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*The* FURROW

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On the Nature  
of Spiritual  
Reading

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# On the Nature of Spiritual Reading

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The 2013 *Directory for the Ministry and the Life of Priests* states: ‘In order for ongoing formation to be complete, it is necessary for it to be structured not as something haphazard but as a systematic offering of subjects ...’ There, we could quite correctly substitute the words ‘spiritual reading’ for ‘ongoing formation.’ Like ongoing formation, spiritual reading needs to be structured rather than haphazard. And it needs to be systematic in *two* senses: with regard to content, and with regard to habit.

In these reflections, I will not be particularly careful of the distinction between spiritual reading and ongoing study. Certainly, there is a distinction, and an important one. During a period of prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, for instance, we might do very well to ponder some lines from a commentary on St John of the Cross, but pondering some lines from a commentary on governance in the Code of Canon Law might not necessarily be the best use of prayer time!

For clergy, spiritual reading is part and parcel of both initial and ongoing formation. As such, it can help to form a bridge between seminary and priestly ministry. Those who acquire a good habit of spiritual reading in the seminary are far more likely to engage in it after they are ordained. Furthermore, a habit of spiritual reading tends to keep us more open to ongoing formation as such. At the beginning of its treatment of ongoing formation, the *Ratio* insists: ‘One must constantly “feed the fire” that gives light and warmth to the exercise of the ministry ...’<sup>1</sup>

Workshops, clergy conferences etc. can be a mainstay of ongoing formation, but they can be attended only periodically. Yet we can ‘feed the fire’ much more frequently, through structured, systematic spiritual reading. Those who feed the fire in this way are far less likely to be cynical about the broader project of ongoing

1 *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*, 80.

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formation.<sup>2</sup> Let us consider just what it is we are about when we engage in spiritual reading (mindful, again, that the distinction between spiritual reading and study, though useful, does not always have to be strictly observed – we will have more to say on this below). Whenever we read good material, we ‘delay with certain minds’; we enter a conversation with others, with men and women of different experience and outlook, from different times and places. To read good material is to spend time in the company of people of intelligence and depth. Here is the advice of 12th-Century theologian, William of St Thierry:

‘You should spend certain periods of time in specific sorts or reading. For if you read now here, now there, the various things that chance and circumstance send, this does not consolidate you, but makes your spirit unstable. For it is easy to take such reading in and easier still to forget it. You ought rather to delay with certain minds and grow used to them.’<sup>3</sup>

Clearly, these words recommend the structured and systematic approach we mentioned at the beginning of these reflections. They urge us not to leave the choice of material to chance, but to consider what will benefit us; to be proactive rather than just running with what falls into our hands. While some of our very best reading material may come to us by chance, we should not ask Providence to bear the entire burden! We should approach spiritual reading intentionally, planning it and actively seeing out sound material.

Good reading, like travel, broadens the mind; though we might better say that good reading *deepens* the mind. What is the situation of the mind that is *not* being deepened? It is, by definition, liable to be more shallow, more superficial that it could otherwise be. We read in order to overcome superficiality. A good deal of contemporary culture is superficial, and if we do not stand our ground, intellectually and culturally, we can be unwittingly coached in superficial attitudes and outlooks. While the superficiality of the ‘sound bite’ culture is relatively recent, superficiality as such is perennial. Half a century ago, one commentator cautioned: ‘If, in

2 Cynicism regarding ongoing formation can be quite acute. One writer describes it as a kind of ‘disgust,’ a feeling of revulsion at the prospect of meetings and talks when there is so much to be done in parish. Some of this reluctance may come down to poor presentations, but there can be a more pervasive underlying cynicism. Reluctance to engage deeply and reflectively with what one does points, in turn, to rather poor morale. After all, should we not be happy to deepen our grasp of what we love? Cf. Giacomo Ruggeri, *Prete in Clergyphone: Discernimento e Formazione Sacerdotale nelle Relazioni Digitali* (Trapani, Italy: Il Pozzo di Giacobbe, 2018), 58-59.

3 Quoted in Aelred Squire, *Asking the Fathers: The Art of Meditation and Prayer* (New York: Paulist, 1973), 124.

our own day, we are to do “holy reading” in the traditional sense of that phrase, nothing but conscious choice and the development of conscious habits of attention will be likely to cure us of a dissipation of mind that so much that we see and hear is designed to foster.<sup>4</sup> *Conscious habits of attention!* That phrase on its own could be the basis for a healthy examination of conscience. Or, for that matter, for a healthy consciousness examen. What measures am I taking to overcome my superficiality?

