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# What to Read? (I): Our map of the world

“A good book is like a good friend. It will stay with you for the rest of your life." An article on fostering the habit of reading.

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When mankind first began to write down the sayings of the sages, the codes of laws and customs, the stories of how each people had been forged, reading was born. Until then

culture, the cultivation of the soul, was only oral. Only what men and women could retain in their memory was transmitted to the following generations, as a valuable map of the world, as a torch in the midst of darkness.

Listening continues to be important for us today. It gives us our first access to language and above all makes dialogue possible, a key fibre in the very fabric of life. But to truly listen and dialogue, we also need to read. Reading occupies an irreplaceable place in human culture. Humanity's memory today is also, to a great extent, the written word that awaits dialogue with a reader.

*Paying attention*

Listening and reading are essential habits for broadening our limited horizons, for maturing in our outlook, for grasping the complexity,

and also the simplicity, of the world. Both habits require the ability to *pay attention*. The means of communication, the social media, the clamor of electronic devices, all strive to attract our attention, as their most valuable capital. And the abundance and urgency of the demands on us can easily lead to fragmentation, as happens to a person who is constantly being interrupted. This fragmented attention is quite useful for the media giants. But it can impoverish us, since it turns our attention outward, and can rob us of our "interior world." Faced with this danger of dispersion, the ability to pay attention to one thing at a time, to a book or conversation, takes on special importance.

Genuine attention is much more than the diligent effort to retain facts; it requires allowing people and events to make an impression on us, to

surprise us and take on life in us. Listening and reading, as ways of paying attention, make the spiritual life possible. And therefore they humanize the world, and contribute to reconciling it with God. A person who reads and listens grasps experiences in life more deeply, thanks to a process of "interiorization," as when Nathan, through a parable, led King David to do penance.[1]

*Legere* ("to read" in Latin) means originally to gather up, to unite. Being truly able to read is much more than knowing how to grasp the meaning of words; it means being able to recollect oneself, to dwell within oneself, to "read into" people and events. The great dialogue that is human culture is nourished by these skills. But even for a person with a good cultural level, the rapid pace of life today brings with it the risk of not reading. Dragged along by the

multiple demands on our attention, weeks and months can go by without finding time to sit quietly with a book in our hands. Our map of the world, instead of being three-dimensional, can be reduced to a few flat contour lines. And our dialogue with others, instead of grasping the vast variety of personal and social nuances, can be limited to four elementary colours, unable to contribute much to improving the world.

Saint Josemaría always encouraged those alongside him to foster a broad outlook on the world, because a Christian is a person capable of being amazed, ready to re-think and revise personal opinions, in order to bring the Gospel everywhere. Well-chosen reading (*non legere, sed eligere*, as the classical adage says) is one of the keys to this apostolic concern. “Since you want to acquire a Catholic or universal mentality, here are some characteristics you should aim at: a

breadth of vision and a deepening insight into the things that remain alive and unchanged in Catholic orthodoxy; a proper and healthy desire, which should never be frivolous, to present anew the standard teachings of traditional thought in philosophy and the interpretation of history; a careful awareness of trends in science and contemporary thought; and a positive and open attitude towards the current changes in society and in ways of living."[2]

*The habit of reading*

Teachers and specialists in educating young people say that it is difficult to possess the habit of reading if it has not been acquired in childhood. There are also significant differences between children who read and those who do not. The former tend to express themselves more easily and understand others better, and have a

deeper self-knowledge. While those who focus on other forms of entertainment tend to be slower to mature. For example, perhaps not the use, but certainly the abuse of video games can make young people less imaginative; their inner world becomes dry and desert-like, dependent on the overly primitive stimuli of these forms of entertainment. But obviously reading can't be encouraged simply by "demonizing" television or video games, or presenting it as a moral duty. Rather one needs to reach the depths of the young person's soul, awakening a fascination for stories and for beauty, sparking the mind and imagination.

Each family needs to discover who can best fulfil this role: the father, the mother, an older brother or sister, or a grandparent perhaps. And one can also rely on the efforts of teachers, youth club tutors, etc.

Young readers need to be helped to discover their own path, which should include, at the appropriate time, the great milestones of universal literature and other books that accord with each one's particular personality. This effort, which doesn't require much in the way of time but certainly some thought and constancy, is decisive. Sometimes we may also have to help young people, by our example as well, to find good times for reading, so that they experience the pleasure of reading, without falling into the selfishness of always preferring it to conversing with others and family life. Probably many of us remember the first books we were given or that we read, the stories we read when young, editions of classics or bible stories adapted for children. Perhaps engraved on our memory is the teacher who opened up to us the world of poetry or awakened our enthusiasm for a particular author.

