

WHY SPIRITUAL READING

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THERE is a remarkable variety of uses to which man has applied the art of reading. When he is fatigued, a mystery story, a tale of high adventure, is a sure-fire source of needed diversion and relaxation. Many find reading a companion against loneliness, a distraction from personal failures, alleviation from sorrow. For some, fiction or history is a pleasant escape into a different world because the present one has lost its appeal or seems no longer endurable. The never satisfied quest for new knowledge—whether it is a question of profound philosophical problems, the intricacies of inter-continental ballistics, or perhaps the secrets of Antarctica—has produced an immense amount of factual literature. Publishers vie with one another in reproducing man's proudest cultural achievements under ever more luxurious formats. The medical-specialist, the Wall-Street lawyer, the laboratory technician find that if they do not keep up an ever increasing amount of professional reading, their classroom knowledge becomes quickly obsolete.

In different ages different types of reading tend to predominate. In a very profound sense we can gain insights into the soul of a single human being or of an entire society by studying its reading habits. Sociologists and religious leaders who have made such a study of present-day reading trends find that *homo sapiens* in the 20th century is increasingly interested in reading for mere pleasure or for personal advantage. His preference is for books that afford "good entertainment" or which are useful to him in rounding out his vocational training. Not that there is anything wrong with recreational reading as such; it is sometimes a "must." But a steady diet of light reading can only make the mind and soul pasty and flabby—as a steady diet of chocolates and cream-puffs would do to the body. And if this reading is immoral, as it so frequently is today, it smothers the soul like a poisonous gas, often before we have time fully to appreciate what is happen-

ing. Professional, vocational reading, too, is absolutely essential in our age of microscopic specialization, but a total preoccupation with what is purely practical or pragmatic eventually blunts all taste for the spiritual. The souls of modern men are like tender, exotic plants set against a bleak, hostile environment. Only solicitous and continuing care will save them from the frost-bite of contemporary scepticism or the mid-summer mildew of a crass, shameless materialism.

Are we willing to take the necessary steps to preserve the *supernatural* point of view in our naturalistic society? To keep intact our lines of communication with God in amoral, anti-God surroundings? Prayer, devout and frequent participation in the Church's sacramental and liturgical life, will always remain the primary means to protect and nourish our interior life of grace. But it is a mistaken notion to think that if we are conscientious, practicing Catholics we need not bother with spiritual reading. We should remember that the human mind is ever active and the sights and sounds received from the outside world have a way of insinuating themselves into man's highest faculties—the intellect and the will. It is through the mind and will, elevated by grace, that man has immediate contact with God. If these two faculties can be turned away from their Divine object, then the whole man becomes earthbound. If day by day we hear objections raised against the Catholic Church but never deepen our knowledge of the mysteries of the Faith; if luxury, pleasure, economic security are constantly extolled, but we never ponder the potentialities and nobility of that supernatural life in which every Catholic in the state of grace participates; if we neglect the saints of God to dote on millionaires, movie stars, political idols, can we promise ourselves that our sights are not being gradually lowered from heaven to earth, that the heart, once fixed wholly on God, will not begin bit by bit to yield to earth's strong gravitational pull?

Preaching, vital though it be, is not intended to stand by itself as an adequate source of information for our Catholic Faith and the practices of the interior life. We must fortify ourselves against a society impregnated with false, secular values and ideals by *daily* spiritual reading. Such spiritual reading will serve to recall and underscore the instructions and admonitions received in previous sermons or conferences. If the godless do not set aside their weapons from weekend to weekend, neither should we.

But we would be drawing a very pale and shallow sketch of the role of spiritual reading in the life of the modern Christian if we indicated only its negative, almost military functions. If spiritual reading seems today to be a defensive "must," it does not for that reason cease to hold out to the Christian who uses it in a prayerful and docile spirit, those same rich benefits which it has offered to Christians through the centuries.

Too often we think of spiritual reading as an academic exercise, as a formal study of spiritual things in much the same way as geometry, for instance, is the study of "the relations, properties, and measurements of solids, surfaces, lines, and angles." To approach spiritual reading in this way would be to take the letter without imbibing the spirit. All spiritual books are in a very true sense nothing more than an extension of the Scriptures, and especially the Epistles and Gospels of the New Testament. We do not mean by this, of course, that spiritual books share in the Bible's divine inspiration, but rather that the only reason for their existence is to reiterate and explain the essential Revelation contained in the two Testaments and the Church's Tradition. That is why the Scriptures must ever remain the core and the standard for all spiritual reading. When we read the Scriptures our primary goal is certainly not an academic one. We strive for a greater knowledge of God, but a knowledge which terminates in greater love; we seek for the Divine Son clothed now in the flesh of human words, as He is foreshadowed in the Old Testament, as He is revealed as our Saviour and Exemplar in the New. We immediately see the absurdity of thinking of St. John's fiery and ecstatic fourth Gospel, the Gospel of Love, as though it were a textbook. But we do not so easily see the incongruity if our choice of a spiritual reading book happens to be one that is decidedly theological in content; perhaps even a sharp challenge to our powers of concentration. All spiritual reading derives its unity of purpose from the Sacred Scriptures. While the Scriptures are a revelation of new knowledge, most profoundly and most fundamentally, they are a revelation of infinite love. The four Gospels, the crown of God's Revelation, announce the tidings of eternal life and the means for our attaining that life. Until we enjoy beatific union with God in heaven, the Scriptures, and by way of extension all spiritual reading, is intended to foster a union of love, a union of wills, human and divine, as a foretaste of eternal life.

