

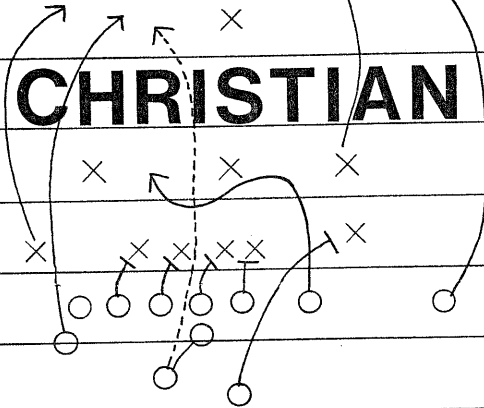
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A

GAME PLAN

**FOR THE
CHRISTIAN**



**JOSEPH
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A GAME PLAN

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AS WE ARE ALL frequently reminded on the Saturdays and Sundays of the Fall football season, the sport has a language of its own. Among the terms of art cherished by coaches, players, sportscasters, and fans is the expression "game plan."

This is the subject I want to deal with in this booklet—game plans. Not those of football, however, but of an even more exciting game played for higher stakes: the spiritual life. That needs a bit of explaining.

Some people may find the idea of having a "plan" for the interior life strange and even unappealing at first. Shouldn't spontaneity predominate here? Why try to regiment spirituality by some pre-conceived plan?

The objection misses the point. The purpose of having a plan for one's spiritual life isn't to enforce conformity but to provide a framework for creativity.

In this respect a spiritual plan of life is really quite a bit like a football team's game plan. As the game develops, the quarterback must

choose scores of individual plays, but he does that best in the context of an overall strategy. Similarly, a person who is serious about the spiritual life recognizes the need for a strategy—a plan—within which he can bring creativity to bear on the process of spiritual growth.

Changing the metaphor, let me put it this way: Just as every building needs a foundation, so a spiritual edifice needs the foundation provided by a plan of life. Building on similar foundations, different individuals will raise their own unique structures of spirituality. But unless the foundation is in place, they will never build anything worthwhile.

One of the heartening realities in the Church today is the fact that more and more people are taking a serious interest in spirituality. Beginners naturally need some help in getting started, while those who have been making the effort for a while benefit from an occasional refresher course.

That is what I hope to offer in this booklet—nothing new or unusual, but just a few reminders concerning the main elements of a plan of life for Catholics who want to make spiritual progress.

Note, too, that I am not writing only for one group or another—priests, or religious, or lay people. In years gone by, we tended to suppose that only priests and religious needed to be concerned about the serious pursuit of sanctity. But the Second Vatican Council exploded that notion by proclaiming the “universal call to holiness.”

Now we see clearly that sanctity is for everyone. Many of the basic elements of a spiritual

program are the same for lay people, religious, and priests alike, although specifics will vary greatly according to each individual's state of life and personal circumstances.

The major elements of a plan of life are not hard to identify. Among them are Mass and Communion, personal prayer, penance (both reception of the sacrament and penitential practices), Scripture, and spiritual reading.

I hope to say a little about these things here, and also about other matters, including the great value—indeed, I would say, the necessity—of spiritual direction for people who are seriously striving for sanctity. I shall point out, too, that authentic spirituality is not an exercise in individualistic narcissism but should—in fact, must—lead to apostolic initiatives of all kinds in our social relationships.

Before launching into that, however, one more general observation needs to be made. As should be clear by now, a plan of life necessarily includes a number of different “activities.”

For them to have maximum benefit, however, it is important that they not remain isolated, individual practices. Instead they must be integrated and oriented toward an overall purpose—establishing, maintaining, and constantly deepening our relationship with God.

There are many ways to express that. One good way, which calls attention to the context of everyday life, is to speak of “presence of God.” The aim is to live constantly with an awareness of God (more or less intense at different times, of course) and with the intention of doing His will. The elements of a spiritual plan can help make this sense of God's abiding presence in

our lives an achievable reality rather than an attractive but unreachable ideal.

So much for the pep talk. Now let's begin to see what our game plan for saints really looks like.

Why the Mass?

