

FOREWORD BY MATTHEW KELLY

Plan of Life

HABITS
TO HELP
YOU GROW
CLOSER
TO GOD

ROGER J. LANDRY



Praise for *Plan of Life*

“From routine tasks to complex projects and special events, if we are going to be successful, we need to have a plan. Father Landry provides us a practical, accessible, and very helpful means of developing a plan for living our faith and growing in holiness. At a time when so many voices are competing for our attention, and some calling us in the wrong direction, this book guides us through the steps of strengthening our spiritual life and our participation in the life of the Church. I highly recommend it for anyone who has recognized the need for a better spiritual focus in their daily life but doesn’t know where or how to begin. With great generosity, humility, and devotion to the Lord and our Blessed Mother, Father Landry shows us the way forward.”

— Séan Cardinal O’Malley, OFM, Cap.,
Archbishop of Boston

“A successful spiritual life needs the same discipline that a successful diet or physical training requires. Father Landry’s very helpful book prompts us to develop such a regimen for growth in holiness. It’s hardly a ‘self-help’ book, but a ‘soul-help’ one, reminding us on each page that the *real help* comes only from the Lord.”

— Timothy Michael Cardinal Dolan,
Archbishop of New York

“Many of us try to squeeze God into our crowded life rather than seek to center our life around God. Father Landry not only shows us the path to unite our life to God but also accompanies

us step by step in that transformation. This book will change you and may be just what you need to find the life you've always wanted and that God has wanted for you."

— Archbishop Bernardito C. Auza, Apostolic Nuncio,
Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations

"The ultimate goal of the life of every Christian is union with the Blessed Trinity and eventually to be a saint. As Father Landry says, 'Every major goal in life requires a plan.' We plan our days, weeks, months, and years. We plan our appointments, activities, commitments, work, and business. How about planning our spiritual life? Father Landry shows in this book how to plan our spiritual journey so that we don't get lost on the way."

— Most Reverend Edgar da Cunha, Bishop of Fall River

"Father Roger Landry is one of the leaders of the New Evangelization in the United States. His advice on how to be the missionary disciples we were all baptized to be is always thoughtful, engaging, and welcome."

— George Weigel, Distinguished Senior Fellow
and William E. Simon Chair at the Catholic Studies,
Ethics and Public Policy Center; author of *Witness to Hope*

"Jesus calls us to friendship with him. How do we take up this wonderful invitation? Father Landry distills the Church's wisdom and provides what we all need—good counsel that's at once practical and spiritual. This is the perfect book for all Christians who want to drink more deeply from the spring of living water that wells up to eternal life.

— R. R. Reno, editor of *First Things*

"'No one plans to fail, but many fail to plan.' Father Roger Landry has written an enormously helpful book for those planning to get to heaven. By explaining in clear and simple language

the time-tested method of a 'Plan of Life,' Father Landry's book will encourage and inspire even the most lukewarm soul to become a better Christian. A must-have book for your spiritual reading library."

— Reverend Francis J. "Rocky" Hoffman,
executive director of Relevant Radio

"Father Landry was born to be a coach of the spiritual life. And this is the most accessible manual you could pick up for being seriously, joyfully Catholic now, in the busy-ness of your life. Your imitation of Christ will only grow if you follow this holy priest's advice."

— Kathryn Jean Lopez, Senior Fellow of the National Review
Institute; editor-at-large of *National Review*;
nationally syndicated columnist

"Lots of people want to improve their spiritual lives and some make repeated efforts to do so. But many fail from not having personal guidance or a workable plan, something we would seek in any other part of life. Father Roger Landry's approach is not only clear and easy to follow, it's lively and spiritually enlightening on every page. One can't help but benefit from the wisdom and practical advice he offers. This is a book to read, and to keep handy to reread often."

— Robert Royal, Faith & Reason Institute

"To have a plan for daily living is posited on the premise that there is a purpose for life. This may seem obvious, but in our culture there are sad rumors that there is no reason for living beyond managing to exist. Since the Spirit gives life, spiritual practices are at the heart of living, and Father Landry suggests in clear and amiable ways, rather like Francis de Sales and Alphonsus Liguori, what this means."

