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NORMS
OF PIETY:

Part 1

61



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SCEPTER BOOKLETS
505 Fifth Avenue; Suite 1402
New York, N.Y. 10017

Nihil Obstat:

Daniel V. Flynn, J.C.D.
Censor librorum

Imprimatur:

✠ James P. Mahoney, D.D.
Vicar General
Archdiocese of New York

January 9, 1977

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Contents

PART I

Plan of life	5
1. Morning offering	7
2. Morning prayer	9
3. Holy Mass	12
4. The Gospel and other spiritual reading ...	16
5. The Angelus	19
6. A visit to the Blessed Sacrament	21

PART II

The following norms of piety are treated in Scepter Booklet No. 62—*Norms of Piety: Part 2.*

7. Afternoon prayer
8. The Holy Rosary
9. Examination of conscience
10. Frequent confession
11. The Hail Holy Queen on Saturdays
12. Always: Presence of God
13. Consideration of our divine filiation
14. Work
15. Cheerfulness

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Printed in the United States of America

EVERYBODY'S LIFE today seems to be filled with all kinds of activities arising out of economic, social and apostolic needs. Time is at such a premium that if a person wants to keep up his social relations and not overlook other important aspects of his life he has to organize himself, plan things out, not leave things to last minute improvisation; in a word: he needs a plan of life. This plan will be concrete and yet flexible at the same time, capable of adapting itself to the changing circumstances of the life of an ordinary person. This plan would include professional work, the family, and apostolate, while at the same time forming a synthesis in the unity of life which should be characteristic of every Christian. Such a plan should not be a strait

jacket, but rather like rails along which a train, symbolizing our life as a Christian, moves swiftly and safely.

This fully personalized plan, the result of reflection, will enable us to accomplish more with the time we have available, and will help us to be realists. In this sense a plan of life expands in a practical way to embrace both the human and the spiritual. For a Christian, the full life is nothing more than human life itself lived in a Christian manner. Hence the importance of religious formation and of the interior life in order to sanctify human activities and, at the same time, to turn them into instruments of apostolate.

When electrical engineers are planning a high-tension line, they mark out the tower sites at prudent distances according to the shape of the terrain. From these will be suspended the cables along which electrical current will pass to light up a city and drive thousands of motors. If the towers were to be set further apart because they got in the way, the cables would be stretched out too far, they would touch ground, and the line would be rendered useless. This is a simple comparison but it helps us understand the importance of certain 'norms' of piety which should be part of our plan of life, and which will sustain the supernatural life in us throughout the day. So distributed, according to the dictates of prudence and the activities which absorb us, they are like the towers of a high-tension line: our interior life is mounted on them. If we spread them too far apart

because they take time from our daily pursuits, our humanity will be left without supernatural light. To fulfill these "norms," to live them, to love them, is to care for our interior life and to draw closer to God.

What follows are some of these norms of piety. They are not all of those practiced by ordinary Christians. Indeed, some very important ones, like the day of recollection, annual retreat and aspirations, have been left out. But in this and the following booklet (Scepter Booklet No. 62) you will find fifteen norms, each with a brief explanation to help you live them better.

1. The Morning Offering

Beginning the day with a "Hello, Lord" is a good way to launch us immediately out of bed, like the soldier who overcomes his fear and leaps from the trench to the attack. To be able to rise and have one's whole day ahead is a great gift. This in itself merits a "thank you." In contrast to such a gift, however, all we can offer is that "heroic minute" of punctuality (1).