In trying to outline a "program" or plan of life for Catholics who want to experience spiritual growth, obviously the Mass holds a central place. But I say this with a certain hesitation.

Not that I doubt that it's so. Quite the contrary. But as with a lot of pious remarks, this one has been repeated so often that most of us are tempted to tune it out when we hear it said yet again.

"The Mass is the center of our lives as Christians." What does that really mean? In what sense is it true? Let's try to put aside the many explanations we've all heard up to now and take a fresh look at the Mass and its meaning in our lives.

The basic fact about the Mass is this: Here Christ renews the act by which He redeemed us and makes it possible for us to share in that act. Essentially, His "act" is a human choice, a decision: to be absolutely faithful to the will of His Father, regardless of the consequences for Himself.

Christ's choice was expressed pre-eminently at the Last Supper which He shared with His Apostles. Aware that He faced death, He could have fled; instead He pursued His calling to give glory to the Father to its ultimate conclusion.

At that meal, furthermore, He specifically commissioned the Apostles and their suc-

cessors to reaffirm and renew the act of fidelity which He then expressed and celebrated. His commitment was brought to completion the following day, Good Friday, in His suffering and death on Calvary.

The Mass is rightly said to be a sacrifice and a meal. But essentially it is the renewal of a human choice—Jesus' choice to be faithful to the Father's will.

Once a choice is made, it lasts and can be renewed until canceled by a contrary choice.

Plainly, however, Jesus will never reverse His decision to be faithful to the Father's will. That choice, which has redemptive value for us, endures; and He renews it in every Mass to the end of time.

More than that, Jesus makes it possible for us to participate in His choice—to unite our weak and imperfect efforts to be faithful to God's will with His perfect act of commitment. In this sense the Mass is indeed "the center of our lives as Christians"—it is an organizing principle of Christian life not just in general terms but, potentially at least, on a day-to-day basis.

There are several reasons for that. For one thing, if we are to celebrate the Mass well it is necessary that we live authentic Christian lives. The Mass reaffirms Jesus' human choice to be faithful to the Father's will and offers us the opportunity to join Him in this act of fidelity. If our lives are not in harmony with what we propose to express through participation in Mass, the Mass will scarcely be a very rewarding experience for us.

People sometimes complain that they "don't get much out of Mass." There are a number of

possible reasons, including carelessly celebrated liturgies and badly preached homilies. But one reason why some people do not get much out of Mass is that they do not prepare for Mass by leading lives which are authentic expressions of what the Mass proclaims and celebrates. The Mass is not magic. Those few minutes do not and cannot compensate for days, weeks, and even years of infidelity to God's will.

For those who do strive to live authentic Christian lives, however, the Mass is a genuine organizing principle of everyday life. In the course of a day such people prepare, as it were, the material which they will bring with them to join with Christ's offering to the Father at Mass.

This "material" is simply the content of their lives. The mutual love and support of a married couple, the generous self-giving of parents in service to their children, the honest carrying out of their duties by working people, the serious pursuit of knowledge by students, the pastoral sensitivity of priests and religious, the patiently accepted suffering of sick persons—these are the "ordinary" elements of life which we can bring with us to Mass to be lifted up to the Father in union with Jesus' act of loving fidelity.

But there is still more to it than that. At Mass we are strengthened by receiving the Eucharist—that is, by being united with Christ Himself, incredibly accessible to us in this sacrament as nourishment for our struggle to live Christian lives. The pattern is circular: our lives as Christians are oriented to participation in the Eu-

charist and also flow from it. Christian life is eucharistic life.

This suggests an answer to the question "How often should I go to Mass?" A person for whom the Mass is the organizing principle of Christian life will participate in the Eucharist as often as possible—daily if that can be done, but in any case frequently and regularly.

We can never "explain" the Mass adequately or exhaust its reality. But I hope that what I have said offers at least a few hints as to why the Mass occupies the central place in any serious program for spiritual growth.

The role of prayer

In writing about a spiritual program or plan of life there is a tendency to call every element "necessary" and "essential." Understandably so, since as a matter of fact every major element of such a program really is essential in its own way. That is certainly true of prayer.

