

Developing a Personal Rule of Life

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Affiliated with Sacred Heart Monastery, Yankton, SD. 2020*

The original intent for March 2020 was to have an in-person Rule of Life Spiritual Pause to meet together and consider various approaches to developing a Personal Rule of Life. In light of the coronavirus pandemic, this is a more in-depth personal study of how to develop or update a Rule of Life. It is not intended to be overwhelming! Consider taking your time as you read through each section. There is no time limit for when your Rule should be complete. In fact, it is an ongoing process and you should be adjusting your Rule as your life circumstances change. Be gentle with the expectations that you bring to this process.

The Rule of Life Spiritual Pause includes background information about the Rule of Benedict, resources to use including the Oblate Handbook, and some options for ways to approach your Personal Rule.

First, find an extended time with few distractions, and have your Rule of Benedict and Oblate Handbook and some writing materials close by. If you do not have a Handbook, see below for a link to our website.

Arriving practice: Start by taking a few deep breaths and let yourself become aware of the weight of your body being supported by your chair. Notice the sensations in your body and especially to notice how you arrive at today's spiritual pause. Are you anxious? Hopeful? Uncertain? Please know that God is here to meet you where you are.

Take a few minutes of silent prayer to begin.

The Rule of St. Benedict and developing a Personal Rule of Life

If you do not have a Rule of Benedict, here's a link for daily readings of the Rule:

<http://archive.osb.org/rb/index.html>

St. Benedict wrote the Rule for a specific group of monks in the early 6th century. This "little rule for beginners" spread over the years and resulted in the rise of monasticism in Europe and all over the world. The Rule continues to be relevant and helpful today. It is not intended to be "harsh or burdensome" (RB Prologue vs 46), so we should also be gentle on our own expectations of developing and following our Personal Rule of Life.

Generally speaking, the Rule has several themes woven throughout its pages: a balance between prayer and work or daily manual labor, preferring Christ above all, stewardship for the items and utensils we use, and the humility to serve others in various ways. One may start with these general themes, and reflect on our own life and how we might want to continue our current efforts or to cultivate in greater depth certain practices or tasks that uphold these themes.

Using the Oblate Handbook

The Oblate Handbook has a section on a Rule of Life; Chapter IV, p. 71.

Here is a link to the online Handbook:

<https://www.nebraskabenedictineoblates.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/OblatesHandbook-SacredHeartMonastery.pdf>

In addition to providing background information and study resources about becoming a Benedictine Oblate, the Handbook is also a reference for spiritual formation including developing a Personal Rule of Life. Review the definitions of a rule and think of ways it can be adaptable to one's own life. We are reminded that when we have made or will make our Final Oblation, we promise to follow the Rule of Benedict "as our state in life permits"; even in our promises we are given the flexibility to change with our personal circumstances. The Rule of Life section has valuable information and processes and even samples of personal rules.

Highlighted selections from the Rule of Benedict

Rule of Benedict (RB) Prologue, v. 46: *"In drawing up its regulations, we hope to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome."* This particular verse encourages us to not be too hard on ourselves. For many, if not most, people, there is a little voice that tends to judge oneself harshly and it can be difficult to turn down the volume on that voice. Be gentle with yourself. Give yourself permission to change the personal Rule so that you are able to follow it more closely. Find the way of moderation with your Rule; not too strict and not too loose. We are reminded of a story where a visitor once asked what the monks or nuns do in the monastery all day. The response is: "we fall down, we get back up; we fall down, and then we get back up." Isn't that what life feels like most days? The implicit message is that between the falling down and getting back up, that we don't chastise ourselves excessively. Being aware of missing the mark on your Rule is helpful to regain the focus on continuing to follow the guidelines. If you find your thoughts are mostly of negativity and self-blame, consider stopping and asking where that voice is coming from. You may want to talk to a Spiritual Director for support. Pray for the ability to start over with a clean slate.

