

We could call the Bible the never-ending book since once we finish it, we simply begin it again, over and over, until God calls us to himself. It is most important that we learn how to live from it and make daily resolutions to that effect. Over time we will find the stories of the Bible, especially from the New Testament, as familiar as the story of our own life and we will begin to live in Christ, being soaked in His words and example.

The Bible will be a frequent inspiration for our meditation and a primary text for our work of evangelization. Having a large Bible for home and a pocket-sized version of the New Testament will assure that our book is never far from us. The home version should have if at all possible a commentary concentrating more on the practical, spiritual or ascetical sense of Scripture rather than the hermeneutical or exegetical. The commentary should be faithful to the teaching of the Church. The Bible above all is a book where by you learn how to live the Christian life, rather than settle arguments on interpretation. Happily, in more recent times, there are several that fit that bill nicely. Some good books on Christ and his life, such as Frank Sheed's *"To Know Christ Jesus"* or Fulton Sheen's *"Life of Christ,"* also can help you to "contemplate His face."

A good complement to the daily reading of Sacred Scripture is the reading of a spiritual book, normally recommended by your spiritual director. As a whole universe of books could not tell all that Jesus did and taught in His life, it will be impossible ever to run out of classic Catholic spiritual books. These books can include works from the magisterium of the Church, lives of and books by the saints, works of theology, and a plethora of Catholic spiritual classics.

The reader should be working on just one book at a time, which he should read from beginning to end, perhaps taking notes or otherwise highlighting those points that particularly strike him, so that way they may be brought to his silent prayer, or to conversation in spiritual direction. As the Catechism says (2654): "Seek in reading and you will find in meditating; knock in mental prayer and it will be opened to you by contemplation." Good spiritual reading will lead to prayer, self-denial and an ever-growing desire to evangelize family, friends, and the culture.

Just a few words of practical advice in ending: when you do your spiritual reading, put yourself in God's presence and invoke the Holy Spirit. Make sure you are fully alert and located in a well-lit space, far from distractions. That's right — not late at night and in bed. Don't you think God's Word and great spiritual classics deserve better than that? The reading need not last more than fifteen minutes, but never less. John Paul II urges us to follow the Lord's command and "Go out into the deep for a catch." Our commitment to spiritual reading on a daily basis will help to make us "fishers of men."

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A Plan for a Lifetime of Spiritual Reading

Father C. John McCloskey

The purpose of our lives as Catholics is to become saints. By God's grace, we can collaborate with Him on that lifelong task. You know many of the ways already, and an indispensable one is spiritual reading, which is accessible to all who are literate. As Blessed Josemaria Escriva put it: "May your behavior and your conversation be such that each person who sees or hears you may say, 'This man reads the life of Jesus Christ.'"

Let's look at the present situation of the majority of Catholics of in North America and Europe. I think it I am accurate, unfortunately, in saying that the great majority of the several hundreds of millions' only exposure to the Bible is for approximately ten minutes at Sunday Mass. In addition, most of them have a rudimentary Catholic catechetical education that usually finished at an early age. Therefore, they don't know Sacred Scripture, and they barely remember at best the Catechism. In addition, a paltry few are familiar with any of the great Catholic spiritual classics.

On the other hand, their sight and hearing are assaulted by a daily barrage of stimulation that appears to be designed by the devil, or at least by his many friends here on earth, to keep us immersed in the world of the ephemeral and our minds off the supernatural life. Most people read only books and magazines that are consistently and increasingly trashy. The movies they watch are full of violence and sexual stimulation, as is much of the popular music. The television is on an average seven hours a day in the typical

American home, turning many people into zombies fit for manipulation. Its only competition is not the healthy enjoyment of each other's company in the family, but rather computer games or the Internet, where serious temptation is only a click away.

I think this is an accurate portrayal of everyday life for hundreds of millions of Catholics. Happily, this is not yet the case all parts of the world, but given the current hegemony of the secular West, it may be soon. What is a remedy for this soul-stultifying if not soul-destroying assault by the culture of death? One answer is Catholic spiritual reading, which is available for all who have eyes to see or ears to hear (Let's not forget books on tape!) and money to buy books or libraries to borrow from.

"Reading indeed has made many saints." I believe it would be difficult think of any saint who was not deeply influenced not only by spiritual reading before he dedicated himself to God's work on this earth, but also who did not continue spiritual reading as an integral part of their daily routine until death.

St. Thomas Aquinas says: "Nothing is in the intellect that did not first come to us through the senses." The wonderful part of it is that we are at a distinct advantage, as the years and centuries go by, as we certainly could never begin to cover even a small portion of the hundreds of the thousands of great spiritual classics and of the poetry and prose inspired by a Catholic worldview.

Look at the example of St. Augustine, who heard that "*Tolle et lege*" (Pick up and read!) and opened the Gospel to a section that changed his life, and the course of Christian civilization as a result. St. Anthony, the founder of monasticism,

was so moved by reading the story of the rich young man that he followed the injunction, "Sell everything you have, give it to the poor, and come follow Me." Without his obedience to the Word, who knows if Christianity could have survived the onslaught of the barbarian invasion. St. Ignatius, recuperating in his bed from grave battle wounds, threw away the equivalent of today's pulp fiction, started spiritual reading that inspired him to change his life radically, embrace Christ, and founded the Jesuits, the great champions of the Catholic Reformation. World history again changed.

Or in more modern times, think of the young Anglican divine, John Henry Newman, who reading over and over again the Fathers of the Church came to realize that, as an Anglican, his position was analogous to a Semi-Pelagian. He read the arguments of St. Athanasius, who said that only the Catholic Church "surely rules the world," and the Church was graced by one of its greatest converts whose thought still affects us today.

Take a look at the modern spiritual writer Thomas Merton who, out of idle curiosity, picked up a book by Etienne Gilson, the great French Thomist on "*The Elements of Christian Philosophy*" and was drawn to study more closely the claims of Catholicism. His study led to conversion and eventually a vocation as a Trappist monk. Flannery O'Connor, the great Southern Catholic author, made a point, she told us, of reading at least 20 minutes of the *Summa* each day, and her writings are suffused with the common sense and even irony of the Angelic doctor. These are just a few of the many examples that can be cited. In fact, I am sure virtually every reader of this article could tell us his own story in that regard or will be able to tell it soon!

In the apostolic blueprint for our century, "At the beginning of the New Millennium," the Holy Father urges us to "Contemplate the face of Christ." One of the primary means he points to is Sacred Scripture: "Scripture has its rightful place of honor the in the public prayer of the Church. It is especially important that listening to the word of God should become a life-giving encounter, in the ancient and ever new tradition of *lectio divina*, which draws from the biblical text the living word which questions, directs, and shapes our lives."

Sacred Scripture — according to the Catechism of the Church and the Second Vatican Council — is the speech of God as it is put down in writing through the breath of the Holy Spirit. The Bible is composed of books in the New and Old Testaments, 72 books confirmed as canonical (or divinely inspired) by the Church at the provincial Council of Hippo in 393. It is not only our guide to salvation, from which flows virtually all Catholic theology and practice, but also forms the basis for Christian culture. Without the Bible, we surely would all be nature worshipers or worse. To paraphrase the Catechism: "The truth that God revealed, for the sake of our salvation, He confided to the Sacred Scripture." But since the Holy Spirit worked through human authors, who used many literary forms to communicate His message, it is understandable that we look above all to the Church to guide us to the proper interpretation. After all, even St. Peter found some of St. Paul's writings puzzling! This all time best-seller, by far most quoted book in history, must be our favorite book, to be read and mediated upon for at least a few minutes each day in an orderly fashion.