Spiritual reading exercises somewhat the same role in nourishing and sustaining the soul, as food does for the body. This is

because spiritual reading is not an isolated practice without any organic connection with other spiritual exercises. So many well-intentioned souls endure fruitless, tedious meditations precisely because they have missed the vital, organic connection between spiritual reading and the interior life. Spiritual reading, the right kind of spiritual reading, i.e., the right book read in an intelligent, prayerful manner, is preliminary to and a necessary requisite for all profitable meditation.

Perhaps a comparison will help to clarify this most important role of spiritual reading in the cultivation of an interior life. We have claimed that spiritual reading is like food for the soul, but it would probably be more accurate to compare it to grist for the mill. It will never be fused into the spiritual bloodstream until it has been masticated or processed by meditation and finally assimilated by mental prayer. Spiritual reading divorced from meditation and mental prayer may add to our store of intellectual knowledge, may suggest fleeting pious thoughts and resolutions, but it will never really become a part of our spiritual organism; it will never really be effective in producing good resolutions or the carrying out of these resolutions. We do not intend to indicate here in any detail ways in which we may perform our spiritual reading with a conscious eye to the meditations and mental prayer that are to follow. Our intention is to underscore what must always remain the primary function and benefit of spiritual reading. We do this to encourage those who do not have regular spiritual reading to begin the practice; to suggest to those who have found spiritual reading wanting or at least not as profitable as they had hoped, that the reason may very well lie in their failure to relate spiritual reading to their other spiritual practices. Religious and clerics have assigned periods of meditation and mental prayer. But every Christian can and should practice meditation and mental prayer—each according to his capacity and state in life. If you have picked the right spiritual book for your needs and personal interests—and the subsequent articles of this issue will help you to make a prudent choice—meditation and mental prayer should lose much of their apparent formalism and complexity.

Thus, if it is not left truncated but is brought to its intended perfection, spiritual reading will give us a greater facility in talking to God *throughout the routine of daily life*. When we begin in this way to consecrate life's little humdrum moments, when we stop "killing" time and start sanctifying it, when our thoughts

are no longer trivial but Christ-centered, we are already well on the way to the development of a deep, fervent interior life.

We hear pleas on all sides today for a reassertion of the dignity and significance of the individual personality. Dwarfed by sky-scrapers, driven to near despair by prospects of total nuclear war, beguiled and brainwashed by high-pressure advertising, victimized by skilled propaganda, "exposed" by the psychoanalysts, plotted on graphs by the sociologists and statisticians, "despiritualized" by the anthropologists, men seem more like dumb cattle than the masterpiece of God's earthly creation. They let others not only suggest what they are to think and what they are to consider desirable, but they even permit them to manipulate their emotional life. As a result the modern personality tends to be colorless and stunted. It is utterly incapable of planning and daring great things. Spiritual reading offers a powerful antidote to present-day passivity, despondency, escapism. Spiritual reading, particularly where it is joined to meditation and mental prayer, encourages us to think for ourselves, to be reflective, to take personal initiative. In emphasizing God's beneficent, all-powerful Providence, the uniqueness of man and his sublime destiny, the inner strength and cohesion of the Mystical Body, spiritual reading helps to revive and enlarge man's spiritual faculties, making them fitter instruments to make a contribution, however small, to the Church's vast and difficult programs, so needful today to subject the world to Christ's kingship.

This plea for spiritual reading is not an unreasonable one. If we spend so much time, money and energy to preserve our physical health, can we do less for our spiritual well-being? Catholics often devote a great deal of outside time to ensure their professional competence as businessmen, doctors, lawyers, etc., but what of their primary obligation to "keep up" spiritually? If athletes have daily practice to keep in perfect form, should the athletes of Christ train only sporadically and half-heartedly? Fifteen minutes a day spent on spiritual reading will bring immense spiritual dividends which will last into eternity; a spiritual insurance policy of which we are both payee *and* beneficiary. There are few people today who do not allot a great deal more time than this to entertainment. If we cannot afford to pass up our meals on the excuse that we "haven't the time," neither can we neglect spiritual reading, the food of the soul, because we "haven't the time." It is a question of values and spiritual values should always be given first place.

Many in this T.V. age have lost the habit of reading books and the prospect of a spiritual reading book frightens them away. But if a book seems too big a project now, you can start with a great variety of interesting, helpful pamphlets which are easily accessible to an increasing number of Catholics. Many of these pamphlets are extremely attractive and profitable in themselves, and often have the effect of whetting the appetite for something more substantial. This is one way to break in easily.

There was a time when most spiritual reading books were a real chore to read. The colorless, unimaginative format, the archaic style, the pietistic tone usually had a deadening effect on even the most enthusiastic. Fortunately, the situation today is entirely different. Among the deluge of spiritual books published in recent years there are certain to be an ample number to meet your personal needs and stylistic preferences. Though style and format are only accidentals, they are very important accidentals and can make all the difference in determining whether or not a beginner will continue in his resolution to read spiritual books.

Spiritual books are selling as never before and an increasing number of pastors, alive to the eagerness of their parishioners for specifically Catholic literature, keep a well-stocked pamphlet rack at the rear of the Church. The Catholic Book of the Month Club, parish Book Discussion Groups, and a host of similar organizations reveal the great hunger of the faithful for the *fullness* of Catholic truth. Spiritual reading has become an integral part of the full Catholic life. Active lay participation in the Liturgy, above all the Sacrifice of the Mass, more frequent reception of the Eucharist, the reading of the Scriptures and the works of the saints and spiritual masters all testify to the encouraging vitality of present-day Catholic life.

If you have not yet begun, now is the time to make spiritual reading an integral part of your life as a Catholic—a sublime and all-rewarding quest for Christ, hidden beneath the sacrament of the written word!