Reading the Rule from a different translation, or in this case, a contemporary paraphrase, can help us to get the sense of a chapter that really helps us with the big picture:

RB 72: The Good Zeal/Passion of Monastics*

*"Just as there are bad passions that lead us away from God to our own destruction, so too there are good passions that set us on fire to chase after God and the life that's really life. This is the right kind of passion that monastics must foster with fervent love: They should each try to be the first to show respect to the other (Romans 12:10b). We're on this road together, and so we must patiently bear with one another's spiritual and physical weaknesses, giving our all to learn to listen carefully to one another. No one should look after themselves, but each one should strive to serve the others in everything. To one another, members should show pure love; to God, loving reverence; to leadership, humble love. We should not want anything more than Christ, who can bring us together to the life that lasts forever. "*From: "The Rule of St. Benedict: A Contemporary Paraphrase", by Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, 2012.*

Note that in this section from the RB, the emphasis is on supporting each other, including spiritual *and* physical weaknesses. Is there someone you know that is going through a difficult time? Is there someone who physically needs support? Consider including in your Rule a way to be listening for the call for help by others.

RB 48: The daily manual labor: *"specified periods for manual labor as well as for prayerful reading"* which provides a safeguard against frenetic activity and the dissipation of energies. In what way can you visualize including a balance of action and contemplation in your daily life?

Approaches to developing a Rule of Life:

Using a schematic for organizing facets of life (see: Figure 1) Look at the circular schematic image including the themes of Health, Relationship, Rest and Work (*credit: Brian Carrier*). Take note of the detailed examples of each theme that fit into each parts of one's life. How might you organize your day following this schematic as a guide?

Using a daily or weekly schedule (see: Figures 2-4). Perhaps you decide on a schedule for a typical day, including the time that a task is to be completed, such as praying upon waking, or time set aside for Lectio Divina or another contemplative practice. Perhaps each day you would like to include tasks that help you be healthier, such as exercise or including time for food preparation, recreation or leisure, whether alone or with others. Figure 2 is a visualization of how your time is spent each day in pie chart form. You may want to do the same for your daily life today and rework the chart for how you would like your day to be more in balance.

Scheduling Sabbath time throughout the year (see Figure 5). Consider times for extended Sabbath that may include 1 day each week or month, a few days each quarter, and/or a week every year for time spent in more intensive prayer and contemplative practices. Write down specific examples of what practices you might participate in and whether this includes travel to a sacred or special place. (Example: an annual retreat at Sacred Heart Monastery)

Please note: Not every person prefers or is able to have a rigid structure to their day. Instead, an alternative approach may be to reflect on and answer specific questions, such as

"How can I care for my relationships with God or the Divine, with myself, and with others?"

"What are some concrete ways to include tasks or themes that help me to tend to and care for these relationships?"

"How can I further develop the relationships I have as an Oblate, including with the sisters at Sacred Heart, and with other Oblates?"

Revisit these questions frequently throughout the year.

Tree of Contemplative Practices and Options for Spiritual Practices

The word contemplative means "sitting or being inside something whole". It is a way of being, whether in a passive or still moment or physically moving our bodies or even listening carefully and intentionally to others. Contemplative practices provide us with a holistic way of being with what's happening our daily lives. The Tree of Contemplative Practices was developed by the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, which is a secular non-profit in Massachusetts. The Tree is included below (Figure 6) and here is an online link if you would like more information:

<http://www.contemplativemind.org/practices/tree>

On the website there is a free video explaining in more detail how the Tree of Contemplative Practices was developed and in-depth descriptions of each branch. Maia Duerr, one of the creators of the Tree, describes contemplative practice as *“shining a light on what we’re doing, building self-awareness and compassion for others, and resilience to what comes to us in life.”* This definition is helpful to consider how these practices can support our efforts in developing and following a Personal Rule of Life.

Description of the Tree of Contemplative Practices (TCP)

There are two roots to the TCP—communion and connection with something greater than yourself, AND awareness—of the wisdom that lives inside of you, also your habits, choices and patterns.

As you look over the seven branches of the TCP, take note to what branches you connect with already, and give yourself credit for already ‘practicing’ the practices. Jot down some examples of practices you already do, and some possible ways to include others into your daily tasks, or plan to set aside time to complete them.

