

Spiritual Reading

(The Sixth Pillar of Catholic Spirituality)

Books change our lives. Most people can identify a book that has marked a life-changing period for them. It was probably a book that said just the right thing at just the right time. They may have been just words on a page, but they came to life for you and in you, and because of them you will never again be the same. Books really do change our lives, because what we read today walks and talks with us tomorrow.

Earlier, in our discussion of prayer and contemplation, we spoke of the cause-and-effect relationship between thought and action. Thought determines action, and one of the most powerful influences on thought is the material we choose to read.

Reading is to the mind what exercise is to the body and prayer is to the soul!

· **An Ancient Tradition**

Spiritual reading is an ancient tradition. It existed in the Church long before we had books to read, when every manuscript had to be copied by hand because the printing press had not yet been invented. In those days, this spiritual tradition was mostly confined to monasteries, where the monks had access to manuscripts of the Scriptures and other great spiritual writings.

The goal of spiritual reading is to ignite the soul with a desire to grow in virtue and thus become the-best-version-of-ourselves. Like all other spiritual exercises and activities, spiritual reading seeks to encourage us to live a life of **holiness**.

· **What Should We Read?**

Reading of the Scriptures, especially the New Testament and in particular the four Gospels, obviously holds first place on our spiritual reading list. All women and men of good will take delight in the Gospels as they become familiar with them. They are the best education of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. Nothing ignites the soul to imitate the Divine Master more than an intimate familiarity with the story of his life, work and teachings.

The Old Testament can also be valuable as a source of spiritual reading. In books such as Psalms and Proverbs, our hearts are easily stirred to live a better life and to strive for virtue through our relationships with God, neighbor and self. On the other hand, many of the historical and prophetic books require some rather serious preparation if we are to understand the culture and context in which they were written and their intended message.

Beyond the Scriptures, there are a great many spiritual writers who can be of assistance to us in our adventure of salvation.

The great masters of spiritual writings are able to set aside the issues of the day and their own personal agendas, and place at the center of their writings God's dream for us to grow each day in virtue and holiness. In their writings, you will always hear a call to become a better person. You will constantly feel inspired and challenged to change, grow, and to become the-best-version-of-yourselfes.

There is also a place within the context of spiritual readings for us to study certain issues, and that most former Catholics, non-practicing Catholics, and many disengaged Catholics are separated from the over one issue. It may be a different issue for each person, but there is usually one issue that speaks the separation and leads people to turn their backs on the Church. For some the issue is contraception, for others it is abortion, and for many modern Catholics it is divorce. I suspect that the great majority of non-practicing Catholics are not joining us each Sunday because of a very limited number of issues, perhaps five or six at most. With that in mind, we have a duty to study and know those issues so we can build bridges of truth and knowledge that will allow them to return to the fullness of our ancient and beautiful faith.

If you want to grow in faith, identify the teaching of the Catholic Church that you find most difficult to understand and accept, then read every thing you can about it. Get yourself a catechism and read what it says, then look up the source texts, find other books that explain why the Church teaches what it teaches about the issue, and get to the heart of the matter. Don't read books by bitter authors who seek to tear the Church down. Read books by women and men of prayer who seek by their writings to reveal the truth and depth of the Church's teachings. If you approach that issue humbly the wisdom and beauty of Catholicism will be unveiled before your very eyes. The issues are so few; let's begin to study them.

· **When, Where, and for How Long?**

When our author, Matthew Kelly, began to take the spiritual life seriously, he crossed paths with a very holy priest. He was a man of prayer who was striving to grow in virtue and clearly focused on trying to live a holy life. This priest's only concern in any conversation with Kelly was his spiritual growth. He would say over and over again, "God is calling you to a life of holiness." In the context of Confession or conversations about struggles with prayer or providing advice about ones personal life, business life, or ministry, the priest always reminded Kelly that our number one concern must be to honor God's call to holiness in our lives and the lives of the people who crossed our paths.

Kelly shares all of this because this priest also used to suggest books for him to read. In each of them, Kelly found worthy guides, spiritual masters, and grace-filled mentors who reinforced this teaching that God call us all to become the-best-version-of-ourselves. God invites us to holiness.

Perhaps we find the litmus test of a good book right there: **Is this book inviting me to live a life of holiness?**

"Fifteen minutes a day," the priest would say. "It's amazing how powerful fifteen minutes with the right book can stir your soul." In the morning, evening, at lunchtime, whenever you can, find fifteen minutes each day to nourish yourself spiritually and intellectually with a good book. Try to do it at the same time every day. Perhaps it is before you go to work. Maybe it is in bed late at night. Then again, perhaps it is while you are eating your lunch. Find a quiet corner at work or at home and read. If you are not sure what to read, visit DynamicCatholic.com and send Kelly an e-mail, and he will send you a list of ten books that changed his life.

You don't need to try and read for two hours a day, just fifteen minutes. But do it every day. Embrace spiritual reading as a daily discipline. Make it a part of your lifestyle. Remember, Catholicism is not a set of lifeless rules and regulations; Catholicism is a lifestyle. Start to build that lifestyle. Read for fifteen minutes every day, and it will become a habit – and our lives change when our habits change.

· **Adult Education**

One of the challenges staring the Church in the face is the great need for adult education. Several generations have now managed to pass through the Catholic education system with little more than an elementary understanding of Catholicism. Over this time, more and more Catholics have decided not to send their children to Catholic schools or religious education programs. All of this is having a devastating effect on future generations.

Our author's proposal to address this serious deficit of adult education is to encourage Catholic adults to read good spiritual books. We can't make up for so much lost ground overnight, but fifteen minutes a day is as good as any place to start. His proposal will no doubt be overlooked by most, and frowned upon by others, because of its sheer simplicity. Nonetheless, let me assure you the simplest solution is usually the best, and hidden in our ancient traditions we will find the solutions to most of our modern problems. Spiritual reading is a perfect example of an ancient solution to a modern problem. If every Catholic were to read a good Catholic book for fifteen minutes a day this habit alone could be a game changer for the Church in our times.

It has been estimated by Matthew Kelly that about one percent of Catholics have read a Catholic book in the past twelve months.

Now imagine for a moment what would happen if every Catholic in your parish read a good spiritual book for fifteen minutes a day. How would your parish change? If every Catholic spent fifteen minutes a day, every day, learning about her or his faith, how different would our Church be in a year? Five Years? Ten years? Rome wasn't built in a day. Most great things are achieved little by little.

· **Keeping the Star in Sight**

Spiritual reading is a great tool to help us keep the great spiritual North Star in sight. When we view everything in relation to our call to become holy and the-best-version-of-ourselves, everything finds meaning. Even the smallest and most menial tasks take on new life, for we come to understand that every action is a character-building action, for better or worse.

Direct all your thoughts and actions toward the great spiritual North Star. What I mean is, find ways of spending time with your friends that help you all become the-best-version-of-yourselves. Similarly, find activities you can do as a family that draw the best out of each of you and challenge you to grow. Read books that

make you want to become a better person, books that show you how to become the-best-version-of-yourself. Cast aside whimsical modern reading materials. What is in those magazines or books that will help you live a richer, fuller life? When was the last time you read a newspaper and thought, “I’m a better person for having read that newspaper?” We have bought into the modern myth that we have to be up on everyone else’s business. Think Facebook or Twitter or Instagram or Snapchat.

Books change our lives. If you really want your life to change, read some good spiritual books. If you approach these books with a spirit of faith, a desire to grow in holiness, and a sincere intention to practice what you read, spiritual reading will become a powerful tool in your life.