

What to Read? (II): Choosing the best

The second part in an article on the importance of fostering the habit of reading. "What we read does change us. It refines our soul or dulls it; it broadens our horizons or narrows them."

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Some books are life-changing. For example, Saint Augustine's experience when he read Cicero's *Hortensius*. Years later he would write in his *Confessions* that this book "changed my affections, and

turned my prayers to Thyself O Lord; and made me have other purposes and desires . . . and I began now to arise, that I might return to Thee.”[1] His journey towards God, after many ups and downs, turned more clearly towards conversion. This became definitive while reading another book: a passage from the Letter to the Romans broke down the last barrier holding him back.[2]

Sharing good discoveries

Although not all books will mark such a clear change in our life, what we read does change us. It refines our soul or dulls it; it broadens our horizons or narrows them. With the passing of the years our personality reflects what we have read and what we haven't read. A person enriched by books chosen with good judgment over the years acquires an open view of the world and people; he or she knows how to confront life's

complexities, and develops the sensitivity needed to bypass banality and recognize true greatness.

It is not always easy to find books that will help us to grow, even when we are just looking for entertainment. That's why we need advice from others. When trying to find directions in a city, asking someone who lives there will often provide valuable data that we would miss with a GPS. And just as we orient ourselves through the advice of experienced people, we can recommend to others the good books that we have read. Speaking about what we read enriches family life and conversations with our friends, which can sometimes become "literary get-togethers" or discussions about the ties between works of literature and movies. And since good reading is passed on effectively by word of mouth, we can also organize reading clubs, visit good

bookshops and speak regularly with booksellers, holding conversations that often enrich both parties.

We can find many lists of good books, classified according to age, topics and interests. But the best list is the one we draw up on our own, from the advice of friends with similar tastes, specific references heard in a class, a talk, a conversation... Since we don't have time to read everything we find interesting, it's useful to draw up a plan of readings for the future. This gives us the serenity of knowing that a specific title won't escape us, and that when we have time to read something else we won't simply pick up the first book that falls into our hands.

It has been said that the internet is in some sense a huge "mimeographing machine." The invention of printing already made it clear that the easier it became to publish books, the more

rapidly mediocre and trivial publications proliferated.

Nevertheless alongside a great quantity of material of scant quality, often produced with the best of intentions, the internet harbors texts that help us to grasp what is really happening today, pointing to key ideas that much of the media overlooks. Here too we need to draw up, with the advice of others and our own experience, a list of the sites or authors we want to follow.

Subscribing to newsletters with material that interests us, which can also be used for offline reading, can be helpful here. The internet also makes it easier to access classical works and other old books that are out of print or hard to find in bookshops or libraries.

Dialoguing with books

“Critic” comes from the Greek *krinein* which means to discern, to choose.

To read “critically” means taking the best from each book. Authors, like all of us, are conditioned by their context and culture. So when reading a book it’s good to ask ourselves, for example: Why does the author express himself in this way? What are the ideals of his time that he projects onto his characters? How does he perceive perennial values such as friendship, forgiveness, loyalty, etc.? Obviously, it’s not a matter of adopting a defensive attitude that perhaps hides a certain pessimism or insecurity. Rather the important thing is to discover the lights and shadows of each book and, if needed, to purify some of its ideas and ideals. Thus we need to enter into an interior dialogue with the book, which could even lead to a real dialogue with the authors (in fact, they are usually grateful for correspondence and suggestions from their readers). In doing so, one’s own convictions will come to

the surface; some of these may need to be corrected as a result of the exchange, while others may at least take on new nuances. Probably the best way to foster a balanced critical sense is to read with an apostolic sense: not just for the sake of an enjoyable read, but also with the goal of understanding the intellectual framework of our contemporaries, in order to purify it and reconcile it with Christian values.

With these coordinates, reading helps us to form deep and solid convictions, well thought out, so that each of us will acquire our own criteria and develop our own personality and way of being. Something similar happens with the movies we watch. When we are surprised by a film because of the values we discover in it, or because of its aesthetic qualities, we learn something specific about our own life, our view of the world and other

people. Thus each of us acquires our own criteria for discerning situations and making correct decisions—criteria that we come to understand better and articulate to ourselves. We acquire a personal perspective on the world, grounded in our faith, which strengthens our unity of life.

Something stirring in our soul

A good reader is usually also a good “re-reader,” someone who returns to books that in the past made an impact. An effective way to become a good “re-reader” is to jot down from time to time notes about what we are reading, which will enable us to return to the interior lights we gained from that particular reading. This habit helps us to get to know ourselves better and acquire a more penetrating outlook on reality and other people. At times we would like to recall a story or a passage that struck us in the past and we are

unable to do so. Here notes we took can be of great use.

In this as in everything, we need to strike a balance. It's good sometimes to let ourselves be surprised by our memory, which retains more than we think. At the same time, reading leaves a much deeper mark on someone who, by writing down ideas, nourishes an interior dialogue with the author. Often this will involve not copying entire passages but rather jotting down our impressions, trying to give shape, perhaps haltingly, to intuitions that we begin to formulate. By this patient effort our journey through different lands, cultures and outlooks is enriched; the scenery doesn't simply pass before us, but shapes our interior world and enables us to "make our own" the problems, yearnings and aspirations of other people. Our understanding of the world thus grows, and we can take

up the constant challenge of the *new evangelization* to which the Holy Father is urging us and which passes through a *new inculturation*.

