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The

A JOURNAL FOR THE
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

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What Should I have in my Spiritual Library?

February 2023

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What books should I have in my spiritual library? One's personal 'acquisitions policy' is, to a great extent, a matter of interest and taste, but some guidance can be useful, particularly for those who are near the beginning of this journey. In what follows, I will recommend twenty-one books. The number twenty-one is, of course, simply a trope, a convention, a springboard into a world of reading that is entirely open-ended (full disclosure: I struggled to keep the list to twenty-one!). Furthermore, the books I suggest are merely *examples of twenty-one types of material that one would do well to read*. If the list is to be given a title, it is not '21 books you should have,' but 'examples of 21 kinds of book you should have.' In any given area on the list, a better example might well be found, and if you find it, get it. I can hardly emphasize enough that the list below is limited and partial.

As for the selection of topics, there is an inevitable element of subjectivity, but it is not entirely subjective.² We should all read good material that will help us to understand, pray and proclaim the Scriptures. We should all seek to deepen our understanding of the nature of prayer and of spirituality. We should all seek to grow in our ability to catechize and teach the faith, including its moral and liturgical aspects. We should all seek to love our Christian commitments (baptism, ordination, etc.) and understand them more deeply. We should all seek to grow in our ability and desire to evangelize. We should all seek to engage with the culture we inhabit, becoming better equipped to proclaim, in and to this

- 1 This article was originally prepared as a talk for seminarians. With a view to publication, I considered changing references to priesthood in order to make the text more inclusive. But I have opted to retain any such references, mindful that as it stands, the article may give readers some insight into an aspect of priestly formation.
- 2 I considered the distinction between spiritual reading and study/ongoing formation/personal development in my article, 'On the Nature of Spiritual Reading' (*The Furrow*, January 2023). For reasons explained there, I have not been scrupulous regarding that distinction in the compilation of the list here.

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WHAT SHOULD I HAVE IN MY SPIRITUAL LIBRARY?

culture, our Christian faith as the beautiful, timely, timeless truth it is. In addition to fundamentals like these, we may feel drawn to deepen our knowledge of particular areas. And so, the list will lengthen and the personal library will grow!

A couple of further observations on the list to follow. It does not include the Bible, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the documents of Vatican II, or key papal encyclicals. I omit these in order to make the point that they should be taken for granted. It would seem odd to recommend the Bible as ‘spiritual reading.’ Who could possibly be qualified to make such a recommendation, and on what basis would it be made?³ Coherence with biblical truth and the biblical worldview is the fundamental principle on which recommendations for spiritual reading are to be made. There is no higher authority than scripture, on the basis of which scripture itself could be recommended. The same point applies, in a lesser way, to the *Catechism* (itself an interpretation – for Catholics, *the authoritative interpretation* – of biblical faith), and to other key Church documents.

Our Church loves to teach, and her output is dizzying. Nobody can be expected to keep up with every papal pronouncement, but it is reasonable to expect that a priest will keep an eye on papal encyclicals. For the most part, they concern the Church as a whole, and reflect the engagement of the Church with today’s culture. The following list could consist of nothing other than papal writings from the past fifty years! To include none seemed a better option than to pick and choose.⁴

EXAMPLES OF TWENTY-ONE KINDS OF BOOK YOU SHOULD HAVE IN YOUR SPIRITUAL LIBRARY

1. Mark Allan Powell, *Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2009).

Every priest should have at least one general, non-technical introduction to the NT, that will help him to teach and catechize. This is one such book. It is clear, accessible and very interestingly written. Take note: in biblical scholarship, the term ‘introduction’ can be deceptive. Many ‘introductions’ are highly technical, and ‘introductory questions’ are often matters of higher criticism (date,

3 I am reminded of a Bible that had an imprimatur inside its cover, with the explanation: ‘The *imprimatur* does not indicate that the ecclesiastical authority agrees with all the opinions expressed in this work.’

4 That said, if I had to include three papal documents on the list, they would probably be Paul VI’s *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, John Paul II’s *Evangelium Vitae*, and Francis’ *Evangelii Gaudium*.

THE FURROW

occasion, integrity, authenticity – and various other matters that hardly belong in either a homily or a parish catechesis). Likewise, the term ‘theological’ can mislead. When it comes to biblical resources, ‘theological’ often means ‘as distinct from *exegetical*,’ which means that a *theological* work is more likely to be of use for preaching, reflection and catechesis. Most busy priests will not wish to pursue obscure questions of exegesis any more than they will wish to engage with issues of higher criticism. For this reason, an introduction that is theological rather than exegetical will often be of more practical and pastoral use.