Using one’s creativity can be helpful to move beyond words and lists when developing or updating a Personal Rule of Life. Using markers, paper, pencils, and magazines as another option to cultivate a personal Rule by using colors and images. Take your time in this process; it isn’t necessarily the end result of a Personal Rule of Life that is important. The process of noticing and being aware of our reactions and usual modes of operations every day has great value.

We are all individuals. We know what types of guidelines help prod us along in our day and what types tend to inhibit our participation. For some, a detailed list placed in a prominent place in our home is a helpful reminder. Others may use a colorful poster or a file that we can refer to every time we use a computer to help remind us of our Personal Rule.

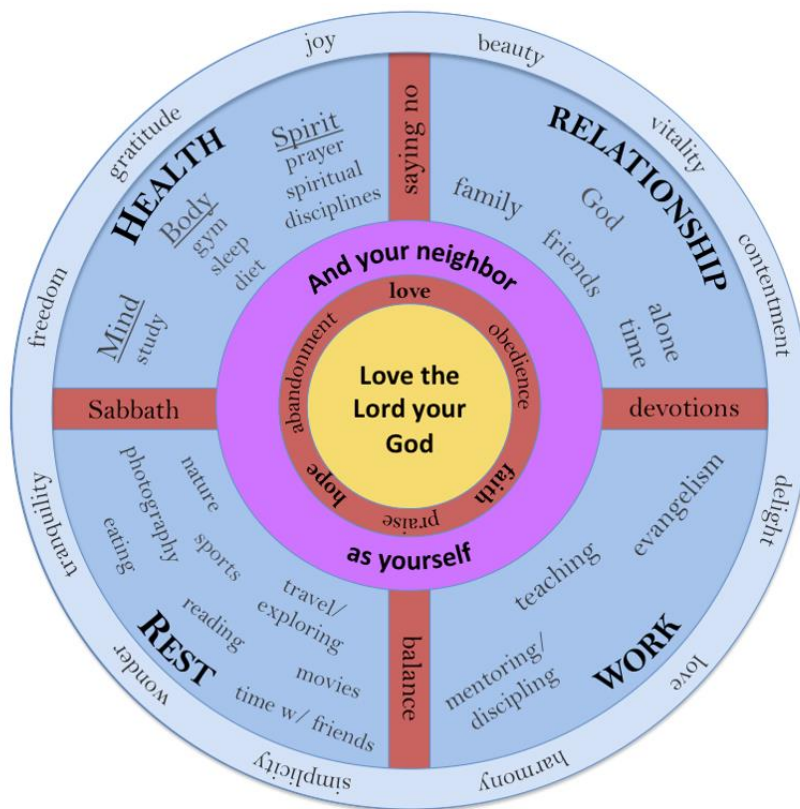
Using the Oblate’s Prayer (see Figure 7) instead of viewing a Rule of Life as a schedule. Instead, it can be a catalyst for a personal reminder about a one’s Rule of Life. Look at all the parts of an Oblates’ life that is included in the prayer. Perhaps you may want to say this prayer frequently throughout your week as a reminder to what an Oblate life could look like.

Next steps:

Take some time in quiet reflection and consider what mode of developing a Personal Rule of Life would be the best for you: detailed schedule, themes, creative, Pie chart, Tree of Contemplative Practices, Oblate’s Prayer, or another mode that works for you. Find the best way of reminding yourself what your Personal Rule is and frequently reflect on it and how you are able to follow it. Be gentle with your expectations, and understand that you may adapt it at any time.

We are reminded of St. Benedict’s admonition that his rule should be “nothing harsh, nothing burdensome”, and so should your Rule be as well!