I realize that sanctity is not something abstract; nor is virtue, or dedication, or vocation. All I have is today: a day filled with a thousand details and perhaps something a little bigger. Thus has the Lord given me this day in order to sanctify myself in it. I must sanctify myself, then, by means of the things of this day: in *them* I must live my dedication and my love for God. In *them* I can make a reality of my vocation and love

my fellow men. They are the material out of which my sanctity is made. Just as the bull fighter ceremoniously dedicates the bull to some important person in the bull ring and then feels a greater obligation to perform well, so the morning offering presents to the Lord the day's work and thus obliges us to carry it out with greater nobility, elegance and finesse. Because of this we might be afraid to seem ridiculous in making a morning offering, for it would be ridiculous to promise everything and give little. "Forty centuries of glory gaze upon you," Napoleon cried out to his soldiers before entering battle. But that is little. God, the angels, the saints, my fellow men are going to be watching the battles of this new day. Later, at night, I will rejoice if I have "fought the good fight" (2 Tim 4:7).

In the morning offering we enliven the present moment, which is the only time we have. More than an act it is an *attitude* of service and of dedication which begins at the very moment when we meet the new day. It means turning into an offering and a gift the commonplaces of one more day. It means making yesterday's resolution reach into today. In this way our dedication to God takes on flesh and blood. We begin again: "Your interior life has to be just that: to begin. . . and to begin again" (2).

The morning offering is something very personal. Everyone will make it in his own way. But we all say more or less the same thing: "here I am Lord, because you have

called me"; "I will serve you, I will be faithful to you," and so on.

Our resolutions are always about a future we do not yet possess. The morning offering includes a resolution which that day will make a reality. "Today"; what a marvelous word! Out of sleep awakens the joy of a new day filled with noble ideals. The purpose, the full joy of living, working, and speaking about God, of loving others and making them happy. These are the noble ideals of a child of God who wants to show his love for his heavenly Father. He loves with his heart and the deeds of today. This is what it means to be a realist.

To offer the day is to enter life's playing field on the right foot. It is the "*procedamus in pace in nomine Christi*" of the liturgy of the Church ("Let us set out in peace in Christ's name"). It is my Christmas present in this morning of dreams and light. How much these simple words contain: "I offer you the deeds of this day," or these more familiar ones: "Good morning, Lord."

2. Morning prayer

St. Mark has left us the schedule of one day in the life of our Lord. It is the tight schedule of one day among many: "And rising up long before daybreak, he went out and departed into a desert place, and there he prayed" (Mk 1:35). That was his morning prayer.

We know that the Lord prayed, sometimes

at length. He sought the peace of the mountain side and he spent hours "alone" with his heavenly Father. He even spent a whole night in prayer when he was about to choose his apostles. Other times he prayed surrounded by people awaiting a miracle in order to believe. There was the long and intense prayer in the garden and the painful prayer on the Cross. We find many periods of prayer in the life of Jesus Christ.

He encouraged his apostles to pray. Sometimes he used parables to teach them the importance of prayer: "And he also told them a parable that they must always pray and not lose heart saying, 'There was a judge in a certain town. . .'" (Lk 18:1). Other times he exhorted them: "Pray, that you may not enter into temptation. . . Rise and pray" (Lk 22: 40, 46). On another occasion he showed them the efficacy of prayer: "Ask, and it shall be given you, seek and you shall find...." "If you, evil as you are, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him" (Mt 7:7,11).

The Lord even taught the apostles a prayer, the "Our Father" (Lk 11:2), and he told them *how* they should pray: "When you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites, who love to pray standing in the synagogues and at the street corners, in order that they may be seen by men. . . . But when you pray, go into your room, and closing the door, pray to your Father in secret; and your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you.

Do not multiply words, as the Gentiles do. . . for your Father knows what you need before you ask him (Mt 6:5-9).

To pray must, then, be something great, because the Lord prays and openly encourages it. "You wrote to me: 'To pray is to talk to God. But about what?' About what? About him, and yourself: joys, sorrows, successes and failures, great ambitions, daily worries—even your weaknesses! And acts of thanksgiving and petitions—and love and reparation.

