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Spiritual Reading

What is spiritual reading and what does it aim to achieve? Why did Saint Josemaría include this practice in the plan of spiritual life he recommended? An article from the "Diccionario de San Josemaría," which is currently being translated into English.

08/23/2020

Spiritual reading is the regular practice of reading Sacred Scripture and other books suitable for nourishing and enlivening our

spiritual life. Saint Josemaría included this practice among the norms he recommended for the plan of spiritual life, in order to stay close to God in our daily life.

Historical context of spiritual reading

The origin of spiritual reading is found in the so-called *lectio divina*. This theological term means a meditative reading of the word of God, which requires an active attitude on the reader's part. The goal is to pray while meditating on the biblical text and make it one's own. "Strive to meditate daily on the words of your Creator. You will learn to know the heart of God in the words of God" (Saint Gregory the Great, *Letter 4*, 31). The Fathers of the Church encouraged all Christians to read the "sacred page" or Bible. In practice, *lectio divina* became a reality primarily in the monasteries,

where it occupied a principal place among the ascetical means practiced there.

During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the practice of reading became more widespread among the Christian people thanks to the *devotio moderna*, a movement that encouraged a practical and methodical piety. Their asceticism, centered on the imitation of Christ and on interior life, made spiritual reading an autonomous and specific spiritual exercise.

Spiritual reading is nourishment that spurs us to charity and incites us to pray. It brings together two inseparable dimensions: love for Christ (*affectus*) and knowledge of the Church's teaching (*intellectus*).

The place of spiritual reading in the teachings of Saint Josemaría

By incorporating spiritual reading into the practices of daily piety, Saint Josemaría encouraged Christians of all walks of life to do it. He recommended that 10 or 15 minutes be dedicated to this practice each day. This recommendation included the reading of the Bible, especially the New Testament, and also other trustworthy books of spirituality. He urged that this reading be done with true recollection, and that one try to take advantage of the text to deepen one's dialogue with God and improve in one's conduct.

As Blessed Alvaro del Portillo, his closest collaborator, recalls, every day Saint Josemaría "dedicated time to the meditative reading of the New Testament. Often he would write down a phrase, as soon as he read it, and use it in his preaching, in his writings, or in his mental prayer in the evening" (Alvaro del Portillo, *40 Years with a Saint*). "He did his

spiritual reading preferably with works of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church. It was a rare day when he did not stop at the end to write down expressions or ideas that had impressed him: a sign not only of the attention with which he carried out this practice of piety, but above all of the importance he attached to it" (*Ibid.*).

Spiritual reading is decisive for attaining the central goal of Christian life: a personal encounter with Christ and identification with Him. Hence the importance of reading the New Testament, with the Gospel accounts of Our Lord's life, the Acts and the Apostolic Letters. This meditative reading leads to making Christ's life the foundation of one's own existence and is necessarily reflected in one's behavior: "How I wish your bearing and conversation were such that, on seeing or hearing you, people would say: This man reads

the life of Jesus Christ" (*The Way*, no. 2). And hence it is also of great importance for apostolic activity, as reflected in a piece of advice that, according to Bishop del Portillo, Saint Josemaría gave to the first priests of Opus Dei. He insisted that they dedicate time "to reading and meditating attentively on Scripture; he insisted that we approach it with great faith, because only in this way, only by leading our souls to a loving encounter with Christ, can we transmit to others our love and desire to be identified with Him" (Alvaro del Portillo, *40 Years with a Saint*).

The reading of other spiritual works should always be related to the core of Christian life, and therefore to the Gospel, to Christ. "In order to draw close to God we must take the right road, which is the Sacred Humanity of Christ. This is why I have always advised people to read books on the

Lord's Passion. Such works, which are full of true piety, bring to our minds the Son of God, a Man like ourselves and also true God, who in his flesh loves and suffers to redeem the world" (*Friends of God*, no. 299). One of the first members of Opus Dei, Ricardo Fernandez Vallespín, said that in his first conversation with Saint Josemaría, "he took a book that was used by him and on the first page he put, by way of a dedication, these three phrases:

+ Madrid - May 29, 1933: *May you seek Christ. May you find Christ. May you love Christ.* The book was *The History of the Sacred Passion* by Fr. Luis de la Palma" (*The Way, Critical-Historical Edition*, p. 553; cf. *The Way*, no. 382).

Spiritual reading provides nourishment for our dialogue with God and helps us to keep God present in our daily life. "You write. 'In my

spiritual reading I build up a store of fuel. It looks like a lifeless heap, but I often find that my memory, of its own accord, will draw from it material which fills my prayer with life and inflames my thanksgiving after Communion" (*The Way*, no. 117). That is why he advised, also in difficult circumstances: "Don't neglect your spiritual reading. Reading has made many saints" (*The Way*, no. 116; cf. *The Way, Critical-Historical Edition*, p. 319).

Saint Josemaría recommended spiritual reading as a means of doctrinal and religious formation because it is directed at both the heart and the mind. He stressed that the search for holiness and apostolate in Opus Dei has to be based on doctrine, on the faith of the Church, and that to acquire this doctrine one needs time and study. Thus one becomes a person strong in one's convictions and in one's love

for Christ (cf. *The Way, Critical-Historical Edition*, p. 535).

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Entry on "Spiritual Reading" in the *Diccionario de San Josemaría*

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