Figure 1



Rule of Life
Spring 2013

<https://ruleoflife.com/myrule/>

Brian Carrier

Figure 2

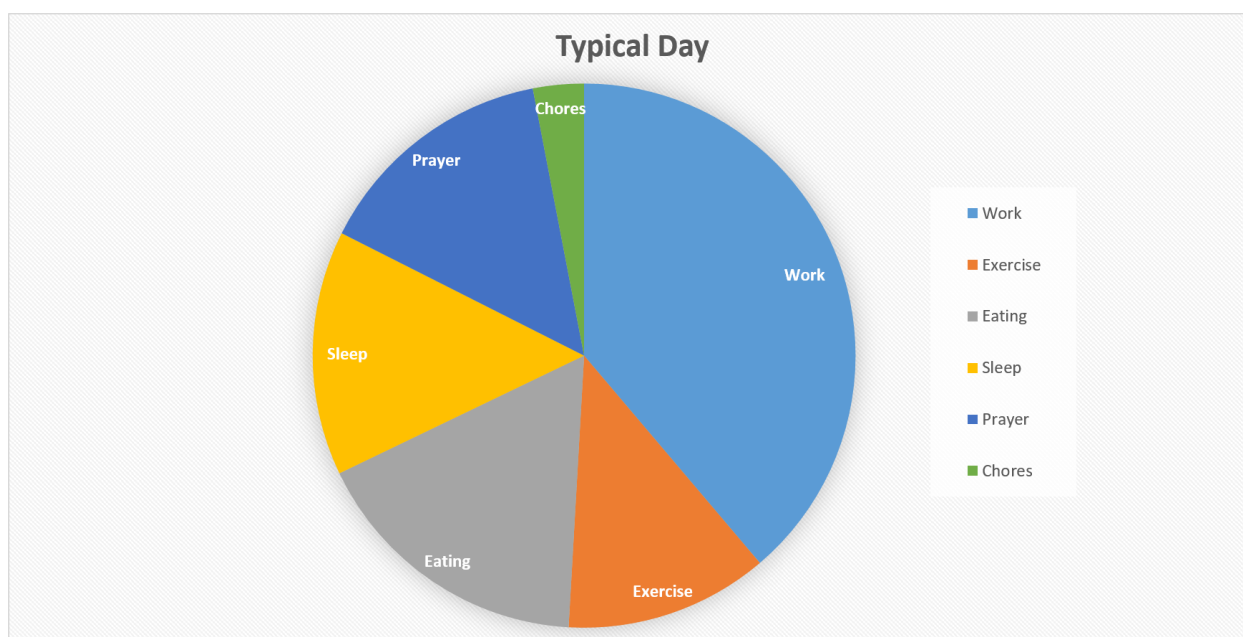


Figure 3

My Personal Rule of Life Weekly Schedule

	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
Contemplative practices/prayer							
Chores							
Rest							
Leisure							
Work							
Exercise							

Figure 4 My Personal Rule of Life Daily Calendar

Early morning
8 a.m.
9 a.m.
10 a.m.
11 a.m.
12 p.m.
1 p.m.
2 p.m.
3 p.m.
4 p.m.
5 p.m.
6 p.m.
Evening

Figure 5 Contemplative/Prayer Practices

	<i>Prayer/retreat time</i>	<i>Contemplative practices</i>
<i>Weekly</i>		
<i>Monthly</i>		
<i>Quarterly</i>		
<i>Annually</i>		

