

YOU CAN'T LOVE WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW; A VERY BASIC CATHOLIC READING LIST

◆ *The Holy Bible*—The best translation is the Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition. Be certain that you are using a good *Catholic Bible* (there are many different versions of Bibles).

◆ *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*—While I recommend the book form of this, it is also available online. Every family needs a Bible and a *Catechism*. If you can't afford it, I will get them for you.

◆ *Theology for Beginners* by Frank Sheed and *Theology and Sanity*—Both books provide a basic understanding of the nature of the soul and *how* we are made in the likeness of God. These books show ways of starting to think about the Trinity. They are elementary to our faith and the second book is a kind of sequel to the first. Many who read *Theology and Sanity* say it is one of the best books they have ever read.

◆ *The Light of Christ; An Introduction to Catholicism* by Fr. Thomas Joseph White—This book has the advantage of being written recently. This is an elegant, robust presentation of how God has revealed Himself in the world. A true pleasure to read, it contains the insight into human nature accumulated by the Church over centuries. Even skeptics will appreciate the reasonableness of religion articulated by Fr. White.

◆ *Mere Christianity* and *The Screwtape Letters* by C.S. Lewis—C.S. Lewis was not a Catholic but his Christianity is catholic and these books have sold in millions of copies which is proof of his insight.

We live in a Protestant nation, although the whole of the developed world is secularized. This presents its own challenges. Some answers and understanding may be attained by reading *The Apostasy That Wasn't* by Rod Bennet and *Catholicism and Fundamentalism* by Karl Keating among other things.

Then there are the certain writers who are so wise that it seems everything they have written is gold. These include Archbishop Fulton Sheen whose cause for sainthood is pending, Josef Pieper, Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), and Romano Guardini, to name some. I especially recommend *The Life of Christ* (by Sheen), *The Four Cardinal Virtues, Leisure as the Basis for Culture* (Pieper), *Introduction to Christianity*, and *Spirit of the Liturgy* (Ratzinger), *The Lord* and *The Art of Praying* (Guardini).

Having an understanding of natural law is extremely useful for Christians. Charles Rice, a former professor at Notre Dame Law School wrote *50 Questions on*

Natural Law; What It Is and Why We Need It.

J. Budziszewski has also written several good books on natural law and see also Pierre Manent.

GOING TO MASS (VERY IMPORTANT!)

The Catholic Mass is sometimes difficult. When the Mass is “dumbed down” to cater to perceived popular tastes, it becomes banal and boring. To the extent this happens, everyone is robbed. On the other hand, we don't attend Mass for what we get out of it — a selfish disposition. We go to give God the worship He is due in justice according to the manner of worship that He has instituted no matter how poorly we may execute His precepts. The Mass ought to be a holy experience. To help us enter the Mass with greater intentionality, we need to deepen our understanding. Basic introductions are *Understanding the Mass* by Charles Belmonte or *A Biblical Walk Through the Mass...* by Edward Sri, and *What Happens at Mass* by Jeremy Driscoll which is fantastic but is not on Amazon.com (except as used).

One theologian who has spent a lot of time looking at the mystical aspects of the liturgy is David Fagerberg. I think even the word “liturgy” sounds boring but reading *Liturgical Dogmatics* will prove the opposite.

To receive Holy Communion worthily, we must be in a “state of grace”. This is achieved through the Sacrament of Reconciliation which is also called Confession. This sacrament is often neglected but it is necessary. It could be helpful to simply read with serious intent, what the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says about it. One book that addresses some of the anxieties and offers practical understanding is *Pardon and Peace* by Fr. Francis Randolph. Another well-respected, older manual is *Frequent Confession; Its Place In the Spiritual Life* by Benedict Bauer.

UNDERSTANDING MARY IN THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

To help understand the place of Mary, the Mother of Jesus in our spiritual life, we could start with a straightforward little book by Scott Hahn called *Hail Holy Queen; the Mother of God In the Word of God*. Books on the level of apologetics include *Refuting the Attack on Mary; A Defense of Marian Doctrines* by Father Mateo or *Behold Your Mother; A Biblical and Historical Defense of Marian Doctrines*. Going deeper in the spirituality of Mary, we can think about Luigi S. Gambero's book *Mary and the Fathers of the Church; the Blessed Virgin Mary In Patristic Thought* or *True Devotion to Mary* by St. Louis de Montfort or *Mary: God's Yes to Man* by Pope St. John Paul II.

