



The Personal Rule of Life Guidebook

Community of the Gospel

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Read through this entire Guidebook before anything else to give you an overview of all that's included. Let's start with an excerpt from the pamphlet, *Explorations: Rhythm of Life*:

“In the Christian tradition, the desire to intentionally structure our lives as Christ followers is usually expressed through the *regula vitae*, the ‘Rule of Life’ (*the Latin is pronounced “ray-goo-lah vee-tay”*). In our contemporary society, when we hear the word ‘rule’ many of us immediately begin thinking of laws, commands, regulations, and directives. The more theologically-minded might bristle: is this an attempt to subvert the grace of God in favor of a system of merit and reward: obey the rules and God will love you? Others, steeped in our culture of fierce individualism and independence, might balk for different reasons: we have become ‘rules-averse.’ No one, we say, can tell me how to live my life. I want freedom and choice, not the constriction of laws and commands.

“But a *regula vitae*, a Rule of Life, is neither an attempt to prove ourselves to God, nor to impose anything on other people. The Latin word *regula* originally described a wooden strip with markings which could be used in construction or drawing. A *regula* was not the rule we find on the statute books—it was the rule we used in geometry classes to help make the sides of our triangles straight and true. In the same way, a *regula vitae* is not a set of instructions telling us how we must live. It is a description of how we *might* live. A Rule of Life outlines a pattern of living which is immersed in Christ, and invites us to shape ourselves to it—to become straight and true.”

A Personal Rule of Life allows you to clarify your deepest values, your most important relationships, your most authentic hopes and dreams, your most meaningful work, your highest priorities. It allows you to live with intention and purpose in the present moment.

It's not so much about what we do with our time, although that's certainly part of it. But it must also capture *why* we spend the time the way we do. The Personal Rule should be based on the Common Rule for Monastics – the Common Rule having a “being” focus, whereas the Personal Rule has more of a “doing” focus. What does it mean as a “doing” focus *for you*? How do you intend to live out the chapters of the Common Rule in your life?

The Personal Rule has a number of components. These are described in the next section. Then we'll get into exploring some ways to discern how to build *your* Rule. There are many examples of what can be put into your Rule, but there is a template available to begin your work.

Structure of the Rule

The basic structure of the Personal Rule of Life is outlined in the table below. The contents for each section will contain different information for each person’s own Rule, but the structure is basically the same for everyone. Here are the pieces and a brief explanation of what goes into each:

I. Preamble	This opening section is a summary of why you are writing a Personal Rule of Life. This may be the hardest part of the Rule to complete. It may also be the longest part, too. It requires that you do some deep inner exploration and discernment. Ask yourself things like this: Who am I now? Who do I want to be? Why? What qualities do you see in Jesus that you would like to have? What person do you admire? Why? How do I currently view my “public self,” “ego self,” and “true self”? Include a paragraph or two here that answers the question, "Why am I a monastic?" What is it that you're saying "Yes" to? How did the Common Rule speak to you?
II. Vows	Our vows are the cornerstones from which your plan is built. How will you manifest these vows in a way that they bring you closer to your True Self? In each section, briefly describe how you intent to practice the vows.
A. Baptismal Covenant	This is the starting point of the Rule, since it represents allegiance to the Triune God and the love it offers. Explore the wording of your Baptismal Covenant and record the most important pieces for you.
B. Daily Prayer	Prayer comes in many forms, and is most effective when it matches your temperament. Some people like the structure of a prayer book; others prefer communing with God in nature. The important thing is that we experience the presence of God on a regular basis. Eventually prayer becomes a life style, and we seem to always be in a state of prayer.
C. Reflective Study	Reflective study causes you to reflect on yourself, other people’s needs, and local, national, and world situations. It teaches us to see deeply – to look past the outward behavior and words of ourselves or others, and seek to understand why things happen the way they do. Learning this, we can better serve others.
D. Personal Service	The result of growing in love is an outpouring of this love into the world. But that does not mean you have to travel the world – the best service you can do is usually at arm’s length, and by using your own talents, skills, and interests – right there next to you!
III. Supporting Materials	This section is meant to embrace those things that have meant a lot to you as you travel your spiritual journey. They include personal values that you strive for, scripture passages or literature that really meant something to you, or various art forms that also spoke to you like icons, paintings, photographs, or poems.
A. Personal Values	Perhaps you are attracted to a particular value that has meant a lot to you in your life, and you want to make sure that it’s part of your journey, too. Honesty? Perseverance? Fidelity? Watch for these in your life, and capture them in your Rule. How would you define them? How can you bring this value into your life?