— Father George William Rutler, author;
pastor of St. Michael Parish, New York City

“The late Father Bob Bedard, founder of Canada’s Companions of the Cross, told thousands of people the secret to a good spiritual life: ‘The decision not to go to bed on time is a decision not to pray the next morning.’ Rather simple. And true. Father Landry, in this most practical of books, takes you from that bedtime moment, to waking the next morning, to bedtime again and shows how—with work and study and family—you can consecrate that time to God. If you don’t have a ‘plan of life’ you won’t grow in friendship with God. You don’t *have* to use this book, but why make it more difficult to begin without it?”

— Father Raymond de Souza, editor in chief
of *Convivium* magazine

“Father Landry has given us an easy-to-read guide on living a daily Catholic spiritual program that is challenging and rewarding, but not impossibly burdensome. He presents and explains various norms of piety that nourish us in our struggle to grow closer to God. This book informs, inspires, and encourages: you can grow in love for God by taking time to pray at different points throughout the day.”

— Father Gerald E. Murray, pastor of Holy Family Church,
New York; member of EWTN’s “Papal Posse”

“At a time when many Christians feel buffeted by the rising tide of secularism, Father Roger Landry’s book is the ideal guide to higher and better ground. *Plan of Life* is nothing less than a beautiful answer to the prayer, ‘Show me and my family how to live.’ It’s the perfect gift for Confirmation, graduation, birthdays, and every other milestone that’s celebrated in this world while pointing to the next.”

— Mary Eberstadt, author of *How the West Really
Lost God* and *Adam and Eve after the Pill*

“I have twice been on pilgrimages to Rome with Father Landry and experienced, with other journalists, his opening up of the great treasures of faith there. So it is no surprise to see him offer here a brilliant little treasure chest of spiritual practices. Most people have a desire to grow closer to God but don’t know how. Herein lies a map.

— Peggy Noonan, Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist,
Wall Street Journal

“Father Landry was instrumental in helping me embrace the Catholic faith. He has a way of explaining the faith with clarity, passion, and beauty. Reading this book has strengthened my faith and will help strengthen yours!”

— Kirsten Powers, CNN political commentator,
USA Today columnist, author of *The Silencing*

“We live in an age of spiritual junk food that brings momentary comfort, but little nutrition. This book is an eighteen-course meal of nourishment—bite-size portions that will bolster your spiritual health while provoking longings for the heavenly banquet. As a member of my ‘Conclave Crew’ during the election of Pope Francis, Father Landry made the most arcane details of Church history and doctrine accessible to everyone. His usual brilliance and heartfelt concern for souls is evident on every page of this much-needed book.”

— Raymond Arroyo, *New York Times* best-selling author,
lead anchor of EWTN’s *The World Over Live*

“We like to plan out every aspect of our celebrations, our travel, and even our errand running, yet so often we leave our spiritual lives up to chance and then wonder why we’re not getting anywhere. Here, like a good coach, Father Landry reveals the ‘game-plan’ by which we can truly deepen our prayer lives, grow

in our outreach, and pursue holiness. *Plan of Life* is a practical and inspiring exhortation to take up the tools, practices, and sacraments of the Church and use them to build a spiritual life that is ingrained, structured, and oriented toward heaven.”

— Elizabeth Scalia, author of *Strange Gods:
Unmasking the Idols in Everyday Life*

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HABITS TO HELP YOU
GROW CLOSER TO GOD

By Roger J. Landry

Foreword by Matthew Kelly



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*To the members of the domestic church
where I first learned to know, love, and serve
God and others.*

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Foreword

“Those who fail to plan can plan to fail.” This was Benjamin Franklin’s counsel to a group of businessmen setting out on a new venture. We plan for so many things in life, but astoundingly very few people have a plan for the most important aspect of life—the spiritual one. And the uncomfortable truth, the often unspoken truth, is that without a plan to grow spiritually, we will fail in many areas of our lives and almost certainly fail to live the rich and fruitful life God created us to live.

In some ways it is easier than ever before to establish a Plan of Life that helps us grow spiritually. This book is a perfect example of that. One hundred years ago, monthly meetings with a great spiritual director for years would have been necessary to learn what you will discover between the covers of this book.