"In short, to get to know him and to get to know yourself—'to get acquainted!' " (3). We pray in order to hear him, and so that he will enlighten our countenance as he did for Moses when he came down from the holy mountain, and with the light of faith we will begin the day's work. *Gallo canente spes redit*, says one of the hymns from Lauds ("When the morning cock sings, hope is reborn"). Morning prayer brings back to life our supernatural outlook on life and work; it enkindles our desire to return to the battle in the same place as yesterday: "You wrote me, and I well understand: 'Every day I spend my "little time" in prayer. If it weren't for that. . . !' " (4).

Morning prayer is a very filial norm. It is the dialogue of a child of God with his Father in heaven; with Jesus Christ, our older Brother; with the Blessed Virgin, our Mother; with our guardian angel and the saints, our family in heaven. Sometimes we will have to get up early, as the Lord did. It is

necessary to organize ourselves well in order to find the best time. Don't pay attention to excuses: "I don't have time, I don't know how, they don't hear me...." When we are fully convinced that we need something or someone, when we really *want* it, we can find time. For a Christian, God is always someone important whom he cannot forget, unless he wants to lessen the value of his life and make it sterile forever.

It is impossible to live without breathing, and it is impossible to become a saint without praying. Each new day must be used well: "God does not lose battles, and if we are united to him, we will never be overcome. On the contrary, we can call ourselves victors and indeed be victors: good children of God" (5). Each morning we have to raise our hands, like Moses. Today's battles require the help of morning prayer. In order to work well we need our hands and our head; but, besides hands and head, in order to sanctify his work the Christian raises his heart to God, too. Then "let us exult and rejoice, because from the beginning of the day we are filled with your mercy."

3. Holy Mass

The first of the commandments of the Church says: "We must attend Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation," and furthermore, "To knowingly break one of the commandments of the Church in serious matter is a mortal sin" (6). This leads us to

suppose that attending Mass must be something of vital importance for a Christian. From the fact that the Church commands this minimum under pain of mortal sin, it is clear that for our spiritual health we need the holy Mass.

Pope Paul VI wrote on August 22, 1973: "The observance of the Sunday and holy day Mass precept more than ever retains its gravity and its fundamental importance. The Church has granted faculties to make this observance possible. The one who is conscious of the content and of the purpose of this precept ought to consider it not only a primary duty, but also a right, a necessity, an honor, and a good fortune which no intelligent and aware believer can set aside without grave reasons."

Holy Mass is the renewal in an unbloody manner of the sacrifice of Calvary. "Between the sacrifice of the Mass and the sacrifice of the Cross there is this difference and relation: on the cross Jesus Christ offered himself, shedding his blood, and merited for us, while on the altar he sacrifices himself without the shedding of blood, and he applies to us the fruits of his passion and death" (7). Without the merits of Christ I cannot save my soul, nor sanctify my work, nor give to God the glory that is due him, nor do apostolate. I need the Mass because "as often as the sacrifice of the Cross in which Christ our Passover was sacrificed is celebrated on the altar, the work of our redemption is carried on" (8). Thus we cannot be content with the

minimum necessary for supernatural life; the personal call to sanctity and the duty of apostolate demand more of us—daily Mass and Communion.

I want to insist on this: We have been born to give glory to God and the fullest glory we can give him is through Jesus Christ: "Through him, with him, in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is yours, almighty Father, for ever and ever." Through holy Mass we give all the glory to God.

Holy Mass "is the sacrifice of the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ," and in the Mass we find the ends which are proper to every sacrifice: the end of *latria* or adoration of God the Father; that of thanksgiving for the redemption and all the benefits we have received; of reparation for the sins we have committed; and petition for all our needs. Only a little reflection is needed in order to see the need we have for all of these. Without them our lives are narrow and without meaning, and overwhelmed by the weight of our sins and our needs. To the extent we feel the obligation of apostolate and realize that without grace all our efforts are in vain—"without me you can do nothing" (Jn15:17)—we will be fully convinced of the need for the Mass. It is for this reason that "a very important characteristic of the apostolic man is his love for the Mass" (9). In it priest and laity are united in the most sublime of tasks: the world's redemption. This is achieved not by direct improvement

of earthly structures (which is really secondary) but by personal conversion, the work of sanctifying grace in the depths of the human soul. For this reason "the Mass should be the center of the entire life of the Christian community" (10). On it rest our interior life, the sanctification of our work—in a word, redemption and eternal life.