B. Wisdom Literature	We've all encountered a wise saying at one time or another that really "struck home." Do you have a favorite Bible verse? Why do you like it so much? Perhaps something a contemporary writer wrote meant a lot to you. Capture these in your Rule to help guide you on your path. Put them in here, and you'll never forget where they are.
C. Art: Pictures, Poetry, etc.	Inspiration comes through images as well as words. Art, in many forms, has provided this inspiration to mankind down through the ages. Photographs, paintings, collages, and the like that have spoken to you in some meaningful way can be added to your Rule of Life in this section.
IV. Application	How will your vows, values, and virtues shape your personal life? In this section, you can capture some of the details about how you truly want to live in the three areas listed here. Choose some of the categories listed, or create your own. This section is the "core impact" of the Personal Rule!
A. Personal Life	<p>There are many things that can be impacted by your monastic vocation in your personal life. Here are a few things you may want to write about:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Your Home (décor, simplicity, monastic cell, clutter, environment, etc.) * Personal Finances (how should I manage my finances as a monastic?) * Sleep and Sleep Areas (Am I getting enough sleep?) * Nature (Do I understand my place in nature and respect it?) * Free time activities (Do I get enough rest? Enjoyment from free-time?) * Nutrition (Am I treating my body justly?) * Wardrobe (What do I really need? versus want?) * Self-development (What do I need to learn/get better at?) * Employment (Is my job serving God in some way?) * Mindfulness (Am I in the present moment?) * Mental Health (Am I getting the mental health care I need?)
B. Family and Relationships	<p>But we obviously are not alone in the world, and you will eventually interact with others around you. In this section consider...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Listening and Talking (Am I a good listener? How can I get better?) * Hospitality & entertaining (Small groups; one-on-ones, etc. Am I a good guest?) * Punctuality (How will I respect the social needs of others?) * Parenting (How should I raise my children/grandchildren?) * Celebrations (how complex or simple should these be? Which should I do?)
C. The Wider World	<p>And, of course, there are other people who are not in our immediate lives who also deserve our attention in some manner...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Do I think of others I do not know? * How can I help others in my city or town? * How can I help others in my country? * How can I help others in the world? * Volunteering (Where can I best use my talents, interests, and skills?) * What random acts of kindness can I do? * How can I protect the environment? * How can I help the wild animals? * How can I reduce my waste?

<p>V. Spiritual Support Network</p>	<p>No one travels his or her journey alone. In fact, it can't be done alone. The journey of life is built on relationships – whether they're life-long and close, or whether they're temporary but interactive, such as when we check out our groceries at the store. A Spiritual Support Network is an intentional set of close relationships designed to help guide you through your journey. This group may include two to four people you can visit with on a regular basis to discuss your journey. The group may include pastors, counselors, therapists, spiritual directors, doctors, or close friends. In all cases, these people should be helping you to discover and sustain <i>your</i> True Self – not something they want you to be.</p>
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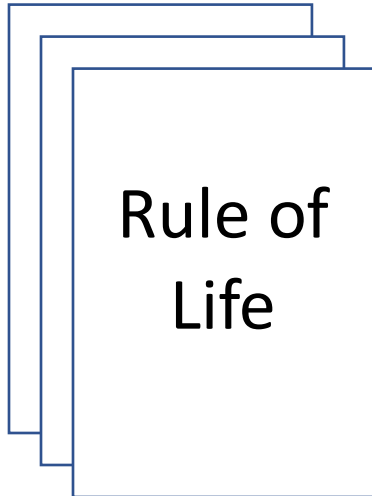
Many monastics build their Rule of Life in a three-ring binder. This allows for easier insertion and organization of materials over time. The Rule of Life is a living, dynamic document that grows with you.

A companion document to the Rule of Life is the *Personal Journal*. Most monastics (as well as many other types of people) keep journals on a daily basis. While the Rule of Life is a “forward-looking” document describing where you'd like to go and what you'd like to do, the Journal describes what happened in the most recent past.