2. Xavier Léon-Dufour, ed., *Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1970).

As distinct from a general biblical dictionary, a theological work will reflect on key themes. In any useful dictionary of biblical theology, we can expect to find articles on such themes as God, grace, prayer, faith, covenant, creation, prophecy, etc. Relatively short, accessible articles on such themes can be invaluable for personal prayer and reflection, and for preaching and catechesis. Léon-Dufour’s dictionary, first published in 1962, is a classic that has stood the test of time.

3. Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality: A Brief History of Spirituality* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2020).

Familiarity with the history of spirituality is more than just historical knowledge: it gives us a sense of what spirituality *is*, and of how it has adapted to meet the requirements of new times and contexts. A good overview of this development – from the Bible, to the desert, to the monasteries, to the cities, to the movements, and right up to the present day – will help us to appreciate the treasure we have inherited. Such a review is also a rich statement of the necessity and possibility of faithful change, growth and adaptation. Sheldrake’s history is a model of clarity, and it includes not just historical description, but ongoing reflection on the significance of developments in spirituality.

4. Thomas Dubay, *Prayer Primer: Igniting a Fire Within* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2002).

The very best writing on prayer is found in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which, for reasons mentioned above, I am not including on this list. Every pastor should be familiar with it, but should also get a solid, catechetically-useful book on prayer.

WHAT SHOULD I HAVE IN MY SPIRITUAL LIBRARY?

Dubay's book is brief, accessible and practical. It ranges from the fundamentals (the nature of prayer), through different kinds of prayer, to problems, difficulties and questions that arise for those seeking to nurture a committed prayer life for themselves or others.

5. Olivier Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism: Texts from the Patristic Era with Commentary* (London: New City, 2002).

A general introduction to prayer (like Dubay's *Prayer Primer*) is invaluable, but it is good to pursue greater depth in our understanding. A particular value of Clément's book is that it provides a springboard to the very early Christian writers, including some of the desert fathers and mothers. In some ways, this book is an early history of spirituality, but with a greater focus on personal prayer than one would find in a general history. Clément gives a lot of attention to prayer as a struggle (as 'spiritual warfare'); he is excellent on the nature of Christian asceticism. The book is full of interesting quotations and Clément's commentaries are very well worthwhile.

6. R. Paul Stevens and Michael Green, *Living the Story: Biblical Spirituality for Everyday Christians* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

A good book on biblical spirituality is a great treasure. Not merely a book about 'prayer in the Bible' (which can also be valuable), but a book that reflects the fact that biblical spirituality is fundamentally a narrative spirituality; a book that makes it clear that the spirituality taught by the Bible is deeply woven into the story – and the stories – the Bible recounts. Biblical spirituality is not the distillation of concepts found in the Bible; rather, it *unfolds* as the story of God's people unfolds, and it invites us to read our lives and our times as a part of that unfolding. A good book of biblical spirituality will help us (and help us to help others) to *inhabit* the biblical story. This book goes a long way towards that; it is also delightfully written and suitable for personal reflection as well as catechesis.

7. Joseph Ratzinger and Christoph Schönborn, *Introduction to the Catechism of the Catholic Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1994).

The *Catechism* is a marvellous resource, but it is extremely comprehensive and wide-ranging. It is good to have an introduction that helps us to approach the *Catechism* as a whole, and to appreciate the unity in the diversity. This brief, readable

THE FURROW

introduction examines the origins and aims of the *Catechism*, in addition to offering a superb apologetic for the idea of a catechism. There is also a brief introduction each of the four parts of the *Catechism*. This book will help its readers to explain and teach the catechism. It will also help them to rejoice in the beauty and coherence of our faith.

8. Austrian Bishops' Conference, *Docat: What to Do?* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2016).

This catechism is in the excellent *Youcat* series, which is officially approved by the Church. The original *Youcat* (also well worth having) has a foreword by Pope Benedict XVI; *Docat* has a foreword by Pope Francis. *Docat* is a catechism of Catholic social teaching, and it is a great resource for personal reflection, teaching and catechesis. A particularly useful feature of *Docat* is its section on the Church's teaching on environmental concern. It also presents the fundamental principles of Catholic social teaching: the dignity of the human person, the common good, solidarity and subsidiarity.