How, then, should we live the Mass? The first condition is our presence. We can apply here what is said of the Olympic games: "the important thing is to take part in them." And then: a dignified posture, the correct responses, an alert mind, a heart in love, and firm resolution of the will. We go to learn, to adore, and to receive: To learn through the liturgy of the word from the Scriptural readings and the homily, in the sacrifice, where he is really present through the transubstantiation of the bread and wine into his body, blood, soul and divinity; we receive Christ himself in Holy Communion, which "is the most perfect participation" (11) in holy Mass. And after this we add a few minutes of personal thanksgiving, recollected in holy silence following the Mass: "It should be pointed out to the faithful that, after the eucharistic banquet, they ought not neglect to make a sincere and fitting thanksgiving corresponding to each one's capacity, state, and occupation" (12).

The pious, recollected, daily assistance at Mass and on Sunday the more solemn and sung Mass make up the sole sacrifice of our Christian religion which perpetuates the

work of redemption until the end of the world. We must not ignore this treasure so close at hand.

4. Reading of the Gospel and other spiritual reading

In the Gospel our Lord reminds us that we Christians are “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world” (Mt 5:13, 14). Salt gives taste and prevents corruption, while light guides and illuminates the way. How clear it is that in order to be a good Christian we need to be good salt and to possess clear light. These qualities are not improvised nor do they come to us by direct revelation; we acquire them by reading and study.

If, like St. Paul, we want to “glory in the knowledge of Jesus Christ” until we achieve “the sublime knowledge of Jesus, my Lord, for whose sake I have suffered the loss of all things” (Phil 3:8), then we must frequently read the gospel. For although “in many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets,...in these last days he has spoken to us by his son” (Heb 1:1-2). The teachings of Jesus are principally in the Gospel and in the other books of the New Testament. Attentive and serene reading of the Gospel makes all of this familiar to us, and over the years we gain a deeper penetration of revealed doctrine; the tenth reading will uncover details that previously escaped us, as we perceive with ever greater clarity

the marvelous figure of the God-Man, Jesus Christ. It is only one more step to fall in love with the Lord, and in this love we will understand him better. “You don’t understand me? If you loved me you would understand me,” is a frequently heard dialogue between married couples. First comes a personal association which is converted into prayer; then, as we try with St. Paul to “put on” Jesus Christ, striving to imitate him, to feel ourselves members of his Body, we reach the point of crying out in astonishment like the apostle: “It is not I who live, it is Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20). The necessary consequence of this fullness of divine life will be a desire to bring other souls to God. Gospel and apostolate go hand in hand in the life of a true Christian: “May your behavior and your conversation be such that everyone who sees or hears you can say: ‘This man reads the life of Jesus Christ.’ ” (13).

The Gospel is our book; of no other book can this be so properly said. In it “we are told about the inner life of God” (14). “The sacred synod forcefully and specifically exhorts all the Christian faithful... to learn ‘the surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ’ (Phil 3:8) by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures.” “Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ” (15).

“Prayer should accompany the reading of sacred Scripture, so that a dialogue takes place between God and man” (16), and divine truth fills the heart.

In addition to the Gospel we should not

5. The Angelus

neglect to read other good spiritual books: "(Spiritual) reading has made many saints" (17). Thus, the intellectual dimension, too, has a place in our interior life. Heart and head must go hand in hand in total dedication to God. Accordingly, spiritual reading, as the source of intellectual enrichment, is absolutely necessary. St. Francis de Sales wrote: "If prayer is the flame of the sanctuary lamp, then spiritual reading is the oil that feeds it." Simply devoting a few minutes each day to spiritual reading represents at the end of a year an impressive wealth of ascetical and mystical formation.