In other ways, however, it is harder than ever to establish a plan of life. The pace of our lives and all we cram into them, the noise of our lives and all the many voices we choose to pay attention to, all prevent us from sinking the roots of regular spiritual habits deep into our daily lives.

These deep roots are essential. They are essential to encounter and befriend the living God; they are essential to discover

the-best-version-of-ourselves; they are essential to live with clarity in a world of confusion; they are essential to find peace in a culture of chaos; and they are essential to experience the joy of being alive and blessed and loved. Deep roots are simply essential for these and so many other reasons. But there is one reason in particular I would like to explore with you.

When a storm blows through town, there are always trees that get blown over and branches that are broken. Why do some trees blow over and others don't? Roots. Deep roots. Strong roots. A tree with deep, strong roots can weather any storm.

And life is full of storms. The question is not, will there be a storm? The question is, when is the next storm getting here? And when the storm arrives, it's too late to think about sinking roots. At that point, you either have them or you don't.

Father Roger Landry is one of the great voices of clarity in our times of confusion. He is a friend to your soul. In these pages he will be your spiritual guide. Chapter by chapter, he presents the great spiritual practices that will help you to build a Plan of Life.

This book is like the man. It will inspire you to want to live a holy life. Every time I am with Father Landry, I walk about inspired, filled with hope, and hungry to be a better person and live a better life. These pages are dripping with that kind of hope and inspiration.

Over these twenty-five years that I have been speaking and writing, I have become absolutely convinced that there is one primary, immutable truth when it comes to living as a Christian in the world. It is this: the Christian life is simply not sustainable without daily prayer. This is the first root to sink deep into our lives. If you don't already have a firmly established habit of daily prayer, this book will help you to establish one. It will become one of the great joys of your life.

But reading these pages, I am led to conclude: it is impossible to excel in the Christian life without a Plan of Life. And that is what we are called to: excellence. We think about achieving excellence in so many areas of our lives, but when was the last time you reflected seriously on achieving excellence in the spiritual life?

Let this book be the beginning. Let it be your beginning. People don't live holy lives accidentally. It happens on purpose. It will never be convenient to build a Plan of Life like Father Landry describes in this book. But the day you decide to set out along that path is a day you will remember forever. I hope today is that day for you.

MATTHEW KELLY

Founder of Dynamic Catholic

Preface

So You Want to Grow Closer to God?

Imagine yourself on your deathbed. Your family and friends surround you. You are full of peace and joy because you are confident that you have lived a good life. You have gone through much of your life with faith, purpose, peace, and charity. You have come to know and love Jesus through Scripture and the Eucharist. You have gradually become more and more like Jesus by growing in virtue and union with him. And now you are getting ready to meet and embrace him whom you have strived to serve and to love. You hear him say to you, in his mercy, the words he told us he longs to say to everyone, “Well done, my good and faithful servant. . . . Come, share your Master’s joy” (Mt 25:21, *NABRE*).

Do you think your last moments will be like this? Do you want them to be?

There is no better time than now to start living in a way that will help your last moments be those of peace rather than regrets. No one lays on his deathbed wishing that he had spent more time watching TV, surfing the Internet, or working.

As a priest who has assisted hundreds of people on their deathbeds, I can tell you that many spend their last moments wishing that they had done the more important things in life, such as being with their families.

But the most important activity of all is prioritizing time with the One with whom we hope to spend eternity. As important as our relationships are with a spouse, parents, children, and friends, the most important relationship of all is with our Creator and Redeemer. Without him, after all, no other relationship would be possible.

It is our relationship with God that matters most.

Every major goal in life requires a plan. Succeeding in the test of life and passing with God from death to eternity is the most important end of our human existence. This book attempts to lay out a plan for the ultimate goal a person can ever have in life: loving union with God.

Are you ready to work on your relationship with God? To put God first? To live as his “good and faithful servant”?

If so, let’s get started.

How to Use This Book

When you put a Plan of Life into practice, it is good to remember that no one can do everything at once. This book is full of practices that you can choose to incorporate gradually into your life. It's possible that you might feel overwhelmed as you make your way through the book, especially if the majority of the practices are new to you. But I would encourage you, in the words of Jesus and Saint John Paul II, "Be not afraid!" This is not a book of demands. Rather, it is a treasure chest of practices that will help you respond to God's help to become holier, happier, and grow closer to him every day.