It is easy to see why. There are two classic definitions of prayer—lifting the mind and heart to God, and conversation with God. Both say something true and useful about prayer, but perhaps the second is the more enlightening since it makes clear prayer's functional role.

Communication is essential to any relationship. But if the purpose of the spiritual life is to establish, maintain, and strengthen a relationship with God, communication with God—prayer—is absolutely indispensable.

In very general terms we can identify two different kinds of prayer. One is vocal prayer—the prayer of words and formulae: the Our Father, the Hail Mary, and so on. The other is mental

prayer. Each has an important role to play; neither can be neglected.

At the outset, however, people usually find mental prayer more difficult. Indeed, the difficulty discourages some from attempting to pray in this way or from persevering in the effort. That is a serious mistake for anyone who wants to make progress in the spiritual life.

Admittedly, "mental prayer" sounds forbidding. We associate it with mystics and are tempted to assume that it doesn't concern us. In fact, however, mental prayer is possible not just for mystics but for everyone who cares to make the effort.

How to begin? With a very simple statement: "Lord, I don't know how to pray." That itself is a prayer—one which has been the starting point of a rich and rewarding prayer life for many people.

There are many techniques for mental prayer, but the best advice is to do what you find helpful and ignore what doesn't help. I would not recommend that beginners become too burdened with theories and techniques. We know that the Lord wants us to pray; if we do our part, He will help us to succeed.

Nevertheless, it is useful to keep in mind a few practical points. For example, it is usually necessary to start mental prayer by making a deliberate effort to shift our focus from immediate concerns to God. Reading something—a passage from scripture, for example—can be helpful, besides providing a starting-point for prayer.

Mental prayer comes from the heart. We can use words if we wish, but they are not essential.

With words or without them, we must open ourselves to God, express what is really in our hearts, and seek His light and help. The subject matter of our prayer need not be edifying in stereotyped terms; we should talk to God about what is really on our minds, not what we think ideally should be there.

One method, accessible to almost everyone, is what is called centering prayer. In this form of prayer, we try simply to relax, set aside distractions, and concentrate on God's presence and His goodness, responding to Him with loving gratitude for all He is and does for us. In a certain sense, nothing happens in such prayer—we just waste time with God. But this "wasting time" is a rewarding experience of spiritual refreshment.

I do not want to make it sound too easy, though. There are difficulties in mental prayer, and sooner or later anyone who makes the effort to pray encounters them. One of the most common is dryness—the absence of consolation, the feeling that one is merely going through the motions without accomplishing anything.

Is dryness in prayer a sign of failure? By no means. Great saints have reported the same experience, often for years on end. Dryness is God's way of simultaneously testing us and encouraging us to persevere: the sense of His absence is, paradoxically, an incentive to continue seeking Him.

Mental prayer requires time set aside every day for this purpose and nothing else. By contrast, vocal prayer is possible in many different circumstances. It enables us to fill the day with prayer.

One of the best of all vocal prayers is the

Rosary. Its familiar "mysteries" are subjects for short meditations through which we grow in understanding and appreciation of central episodes in the lives of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. As a prayer particularly associated with the Blessed Virgin, the Rosary deepens our devotion to her and thus associates us closely with our best, most reliable guide to the life of the spirit.

Almost everyone can pray occasionally—at times of crisis and great need. It is saints who pray perseveringly, in season and out, when prayer comes easily and also when it doesn't. More than anything else, perhaps, perseverance is the test of "good" prayer.

Spiritual reading

Spiritual reading has traditionally been considered an important part of a spiritual program or plan of life for people seriously pursuing sanctity, whether they be priests, religious, or laity. But it is necessary to understand why this is so—what the role of "spiritual reading" really is.

Let's rule out two things at the start. The basic aim of spiritual reading is neither information nor entertainment. Of course, if something we read does inform or entertain us—so much the better. Certainly no one will profit much from spiritual reading which he finds obscure or unbearably dull.

Nevertheless the focus of this particular exercise is somewhere else. Spiritual reading is directly linked to prayer. The aim is to acquire material for our conversation with God.