Our lives as ordinary Christians pass through different stages from infancy to adulthood. These are not only chronological but, more importantly, steps toward intellectual and spiritual maturity. Hence our spiritual reading should be accommodated to the stage in which we find ourselves at the moment if we are to receive proper intellectual and spiritual formation. It goes without saying that a spiritual director can and ought to help us choose appropriate reading for each phase of our development.

Like the river "that always sings the same stanza but with different water," our daily reading of the Gospel and of a sound spiritual book gives us the same doctrine, but in different forms, with greater profundity and solidity, and with the warmth of life itself. Spiritual reading is a daily norm that enriches the head while it moves the heart to serve God.

Have you ever contemplated that painting of Millet entitled "The Angelus"? A man and a woman at midday, in the midst of their work, stand with basket and wheel-barrow in the middle of a field. From a tower in the distance sounds the melodious bell: it is time for the Angelus. He takes off his cap; she bows her head. The two pray to the holy Virgin in the well-known words of the Gospel.

In St. Peter's Square in Rome the Holy Father appears at noon to pray the Angelus with the Christians who have come there. It is the hour of the Angelus. In your everyday work, in the shop, the classroom, the office, the street, the time of the Angelus arrives every day. The Angelus times are "those characteristic moments of the day—morning, noon, and evening—which set off the times of work and constitute an invitation to stop a few minutes to pray" (18).

Pope Paul VI tells us: "Our words about the 'Angelus' are meant to be a simple but vibrant exhortation to retain this customary prayer wherever and whenever possible." It is a simple prayer that "over the passage of centuries preserves its unalterable value and its freshness intact" (19).

Its content is thoroughly theological: It recalls the first step in the Redemption, the Incarnation of the Son of God in the virginal womb of holy Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit. It points out the role of the Blessed Virgin in the work of Redemption,

and the intimate relation and cooperation of her life with the life of Jesus. Let us admire her humility: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; let it be done to me according to your word." Let us contemplate in awe her greatness as the Mother of Jesus: "And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us." We begin to penetrate the mystery of her office as mediatrix between Jesus and men, and we ask her to pray for us "so that we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ." and finally, our constant supplication is that we may obtain that grace through the merits of Christ and be brought to the glory of his Resurrection.

In the Angelus we recall the most intimate scene in the life of the Blessed Virgin: her calling to be Mother of Jesus and our Mother. "We contemplate the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word, the greeting to the Virgin and her merciful intercession" (20).

The Angelus brings us to the Blessed Virgin. This is something very important, because devotion to Mary is an essential part of the Christian life. "There can be no fully Christian life if it is not Marian," Bishop Ramon Masnou of Vich (Spain) has written. This common denominator unites everyone. At the hour of the Angelus we keep our appointment with the Blessed Virgin; this blessed hour of noon, as it circles the globe with the sun, is the burning torch which we all carry, like athletes in a relay race, as the early Christians did that night in Ephesus when the fathers of the Ecumenical Council de-

finied the dogma of the divine maternity of Mary.

After the important persons in this prayer (the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ, the Virgin, the Archangel Gabriel), it becomes our own as we ask for and desire the "glory of the resurrection." And through it we develop a more familiar devotion to the Holy Spirit, to our Mother, holy Mary, and to the Guardian Angels.

During Eastertide the "Regina Coeli" replaces the Angelus. This is a hymn of joy over the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The word "alleluia" is repeated while we remind the Virgin of the Incarnation and the wonderful triumph of the Resurrection: "He whom you were made worthy to bear has risen as he said." The final petition is our desire to obtain the joys of eternal life.

6. A visit to the Blessed Sacrament

The Holy Father, Pope Paul VI, has said about eucharistic worship: "The faithful should not neglect each day to make a visit to the Blessed Sacrament, which ought to be reserved in churches in a most worthy place with maximum honor according to the liturgical laws, since this visit is proof of gratitude, a sign of love, and a duty of adoration to our Lord Jesus Christ who is present there" (21).

