Short rules to perfection

What *is* good and acceptable and perfect?

by Carol Zaleski in the September 13, 2000 issue

Andy, five years old, is standing on his chair at the dinner table and using his fork to make the sign of the cross. Having coated his spaghetti with grated cheese until it is a lovely paste, he is now draping a strand over his ear. From where I sit, I can see piles of junk mail on the radiator and peeling linoleum in the kitchen. Every unoccupied chair has a pile of books on it—here are books on prayer, here are books on polar exploration, here is Star Wars, Pokémon and Asterix. The mantelpiece has an icon of Elijah with a yo-yo in front of it. At the foot of the stairs there is a Buddhist scroll with a smudged handprint next to it. Wherever my gaze travels, I see something untidy. There are moments when it seems that everything is crumbling and the daily work of shoring it all up is more than I can hope to do. The mystery is that other people seem to manage these things so well.

Sitting in the midst of this disarray, I think about Christ's call to perfection ("Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect") and St. Paul's elaboration: "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom. 12:1-3).

Working out what is meant by this summons to perfection has occupied Christians for the full span of the millennium. The trouble is that perfection can mean so many things.

Our 13-year-old is downloading a game from the Internet. My curiosity piqued, I kick John off the computer and ask "Google" to search for the word "perfection" on the Web. In 0.24 seconds, Google finds 131,999 occurrences. Judging by the top ten or so, they fall into five categories: spiritual theology (St. Teresa's *Way of Perfection*, John Wesley's *Plain Account of Christian Perfection*); athletic endeavor ("Doyle's second shot at perfection"); technology ("scanner perfection," "desktop perfection"); pornography ("nude celeb perfection"); self-help, as in this excerpt from *Be Your*

Own Therapist: “A most liberating and happiness-generating belief that one can have is to believe in the perfection of everyone around. Not only is Mother Teresa perfect, but so is Saddam Hussein and everyone in between.”

By this measure, our culture seems to be seriously confused about perfection. Either we mistake it for an inhuman perfectionism or we empty it of meaning by proclaiming everything perfect. It is easy, under such conditions, to lose sight of the distinctively Christian understanding of perfection: maturity, wholeness and obedience in a life consecrated to the law of love revealed by Christ.

Ever since the early days of monasticism, a remedy for confusion has been sought in the form of short rules that show the way to Christian perfection. There’s a long history to such short rules: almost all founders of religious communities from Basil the Great to the present day have tried their hand at composing brief rules to teach beginners the one thing (or perhaps three or ten things) needful to follow Christ.

One of my favorite short rules is the one John Henry Newman provided in 1856 for his fellow Oratorians in Birmingham. The Oratory is a brotherhood of secular priests who live together in the manner of a family. They are not formally bound to the evangelical counsels of perfection nor do they practice visible austerities. Instead, their asceticism springs from, as Newman puts it, “personal attachment and love of the nest,” and consists principally in giving oneself to others in daily, unremarkable acts.

Here is Newman’s “short rule to perfection”:

> Do not lie in bed beyond the due time of rising—give your first thoughts to God—make a good meditation—say or hear Mass and communicate with devotion—make a good thanksgiving—say carefully all the prayers which you are bound to say—say Office attentively, do the work of the day, whatever it is, diligently and for God—make a good visit to the Blessed Sacrament. Say the Angelus devoutly—eat and drink to God’s glory—say the Rosary well, be recollected—keep out bad thoughts. Make your evening meditation well—examine yourself duly. Go to bed in good time, and you are already perfect.

Some of these observances will seem supererogatory or alien to us; but Newman’s key point is that we “need not go out of the *round* of the day” in order to enter into

the divine service that frees us from captivity to our selfish desires.

It is a rule for perfection that has everything to do with ordinary domestic routine (the spaghetti over the ear, the bedtime rituals, the endless games of “Andy-chess”) and nothing to do with Martha Stewart–like flawlessness. It has everything to do with grace, as John Wesley teaches us, and nothing to do with merit or with exalted spiritual feelings. It is surrender to divine providence, the “little way” of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, the road to perfection that runs straight through the center of our smallest daily tasks, straight through the heart of our fatigue and inadequacy, and points beyond them to where true perfection resides. Of course one is bound to fail. But perhaps Chesterton’s saying applies even to perfection itself: “If a thing is worth doing, it is worth doing badly.”