We live in a period of cultural upheaval and flux, and while we cannot reasonably expect to keep up with every development in every spiritually and pastorally relevant area, we will do well to recognize that our personal experience alone will not leave us adequately kitted out for the challenges of the day.<sup>5</sup> Ongoing formation in general, and good reading in particular, open up more avenues than concrete pastoral experience alone. We need to be stretched; we need elements of an intellectual, spiritual and cultural ‘workout.’ Otherwise, we are liable to flow uncritically with the currents of our time. Social media, for example, can be a useful pastoral resource, but we should cultivate a critical – and self-critical – spirit regarding their use. Defaulting regularly into a social media and newsfeed-generated echo chamber is unlikely to advance the Kingdom. This is an area crying out for pastoral reflection and leadership, and these need not be left entirely to specialists. As a small wake-up call, we could ponder the tart words of one commentator: ‘One can spread the Gospel by Twitter, in mouthfuls of 160 characters, but that is to reduce it to slogans. Worse still: it’s to act as if the Gospel were a notification about something, rather than an encounter with someone.’<sup>6</sup>

The proliferation of social media invites us to grow in our sensitivity to the ‘signs of the times.’ Signs of the times demand to be *read and understood*: ‘At all times the Church carries the responsibility of reading the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel.’<sup>7</sup> Solid spiritual reading will make us better able to engage in such reading and interpretation. We read in order to read the signs of the times! What is at issue here is not some frenetic pursuit of ‘relevance’ by keeping up to date with all that is happening in our world. Rather, a commitment to sound reading can help us to be sensitive to cultural factors that favour, and cultural factors that impede, the reception and living out of the

4 Squire, *Asking the Fathers*, 125.

5 Cf. Ruggeri, *Prete in Clergyphone*, 59.

6 Fabrice Hadjadj, *l’Aubaine d’Être Né en ce Temps* (Paris: Éditions Emmanuel, 2021), 41. In recent papal teaching, the groundwork is being laid for a thoughtful critique of digital culture and our digital habits – cf. Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, 42-50, 205; *Christus Vivit*, 86-90.

7 *Gaudium et Spes*, 4. Cf. Mt 16:3.

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Good News of Jesus. A word of caution is in order. It does not – or should not – follow from what we have been saying that all our spiritual reading needs to be immediately practical and purposeful. There is room for beauty, for poetry, for excellent literature of various kinds: ‘a poem or a novel will often be more likely to lead us back to the world of the Bible than many consciously “spiritual” books, for the Scriptures themselves are poems and songs and warcries and never desiccated theology.’<sup>8</sup> We can at times simply ‘read for beauty,’ in much the way that we ‘read’ an icon (which is, itself, ‘written’ rather than simply ‘painted’).

Spiritual reading is not only a means of acquiring *information*: crucially, it is a vehicle for *transformation*. As noted earlier, when we read, we spend time in the company of others. The old adage, ‘show me your friends and I’ll tell you what you are’ may be applied here. As philosopher of literature Martha Nussbaum puts it:

‘People care for the books they read; and they are changed by what they care for – both during the time of reading and in countless later ways more difficult to discern. But if this is so, and if the reader is a reflective person who wishes to ask (on behalf of herself and/or her community) what might be good ways to live, then it becomes not only reasonable, but also urgent to ask: What is the character of these literary friendships in which I and others find ourselves? What are they doing to me? To others? To my society? In whose company are we choosing to spend our time?’<sup>9</sup>

Here, Nussbaum’s primary concern is with the reading of fiction, but her remarks apply more generally, and when it comes to spiritual reading, our ‘literary friendships’ are formative – formative of our outlook, our spirituality, our pastoral approach, our evangelisation and catechesis.

A good question to ask of one’s spiritual reading is: ‘What is it inviting me to love?’<sup>10</sup> Good reading can refine our desires and draw us into a closer relationship with God and his people.