Figure 6

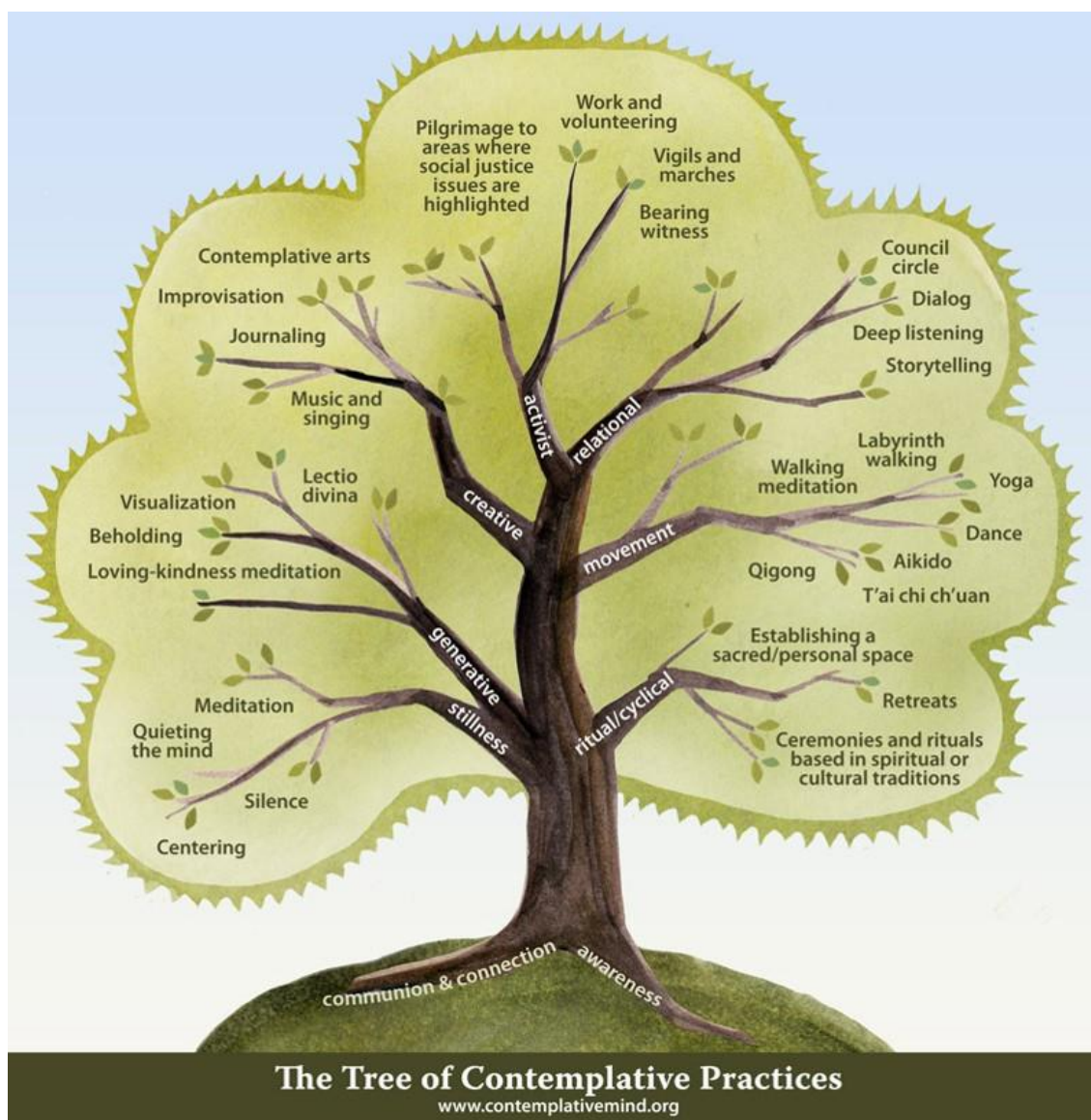


Figure 7

The Oblate's Prayer and a Rule of Life

O Loving God,
I ask your blessing this day
on all the Oblates of Saint Benedict
and those with whom we are affiliated.

Help us to become people
of prayer and peace.

Though scattered far and wide,
help us to be together
in the spirit of your love.
Give us hearts wide enough
to embrace each other
as well as those
whose lives we touch.

Enable us to listen and to learn
from each other
and those around us each day.

May we be models
in our homes, neighborhoods,
and communities
of wise stewardship,
dignified human labor,
sacred leisure,
and reverence for all living things.

Above all, O God, may our presence
among others
be a constant witness of justice,
compassion, and hope to all. Amen.

Self-reflection:

Review the themes of the Oblates' prayer below, noting which areas tend to be 'easy' and which are challenging. Prayerfully consider how you may address 2 or 3 areas to emphasize over the coming year. Be as specific as you can, and also be gentle with your expectations. You may prefer to write out your plan, or use creative ways such as using images or drawing to do the same. Place your Rule of Life in an area of your home where you can look at it frequently as a reminder.

Prayer

Peace

Community—Oblates, work, home

Wide hearts/embracing

Listening

Learning

Wise stewardship

Dignified human labor

Sacred leisure

Reverence for all living things

Justice

Compassion

Hope

Thank you for taking the time to further deepen your spiritual and daily life as an Oblate of St Benedict!