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UNDERSTANDING PRAYER AND SPIRITUAL LIFE

A very good, short introduction to prayer is *Thirsting for Prayer* by Fr. Jacques Philippe. He also wrote *Searching for and Maintaining Peace* and other treatises that are simple and substantive. The most widely read devotional book is by Thomas à Kempis called *Imitation of Christ*. An excellent synthesis of the spiritual life is *The Fire Within* by Fr. Thomas Dubay. Perhaps the greatest introduction to the spiritual life — appreciated over hundreds of years — is by St. Francis de Sales who wrote *Introduction to the Devout Life*.

Saints are the most reliable witnesses in matters of the spirit. *The Diary of St. Faustina; Divine Mercy In My Soul* is an eyewitness testimony to the mercy of the Lord. St. Thérèse of Lisieux is a spiritual genius of modern time. Her autobiography *Story of a Soul* and her letters trace the path of her heart. One must be patient, however, to appreciate the depth of Thérèse's writing because of the style of expression of her time, but countless holy people have benefitted from her "little way" including St. Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

Reading the lives of the saints is another very important source of information and inspiration in the spiritual life. It is especially effective for young people and it provides not only some theology but the drama of their story as well as some history and culture.

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY LIFE

It is essential for both spouses to constantly revitalize their appreciation for each other. An important way of stimulating the graces of the Sacrament of Matrimony is to pray with your spouse and to conscientiously work at love as a skill. It is ideal if this disposition is present from the very beginning of marriage.

Hidden Keys to a Loving, Lasting Marriage by Gary Smalley and *The 5 Love Languages; the Secret to Love that Lasts* by Gary Chapman are books by Christians which offer very practical advice. Another very good book that is secular in its character is *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* by John M. Gottman. Dr. Gottman has done outstanding work. Managers in business still use the protopsychological methods of the ancient Greeks in leadership and management theory. You can use these in your family by reading *The Temperament God Gave You* by Art and Laraine Bennett.

Pope St. John Paul II wrote *Love and Responsibility* and *Man and Woman He Created Them; a Theology of the Body*. Those two books may be too academic for some people. But whatever you do, make sure you commit to that conscious, reflective spiritual investment in your marriage.

A FEW MORE CONSIDERATIONS

It is important — especially for the sake of the young — to round out our catechesis with some moral theology. *Introduction to Moral Theology* by Romanus Cessario is recommended as is the one by William C. Mattison III which is more accessible perhaps. You might be interested in *Catholic Sexual Ethics* by May, Lawler and Boyle or *Catholic Sexual Morality* by Fastiggi.

One can be very simple or very sophisticated and still find satisfaction in the body of Christian thought. However, as John Paul II wrote in *Faith and Reason*, it helps greatly to learn some classical metaphysics to penetrate some of the deeper truths. An excellent and practical introduction to philosophy is recently published: *Seat of Wisdom* by James M. Jacobs. Other works that serve this purpose are, *What Is; Introductory Reflections on Thomistic Metaphysics* by Michael Torre or *An Elementary Christian Metaphysics* by Joseph Owens (although that one is densely written).

It really helps to have things laying around the house that people can just pick up and read. Subscribing to a Catholic newspaper, magazine or journal helps to see the Church active in the world and unafraid to address her challenges. Often the headlines or titles in these periodicals are sufficient to provoke thought. That alone is valuable. Subscribe to *The National Catholic Register* or *Catholic Answers* magazine.

There are countless resources online. The non-profit Catholic Answers owns the domain www.catholic.com. I generally recommend that for basic apologetic questions. There are other popular sites, but even "good" websites can take people down some tangled trails, so to speak. I have tried to compile things here that are consonant with the orthodox, historically reliable teaching of the Church. Reading books is better than the using websites, generally, if for no other reason than finding the depth of material commensurate to your intelligence. Reading a book allows for a sustained and layered consideration of the truth we seek.

I concede that no one really reads anymore. I "stick to my guns" though, for several reasons. Many studies and meta-analysis show that, not only is it healthy to read, but physical books are better than digital devices for comprehension and retention. It is good for your children that you read too. Reading makes us better in lots of ways. Studies show reading out loud stimulates positive neurochemicals and that heart rates beat in unison among those present!

For this reason, I bring an end to my reading list by recommending a book on book-reading itself. Consider the great *How to Read a Book* by Mortimer Adler.

—Fr. Gerald