

Year 2025

Course: Recognising oneself
The Statutes: a path and a mirror

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Lesson 2A

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The Carism and the Rule

I am happy to speak, to give this lesson, here in this classroom, because I lived many moments here with Chiara over several years.

I am not going to talk specifically about the Statutes of the Movement. This will just be an introduction which will help us to a greater understanding of the Statutes. I will stop at the idea of a Rule in general, and how it arose in consecrated life.

In the beginning, when monasticism was born, one of the names that monasticism had was precisely "life according to the Gospel" because the only goal of monastic life was to live the Gospel: to follow Jesus by living the Gospel.

Ideally, the consecrated life was born from Saint Anthony's experience of the desert. And his biographer, St. Athanasius, said that Anthony was like an open field, ploughed, ready to receive the seed of God's word. And he writes, "he was so attentive to the reading of the Scriptures, that nothing written there failed to bear fruit in the soil of his mind: he meditated everything within, so that eventually his memory took the place of books." That is, he had assimilated the Word of God and knew it by heart. It is one of the characteristics of early monasticism to learn the Word of God by heart, with the technique of "rumination" (that is, they repeated, they repeated the words of the Gospel, of Holy Scripture) and it entered into them, it was transformed into life.

Anthony did not, therefore, have a Rule because his Rule was precisely the Gospel. And Martin Luther, who was so critical of monasticism, had a very high esteem for St. Anthony and wrote: "St. Anthony, the father of monks and the founder of monastic life, considered and taught that one should never undertake anything that is not founded on the authority of Scripture. Nothing was wiser and more Christian!" This was why Luther had such words of praise for the beginning of monasticism: because it was purely the Word of God!

Even later, throughout the first millennium, the Word of God was central to monasticism.

In the East, the first Rules, when they were born, were very simple, they did not have deep spiritual content, why? Because the Rule precisely was the Gospel. They were just practical rules for living together.

The same in the West. The Rule, the great Rule of St. Benedict, begins by saying, "Listen, son..." and sets the monk in attentive listening to the Word of God. And he writes again, "Let us listen to the voice of God who addresses us every day..." So, for St. Benedict, as I mentioned already in the

introduction last time, his Rule is only an initiation for beginners, something to begin with; in order to go on, there is the whole of Scripture.

At the beginning of the second millennium, St. Stephen of Muret summarized the whole path that the monastic, consecrated life had taken in the first millennium. He wrote, "Toward the house of the Father ... there are different ways ... called the Rule of St. Basil, of St. Augustine, of St. Benedict. But these rules are not the true rule, they are not the source ... In fact, for faith and for salvation there is only one first and primary rule, from which all the others flow like streams from the source: this is the holy gospel which the Saviour transmitted to the apostles and which they faithfully proclaimed to the whole universe." "There is no other rule but the Gospel."

And we could go on... St. Francis of Assisi as his Rule begins, "The Rule of the Friars Minor is to observe the holy Gospel of our Lord, Jesus Christ." This is the Rule.

And I could quote many, even recent ones, in the twentieth century... Luigi Orione: "Our first Rule and life is to observe ... the Holy Gospel." And little Sister Madeleine: "We must build something new. A new thing that is ancient, which is the authentic Christianity of the first disciples of Jesus." That is, we must "take up the Gospel again, word for word."

The Second Vatican Council summarizes this path by saying that "the supreme rule" of all institutes, the ultimate norm of religious life, is to follow Christ as the holy gospel teaches.

So the question is: If everyone wants to live only the Gospel, why are there so many Rules? Why are there so many religious families?

It seems to me that the transition from the Rule of the gospel to the Rules is given by the charism. The Holy Spirit gives special graces to people so that they have a particular reading of the Gospel, have an ever-new understanding of the Gospel. It seems to me that the Holy Spirit is like a prism that breaks down the white light of the Gospel into many colours. Each charism has a different colour, but it is the same nature, because it is light.

So, each founder is led by the Holy Spirit to a particular understanding of the Gospel, of the mystery of Jesus: and to relive it, to implement it.

A charism therefore is like a "magnifying glass" of certain Gospel pages that for these men, these women, who found a charismatic family, are the key words that give it an identity.

Lumen Gentium precisely describes the multiplicity of charisms by saying that they are the same Christ but caught in different moments: "either as he contemplates on the mountain, or as he proclaims the kingdom of God to the crowds, or as he heals the sick and wounded and converts ... sinners or blesses children and does good to all."

So, the founders are a particular Gospel Word translated into life: an interpretation of the Gospel, a living exegesis of the words of the Gospel.

Chiara, indeed, says with a very beautiful image: What is the Church? Looking at the charisms she says that the Church is "Christ unfolded over the centuries. It is the mystery of Christ that is actualized from century to century; it is a living Gospel that is actualized in ever new forms.

What then is the Rule, a Rule? It is the Gospel read through the mediation of a charism. It is at the service of a life project that stems from the Gospel.

Another beautiful image of St. Francis. Thomas of Celano, his first biographer recounts, "It seemed to him that he had picked up very small crumbs of bread from the ground and had to distribute them to many hungry friars who were around him. (He had to feed the friars.) And as he hesitated, fearing that such fine crumbs, like little grains of dust, would slip from his hands, he heard a voice telling him: 'Francis, using all the crumbs make a single host and give it to whoever wishes to eat'... shortly afterwards, as he was keeping vigil in prayer, this voice came to him from heaven: 'Francis, the crumbs of last night are the words of the Gospel, the host is the Rule...' So, the Rule is the ground

together words of the Gospel, lived by Francis, and given to his disciples.