Personal responsibility

Recalling his visits with young people to hospital patients in Madrid, Saint Josemaría once said: “we were trying to provide them with accompaniment and some small material help: washing their hands, their feet or their face; cutting their nails, combing their hair.... We couldn’t take them food because it wasn’t allowed, but we always left them some good reading material.”^[3] His concern as a shepherd of souls led him to remind everyone of the importance of choosing readings carefully, because of the deep impact these have on the intellectual and spiritual formation of each person. In this regard the Catechism of the Catholic Church

reminds us: “the first commandment requires us to nourish and protect our faith with prudence and vigilance, and to reject everything that is opposed to it.”[4] The Pope also recommends this: “If I watch a show that isn’t good for me, that is at odds with my values, that makes me vulgar or even has filthy things, I have to change the channel. As we used to do back in the ‘stone age’ when I was growing up, if a book was good, you read it; if a book was harmful, you threw it away.”[5] Choosing a book, like choosing a friend, going to the movies, or watching a play, is a responsible and free act for each Christian and also has moral connotations.[6]

To fight against our own ignorance or superficial view of the world, a good piece of advice is to read a lot, getting to know a variety of authors with varied content. Thus we are helped to have an open mind and

overcome groundless prejudices we may have absorbed, and we learn to live and communicate the faith in an attractive way. Responsibility for our own formation also leads us to try to read good quality books, choosing works that really help us to grow humanly and supernaturally. A wise piece of advice in this regard is the following: “Great books have the courtesy of a magnanimous king: they welcome the reader as an equal. Mediocre authors try to humiliate us in order to hide their own low position.”[7]

The advice of people who have read a lot can be very valuable for forming our plan of readings, for getting a better understanding of different authors and recognizing where they may present an incomplete or biased view of the world. Often a comment from a friend can alert us to a work we didn't know about, and open up for

us broad cultural, intellectual and spiritual horizons. Or it will prevent us from wasting our time on banal readings that promote behaviour at odds with peaceful coexistence, attack religion, etc. We also know that certain books can be harmful to us because at that moment we lack the formation needed to digest them; there are some types of bread that can be too hard for our teeth. We need to have the intellectual humility required to recognize our own limitations: this is not being prudish, but rather prudence. With others' help, we will find alternative, more accessible readings that, in the future, will enable us, if need be, to take in the bread that now would cause us harm. In the end, the aim should be that the culture we acquire by reading embodies Christ's teachings and meshes with our personal experience. Reading books that are ill-advised or not reading enough makes us especially

vulnerable to error, although in different ways.

Seeking and giving advice

An immediate consequence of the value of others' advice is the need for each of us to assist others here. Our personal advice will help family members and friends to choose good quality books that can enrich them. It's also useful to take part in initiatives offering assessments in the areas of literature, movies, culture, etc. The effort to spend a few minutes to share one's impressions can help many others. Here the principle that the best is the enemy of the good sometimes holds. A brief review, written down when what we have just read is still fresh in our mind, is better than a detailed critique that never comes to be. The more people taking part in these initiatives, the more objective and useful the advice will be.

The information given by magazines, cultural journals, etc. can also be valuable. We can easily recognise reliable critics by their good work, their sound cultural and doctrinal background, and their balanced opinions. These indicators will be helpful before making the decision to read or buy a book.

In any case, we should avoid simplistic or superficial views on the need to ask for advice or to follow the guidance of ratings and reviews that we are given. The specific evaluation of a book is always meant to be a prudential guideline, and we shouldn't be surprised that some of these ratings change over time, or that what presents no problem for one person might not be recommendable for another. A rating is meant to be a guide that helps us to choose responsibly. At the same time, it doesn't exclude asking for advice in personal spiritual direction, when

we find it opportune for our soul. Nevertheless, being attentive to moral ratings should not distract us from what is essential: the importance of reading and, to the extent possible, reading a lot.

Do not quench the Spirit, do not despise prophesying, but test everything; hold fast what is good, abstain from every form of evil.[8]

The effort to open up our mind, to broaden our horizons is authentic when it goes hand in hand with an ever more ardent and serene search for Truth and Beauty.

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1. Saint Augustine, *Confessions* III.
4.7.

2. Saint Augustine, *Confessions* VIII.
12.29.

3. Saint Josemaría, notes taken in a family get together, 20 December 1970 (cf. *Obras* 1979, pp. 125-126).

4. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no 2088.

5. Francis. *Audience*, 6 June 2015.

7. Regarding this point, see Angel Rodriguez Luño, *Cultural factors of special importance in spiritual formation*, part 2 (“La lectura”), available at *collationes.org*.

8. N. Gomez Davila, *Escolios a un texto implicito* (vol 1), Instituto Colombiano de Cultura, 1977, p. 325.

9. *1 Thess* 5:19-22.