I urge you to read through this book prayerfully and allow the chapters to serve as conversation starters for a dialogue with God about your life. He knows where you are spiritually as well as all your commitments, struggles, and joys. Let God help you to see which practices can be integrated right away to grow in greater union with him and which can wait. Don't hesitate to ask him for help when and how you need it. It might be good to stop for at least a brief one-on-one with God at the end of every chapter.

In the first part of the book, "The Basics," we will focus on the fundamentals for growth in the spiritual life. Then you will have a

chance to pause and take an inventory. At that point you can reflect on what you're already doing well, what you're doing but could do better, and which practices you have perhaps not even considered as being part of your spiritual life. It will be an opportunity to water some of the seeds that God may have planted so that they might grow and bear fruit.

In the second part of the book, "Beyond the Basics," we'll focus on those habits that might assist you to grow even more. And at the end of the book, a worksheet and the resources in the appendices will help you formulate and begin to keep a Plan of Life.

You've certainly taken a step in the right direction by picking up this book. I hope that you will find what I have discovered personally and in my pastoral work with many others at all stages in their journey: that formulating and following a solid spiritual Plan of Life is one of the most important and life-enhancing decisions any of us can make!

Introduction

Jumpstart Your Spiritual Life

“No disciple is superior to the teacher; but when fully trained, every disciple will be like his teacher.” (Lk 6:40, *NABRE*)

To become like Jesus, to follow him, to imitate him, and to love God and others with our whole heart and mind is the deepest reason for our existence. At a sacramental level, we are conformed to Christ in Baptism, but most of us, at a moral level, have a long way to go to become more like Jesus. The whole mission of the Church is to help people to become more like Jesus, to become saints. Over the centuries, the Church has needed to sledgehammer the heresy that holiness is the calling of only a few. Rather, the call to holiness comes from our Baptism and the ways to sanctity are many.

God the Father’s ultimate desire, shown in the great lengths to which he went in Jesus’ suffering, death, and Resurrection, is that all of us will one day share eternal life with him. For that desire to be realized, however, our cooperation is required. Saint Augustine

once wrote that though God created us without our consent, he won't save us without our consent. To become a saint and eventually enter heaven, we must will it. Jesus spoke powerfully about that willing in the Gospel. He said that we need to "strive to enter through the narrow door" that leads to heaven (Lk 13:24). Which road we're on, which road we'll seek to be on, and whether we're heading toward or away from holiness, happiness, and heaven, involves the most consequential decisions of our life.

Saint John of the Cross wrote that we were born "for no other reason than to be a saint." French intellectual Léon Bloy once stated that life's only great tragedy is *not* to become holy—not just because of the potential eternal consequences, but because one would go through life without establishing the friendship with God that makes life most meaningful.

Willing holiness, however, is not enough. As Peter realized, much to his dismay on Holy Thursday night, "The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Mt 26:41). We need something that can strengthen our frail flesh to align itself with our willing spirit. The reality is that becoming like Jesus is the work of a lifetime. We need what Saint John Paul II called a "genuine training in holiness, adapted to people's needs." We need a Plan of Life, a "game plan" for our spiritual life.

In almost every sphere of life, a person who takes something seriously comes up with a plan. Success depends on a solid plan and perseverance. Championship sports teams, flourishing businesses, triumphant political campaigns, and successful people all teach us a powerful lesson: those who get results are generally the ones with better strategies. There's got to be a plan. It's got to be a good plan. And you have to stick to that plan.

The same is true of the spiritual life. There's no reason why we shouldn't take our spiritual plan just as seriously as sports teams that

train and strategize, and dieters who count calories and plan what they eat. The spiritual life is too important to wing. So much of our happiness, in this world and in the next, depends on whether we have a Plan of Life, whether it's adequate to form us in holiness, and whether we make and keep the commitment to follow our plan.

