

The Latin Rule

A Templar Talk for the 2022 Texas York Rite Conferences

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Sir Knights,

My name is Gabriel Jagush. I am a Past Commander of Worth Commandery N^o 19 in Fort Worth. Today, we're going to explore the Latin Rule. This was the monastic code by which our spiritual ancestors, the Knights Templar, governed their lives. We'll also reflect on what it means to us as Templar Masons.

A "Rule" is a system of regulations for a monastic order. Each member of the community has to follow this Rule. Every monastic order uses (or used) a Rule of some kind. The Knights Templar were no exception.

Historians have studied many monastic Rules. They have taught us a lot about the spiritual beliefs and structures of those orders. However, the Latin Rule of the Knights Templar has not been studied this way. In fact, it has never been fully translated into English. The full text contains hundreds of regulations. So far, English translations only cover the first seventy-two sections. This is known as the Primitive Rule.

The Latin Rule was the guiding document for the Knights Templar. They used it to govern themselves, their monasteries, and their entire order. It was important from a legal perspective, too. It let the Church recognize them as a valid military-monastic order. As Templar Masons, we can use it to help govern our own lives and actions.

The Rule covers many aspects of consecrated life. A lot of it prescribes how to worship both in public and in private. For example, you had to attend church services multiple times a day. If you couldn't attend services, you had to pray to make up for it. You had to pray the Lord's Prayer thirteen times at 2 AM, seven times every three hours, and nine times for evening prayer.

Other regulations governed how the Knights ate. They ate only three meat-based meals per week. At all other meals, they ate simple plant-based food. They didn't eat breakfast. During lunch and dinner, they ate in complete silence. They used only hand signals to communicate. A member of the Order read Scripture out loud at every meal.

Some regulations are interesting to us as Masons. §24 dictates that “permanent brothers” couldn't wear furs, hides, or skins. They were, however, allowed to wear lambskin or ram's skin. The reception of candidates into the Order is similar to how we investigate candidates for the lodge. It's also similar to the installation of the Worshipful Master. Brethren travelling through different regions were instructed, “let them not defile by word or action the purpose of the order, but by their examples let them display - especially to those with whom they may be joined - the salt of wisdom and the spice of good works.” This should sound familiar to every modern Knight Templar!

The defining trait of the Latin Rule is its emphasis on humility. Unselfishness, obedience, and living a simple, quiet life mark the Rule like a steady drumbeat. We can especially see this in the regulations about clothing.

Clothing was uniform in color. The color varied depending on the brother and his role in the order. Members wore black, white, or sometimes brown. Clothing had to be simple. Any clothing that required more than one person to put on - like that of the nobility - was forbidden. §28 set grooming standards. Hair had to be “regular and orderly.” Beards could not be “excessive or facetious.” The Rule forbade pointed shoes and shoes with buckles, which were expensive exotic imports. Gold, silver, and jeweled horse tack was forbidden unless it was old and had been given as a gift. Horse feed bags had to be plain. You couldn't put your family coat of arms or another “cover” on any of your weapons, shields, or armor. Doing so meant you were attached to secular titles and worldly connections. This wasn't compatible with the spirit of the Order.

Other sections of the Rule address humility more directly. §43 condemns bragging about your sinful ways before joining the Order. §47 and §48 tell Knights to humbly accept any legal actions taken against them. This applies even if the judgement may not be fair. That may remind us a little of the Entered Apprentice Charge.

There are parts of the Rule that don't translate as well to a modern day perspective. §44 forbids going hawking with a falconer. At first, this might seem like a deviation from the theme. Further context helps us out here. Hawking and falconry were hobbies reserved for the rich as a spectator sport. Someone sworn to live a humble life couldn't take part in this. Thus, we see the continued development of the theme of humility. Avoid selfishness. Obey God, the Church, and the Order. Live a quiet and simple life.

We can't summarize the entire Rule in this talk. It's a document that deserves several deep dives from every Sir Knight. As Templar Masons, it calls to us. What can we learn from it today? How can we guide our lives by its wisdom? We are the spiritual descendants of those Knights. Their Rule is our inheritance. We know that it's got real value.

Nowadays, not many of us - myself included - live by a monastic code. We have “house rules.” Our commanderies have bylaws. The Grand Commandery has a book of statutes and regulations. The Grand Encampment has a Constitution. What about a personal Rule?

I have a question for the Sir Knights here today. Imagine that you are writing a formal moral code for yourself. This is something to live by as a man and a Templar Mason. What is the first or most important rule you'd write down?

[Short, limited discussion.]

Sir Knights, I have to wrap us up here. You can learn more about the Latin Rule in “The Original Rule of the Knights Templar.” This is a master's thesis by Robert Wojtowicz of Western Michigan University. If you'd like a copy, please send me an email.

Thank you so much for your attention. I hope you all enjoyed this talk. God bless!