A good examination of one's spiritual journey compares what actually happens with what we'd like to happen. Rarely will the two be exact. At day's end, perhaps just prior to Compline, use the Awareness Examen (found in our CG website library) as a basis for your journaling.

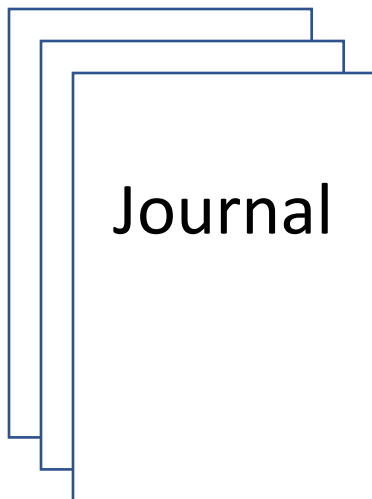
Reflect whether you're headed in the right direction, and make some course corrections for the next day. Celebrate successes and when you recognize the presence of God, but don't beat yourself up when you've had a bad day. Learn from it, and know that God loves you regardless!

Summary: Two key monastic tools and how they work together: The *Personal Rule of Life* is **aspirational and forward-looking**: Who am I? Where am I going; what do I really want to do? It's a planning tool based on deep reflection and discernment.



- Where am I now?
- Who do I want to be? Why?
- What tools or methods will help get me there?
- What role do my vows play? (Baptismal and Monastic)
- What scripture, quotes, stories, poems, or pictures have inspired me?

The *Journal* is a reflective tool, looking **backward**: How is it going for me? What changes do I need to make? What's working well? These two tools are the heartbeat of the monastic journey.



- Use Awareness Examen:
- How was God present in my life today?
- What went well today? (Celebrate!)
- What didn't go well?
- What do I need to:
 - Change?
 - Accept?
 - Leave alone?

Here are some key principles to keep in mind as you create and update your Personal Rule of Life. These come from various sources, some of which are on the Resources page near the end of this workbook.

I. Invite God into the process: Say a prayer for God's guidance as you sit down to meditate on these questions. You may want to pray about each question, or stop and say a prayer as you come to the end of each section.

II. Walk the journey with other people (and Christ) at your side. Build a spiritual direction network and work with them.

III. Take your time: Allow yourself time to be with each of the sections. You may not immediately know the answer and your answers may change over time. You might find it helpful to work through the Rule's sections over a series of days.

IV. Be gentle: Remember that this is a chance for you to celebrate and sanctify what matters most to you, not to berate yourself for what you aren't doing. Remember that the key is progress – not perfection!

V. Be realistic: Being honest about what you are capable of accomplishing and what your schedule allows is essential in creating a rule. An overly strenuous rule will not be sustainable or enjoyable to keep.

VI. The foundation of the Rule rests on your Baptismal Covenant. The one for the Episcopal Church can be found on page 11.

VII. Write your goals down: Putting pen to paper asks you to engage in a more concrete way than simply thinking about a theme or question. Use the space provided in the pages of this workbook or on a separate pad of paper.

In this section you'll find a collection of readings, prayers, and tools that will help you discern what to put into your own Rule of Life. Use what works for you, and leave the rest!

I. What is *my* purpose in life?

Each person has two essential purposes in life. The first, an inner purpose, is to return to the unity of the Eternal God. This is actually everyone's primary purpose, whether they know it or not. To achieve this, we need God's Grace to dissolve the false self (dysfunctional ego) in us, and allow the true self to emerge. We must "die to ourselves" so that our true selves may live in the knowledge of God. The false self is a barrier separating us from God. There must be an imitation of Christ before there can be identification with the Father. But God calls all His children to this union, and one way or another, all will finally come to it.

The second purpose is an outer one. This purpose is different for each person. It is to know, love and serve God in our own unique way, using the specific gifts and interests that God has given us. These gifts are not to be valued based on society's norms, but by the love and compassion of God.

Both of these purposes can be realized with the help of God through our Baptismal vows and monastic practices.

II. Anthony and the Angel

The Sayings of the Desert Fathers, a collection of stories from early Christian Egypt, tells a fascinating tale about structure and rhythms. Anthony of Egypt was a young man who went to live in the harsh desert regions east of the Nile with one simple yet daring goal in mind: to strip away every distraction this world had to offer so he could seek God with his whole heart.

