

## PLANNING OUR READING

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**N**OW THAT we are convinced that spiritual reading is essential to progress in the spiritual life, it would seem that the only thing left to do is to pick up a book and start reading. Which one? Well, any one. Look at the advertisements in the Catholic paper, pick one that is attractive and start reading.

It is at this point that many, convinced of the desirability and even the necessity of spiritual reading, have given up the ghost in the matter. One look at the extensive advertising by Catholic publishers and the hardiest soul is plunged into dismay. Where should one start? It is not a question of not enough books, it is a question of too many. And each day sees an increase in the number of books to choose from.

To solve this problem of selection, we must bear in mind the purpose of our spiritual reading. As has been indicated in the previous article, it is ultimately directed towards mental prayer. It provides the matter for our meditations, the motives for our acts of love, the substance of our resolutions. Because of this common end, even though individual needs, inclinations and abilities will vary, certain general norms can be established to aid each one in profiting as he should from the time and money invested in this important exercise of the spiritual life.

We are used to planning in all phases of our life: budgets for the household, curricula for our children, highway planning for our cities, and military planning for our nation. Since planning is such an accepted part of modern life and so essential to it, it is not surprising that planning is equally important in building up the spiritual edifice of our souls.

The advantages of planned spiritual reading are manifold. First, as we pointed out, the plethora of books available renders it impossible for one individual to read all of them. This sheer quantity, to say nothing of quality, demands selectivity. By prudent selection we can avoid useless reading which does not contribute to our efforts to advance in mental prayer. For it can happen that in our desire to read too much, we think too little. Instead of try-

ing to penetrate and absorb prayerfully the matter at hand, we might rush through it just so we can go on to something new. In other words, it provides a measure for our rate of reading: neither so fast that we are not able to think, nor so slow that we lose all zest for reading.

A planned program eliminates from the outset those books which deal with less important and less beneficial matter while at the same time no necessary area of development is neglected. Because the matter to be covered is carefully laid out, harmful gaps are avoided and needless repetitions excluded. Moreover, if our reading were haphazard and depended only on the mood of the moment, it could happen that when the mood passed, so would all our desire for any kind of spiritual reading. Or it might be that we would become so satiated with one type of fare that we would be inclined to drop reading altogether. If, on the other hand, due allowance is made for our changing tastes and dispositions, when one kind of reading no longer appeals to us, we can switch to another and perhaps lighter diet, so continuing to nourish ourselves on the things of the spirit. In this way our reading will be continuous and vital, maintaining our interest and enabling us to establish a habit which will add ease and pleasure to our interior life.

Because excessive and useless reading is thus eliminated, we will have more time to keep abreast of the latest trends in reading which are solidly beneficial and of interest to us because of our likes, vocation, or what is more important, the workings of the Holy Ghost in our own souls.

Another danger presents itself to the chance reader of spiritual books. In his efforts to learn more of the dogmatic basis of his spiritual life, he may become wholly absorbed in the intellectual side of his development while neglecting the affective side. This aberration can easily come about through a failure to apply the great truths he learns to his own existential situation. The effects of this unbalance will soon become evident in his mental prayer. The motives of love being obscured by abstract doctrinal considerations, his prayer will soon cease to be true prayer and become instead dry, abstract meditations with no positive application to his own life. At the opposite extreme is the more common danger that affective reading without the necessary intellectual penetration of the mysteries of our faith will result in a weak sentimentalism and a desire for emotional satisfaction. Planned reading will enable us effectively to utilize both the in-

tellectual and volitional aspects of reading without danger of excess in either direction.

Finally, our reading road map lays out clearly and unmistakably the routes we are to follow, the goals we are to achieve and the distances we have to travel on our journey to spiritual perfection.

Now, there are a number of different plans available today, each of which has its peculiar merits and which can be used to advantage. For example, Frank Sheed has published an excellent booklet, *Ground Plan for Catholic Reading* (Sheed and Ward), which provides an extensive and easily available program. *Cross and Crown* (June 1958) also provides a plan. However, in using any prepared booklist, it is necessary to recall that they must be adapted to one's own needs; and furthermore, because they are quickly dated, must be constantly revised. But whatever plan is used, all have certain aspects in common.

First, all are agreed that a certain portion of our reading must be devoted to the fundamentals of the spiritual life. Some call it "the total view," others refer to it as "the doctrinal foundations." No matter what name it goes by, it amounts to the same thing: a reading of Sacred Scripture itself (along with pertinent commentaries as necessary), and the basic works of a recognized master of the spiritual life. These two sources will give us a foundation of basic dogmatic and moral truths on which to build the superstructure demanded by our vocation in life. Individual needs are to some extent diverse, but all Christians share a common need for the basic truths of faith and the spiritual life. It is the function of this first part of the program to provide for these common basic needs.

Aside from this basic reading, however, there are other special areas which must be considered by the prudent Christian. Catechism knowledge is not sufficient for real growth. The truths learned as a child satisfy the child and contain the seed for adult living, but they are not the full flower of Christianity. Like any seed, these truths must be nurtured by the Christian as he advances in grace and wisdom.

Special areas will be determined in each case by our taste, interest or vocation. When the basic truths have been acquired in any given segment of our reading, we will want to penetrate more deeply into the truths already known, investigating and meditating upon the finer points of doctrine, drawing out their implications, seeing their ramifications and considering special

difficulties or aspects which might strike us. Planning should take this, too, into account. If one were a parent, for example, a whole new field of reading for Catholic parents would be opened up. Under such topical reading, we would have books on child-rearing, sex instruction, prayers for children, the sacramental life for the young Christian, and the liturgy for the family. Again, converts would have unique interests and needs to be taken into consideration. So would other special groups such as Third Order members, doctors, lawyers and business men.

One detailed example would, perhaps, clarify this last point. For the past few years a program of planned spiritual reading has been used to great advantage in preparing Dominican students for the priesthood in St. Joseph's province. These young men come to the Order with diverse backgrounds. As a result, not all have read the same books or have the same preferences. To get them started on the planned use of books, it was suggested that they make a list of all the books they had read according to various topical divisions, like meditation and mental prayer, Our Lady, or the priesthood. After this, they submitted the list to a spiritual director who, because of his training and experience, was in a position to advise them on their future reading. By having the list in front of them, they could see what areas had been sufficiently covered, what needed supplemental reading, or what, through oversight, had been neglected. As time progressed, newly read books were added to the list of those already read, thus supplying for any deficiencies and extending areas of investigation. Under such a procedure, by the end of the seven-year training period, every student could be assured that he had a good foundation in the spiritual life, one upon which he could continue to build with confidence throughout his priestly career.

In conclusion then, it is clear that in spite of the necessity of good spiritual reading, all the books which would aid our mental prayer cannot be read everyday, or even within a relatively short period of time. Therefore, it remains that only by prudently organizing our reading, not just for today or tomorrow, but for the total period of our pilgrimage on earth, can we utilize the wealth of reading matter available to us. By carefully plotting where we are going and how we are going to attain our destination, we can acquire good reading habits so that without undue effort or fatigue we will learn to know and to love God a little more each day. In this way our life becomes a truly Christian life, a life superbly imaging the intimate Life of God.