In that respect spiritual reading is not much different from reading a newspaper and then

chatting with a spouse or friend about what we've read.

In these cases, too, reading serves as an instrument for building up relationships.

That suggests why, technically speaking, it is even a little misleading to speak of spiritual "reading." Although for most people what is in question here does involve reading, it could and sometimes does involve "hearing" (the proclamation of God's word) or even "seeing" (images—the crucifix is a good example—which provide us food for thought, stir up our devotion, and lead us to prayer). In no sense is "spiritual reading" an elitist activity.

The pre-eminent reading matter for all Christians is God's word as it comes to us in the Bible. One of the great graces of these days is the renewed interest in Scripture which one finds among so many Catholics and other Christians. On all sides, growing numbers of people are turning to God's word for light and strength in leading their lives.

A moment's reflection should make clear the role of Scripture in the prayer life of an individual who is seriously seeking to make spiritual progress. If prayer is a conversation with God, where does one turn to find God's side of the conversation?

In fact God speaks to us in many ways—through the events of our lives, through our family, friends, and associates, through the teaching of the Church, even through direct promptings that may come to us at the time of prayer itself.

In a special way, however, God speaks to us in Sacred Scripture. An excellent pattern for

prayer is to begin with thoughtful, reflective reading of the Bible in order to hear God's word, and to follow this with our own response—the thoughts, affections, and resolutions that God's word inspires in us.

There are also many excellent books for spiritual reading in addition to—though certainly not in place of—the Bible. While a great deal of fine spiritual literature is being written and published today, it may help beginners if I mention here some recognized classics in the field.

For centuries Christians have made use of *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas a Kempis. Many contemporary Christians still do. The book is a product of its time, and the spirituality it recommends is not totally suited to the needs of Christians in today's world. Yet everyone will find something of lasting benefit here.

Somewhat closer to our times is *The Introduction to the Devout Life* by St. Francis de Sales. Written especially for lay people, it remains a highly practical treatment of lay spirituality.

One of the best modern introductions to the spiritual life is *This Tremendous Lover* by Dom Eugene Boylan. This, too, is a work which deals with the theory and the practice of spirituality and does so in a way which both beginners and veterans can profit from. Boylan's *Difficulties in Mental Prayer* is an excellent short introduction to methods and attitudes in prayer.

Lives of the saints depict models for our pursuit of sanctity, and some saints have given lasting accounts of their own pilgrimages—for example, St. Augustine in his *Confessions*

(the first, autobiographical half of the book, that is) and Saints Teresa of Avila and Therese of Lisieux, two strikingly different personalities who scaled the heights of sanctity.

Fairly recent writers like G. K. Chesterton and Cardinal Newman have produced many works which are of high literary quality besides being excellent spiritual reading. Nor should we neglect the documents of Vatican II (the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* and *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* are especially meaty) and encyclicals like Pope John Paul II's *On Human Work* and *Rich in Mercy*. The style of conciliar and papal documents tends to be heavy, but the content is excellent.

How much time should one spend on spiritual reading? It is more important to do it regularly—daily if possible—than at great length. Fifteen minutes a day, divided between Scripture and some other book, is ample for most people. Try it in conjunction with prayer. You will find that it helps immensely.

Penance and "examination"

Here, I want to take a look at three related elements: Penance, examination of conscience, and the "particular examination." It helps to consider them all in the context of spiritual direction.

But to begin with, that notion of "spiritual direction" needs some explaining.

Most people who have thought seriously about spirituality agree that spiritual direction is very nearly indispensable for anyone who

wants to make real progress.

We routinely consult other people in other areas of our lives, on the sound principle that our subjective opinions need to be supplemented by the informed, objective views of others. We see doctors about our physical health, lawyers about our legal affairs, auto mechanics about our cars, and so on.

It is not very different in the spiritual life. If we are prudent, we will use a counselor in our efforts to achieve sanctity. His role is not "direction" in the sense of giving orders; rather, he is an advisor and a friend—someone who knows us well and puts his own experience of the spiritual life at our disposal as we seek to find our way.