If we are striving to live the reality present in the tabernacle, and our hearts are not asleep, we will not be able to pass a tabernacle where Jesus awaits us without stopping. Perhaps we cannot enter the church

and remain for a brief time, but we can always "enter" it in spirit, making acts of love and reparation, our thoughts fixed on the tabernacle. Church steeples do more than hold up the bells and the clock: "As you make your usual way through the city streets, aren't you happy when you discover another tabernacle?" (22)

Let us recall once more something Pope Paul VI said in his encyclical on the Eucharist: "While the Eucharist is reserved in a church or oratory, Christ is truly Emmanuel, that is, God with us. 'No other nation has a God as close to us as our God.' This closeness gives us an incomparable dignity; it orders moral actions, nourishes virtue, consoles the afflicted, and strengthens the weak." All of this well merits a "thank you." Christ need not have remained in our tabernacles; he chose to do so out of no need of his own, but because of our need. He knew that we would need him. Love's ingenious inventions are like that: "God so loved the world...;" "I shall be with you until the end of time."

A Christian's life revolves around Christ in such a way that He is "the spiritual center of the religious and parish community, and even more, of the universal church and of all mankind" (23). At the same time he is the center of all our affections and aspirations, the "center of all hearts" (24). Having begun the day with holy Mass and Communion, how natural it is to conclude it with a visit to the Blessed Sacrament. To return a visit is

only the polite thing to do.

It is a duty of adoration. "Reserved in the Eucharist, Christ should be adored because he is substantially present there by that conversion of the bread and wine which, according to the Council of Trent, is properly called transubstantiation" (25). For this reason "an external and public manifestation is con-natural to faith in the real presence of the Lord" (26). If there were only one tabernacle in the world how happy we would be if we could adore him there a few times in our lives. God has made it easier, more human. Those who go to him there "enjoy an intimate association with him; they open their hearts in prayer for themselves and for their families, and for the peace and salvation of the world" (27).

By visiting our Lord we learn something not found in books, for love is born and grows through personal association. We can begin to understand something of the reason for the Eucharist only by identifying with people who love each other. Present together, their eyes say everything, almost without a need for words. "He looks at me and I look at Him," an old man told the Cure of Ars about his visits to the tabernacle. There, without realizing it, we are contemplatives: I know he is there; I really am in the presence of the Most High. One might suppose that the natural thing would be to feel small. But here the natural thing is to know that he loves you and to say to him

with the confidence of St. Peter: "Lord, you know all things, you know that I love you" (Jn 21:17).

- (1) Cf. J. Escrivá de Balaguer, *The Way*, n. 206 and 191.
- (2) *Ibid.*, n. 292.
- (3) *Ibid.*, n. 91.
- (4) *Ibid.*, n. 106.
- (5) J. Escrivá de Balaguer, *Christ Is Passing By*, n. 66.
- (6) St. Pius X, *Catechism*, n. 467 and 474.
- (7) *Ibidem*, n. 657.
- (8) Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 3.
- (9) *The Way*, n. 528
- (10) Vatican Council II, *Christus Dominus*, n. 30.
- (11) Vatican Council II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 55.
- (12) Sacred Congregation of Divine Worship, Jan. 25, 1973, *Immensae Caritatis*, n. 3.
- (13) *The Way*, n. 2.
- (14) Vatican Council II, *Dei Verbum*, n. 4.
- (15) *Ibid.*, n. 25.
- (16) *Ibid.*
- (17) *The Way*, n. 116.
- (18) Pope Paul VI, *Marialis Cultus*, n. 41.
- (19) *Ibid.*
- (20) *Ibid.*
- (21) Pope Paul VI, Encyclical *Mysterium Fidei*.
- (22) *The Way*, n. 270.
- (23) Pope Paul VI, *Op. Cit.*
- (24) *Ibid.*
- (25) *Ibid.*, n. 3.
- (26) *Ibid.*, n. 49.
- (27) *Ibid.*, n. 50.