



Picking up a habit this winter

The medieval English mystic Richard Rolle was not the quiet contemplative soul that we usually associate with persons of similar vocation. Although he was a hermit for at least the second half of his life, he was also one of the most popular spiritual writers of the 14th century, a fact attested to by the exceptionally high number of surviving manuscripts of his work. He was born in about 1300 in the village of Thornton in York and it is known that he studied for some years at Oxford though it is unlikely that he completed his degree. He “disappears” from record in 1349 and is believed to have died of the plague but not before having established a solid following of people convinced of his sanctity. Many regarded him as a saint and, in preparation for his anticipated canonisation, an office (The *Legenda*) was written. The canonisation never eventuated but Rolle was already immortalised by his prolific writings, some of which give an insight into his often unconventional approach to life, worship and contemplation. In one of his more surprising antics, Rolle announced his decision to retire to the contemplative life by donning two of his sister’s dresses and his father’s rainhood in an effort to fashion for himself a suitable “hermit’s” outfit. His sister, witnessing this, reacted by crying out, “My brother is mad” and, indeed, some commentators have echoed similar sentiments. My own view on this is that the behaviour, though perhaps somewhat bizarre, was quite in keeping with a time and a society that valued outward “signs” of sanctity.

In this dramatic change of clothing, I think Rolle was signalling his inner spiritual transformation by the purposeful change in his outward appearance. The changed outward look would have alerted his society to his new statue or life state. It would also have provided Rolle with a means of signifying a clear separation between his former (very colourful) life and his (intended) new life of spiritual devotion. Thus, his transformed “habit” of life was exemplified by the donning of a habit. Most of us are familiar with this idea as represented by the tradition of religious habits and of St Paul’s references to putting off the old, and putting on the new (Ephesians 4.22-24). It’s worth remembering, too, that “habit” really has three connotations: clothing, particularly religious attire; outward form or appearance; and bodily constitution, mental habit, or customary practice.

Today, we are very familiar with the “customary practice” connotation. How often do we notice that when we’re overweight and unfit, or unhappy in a job or a relationship, it affects our approach to life in general. How often does a decision to lose weight lead to a new outlook on life (or, perhaps, vice versa); or a new hairstyle

make us feel more confident? Sometimes it's just that we've fallen into bad habits – overeating, taking shortcuts in our work, becoming lazy in a relationship. It's sometimes said that you need to do something only seven times before it becomes a habit; but to undo the same acquired habit, it takes at least twenty-one conscious rejections of the practice and ten times the effort.

Winter is a time when picking up bad habits is easy, especially those habits of the overeating- under exercising type. But it can also be a slower, more reflective time of year in which we can pick up some good habits – spending more time with family, volunteering to help those less fortunate in our communities, nurturing and improving our home and home life, establishing new approaches to prayer and contemplation, reading and improving our minds. Our embrace of the “new” need not be so dramatic as Richard Rolle's but, even so, we might still learn something from him about pursuing new habits with unbridled enthusiasm.

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