Anthony pursued life with God at a level of intensity most of us find difficult to imagine—a pursuit which led to incredible spiritual experiences: visions of Christ, battles with evil spirits, and divine revelations. Anthony, though, became deeply discouraged, uncertain that all his efforts were really achieving anything. He was still deeply conscious of his faults, and at times felt far from God. He turned his anxiety into prayer: "Lord, I want to be made whole by your grace, but this discouragement will not leave me alone. What can I do? How can I be made whole?" As he finished praying he opened the door of his cell and caught sight of an angel sitting outside patiently weaving reed baskets. After a while the angel set aside his work, stood up, and stretched out his hands to pray. Then when he had finished, he sat down and began weaving

again. As Anthony watched from his doorway, the angel turned to him, smiled, and said, Anthony, just do this—and then you will be made whole.”

To Anthony, the point was immediately clear. The angel did not bring another astounding experience, another revelation or vision. Instead, he modeled a rhythm of living: work and pray. Work and pray. Just do this and do it this way, quietly and faithfully—and you will find the wholeness of life you seek.

III. Consider some of Jesus’s characteristics.

List them on a sheet of paper. (For example, contemplative; thoughtful; compassionate; sociable; an activist; studious; occasionally could be angered, etc.)

Then ask:

- How is this aspect of his character already expressed in my life?
- How could this aspect of the character of Christ be more fully expressed in my life?

IV. Two prayer exercises (from the Rule of Life Workbook of the SSJE) that you might find helpful in beginning to design a rule of life:

1) In prayer, imagine yourself in a conversation with Jesus in which you describe to him what it is you value most and how you want to live faithfully in the world. Ask what he values most and how he wants you to live.

2) You might imagine yourself at the end of your life and reflect on what you would like others to think of you or say about you at that time. You might even write your own eulogy. This meditation helps clarify what is most important to us by helping us reflect on who and what we want to be/become.

V. Discerning Relationships

Life and love are built on relationships. Therefore, the building blocks of your Rule are also built on relationships. Listed here are some key relationships and related questions (courtesy of SSJE) that you could consider when building your Rule. Have some paper handy to jot down some notes as you reflect on each of these questions.

What should your relationship be with God and His Church?

How would I describe the relationship with God that I desire and seek?

What spiritual practices or disciplines do I already know feed this relationship?

What spiritual practices or disciplines might I adopt that would help me grow in this relationship?

What pattern or rhythm of prayer (including times for silent reflection or for retreat) would fit my present circumstances?

How will I incorporate times for regular worship, alone and with others, into my life?

How can I take advantage of the sacraments of the Church (for example, the Holy Eucharist and the Rite of Reconciliation) to deepen my relationship with God?

What should your relationship be with other people in your life?

To what relationships in my life should I be giving special attention?

What guidelines can I identify that would help me grow in love for my spouse, my family, my friends, my colleagues in the workplace, and others?

What specific roles and responsibilities do I have?

How will I carry them out faithfully in my day to day life?

How will I carry them out faithfully over the long term?

How will I seek and serve God in others, especially in those who are different from me?

In what ways can I contribute to the work of God in the world, advancing the cause of peace and justice and bringing healing, reconciliation and hope to my community, my Church, my nation and the world?

What should your relationship be with yourself?

Where in my relationship with myself do I recognize the need for change or balance?

How will I care for myself (e.g., by eating healthy foods and by getting regular exercise and adequate sleep)?

How will I preserve a “balance” in my life, so that one area of life (for example, my work) doesn’t dominate other areas?

How will I express my creativity and develop my mind (through study and reading, the arts, music, etc.)?

How can I incorporate times for rest and recreation into my day, my week, my year?

Baptismal Covenants may vary in wording from denomination to denomination, but the intent and purpose is similar – to declare allegiance to, and desire for, God’s love for you, and to lay the groundwork for applying this love in your life. Holy Baptism is a full spiritual initiation by water and the Holy Spirit into Christ’s family.

Without going into the various theological implications of the impact of Baptism, and how it can happen for those who don’t “officially” participate in the Church’s Rite, be assured that God will find a way to bring all of His flock home, one way or another. No child is left behind! But when we have the Rite available to us, it’s a beautiful way to commit to a spiritual journey that leads us back to Our Creator. For the Episcopal Church, the Baptismal Covenant contains these two principle parts:

Commitment

Believing in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. (This, as we know, was recorded in Genesis 1, and was continuously revealed throughout scripture. As God created these things – including us – they were proclaimed “good”! Love!)