The Rule, then, is like an "introduction," as St. Benedict wrote, an introduction to the Gospel, a "mediation," an "educational tool" that helps to live the great rule of Scripture. It is a help for understanding and living the Gospel in the light of a particular charism. It is bread of the gospel, made of the Gospel, as St. Francis said.

And St. Francis de Sales uses another very beautiful poetic image: "Between the Gospel and the Rules ... there is no greater diversity than between written music and sung music." A Rule is the song of the Gospel.

All religious Families have a Rule. Some Rules have lasted for centuries and remained unchanged, such as that of Basil, Augustine, Benedict. There are no other types of institutions that have such ancient regulations. The oldest Constitutions of various States are from yesterday; these have lasted through the centuries. They are extraordinary Rules, which shaped the saints and gave birth to monuments of civilization.

But why is there a need for a Rule? I would use four words, briefly, to explain, as I understand it, why we need a Rule.

The first word is Order. Creation happens on chaos (there is a primitive chaos)! The Spirit comes, the Word comes, and order comes, creation comes. And how does creation happen? Through distinction: the distinction between heaven and earth, between light and darkness, between water and land. Chaos is brought into order.

Sin is the return to primitive, primordial chaos; sin is the elimination of distinction, the abolition of law.

A Rule helps restore the initial order, bringing back the distinction between things and between actions, as well as the distinction between good and evil, the law of death and the law of life.

Second word: Harmony. This distinction could degenerate into a division, an incommunicable separation between the various elements; a dichotomy between action and contemplation, body and spirit, person and community... A person is not fulfilled if he or she does not live all aspects, all dimensions of life. The community is not constituted if all dimensions of life are not active and animated by the one love. The Rule helps to find and preserve, guard the harmony of persons and communities.

Third word: Rhythm. Everything has a rhythm, life has a rhythm: the seasons, the heartbeat... The Church as rhythm has the liturgical year.

Even the person, even the community in its life needs to have a rhythm. The Rule of Benedict separated time into three equal parts: prayer, work, rest. So, the succession of moments within the day, the week, the month, the year, must have norms according to the Rule, and this guarantees an orderly and harmonious progression.

So, order, harmony, rhythm... The fourth word may seem a bit difficult: Discipline.

Remaining faithful to a life project that we have been given requires asceticism, self-control, constant monitoring of progress (am I doing well?); a discipline that places boundaries on changing moods, a lowering of the tone, improvisation. We are on a serious pathway! The Rule helps to take charge of our life, precisely with seriousness, without alibis, placing a discipline on the person and the community, so as to cope with possible deviations or temptations to deviate.

Transmission tool

And who is it that gives a Rule? In itself, it is the Holy Spirit, precisely ... who helps a person to understand in a new way, the Gospel; and to understand how to live it. So, a founder has an experience under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and he or she has to communicate it, has to pass it on. And the Rule is precisely the main tool that founders, foundresses, have in order to transmit their experience of the Spirit, to transmit the charism they have received. Hence the importance of

the Rule for charismatic continuity.

St. Francis of Assisi in his *Testament* commands "firmly out of obedience" all friars, not to add explanations to the Rule: "As the Lord has given me to say and to write the Rule ... so simply and without comment you must understand it and devoutly observe it to the end."

St. Angela Merici, speaking of her "holy Rule," invites the Virgins of her Company never to stray from it because it is "divinely ordained."

St. Vincent de Paul. The spirit of his family is "contained and incorporated" in the Rule and it is "impossible to acquire the spirit of the mission (which is its charism) without observing the Rule." "Everything is indicated therein; and to see how each one is to be formed and how he is to work, he has (no other way) than to cast his eyes on that mirror."

And my holy founder, Saint Eugene de Mazenod invites us to "impregnate ourselves with the spirit of the Rule," to practice it: "Only thus will we be what God wants us to be and worthy of our vocation." "There is the secret of perfection; there is everything that must lead you to God."

The Rule, in conclusion, is a privileged tool for transmitting the charism and thus for living the Gospel read according to the charism. It is inspiration communicated; it is an experience communicated that generates a similar experience.

Chiara, in one of her writings from the 1950s, calls it "The masterpiece of the saint." And she writes: The founder is "a little father, the saint is a little mother." "The rule witnesses, explains, establishes, preserves" his or her ideal, with "its own appearance, its own character, its own blood." The founder feels the need to do this publicly with the same strength that a mother has when she says, 'This is my child and not any other one.'" This is why the Rule "is the masterpiece of the saint."

As a mediation of the Gospel, the Rule directs the first steps toward an ever deeper reading of God's Word. It is the beginning of a spiritual journey that is a constant opening to new unlimited horizons. In this sense, the Rule has a "minimal," indicative value, never final: it opens up to an ever-greater experience, it starts you off, and then you move ahead!

The Holy Spirit, who is at the origin of the charism, is always the ultimate guide for every member of a charismatic family, just as He was for Jesus, for every Christian, for the founders and for the foundresses. The Rule of the founders was the Holy Spirit guiding them; the Rule leads on to the inner guidance of the Holy Spirit, which sets us free.

I'd like to finish with these important last words that St. Francis addressed to his friars, just before he died. He said to them, "I have done my part (we would expect him to say now you do yours, but no!) He says: I have done my part (i.e., I have let myself be led by the Holy Spirit); may Christ teach you yours." Everyone must be docile to the Spirit's action and follow what the Spirit indicates. He has done his part, he has transmitted it... Now you do the part that Christ will teach you. This is the meaning of a Rule.