

Plan of Life

(extract from Spiritual Theology by Jordan Aumann, O.P.)

The plan of life is a schedule of the occupations and practices of piety an individual should perform during the day. The advantage of some kind of plan or schedule is that it gives a constancy and regularity to one's efforts toward greater perfection. Without a schedule, one may lose much time, fall into a habit of indecision, neglect duties or fulfill them carelessly, or develop the defect of inconstancy. If one has a fixed schedule of life, there is much less danger of vacillation and wasted time, of being caught unprepared by some unexpected event, and of falling away from the practices of piety that are necessary for the spiritual advancement of the individual. When one is faithful to a plan of life, it is much easier to supernaturalize all the activities of daily life and to be attentive to the duty of the moment.

However, the plan of life should be adapted prudently to one's particular vocation and duties of state in life. A plan of life that would be suitable for several classes of persons would lose its effectiveness by being too general. The requirements differ for persons in various vocations or states of life: the laity, diocesan priests, and persons in the consecrated life.

The Laity

Living as they do in the world, without a superior whom they are bound to obey in matters that touch their personal spiritual life, and without a rule to guide them in their efforts toward greater perfection, it is difficult for the laity to avoid the danger of extreme individualism in their practices of piety. They may prefer to follow their own personal tastes and inclinations rather than select those exercises most beneficial to them. It should be strongly emphasized that, although the laity have a great liberty as regards practices of piety and means of sanctification, they should take care to utilize the fundamental means of sanctification before selecting this or that secondary practice of piety. Thus the frequent use of the sacraments, devout attendance at Mass, fidelity in the practice of daily prayer, the performance of the works of mercy -- these are basic practices that should play a dominant part in the spiritual life of the laity.

It is not unusual to find that the laity put greater emphasis on certain private devotions or secondary means of sanctification and neglect those things that are of greater importance. Moreover, it frequently happens that the laity identify a plan of life with certain observances that are proper to the religious or priestly state. The life of the religious or the priest is not a life suited to the laity and consequently it would be a serious error for a lay person to attempt to live an adapted form of the religious life. The plan of life utilized by a husband or wife, a father or mother, or a member of the various professions in the world should be orientated to an ever-increasing love of God but placed within the framework of the duties of the individual in his or her particular vocation or profession. Perhaps the best rule to follow in drawing up such a plan of life is to ensure that nothing

in the schedule would make it impossible or difficult for the individual to fulfill the duties of his or her vocation or profession.

Diocesan Priests

The diocesan priest and members of secular institutes are sometimes exposed to the same dangers and difficulties that threaten the lay person who has no definite plan of life. The diocesan priest must be in the world, but not of the world. His apostolate is such that it keeps him in constant contact with the people, and for that reason his way of life is evident to all. He must, therefore, be conscious of his personal obligation to strive for holiness and to give good example to the faithful. It goes without saying that he needs some schedule or plan of life as an individual Christian, and also in view of the demands of his priestly apostolate.

In this respect, he must avoid the same mistake the laity must avoid, namely, attempting to live a watered-down religious life. The diocesan priest is above all a man of the people, and although it may prove very satisfying to follow a plan of life that would provide many hours of recollection and solitude, he would run the risk of withdrawing too much from the people he has been sent to serve. At the other extreme, the diocesan priest without any plan of life is a constant contradiction in the eyes of his people; they cannot understand how a priest would be a worthy priest and still give no sign of regularity in the practices of the spiritual life. A priest is expected to be a man of temperate and regular habits, to be available at all times for the needs of his people, to have that delicate sense of prudence that enables him to be in the world without becoming worldly.

The diocesan priest should seek to draw up a plan of life enabling him to dedicate himself completely to his apostolate and at the same time to utilize certain hours of the day for his own personal sanctification. Unlike the religious priest, the diocesan priest does not have a schedule of daily life provided for him by a rule; except for the demands of his ministry and the care of souls, he is left to himself regarding the schedule of his daily life.

Religious

Although religious have a definite schedule for community exercises, they also need a plan of life for their personal exercises. Community prayer and spiritual reading provide important material for meditation and private recollection, but there is still the question of arranging those hours that are left to the personal initiative of the individual religious. It is a strange paradox to find in a religious house certain individuals who attend the community exercises regularly and perform their duties faithfully but use their free time to do absolutely nothing. It is as if they erroneously believed that they should do nothing except that which is explicitly demanded of them by their rule or their superior.

This is obviously a serious misunderstanding of the function of the vow of obedience, for it is precisely in those hours of freedom from explicitly commanded duties that the religious manifest the intensity of their desire to perfect themselves. The religious,

therefore, whether living in a cloistered community or in one of the active institutes, will always have some free time that can be put to good use or simply wasted. It is for these free hours that the plan of life should provide, and it is in this area that the zealous religious will prudently arrange a schedule of life allowing for reasonable relaxation and at the same time preventing slothfulness.

It is a prudent practice to give the plan a period of trial. The first requisite is that the plan of life must be adapted to the duties of one's state, to one's profession or work, to one's disposition of spirit, to one's character and temperament, to one's strength of body, to the degree of perfection already attained, and to the attractions of grace. Moreover, the plan of life should be at once rigid and flexible. It needs a certain rigidity in order to give regularity and constancy to one's life; it must be flexible in order to allow for dispensations or adaptations when the need arises, or for substitutions and changes as one's needs vary. If there is a reasonable cause for departing from the schedule under given circumstances, the individual should not hesitate to do so, but one should never depart from the plan of life without a reasonable and justifying cause.