9. Miroslav Volf, *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good* (Grand Rapids MI: Brazos Press, 2011).

Priests are called to form and guide the people of God, and people of God are called to transform society. The Lord – who most assuredly wants to save our souls! – did not teach us to pray, 'save our souls,' but 'thy kingdom come.' There is a public aspect to faith; to be a follower of Christ is to be concerned for the common good. We ought to reflect on this aspect of our faith and our pastoral ministry, and to acquire some good reading on it. Volf's book is a really excellent start. It encourages us to ponder how our faith promotes human flourishing, and a careful reading of it can help us to grow in the confidence that, however misunderstood our faith may be, we have a valuable contribution to make to the common good and the welfare of society.

10. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London: SPCK, 1989).

What are the challenges we face as Christians in today's pluralist, secular world? There is an abundance of thoughtful literature on this topic, but it would be hard to beat Lesslie Newbigin's classic (it's safe to call it a classic by now: it is very widely cited in a range

WHAT SHOULD I HAVE IN MY SPIRITUAL LIBRARY?

of scholarly and mid-level literature). This is not a light read, but it is an unusually rewarding one. Newbigin looks at such topics as dogma and doubt, authority and tradition, reason and revelation, Christ and history, the nature of secularism and pluralism, the nature of mission. This is a bracing, stirring read, which insists that we can and we must place Christ at the centre of all we are and do as believers. It will more than reward the effort it certainly calls for.

11. Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Scepticism* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2008).

The ‘new atheism’ of Richard Dawkins *et al.* is now old and decrepit, but the challenge of unbelief is perennial. Although this book was written at the height of the new atheism, it remains relevant and fresh. It is an exceptionally clear, cogent and accessible defence of the reasonableness and goodness of Christian faith. It addresses standard arguments against faith; it engages with a broad range of thinkers – yes, including Dawkins *et al.* Every priest should try to become able to offer a fundamental apologetic for faith (mindful that defending the reasonableness of faith is not the same thing as proving the existence of God. Happily, we can do the former without having to do the latter). This book can serve as a fine, thoughtful introduction to this pastorally and spiritually important topic.

12. Alister E. McGrath, *Apologetics: How to Help Seekers and Sceptics Find Faith* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker, 2012).

‘Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who asks you to account for the hope that is within you.’ (1Pet 3:15). This readiness is the task of apologetics; it is readiness both to *defend* and to *commend* our faith, and it is both an intellectual and a spiritual task. After all, if we feel incapable of accounting for our deepest beliefs and commitments, this can be morale-sapping and spiritually debilitating. Yet committed reflection and study are required before we gain an overall capacity to defend the reasonableness of our faith, and to show that it is not only reasonable, but also beautiful. McGrath’s short and readable book is an excellent introduction to apologetics. It grounds the task in contemporary culture and suggests practical ways in which we can hone our apologetic skills, and do so precisely as an expression of our faith (and, one might add, of our spirituality).

THE FURROW

13. Jeremy Driscoll, *Awesome Glory: Resurrection in Scripture, Liturgy, and Theology* (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 2019).

It is important to be familiar with some writing that helps us to pray the liturgy; not merely to understand it theologically, but to enter into it (and to draw our parishioners into it). *Awesome Glory* is an outstanding example of such writing. It reflects in depth on the Easter liturgy, from Holy Thursday right through till Pentecost. While it is not a systematic commentary on the liturgical and biblical texts, it offers a rich and deep understanding of both. It is full of striking observations on the liturgical celebrations, including some arresting comments on the rubrics, which, as Driscoll shows, ‘embody very condensed pieces of theology’ – and, one might add, of spirituality. It would be hard to find a better companion for the Easter Triduum than this book.

14. Dietrich von Hildebrand, *Transformation in Christ: On the Christian Attitude* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2001).

I hesitated before including this book. It is a long and demanding read. But for two reasons, I decided to include it. First, because it is simply excellent. It is full of valuable insights regarding the life of discipleship, prayer, the Christian attitude, the virtues. The book exudes a calm, steady, serene wisdom, and it is fascinating to reflect that it was written, not during a time of peace and leisure in the author’s life, but while von Hildebrand was fighting against Nazism in his native Germany. It is a book from the coalface. The second reason I decided to include this book is precisely that fact that it is demanding! It is a good thing to acquire, from time to time, reading that challenges us, that draws us beyond what we are comfortable with. At times, it is good to think of our reading as a ‘reading project.’ This book could be just that: a reading project to challenge and to illuminate in equal measure. Though perhaps not exactly equal, as the illumination will remain long after the challenge has been overcome.