When one enters the world of work and life takes on a faster pace, even those who appreciate the value of reading may find that the time available for it is quite limited. Hence the importance of defending some time each day for reading. Perhaps we find it hard to do so, but it is a matter of setting priorities, of order, of gaining minutes from less important activities. To some extent "it is not time that we lack, but concentration."[3] We can find enjoyment in reading on train trips, on flights, when using public transport, when waiting for someone, and of course as a way to rest. A person who tries to always bring along a book, now made easier to do with digital readers, tablets, etc, can take advantage of precious, perhaps unforeseen, minutes. Although the few minutes gained will sometimes seem like drip irrigation, as the days and the months go by the plants will grow.

Digital technologies have also facilitated the proliferation of audiobooks, podcasts and even the audio reading of almost any text. These are very useful resources for those who have to spend many hours behind the wheel, walking or doing housework. Audiobooks, especially when good recordings, show that reading is another way of listening, and they take us back somehow to the time when a group of listeners gathered around a person who enjoyed a gift they were lacking: the ability to read!

*Flooded with books*

Every year thousands of books are published around the world, not counting the enormous amount of ever more specialized scientific literature. Moreover, the Internet gives us access, often for free, to an almost infinite amount of information services and opinion

sites. Faced with so many possibilities, and with the evident limitations on each one's time, John Paul II's words are more relevant than ever. "This has always been a dilemma for me: What am I to read? I have always tried to choose what was most essential. So much has been published and not everything is valuable and useful. It is important to know how to choose and to consult others about what is worth reading"[4]

Reading can be a relaxing and entertaining way to rest, and an abundance of books exist that are useful in this regard. Another matter, however, is the serene and leisurely reading of books that broaden our mind. There is a long tradition of books that both educate and give delight, but we can fall into the habit of reading mainly light books that allow us an easy "escape." So it's not simply a question of being a

“voracious reader,” but of reading, in accord with each one’s capacity and circumstances, worthwhile works of philosophy, theology, literature, history, science, art, etc., in order to enrich our outlook on the world. There are so many good books in a great variety of fields that can enrich our interior world. With a little patience, we can always find a good book to read.

When choosing a book, it is important to take into account that not a few media companies manage publishing houses. Therefore they give priority to their own publications to the detriment of other perhaps more worthwhile books published by smaller companies with less media presence. Thus it is usually advisable to ignore the exaggerated praise of the most recent books and best-sellers, as if this were a guarantee of quality. “There are books of which the backs

and covers are by far the best parts,”[5] Charles Dickens wrote ironically. Wanting to always have the latest book could cause us to miss out on other more entertaining, worthwhile or creative books that lie forgotten on the shelves of libraries or at home. Since often there is not much time for reading and there are so many good books, it is worthwhile choosing carefully what to read and not allowing oneself to be led by the siren call of advertising.

When someone has seen a mediocre movie they may regret having wasted two hours of their life. But when we come to the end of a book, even if it is a good one but that never really interested us, we may have wasted much more time. If a book fails to win us over and we have no special reason to read it, it may be good to set it aside. Many other books await us that perhaps we will get more out of. “Skipping around”

between books can simply be a cloak for our own impatience or lack of steady purpose, but often setting a book aside and picking up a new one enables us to find a book we really enjoy and grow with.

A reader who is considering starting a book doesn't have a contract with the author that prevents skimming through it or that requires reading it to the end. Some people have the habit of opening books at a random page. If that page wins them over, they start reading it; if not, they set it aside. It is good, no doubt, to give the author a chance to gain our attention. But why devote time to a book we don't really like or find hard to read? Of course, as can happen with the great classics, the problem we have in connecting with an author is sometimes due to our own lack of literary training. Perhaps we should set a specific book aside for a while, and take it up again after

some months or years have gone by. And we can read another good book in the meantime.

A whole lifetime wouldn't suffice to read all the books that today are considered classics. Aristotle, Shakespeare, Cicero, Molière, Dostoevsky or Chesterton… we learn to choose the one that is best for us, as we do our friends. "A good book is like a good friend. It will stay with you for the rest of your life. When you first get to know it, it will give you excitement and adventure, and years later it will provide you with comfort and familiarity. And best of all, you can share it with your children or your grandchildren or anyone you love enough to let into its secrets."[6]

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[1] Cf. *2 Sam* 12:1-19.

[2] Saint Josemaria, *Furrow*, 428.

[3] Adam Zagajewski, *En la belleza ajena*, Valencia, Pre-textos 2003, 165.

[4] John Paul II, *Rise, Let Us Be on Our Way*, New York: Warner Books, 2004, pp. 93-94, 97.

[5] Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*.

[6] Charlie Lovett, *First Impressions: A Novel of Old Books, Unexpected Love, and Jane Austen*.

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