

“Keep the Rule . . .”

It used to be that, when a novice made his vows, he would receive a number of holy cards on the backs of which his confrères would have inscribed axioms useful for someone beginning religious life in earnest. A favourite saying used to be, “Keep the rule and the rule will keep you.” I’m not sure what the second part of this nicely balanced aphorism means, but the opening phrase bears reflecting on at a time when some religious communities are still talking about renewal.

The old rules were elaborate affairs, in which little or nothing was left to the discretion of the religious or even his superior. It has been said, with reason, perhaps, that such rules encourage immaturity. One instance comes to mind, the reaction among seasoned religious to the Church’s altering in the 1960s the laws governing fast and abstinence. Without the slightest hesitation, many abandoned penitential practices that bore the recommendation of centuries of use in the Church and decades of observance among themselves. One must wonder what spiritual profit had been gained by their mechanically following a regulation that had never, apparently, been internalized. Indeed, one may ask if the behaviour of a mature Christian should be governed by any externally imposed rule’

I would answer this question resoundingly in the affirmative, for all sorts of reasons. For one thing, it’s a practical necessity to have a fixed routine for a group of like-minded people living together. In the case of religious life, we are drawing upon the collective wisdom of generations of consecrated men and women who have learned by experience how best to order their lives in this specific form of following the gospel. The approval of the magisterium, too, confirms the conviction that religious life is legitimate and necessary to the Church’s corporate witness. Then there is the fact that, in a well-regulated religious house, prayers are said, the Eucharist is celebrated, God is praised, and members exercise in their mutual dependence that love of neighbour which is the second great commandment. But the greatest boon that the scrupulous observance of a rule can bring is one that involves all of these and yet is difficult to describe. Only gradually have I come to recognize how powerful force for individual and social good religious life can be. The insight had been forming in my mind came to completion as I pondered a remarkable novel about another sort of regulated life in which a renunciation is required of the leading character that is as extensive as that most radical demand of the Gospel: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sister, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple” Lk 14.26).

The novel, *The Remains of the Day* by Kazuo Ishiguro, centres on the career of Stevens, butler at Dalington Hall during the 1920s and 30s, when Lord

Darlington, a fascist sympathizer, dabbled ineffectively and disastrously in international politics. The reader, wise through hindsight, grasps the full situation as poor Stevens could not. His concern was exclusively centred on the domestic affairs of the great house, to which he has sacrificed “father and mother and wife and children.” At the end of the novel, what had been his boast—“I’ve given what I had to give. I gave it all to Lord Darlington”—becomes regret for a wasted life:

I trusted . . . I trusted in his lordship’s wisdom. All those years I served him I trusted. It was doing something worthwhile. I can’t even say I made my own mistakes. Really—one has to ask oneself—what dignity is there in that?

The parallels between Ishiguro’s Darlington Hall and a monastery are striking, for in each the members of the household, including the lord/abbot, are totally subject to an ideal. Steven’s tragedy is that the object of his absolute loyalty was unworthy of it. Ishiguro’s point is subtly made, for the efficient management of Darlington Hall is no mean feat, and there is a vicarious thrill in witnessing Stevens successfully stage a grand banquet—“It is always something of a memorable sight to see that magnificent banquet hall employed to its full capacity”—at the same time as he points out to the housekeeper that the crockery is carelessly placed on the kitchen shelves. Stevens feels somehow ennobled by the great events that transpire at Darlington Hall, although he does not presume even to ask what they are much less question their worth. Ishiguro suggests that Stevens’s work could have been worthwhile if the causes Lord Darlington espoused had been right and good.

There is in man a desire to give of himself totally, and he will be at his best when he has committed himself to a (good) cause. The charm of monastic life lies in its providing the monk or nun with an object worthy of the complete donation of self that the vows represent: “You were slaves of sin, . . . now you have become slaves of God” (Rom 6.20,22). From the beginning of Christianity there have been figures whose absolute devotion to God has fascinated other Christians who were eager to learn from them the secret of continual prayer. An Antony of Egypt (d. 356) or a Martin of Tours (d. 397) were like magnets drawing to themselves devout souls who wanted more than anything to learn from the master the way of perfection. The phenomenon has persisted in a Basil or a Benedict, a Francis or a Teresa of Avila, a Baroness de Hueck or a Mother Teresa, and in countless other founders and foundresses of religious communities who effortlessly surrounded themselves with followers as devoted to their ideal as Stevens was to what Lord Darlington represented.

The difference between an Antony and a Basil or a Benedict is the invention of the rule. In its earliest period, monasticism depended completely upon the

influence of the charismatic leader. His authority, his methods determined the way of life of the group of devotees who had gathered around him. The drawback with this arrangement was twofold: it depended upon the appearance of a religious genius; and the community dissolved when the leader died. As religious geniuses are as rare as any other sort, the continued existence of such a community was precarious. Early on, the idea arose that the externals of monasticism could be put down in writing, and so the rule was born. When, for example, Saint Paula, the patroness of Jerome, died in 404 her monastic establishments—there were three of them, two for women and one for men—at Bethlehem were in danger of disappearing, for her daughter Eustochium did not have her mother's charism of governing. Jerome then translated into Latin the rule that the Egyptian monk Pachomius had composed. And so the powerful presence of Paula continued through the medium of the Pachomian rule. It is striking evidence of the power of a rule that the monks of the east and west follow even today, respectively, the rules of Basil (d. 379) and Benedict (d. ca.550).

Two elements are necessary for a successful rule: an active authority and a workable content. With these in place, one finds that many Stevenses—i.e., ordinary men and women—are able to accomplish stupendous works simply by putting into practice the dictates of the rule. The majority of the monk and nuns who preserved classical culture, who converted the barbarous peoples of Europe, who constructed churches and a liturgy of surpassing beauty were not geniuses. But they had in their rule something that the Stevenses of the world could not find in the aristocratic ethos of Lord Darlington: a cause worthy of allegiance and a method of serving it effectively.

Religious can successfully meet the crisis of our time in two ways: they can discover a religious genius to direct their efforts to please God and serve their neighbours; or they can find a rule that will allow mediocre people to effect mighty works for God and the Church. Geniuses are rare, but rules are numerous; their wisdom should not be neglected by a community that truly wants to direct the zeal of its members effectively. My advice to any community anxious to succeed in the adventure of religious life is to find a rule and keep it. It may be that in so doing they will discover the meaning of the phrase, “. . . and the rule will keep you.” ❧