15. Bert Ghezzi, *The Times Book of Saints* (London: Harper Collins, 2000).

As far as its structure goes, this is a slightly unconventional book of Saints. The genre usually lists saints according to where their feast day falls on the calendar, but Ghezzi lists 365 saints in alphabetical order, from Aelred of Rievaulx to Willibrord of Northumbria. While the alphabetical listing makes it easy to find a given saint,

WHAT SHOULD I HAVE IN MY SPIRITUAL LIBRARY?

it might seem to make the book less practical for liturgical use. However, that problem is entirely solved by the inclusion, at the end of the book, of a calendar including all the saints listed. Also, at the end of each entry there is a reference which includes the date of the feast, the date of the beatification or canonization, and reference to related saints. As for the content, under each saint there are some biographical notes, followed by an extract from the writings of the saint. Each entry concludes with a brief prayer or reflection. Every sacristy should contain an accessible book of saints. This one is quite excellent.

16. Benedict XVI, *Priests of Jesus Christ* (Oxford: Family Publications, 2009).

Our ‘job description’ as seminarians and priests is spelled out in detail in many Church documents, above all in *Pastores Dabo Vobis* and in the *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*. In addition to familiarity with such basic sources, it is good to acquire reading on priesthood that will help us to reflect prayerfully on our identity and work. This book contains writings of the late Pope Benedict XVI, from the time of his election in April 2005 until the end of 2008. Before becoming Pope Benedict XVI, Cardinal Josef Ratzinger had published a small book on priesthood, entitled *Servants of Your Joy*, which has been widely and gratefully received. A notable feature of his writing – and these reflections are no exception – is that it inspires joy and hope. Given the challenges of our day, we can do with both of these in abundance! Benedict’s reflections are, at one and the same time, both accessible and profound. In this, they are a model of good theology and good teaching. In addition to the notes of joy and hope, these reflections can also purify, guide and enlighten.

17. Sherry Weddell, *Forming Intentional Disciples: The Path to Knowing and Following Jesus* (Huntington IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2012).

How should diocesan clergy *do* evangelization? How can we lead people to a deliberate, purposeful, *intentional* discipleship? Must the project be hit-and-miss, always somewhat blurred around the edges, or is there a clear approach that we can follow? Happily, there is an increasing number of excellent publications that help us to address questions like these. Weddell’s book is one such. It is a model of clarity and coherence; it presents a thoroughly pastoral theology of evangelization. Weddell makes the point that catechesis alone is no longer sufficient: ‘The situation in the West

THE FURROW

today is far beyond a failure of catechesis.’ She does not, however, indulge in lamenting this failure, but offers tools for engaging in a more fundamental proclamation of Christ and the Gospel. At the heart of the book is a detailed description of ‘the five thresholds of conversion’: initial trust; spiritual curiosity; spiritual openness; spiritual seeking and intentional discipleship. Pope Saint Paul VI summed up the spirit of evangelization as follows: ‘There is no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the Kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God are not proclaimed’ (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 22). Weddell’s book can help us to make this a concrete reality in our ministry.

18. Christopher Hayden, *A Better Vision: Understanding, Living and Sharing the Catholic Vision for Human Sexuality* (Dublin/London: St Paul’s, 2022).

Another book that I hesitated to include, this time because I’d rather not appear to be engaging in self-promotion! However, I think it will be a useful addition to any spiritual library. One of the main features of the book is that it roots the Catholic sexual ethic in a consistent understanding of the human person – i.e. in an anthropology. It is not enough simply to proclaim *what* the Church teaches about human sexuality: we need to be able to explain *why*. After that, we need to be able to *defend* and *commend* the teaching, in and to a culture that rejects it. Hence the structure of the book in three sections: ‘What our faith teaches us about ourselves’ (anthropology); ‘How our faith asks us to live’ (ethics); ‘Defending and commending our understanding of sexuality’ (apologetics). My intention in this book has been to equip priests, teachers, catechists and parents to share the wisdom of our faith. On the basis of feedback received so far, I’m happy to recommend it.

