

# Discipline

*A Reflection on the Note on Discipline by Fr Peter Hibbert, OGS*

Father in heaven,  
The hand of your loving kindness  
Powerfully yet gently guides  
All the moments of our day.  
Go before us in our pilgrimage of life,  
Anticipate our needs and prevent our failing.  
Send us your Spirit to unite us in faith,  
That sharing in your service  
We may rejoice in your presence.  
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

## **The Note on Discipline:**

*Members of the Oratory are men under authority, pledged to assist in maintaining its common discipline. They will be particularly careful in the practice of internal discipline and surrender to the will of God, which it is the purpose of the Oratory to assist them to attain, and in submitting to the degree of corporate control demanded by the Oratory and their College. Each brother will have a share in the formation of that common mind, and will accept it in a spirit of love and loyalty, and in confidence in the combined experience of the whole fellowship. It is his duty to see that his own contribution to the corporate mind of the Oratory will strengthen the authority of the whole society over individual members.*

You probably have never heard of a product called “Jack the Bean Espresso Coffee.” One of its devotees is Jo Henry, who wrote a piece proclaiming the qualities of this Californian coffee. Jo wrote as follows:

“Well, I consider coffee to be a religious discipline of sorts: it begins my day, like prayer does; it is a sacrament at every familial function, friendly gathering, and every celebratory or solemn occasion. If I venture out for a walk in a strange city, the quest for it directs me along my way. I offer it to every soul who enters my house, and likewise I would never refuse its offer without due cause, any more than I would refuse someone's handshake. It's not so much a substance, I mean, as a way of life...a true habit of my being.”

Powerful words from a coffee drinker – but perhaps Jo Henry speaks a profound truth.

It isn't so much that “religious discipline” has to *percolate* within us, like coffee beans crushed in a grinding machine. But rather, it needs to be a way of life - a true habit of our being - something that *permeates* every moment of our being.

God requires His children to exercise discipline upon themselves individually, as well as collectively within the community to which they belong.

This dual aspect of discipline – internal discipline and collective discipline – is a topic addressed by Jesus in his discussions with the Pharisees.

In St. Luke's gospel, Jesus says to them "You tithe mint and rue and every herb, and neglect justice and the love of God. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others."

The basic problem with the Pharisees was that their improper understanding of what constituted right practice (that is, their lack of love) led them into hypocrisy and error.

Getting discipline right has important implications not only for individual members of a community, but also for the community itself.

If the Pharisees in ancient times erred on the side of discipline without love, there is equally a danger that, in our present liberal society, we may err on the side of love without discipline. The same Jesus who warned against the legalistic and hypocritical leaven of the Pharisees likewise warned against the licentiousness of those who, out of a misplaced and mistaken understanding of love, would do away with law and discipline.

For the Pharisees, being disciples of Moses meant following the instructions he had passed on, being faithful to the way of life he had communicated to Israel. For Christians, being disciples of Jesus likewise means following his instructions, and being devoted to him as the ultimate authority for true belief and appropriate behaviour.

Discipleship within any Christian community requires discipline, both in terms of *objective standards and guidelines* provided by the community's rules and in terms of *subjective conformity and obedience* provided by its followers.

Individual discipline, we are told in the Notes, involves an *internal* discipline – "a surrender to the will of God, which it is the purpose of the Oratory to assist them to attain".

Internal discipline by surrendering to the will of God was again explained in St. Luke's gospel when Jesus places the concept of *discipleship* immediately alongside the concept of *self-discipline*, when he says:

"If anyone desires to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me."

As John Wesley remarked in one of his sermons on Jesus' words: "The *denying* of ourselves and the *taking up of the cross*, in the full extent of the expression, is not a small thing of concern... If we do not continually deny ourselves, we do not learn from him; if we do not take up our cross daily, we do not come after him, but after the world."

The Oratory Note encapsulates this by using the expression, "surrendering to the will of God", and in the Oratory prayer, we ask God daily "to lift us up more and more continually to heavenly desires".

On the one hand, the Note gives us the absolute standard, whilst the Oratory prayer introduces, mercifully, an acknowledgement of human frailty. We daily fall short of the standard of denying ourselves and of taking up the cross, and we ask God in our daily prayer to help us to re-focus our attention and our concerns.

The Oratory prayer has something of the sentiment of St. Benedict, when he acknowledges at the front of his prayer book: “Always, we begin again.”

Lifting ourselves up when we have fallen, dusting ourselves down, and refocusing our attention and concerns, is a daily and life-long process of internal self-discipline.

Perhaps it here that a daily Rule of life becomes important. It is not something to brag about if you attain its requirements. Neither is it something with which to crush yourself with guilt, if you fail to meet its stipulations. It is more in the nature a life-line for each of us to hold on to, to give structure and meaning to our daily life, and to help us each day to begin, again.

In terms of collective discipline, I always smile when I read St. Benedict’s Rule when he addresses monks and nuns and remarks “... as soon as a superior gives them an order it is as though it came from God himself and they cannot endure any delay in carrying out what they have been told to do.”

That is very far removed from the Oratory. As Superior, I cannot claim to have ever given anyone an order – let alone claimed that anything I have said was an order from God. That is not the Oratory way.

The job description of the Superior can be summarised in one short phrase: to maintain the unity of the Oratory. Maintaining the unity of a religious community located on four different continents with four different cultures, is not achieved by giving orders or by threatening sanctions for non-compliance. It is achieved by being alongside brothers who are in difficulties, by showing a loving understanding of their problems, and by giving advice and by friendly persuasion. The Superior is often the shepherd who will go after the lost sheep and guide them back into the fold.

You cannot have discipline without love, and you cannot love without having discipline. They are not opposites; they are the hallmarks of discipleship. And this is at the core of the Oratory Note. As individuals, we submit to the degree of corporate control demanded by the Oratory, not in a spirit of reluctance or fear, but “in a spirit of love and loyalty.”

This is of crucial importance, because the concept of discipline and obedience and compliance with rules and regulations can appear to be at odds with our understanding of God as the Spirit of Freedom. For it was St. Paul who tells us, when writing to the church at Corinth: “The Lord is Spirit; and where the Spirit of Lord is, there is freedom.”

This freedom is a freedom from the rules and regulations of the Old Law but isn’t there a danger that we can end up replacing these with our own rules and regulations, as a Church in general, and as a community in particular. And isn’t there

a danger that our response can be one of reluctant compliance or complaint that they are a restriction or a barrier upon the very freedom that the Lord has given us.

The discipline sought by our community is not one merely of exterior fulfillment, but also of interior compliance. Our rule of life is a rule that governs our inner self. Whereas the fulfillment of our Lord's commandments is an act of devotion to the Lord, the fulfillment of a human-made rule can often be done apathetically. How might we find a way to fulfill our obligations with our real heart?

Karl Rahner, in his beautifully written book *Encounters with Silence*, speaks to God about his difficulties in complying with church-made regulations. He tells God: "...whenever I obey such a law, I must keep looking directly at You. In this way I can pay homage to You directly and exclusively, and not to the thing that is required of me...Obedience can be the expression of my seeking you alone in it... Give me a ready and willing heart, O Lord. Let me bear the burden...in such a way that this bearing is an exercise of selflessness, of patience, of fidelity."

Our individual discipline of following a rule of life, and our corporate discipline in following the rules of our community, is our expression of the way in which we seek God – He gives us the freedom to do this – it is a measure of his love for us and of our love for Him.

In this way, discipline can become a way of life, a way of expressing our love of God and our love of our community. It becomes as natural as drinking that freshly brewed Californian coffee. It becomes a true habit of our being.