

THE PROLEGOMENA TO THE RULE OF THE ORDER

A MORAL COVENANT AND CORPORATE DISCIPLINE

A Prologue to Corporate Discipline

I

1. We, the _____ Community, by our free resolve, before the creator of our personal and collective destinies and the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, take upon ourselves the moral covenant and rule of life, for the sake of a particular corporate mission within the total calling of the church, to which we have been commonly elected.

II

2. We confess, in the first place, that we can do so only because we have been seized by the word of the love of God in Christ Jesus solely for the sake of the mission of being His People in the world.

3. We acknowledge, secondly, that we can do so only because we find ourselves so historically situated that we are commonly called to exercise this self-understanding and mission in a particular time and place and endeavor.

III

4. We further acknowledge and confess that we have been immediately prompted to this course by the church's new vision of the Gospel as the freedom to involve oneself utterly in this world; and we believe that free involvement in the world demands a disciplined life;

5. By the church's new image of herself as mission: the bearer of the Word of Life in and to history without which men do not live as historical beings; and we are persuaded that historical mission calls for a disciplined people;

6. By the church's new concern for her own radical renewal in our time which necessitates creative experiments of many kinds and various forms; we deem this corporate discipline to be one such experiment for the renewal of the church;

7. By the church's new confrontation by the Fathers with the fact that wherever authentic faith in Jesus Christ has been recovered in the past, there has followed a new sense of mission to the world and intentional discipline for the sake of that mission;

8. By the church's new awareness, born of the times, that all men live consciously or unconsciously by some structure and that the self-aware man does and must exist in a self-consciously ordered life. Discipline is a concern of our age both inside and outside the church.

IV

9. We must always remember and ever remind one another that in our corporate discipline we begin with Christ; we do not strive toward Him. Our covenant is a sign and symbol of our immutable standing before the Lord; it must never be perverted into a means to that end. God's acceptance of us is accomplished forever and it is utterly impossible and utterly unnecessary to gain our salvation through this rule or any other pious work, so called.

10. This means, and let us ever be clear about it, that our covenant is solely for the sake of the common mission to which we have been called. By-productive consequences there may be, but the rule is not directed toward the nourishment of our religious life, the development of a sense of togetherness, the creation of harmonious relationships, or the establishment of human community as such, in any form. Our common rule thrusts us upon our task and exists only for the sake of that task.

11. We must always remember and ever remind one another that while our corporate discipline does and must make explicit certain structures in which we labor, our common existence is in no sense and at no time synonymous or reducible to structures of any kind, hidden or disclosed, written or unwritten. Human relationships remain mysteriously beyond the power of human reason to articulate and any order to contain.

12. Again, let us also be aware that though our covenant necessarily has a definite fixedness and a certain rigidity, it must always be kept pliable, ready for adjustment for the varying needs, situations and obligations of the different individuals participating in it. Finally and most important, the total rule must constantly be maintained as open for alteration, for continuing development and indeed for complete discontinuation.

13. We must always remember and ever remind one another that in our corporate discipline, we no longer live and work alone as isolated individuals. Henceforth our historical calling and mission, our corporate being and doing, our personal thinking and acting, are embodied in a definite community itself incorporated into the total life and mission of the historical church. All men hiddenly or overtly live out of some community; in our moral covenant we make our social being explicitly intentional.

14. On the other hand, we dare not forget that moral covenants are never for the purpose of escaping the burden of selfhood. Authentic, self-consciously disciplined community does not swallow the individual; it rather creates the very possibility of personhood pushing the individual against the necessity to decide for himself and then holding him accountable for the consequences of his own actions. Genuine participation in the structures of community and authentic individuality are two poles of the same reality.

15. We must always remember and ever remind one another that in our corporate discipline we are both responsible to and for one another. Not only must each one of us carry the burden of his own relation to the rule, but we must each bear the loyalty and disloyalty of our brothers under the rule. We must assume responsibility for intruding into the other's existence up to the point of his freedom, and in turn, freely open ourselves to the other's responsibility to intrude into our life up to the point of our conscience before God.

16. Furthermore, let us never forget that though we are utterly bound by our covenant, we remain free at any time and in any circumstance to break the covenant; never, to be sure, by default in decision but by a self-conscious free resolve made in the light of other claims which other covenants in life lay upon us. In one sense, a rule was made to be broken and the disloyalty taken freely upon ourselves. Our covenant thrusts upon us our freedom and responsibility.

17. We must always remember and ever remind each other that though our corporate discipline necessarily must include within it explicit ways and means of accounting before one another and exposing ourselves to our fellows, it is never to the end of maintaining the rule intact, never for the sake of judgment in and for itself, but rather to provide the opportunity for taking upon ourselves afresh our freedom to be responsible persons in our mission.

18. Moreover, we must bear in mind that such explicit opening of ourselves through our covenant to our promises before the gaze of another, though not determining our objective guilt, does bring many hidden guilts to the surface of our lives. Such intensifying of our sensitivities to guilt in a community grounded in the word of acceptance becomes a great gift. The releasing of hidden guilt and the possibility of embracing the same, is that without which we cannot and do not have life.

19. We must always remember and ever remind each other that a corporate discipline involves a kind of total commitment; he who enters into it therefore must do so through his own free resolve in such a fashion that the rule becomes his own life discipline and not some demand thrust upon him by another. And if the covenant is to remain an imperative from within ourselves rather than an alien pressure from without, it must ever and again be renewed with an abandonment, which mixes our total being with it.

20. Nevertheless it is utterly necessary that any covenant be understood and held as relative: relative before our relation to God in Christ; relative to our effective engagement in the world. For this reason it must continually be grasped as open-ended; responsible discontinuation will then be an ever-present possibility for everyone involved; our concrete concern for one another will insure that such a course be taken only in the same sobriety and fear of God that our entrance into the covenant demands.