19. Erica Bachiochi, ed., *Women, Sex, and the Church: A Case for Catholic Teaching* (Boston: Pauline, 2010).

No, it’s not that you need two books in a row on the Church’s sexual teaching! But this book is much more far-reaching than the title suggests. It contains – *rara avis!* – a contentedly Catholic feminism. All the authors in the collection (bar one co-writer) are women. Their arguments in favour of Church teaching are clear and cogent; their arguments against those who reject that teaching are charitable and formidable. The book is extremely well resourced, by means of detailed endnotes. Before the treatments of individual aspects of moral teaching, there is a long introductory

WHAT SHOULD I HAVE IN MY SPIRITUAL LIBRARY?

chapter (entitled ‘Authentic Freedom and Equality in Difference’) on Catholic feminism as such. Other topics include infertility treatment, women and the priesthood, women and work/public life, and the relationship between Catholic sexual and social teaching. For priests, this book is a gift. It equips us to make the point that Catholic teaching is pro-woman and authentically feminist. A word on why this particular book might be considered ‘spiritual reading’: it is a work of tremendous *encouragement*, in that it assures us that we are on solid ground in our proclamation of Church teaching.

20. Gerald G. May, *Addiction and Grace: Love and Spirituality in the Healing of Addictions* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991).

The vast majority of clergy are not clinicians. That is not our role and while we should be confident of our distinctive contribution to those in difficulty, we should also be mindful of the limits of our expertise. It is good to have some sense of the interplay between psychology and pastoral care. We can be confident of the healing potential of sound spirituality; and we should, in turn, be open to learning from the insights of sound psychology. May’s book is a useful example of the kind of literature that can help us to appreciate the link between psychology and theology, counselling and pastoral practice. The focus of the book is much wider than the negative behaviours we commonly refer to as addictions. For the author, addictive processes are at the root of negative and sinful behaviour in general. He examines the psychological, neurological and theological nature of addiction in this general sense, and insists that humility and reserve are a better guarantee of health than any elusive solution or cure. ‘Willpower and resolutions come and go,’ he notes, ‘but the addictive process never sleeps.’ An informative book, but more than just informative: a book that invites us to ponder and review our attitudes to human brokenness.

21. Peter L. Steinke, *How Your Church Family Works: Understanding Congregations as Emotional Systems* (Alban Institute, 2002).

Most priests spend most of their lives serving parish communities; yet we do not give much time to pondering community as such – with all its rich and complex human dynamics. What makes communities tick? How can we minister contentedly and productively within the context of ordinary human brokenness, limitations, crises and contrariness? Are there any particular interpersonal dynamics we should bear in mind? This short and

THE FURROW

readable book alerts us – always in a gentle and sympathetic way – to human factors that are present in every community, in every individual, in every pastoral conversation, at every meeting. It offers excellent insights into the nature of pastoral leadership (which includes the ability not to panic when others are panicking, to be imaginative in times of difficulty, and to hold one’s ground rather than reacting to stresses). The core insight of the book is that a congregation is not a set of isolated individuals, but a *system*, in which people relate to each other and think of each other in some fairly predictable ways. Read Steinke’s book, and you will at times be entertained. More importantly, you will gain some really helpful insights into how to maintain composure and poise in a range of delicate pastoral situations. It is not hard to see why this book can be regarded as spiritual reading: it can help us to become more clued-in and compassionate ministers of the Gospel.

CONCLUSION

So much for a ‘tasting menu’ of books for one’s spiritual library! The inevitable subjectivity I mentioned earlier may, in the view of some readers, have given rise to glaring omissions. What about a decent commentary on each of the four Gospels? Surely an essential part of any priest’s library? What about the art and craft and spirituality of preaching? These and other *mea culpas* notwithstanding, I think that the 21 representative volumes we’ve considered offer a pretty comprehensive range of reading material. Again, I have not been unduly concerned to define spiritual reading material and how it might be distinguished from ‘non-spiritual’ texts. In this regard, I think it is no harm to err on the side of inclusiveness. The old maxim, ‘if the shoe fits, wear it,’ is apt: anything that helps us to live the life of discipleship is fair game for spiritual reading. To quote Saint Paul, with just one change of verb, which I leave it to the reader to spot: ‘Whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, read about these things’ (Phil 4:8).