In the early Church, Saint Paul specialized in providing training in the Christian life. His letters are full of advice from an expert coach in the spiritual life. Paul urged parents to raise their children "in the discipline and instruction of the Lord," and he provided the same training for his spiritual children (Eph 6:4). "I am again in the pain of childbirth," he wrote to the Galatians, comparing himself to a mother, "until Christ is formed in you" (Gal 4:19).

Paul urged the young Saint Timothy, "Train yourself in godliness, for, while physical training is of some value, godliness is valuable in every way, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come" (1 Tim 4:7-8). Paul followed his own advice, telling the Corinthians, "I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified" (1 Cor 9:26-27).

Paul's spiritual training involved years of prayer and study in the Arabian Desert. He suffered a "thorn . . . in the flesh," and battled "against the spiritual forces of evil" (2 Cor 12:7; Eph 6:12). Paul endured multiple assassination attempts, shipwrecks, scourging, stoning, betrayals, imprisonments, sleepless nights, hunger and thirst, cold and exposure, opposition, and so much more.

But through it all, Paul was able to "have the mind of Christ," adopt Christ's attitude, and vest himself with God's armor of truth and holiness (see 1 Cor 2:16). So thorough was his training that he was eventually able to tell the Galatians, "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20).

Christian training can take on many different forms. (Hopefully yours will not involve years in the Arabian Desert!) But Jesus is constantly trying to do for us what he did for Saint Paul: give us, through the Church, a full training, so that we may become more and more like him and he can truly and increasingly live in us.

At this point, you may be asking yourself, “How can I train to become more like Christ?”

The Church has a treasure trove of saint-making tips and spiritual practices. From the example of Christ in Scripture, to the model of the early Christian martyrs, to the lives of canonized men and women from all walks of life, we have learned many ways to become more like Christ.

Saint John Paul II summed up the Church’s wisdom regarding attaining union with God by naming six pillars of “training in holiness”: grace, prayer, Sunday Mass, Confession, listening to the word of God, and proclaiming that word.

Making sure each of these pillars is present in our lives, however, does not guarantee sanctity. We need not just to do them, but also to get the most out of them and integrate them into our daily lives. We must prayerfully work with God to develop a “curriculum” of spiritual formation—something similar to the “rules” found in consecrated communities—designed to help those who follow them grow in holiness day by day.

That program of spiritual formation is generally called a Plan of Life, which is a game plan of spiritual exercises to help people learn how to fight the good fight, to run the race of life so as to win, and to keep the faith by growing in faith and sharing it (see 2 Tim 4:7; 1 Cor 9:14). It’s a series of practices given to us by the saints and spiritual directors to help people to translate their desire to grow closer to God from a vague aspiration into a reality.

Developing a Plan of Life may sound frightening, but remember that growth in the spiritual life is an exciting invitation, not a chore. And any good plan involves making small steps in the right direction. A plan for holiness of life is no different.



THE BASICS

CHAPTER 1

The Holy Spirit

A Sanctifying Fire

The purpose of a Plan of Life is to help us grow in holiness. But it's essential to focus primarily on the work of sanctification that God is trying to accomplish in us rather than on our own efforts. Saint Paul tells us that the Holy Spirit carries out the work of sanctification (see Rom 15:16). The Holy Spirit worked a miraculous metamorphosis in the lives of the first members of the Church on Pentecost, changing them from apostates to apostles, from chickens to shepherds. When we consider how the Holy Spirit worked in the lives of the first members of his Church, it is fitting also to ponder whether the Holy Spirit is truly the guide of our day-to-day life as well.

During the Last Supper, Jesus described how important the Holy Spirit is when he said, "I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you" (Jn 16:7). Jesus was saying that if we had to choose between him and the Holy Spirit, we

should choose the latter: that's how important the Holy Spirit is! Obviously, the great joy is that we don't have to choose, because God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is a Trinitarian unity. But it's still key to understand that if we take Jesus seriously, if we take God the Father seriously, we need to take the Holy Spirit just as seriously.

The unfortunate reality, however, is that the Holy Spirit remains "the great unknown" in so many people's lives. When Saint Paul came to Ephesus and met some disciples, he asked, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" They responded, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit" (Acts 19:2).