8 Squire, *Asking the Fathers*, 126.

9 Martha Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 231.

10 Nussbaum notes that in general, philosophical texts ‘do not invite the reader to fall in love.’ *Ibid.*, 237. However, even an arid book of philosophy or of cultural criticism may equip us to defend or safeguard what we love, and this points to the fact that spiritual reading can have an apologetic function, giving us the tools to address objections to faith. Defending and commending the faith is the task of apologetics. It is, to be sure, an intellectual business, but it is also both profoundly pastoral and profoundly spiritual.

## ON THE NATURE OF SPIRITUAL READING

Not all that poses as spiritual literature is worthwhile, but sound material will enthuse us – for God and his Kingdom, for the person of Christ, for the flourishing of the people entrusted to us, for the good and the healing of our culture. This is one of the reasons why we need not always press the distinction between spiritual reading and study: there are many books that do not have the word ‘spirituality’ on the cover, but that can enkindle our spirits, our enthusiasm for the things of God, every bit as effectively as more obviously spiritual writing.

We do not have to do graduate studies in order to deepen a particular area of interest, and our choice of reading material can be guided by the question, ‘in what area would I like to gain a deeper understanding?’ It might be the Apostolic Fathers, pastoral psychology, human sexuality, the challenges of atheism, iconography, religious poetry, faith and culture ... Whatever the details, it is a good thing to cultivate a particular interest. In addition to the satisfaction it can bring, it can also help to give an overall shape to our spiritual reading; it can help us to be intentional, rather than haphazard, in our choice of reading material.

A prominent scholar of spirituality laments that ‘much contemporary spiritual writing is open to the accusation that it amounts to little more than uncritical devotion quite detached from the major themes of Christian faith.’<sup>11</sup> He does not explicitly mention the analogy of faith, but it is very much in the background of his comments. The analogy of faith refers to ‘the coherence of the truths of faith among themselves and within the whole plan of revelation.’<sup>12</sup> This suggests a further useful question that we might bring to our spiritual reading: ‘How does what I am reading relate to the major themes of Christian faith?’ A question like this offers a criterion for coherence; it encourages us to ponder whether the content of our spiritual reading is casual, hit-and-miss, ‘whatever-I-stumble-upon,’ or whether it is widening and deepening our grasp of the bigger picture – the vast picture! – that is the wisdom and beauty of our faith.

Finally, a few more words on what does or doesn’t constitute material for spiritual reading, and why. I have heard it remarked that when a person is experiencing a period of particular blessing in prayer, a time when the ground is irrigated and praying comes easily, one could give her the telephone directory and she would find it stimulating spiritual reading. Hyperbole, but it makes the point that the suitability of material for spiritual reading is gauged not merely by considering the material in itself, but by considering

11 Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and Theology: Christian Living and the Doctrine of God* (London: DLT, 1998), xi.

12 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 114.

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how it suits the individual reader – how it coheres with his or her interests, temperament, situation, commitments, etc. While one might struggle to understand how an engineering textbook could ‘work’ as spiritual reading, someone with the requisite background might, for example, find a book on astronomy very conducive to praise and contemplation. Conversely, while the ‘Spiritual Canticle’ of St John of the Cross would appear to be suitable spiritual reading material in an unqualified sense, this might not be the case for a person facing an examination on St John of the Cross the following day! Context can, at times, be just as important as content. An underlying question might be: ‘Does this text lead me beyond itself? As I read, do I find myself tapering off into reflection, meditation, intercession, praise and thanksgiving?’ More paradoxically, we might ask whether a given text is able, as we read it, to *distract* us from the reading of it. Good spiritual reading material, whether it is a mystical poem or a sympathetic critique of social media, will point beyond itself; it will tend to ‘commission’ the reader; it will have a centrifugal effect.

The ‘spiritual life’ does not reduce to the ‘interior life.’<sup>13</sup> It follows that spiritual reading need not be confined to texts that deal explicitly with matters of prayer and spirituality. Let each reader judge for him- or herself where the boundaries lie, and let the fundamental criterion for that judgment be whether and how our reading helps us in our Christian living and commitments, and helps us to help others in theirs.

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13 ‘Contemporary spiritual writers are unanimous in their rejection of the idea that spirituality is simply concerned with “interiority.” Such a disjunction fails to integrate in the Christian way of life crucial elements of sane living: friendship, sexuality, health, family ties, and so on.’ Lawrence Cunningham and Keith Egan, *Christian Spirituality: Themes from the Tradition* (New York: Paulist, 1996), 18.