Believing in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. (God so loved the world – and its people – that He wanted dearly to come to us to teach, to heal, and show us how to live together. Love!)

Believing in God the Holy Spirit. (God would not leave us unconnected – so He sent us the Holy Spirit through Christ to teach us and sustain us. A loving parent! Love!)

Commission

Continuing your life in the Apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread together, and in prayers. (Requires prayer, study, and service!)

Persevering in resisting evil, repenting when needed, and returning to God’s embrace (Who will always welcome you back!)

Proclaiming by word and example the Good News of God in Christ. (Some of us are better at words, other at actions – and that’s OK!)

Seeking and serving Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself. (This does not mean that you love your neighbor to the same degree as you love yourself, but that you use *God’s* standard of love for *both* you and your neighbor.)

Striving for [restorative] justice and peace among all people, and respecting the dignity of every human being. (We do not seek retribution, but restoration!)

When we think of service to others, we often fill our head with images of journeys to third world nations to cure diseases or stop famines. While these things certainly are very important, we are all not born to do these types of things. We can support them in other ways through prayer, donations, and keeping our legislators aware of these types of causes.

Just as important to God are the “littler” acts of service to others – people we see on a day by day basis. There are so many people hurting in this world, and they are all around us. Sometimes a well-placed smile or “hello” is just what can save another person.

Each of us has been formed by God with a special set of gifts and interests. It is one of our chief challenges in life to discover who we really are so that we can live our lives to the fullest. It has often been said that we “can be anything we want to be.” Unfortunately, this is not true. We must become who God made us to be. This is the place where true happiness and fulfillment can be found, and nowhere else.

“Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” Col. 3:17 “Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power for ever and ever.” I Peter 4:11 We glorify God when we become who He made us to be, and then we serve God to our fullest within this ideal.

What guidepost can we use to determine what service we do? The standard to which we must turn rests in the higher ideals of our Baptismal Covenant: "Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?" This can be done in every personal encounter as we walk through every moment of each day.

And here are some discerning questions about Service:

How can I be a good steward of the resources God has entrusted to me (money, possessions, talent, time, education, experience, etc.)?

How can I best employ my gifts in the service of God and for the benefit of others?

How will I care for the environment (e.g., by living more simply and avoiding wasteful extravagance)?

What cause(s) am I drawn to support?

Selections from "The Ways of the Mystic: Seven Paths to God" by Joan Borysenko, PhD., Hay House, Inc., Carlsbad, CA, 1997

Some ideas to consider for your Personal Rule of Life:

1. Practice Gratitude/Count Your Blessings.
2. Say Grace: Think about what went into producing this food for you, and how it got to this table.
3. Protect the earth: buy natural, organic foods; avoid the use of fertilizers, but focus on building up the soil naturally. Start a compost pile.
4. Pay attention to seasons and cycles: there is a rhythm in the natural world which is beautiful and meaningful. Some of the religious celebrations are based on the lunar and solar cycles.
5. Unclutter and beautify your home and workplace.
6. Start and maintain a garden.
7. Care for a pet.
8. Spend time in the solitude of nature.
9. Give to Charity - time or money.
10. Meditate - Seek conscious communion with God.
11. Take time for yourself.
12. Nurture Your Relationships.
13. Cultivate a sense of humor.
14. Cultivate patience.
15. Practice self-forgiveness.
16. Forgive others.
17. See God in other people.
18. Practice devotion - daily offices, the Rosary, Stations of the Cross, etc.
19. Let music open your heart to God.
20. Act with integrity.
21. Bible reading and contemplation.
22. Study the teachings of other religions.
23. Learn why people take different paths to God; do not judge them.
24. When you are wrong, promptly admit it.
25. Do an active, fun activity daily.
26. Go on regular retreats.
27. Be gentle with yourself.
28. Study the lives of mystics.
29. Avoid spiritual materialism.

Selections from Borysenko, Joan, PhD. *The Ways of the Mystic: Seven Paths to God*, Hay House, Inc., Carlsbad, CA, 1997

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