Pope Benedict XVI once said, "The Holy Spirit has been in some ways the neglected person of the Blessed Trinity." Benedict confessed that it was only as a young priest that he began to recognize the importance of the Holy Spirit and came to know him more intimately. Benedict stressed that the Holy Spirit is the highest gift of God to humanity. If we wish to understand the faith, if we wish to live it, if we wish to pass it on, we must allow the Holy Spirit to become the guide of our souls, even if, like the young future pope Joseph Ratzinger, we begin later in life. For us, the "great unknown" must become the "great known," our Teacher, Leader, Consoler, and Advocate. We must come to consider him, as did Pope Benedict XVI, "the highest gift of God to mankind."

As Catholics, how can we grow in our relationship with the Holy Spirit so that he can carry out his work of sanctification in us? The best way is to allow him into every area of our life, since holiness is about living fully in communion with God.

To illustrate the difference the Holy Spirit can make if we let him, we can focus on a few areas.

The first area where the Holy Spirit helps us is in our prayer. Saint Paul tells us, "The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes

with sighs too deep for words” (Rom 8:26). The Holy Spirit teaches us how to pray. He does this not principally by putting words in our minds and mouths, but *by changing who we are* as we pray. The Holy Spirit helps us to be conscious of our reality as beloved sons and daughters of God the Father, able to cry out confidently “Abba!” or “Father!” or “Daddy!” (Gal 4:6).

Do we allow the Holy Spirit to guide our prayer? One simple way to do this, if you don’t already, is to start any type of prayer, including preparation for Mass, with a prayer to the Holy Spirit.

The second area the Holy Spirit helps with is in our daily living, which is meant to be a life “according to the Spirit,” seeking the things of the Spirit and putting to death the things of the flesh (Rom 8:5). Life according to the Spirit is authentic Christian spirituality; someone who lives indulgently is not, as some claim, genuinely spiritual, but carnal. To be spiritual means to follow the Spirit’s guidance throughout the day, seeking to live by his wisdom, knowledge, understanding, prudence, courage, reverence, and awe (see Is 11:2). It means consciously allowing the Holy Spirit to guide us and influence the choices we make. Living by the Spirit means recognizing that each of us has been given a “manifestation of the Spirit” for the common good and striving to use those gifts for God and others (1 Cor 12:7). It also means allowing and accepting that the Holy Spirit will occasionally prevent our doing even good things to guide us in other directions (see Acts 16:6–7).

Do we allow the Holy Spirit to guide the nitty-gritty details of our daily life? One good practice is to pause at the beginning of an activity and simply pray, “Come, Holy Spirit!” Another is to ask for his light whenever we have to make an important decision. A third is to stop and ask in which direction the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus says is like the wind that “blows where it chooses,” is trying to move me now (Jn 3:8).

The third way the Holy Spirit helps us is in our sharing our faith. The Holy Spirit came upon the first members of the Church as tongues of fire so that they could proclaim the Gospel with ardent love (see Acts 2:3). The Holy Spirit helps us to be witnesses of the faith. Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would teach us all things, lead us to all truth, give us the words we need under trial, and remind us of everything Jesus had taught, precisely so that we could give this witness (see Jn 14:26; Mk 13:11). Our sanctification involves our cooperation in the Spirit's work to complete Jesus' mission of the salvation of the world.

Do our lives give evidence of tongues of fire and burning hearts? One way we can determine the answer is to ask whether we honestly are yearning to share the gift of our faith with others. We also can consider whether we are asking the Holy Spirit to inspire our words and actions so that we may give authentic witness to the light of God's truth and the warmth of divine love when we are with our friends, family, co-workers, or fellow students.

Saint Paul implored the Thessalonians, "Do not quench the Spirit!" (1 Thess 5:19). He begged the Ephesians: "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God!" (Eph 4:30). How much we grieve the Holy Spirit when we limit the work he tries to accomplish in us, when we treat him as an unknown, or merely as a theological accessory, as something other than God's greatest gift.

A Plan of Life is an occasion for us to resolve to love the Holy Spirit by giving him free rein in our lives. That's the essence of the Christian life, which begins with God's grace. Docility to the Holy Spirit is what underlies all parts of the program of sanctification that we will be considering together and striving to put into practice.