As I have suggested, Penance, examination of conscience, and the practice known as the "particular examination" fit well into the context of spiritual direction. Not that these practices are impossible otherwise; but in most cases they will produce the maximum benefit when they are part of the process broadly known as "direction."

Penance and examination of conscience go together. Self-examination is a necessary part of the preparation for the sacrament. What is less obvious, perhaps, is that examination of conscience should not be simply an occasional activity in immediate preparation for reception of the sacrament. Instead, it should be a regular, daily part of our plan of life.

Obviously I am not suggesting a prolonged, possibly morbid exercise in self-examination. A quick but reasonably thorough check according to some predetermined plan is ordinarily suffi-

cient. Where did I miss the target today? How can I do better tomorrow? Then a quick word of sorrow to God and a prayer for His help—and the examination is completed.

What is the point of this? It is precisely to be as realistic and accurate as we can about our spiritual selves. Daily examination of conscience takes the process of self-assessment out of the realm of an occasional, impressionistic overview and enables us to come to grips with small problems before they become large ones. And of course as preparation for fruitful reception of the Sacrament of Penance, the practice cannot be surpassed.

For its part, Penance is the sacramental action in which we directly encounter Christ for the specific purpose of receiving forgiveness of our sins and strength for our future efforts. The sacrament's importance in case of absolute necessity—serious sin, that is—is obvious. More to the point here, however, Penance is hardly less necessary for one who is striving to deepen his or her spiritual life.

Serious sin may seldom be in question for such a person, but sin and weakness are part of the reality of everyone's life. There is no better way of coping with our frailty and receiving Christ's pardon and encouragement than this sacrament.

These purposes are best served when Penance is part of the process of spiritual direction. Then the benefits are magnified and brought to focus with great specificity upon our spiritual needs and condition. To put it another way, the Sacrament of Penance is a remarkably effective tool in the hands of a skilled spiritual director.

So, too, is the practice called "particular examination." This traditional spiritual exercise is an "examination" in the sense that it requires us to reflect on ourselves—our strengths and weaknesses, our virtues and vices—and come to know ourselves better. It is "particular" in the sense that it zeroes in on something specific—some virtue we need to acquire, some bad habit we need to overcome. It does this furthermore by proposing some very concrete practice in order to achieve the desired result.

For instance, a priest who determined to work harder at giving good sermons might as his "particular examination" set himself a definite schedule for preparing his Sunday homilies. A husband determined to be kinder to his wife might decide as his particular examination to do the dishes every night. The point of the exercise is to concentrate on an area where improvement is needed and adopt a very specific way to achieve it.

Here, too, the advice of a prudent spiritual director who knows us well is of inestimable value. Examination of conscience, Penance, and the particular examination: each in its own way helps us to overcome our weaknesses and grow in the life of the spirit. The help of a spiritual guide is an enormous advantage in that effort.

The role of the apostolate

The interior life of a Christian is essentially concerned with his or her relationship with God. But if it is *only* concerned with that, there is something lacking even in the relationship itself.

It is important to underline that point as we end this booklet describing a plan of life or program of spirituality for Christians who are serious about their Christianity—what I have called a "game plan" for sanctity.

In the pages you have just read, I have written about various elements of such a plan. These include the Mass and reception of the Eucharist; mental and vocal prayer; Scripture and spiritual reading; Penance, examination of conscience, and the practice called the "particular examination;" and spiritual direction.

All of these things are useful, even essential, for progress in the interior life. But it would be a mistake to understand them as focusing exclusively on the one-to-one relationship between the individual and God.

Plainly it is important to nourish that relationship. That is precisely the point of establishing a plan of life and keeping to it. But it is also crucial to realize that our relationship with God cannot be isolated from our relationships with other people. The ultimate test of how well we have loved the Lord will be how well we have loved other human beings. Jesus tells us just that in the New Testament.

One useful concept for expressing this is "apostolate." Every Christian is called to the apostolate in the circumstances of his or her own life. To a great extent, the sincerity of our response to this call is the measure of the sincerity of our commitment to Christianity itself.

