more among you, as we have seen too often, alas, in the past, men who have tried to reconcile what is irreconcilable: the principles of the Gospel and the ideas of the world, the interests of the present life and the hopes of the life to come”* ⁵⁷.

The rule is the expression of the spirit of the congregation. To forget that would be to lose the spirit of its foundation and origins, and so go down the way of relaxation. “ *The more rapid the increase of the congregation, the more we have to fear that it will weaken, and that relaxation will be introduced, and that will certainly happen if we fail to redouble our vigilance and concern to maintain in all its purity the primitive spirit and the exact observance of the rule”* ⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Sermons 73 FR 528 (Volume II, p. 556)

⁵⁷ Sermons 73 FR 528 (Volume II, p. 557)

⁵⁸ Sermons 73 FR 526 (Volume II, p. 552)

The rule is the gentle yoke of the Lord, but relaxation will turn it into a yoke that is unbearable. “ *An inner boredom has taken over my soul; what pleased and delighted me, now tires me and wounds me; everything seems to have changed in me; I am no longer the same man. I used to love and respect my rule. How dear it was for me! I read it often, with the greatest of pleasure and with renewed interest. But now I try to forget it, as it has become for me nothing but an embarrassment. I drag it along as if it were a heavy burden*” ⁵⁹.

“ *If the Lord’s yoke is light for the one who carries it with love, it is heavy for the one who drags it. There is no better life than that of a Brother who is faithful to his duties; whilst the Brother who is unfaithful to them, is most unhappy. The more he goes on, the more he is unhappy, the more he becomes unbearable to himself and very often to others also. Whilst a more Christian and more fervent life would restore to him immediately all the graces and all the consolations that his lack of fervour deprived him of*” ⁶⁰.

Finally, the rule imprints in our lives the image of Jesus Christ we have been called to model ourselves upon.

“ *You will continue to study the rule that you have promised to observe. The more you deepen within you its maxims and its spirit, the more you become attached to it, the more you will cherish it. So that in practicing poverty, chastity and obedience, and in dedicating yourselves in the service of those young people that Divine Providence itself put into your hands to convert and make them holy, you will make progress in virtue. You will be associated in the hereafter with the eternal glory and happiness of the one you have tried to imitate here on earth*” ⁶¹

⁵⁹ Sermons 73 FR 525 (Volume II, p. 551)

⁶⁰ Sermons 73 FR 513 (Volume II, p. 527)

⁶¹ Sermons 73 FR 499 (Volume II, p. 501)

Rule and retreat.

For John de la Mennais there is a very close connection between rule and retreat. The reading of the rule is the best way of preparing the Brother for the retreat. The retreat is the best time for the Brother to understand better the spirit of the rule and to become more attached to it.

“ From the 15th. to the 29th. August, every Brother will recite every day the “Veni Creator” to ask for the light of the Holy Spirit, and he will read the rule once a week from the 15th. to the 29th., so as to have present in his mind during the retreat the obligations that the rule demands of him “⁶².

⁶² Letter 1160 : Circular for the retreat