The word "apostolate" should not be taken as referring to some kind of out-of-the-ordinary activity. Precisely that kind of thinking has done harm in the past, helping to reinforce the idea

that priests and religious are the only people who have a serious role in carrying on the mission of Christ and the Church. One bad result has been to encourage passivity and non-involvement on the part of lay people.

It is true that clergy, religious, and laity have specifically different functions in the Church. Saint Paul, among others, is very clear about the differentiation of roles and tasks within the Mystical Body.

But all members of the Church—clergy, religious, and laity—share the basic Christian vocation by reason of their baptism. All are called to the apostolate.

And what is “apostolate?” Fundamentally, it means continuing the mission of Christ in our world today.

Apostolate isn’t reserved for special people in special circumstances. It isn’t something that pertains only to Sunday and to “churchy” settings alone. Everyone should do apostolate wherever the circumstances of his or her life carry him—at home, in the neighborhood, at school, on the job. All these are places where Christ wishes to be present. That will only be the case if dedicated Christians make Him present there.

I do not wish, however, to give a painfully “pious” impression of the apostolate. Apostolate takes many forms, but one form it almost certainly does *not* take is pulling a long face, indulging in preachy talk, and handing out religious tracts.

On the contrary, apostolate will usually begin with the most natural thing in the world—friendship. Christians who want to live apos-

tolically must get to know other people, enter into their lives, share their sorrows and their joys, look for ways to extend them the human encouragement and support that help them cope with their manifold needs and challenges.

Then, perhaps, times will come when apostolate can naturally move to a different, deeper plane: A word spoken to a friend who stopped practicing his religion years ago; a serious conversation with a fellow worker who acknowledges her uncertainties about the meaning of life; some practical suggestions for a neighbor who thinks he might like to work harder at improving his relationship with God but doesn’t know where or how to begin.

The clergy and religious cannot do it all. There aren’t enough of them, and they cannot enter into every corner of the secular world and every situation in daily life. To bring Christ into all these environments demands the best efforts of us all. That is apostolate.

Apostolate is a necessary part of a plan of life for serious Christians. More than that, the other elements of the “plan” provide the strength and encouragement—the spiritual calories, as it were—for diligent and persevering apostolic activity. Interior life and apostolate are inseparable.

These thoughts about the interior life are only words on paper. The words must be adapted, interiorized, and put into living practice by each one of us if our spiritual lives are to grow and flourish. I pray that this will happen, both in my case and in yours.

The Author

Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, Archbishop of Chicago, a native of South Carolina, served in his home diocese of Charleston for fourteen years before being appointed auxiliary bishop of Atlanta in 1966. While in Atlanta he was elected General Secretary of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB) and the United States Catholic Conference (USCC). Appointed Archbishop of Cincinnati in 1972, he held this post for almost ten years until named Archbishop of Chicago in 1982. He was raised to the College of Cardinals by Pope John Paul II in 1983.

Archbishop Bernardin served as President of the NCCB and USCC from 1974 to 1977. He has also been chairman of the USCC Communications Committee and the NCCB Committee for Canonical Affairs, and currently is chairman of the NCCB Committee for Pro-Life Activities. His work

as chairman of the NCCB ad hoc Committee on War and Peace earned him the Albert Einstein Foundation Peace Prize in November of 1983.

Among his Vatican posts have been appointment as consultor to the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, appointment to the Pontifical Commission for the Revision of the Code of Canon Law, and his current membership in the Sacred Congregations for the Sacraments and Divine Worship, for the Evangelization of Peoples, and for Promoting Christian Unity.

Archbishop Bernardin was one of four elected NCCB delegates to the World Synod of Bishops held in Rome in 1974, 1977, 1980 and 1983. In each of these four synods he was elected to the 15-member Permanent Council to plan the next synod.

Among his writing are *Prayer in Our Time*, 1973; *"Let the Children Come to Me," a Guide for the Religious Education of Children*, 1976; *Called to Serve, Called to Lead—Reflections on the Ministerial Priesthood*, 1981; and *It is Christ We Preach*, 1982. Cardinal Bernardin also writes a weekly newspaper column for the *Chicago Catholic*, from which this booklet is taken.