

Summer: a perfect time for spiritual reading

The very idea of summer reading may call to mind tedious assignments from school insisting that even the free months have some sort of homework attached to them. That said, we usually have extra time in the summer and could use that time well for some reading that would enrich our spiritual lives.

If the last spiritual book you read was when you graduated from Catholic school, then you know that you are overdue for some “freshening up.” We change as we grow older. We encounter new situations in life which require us to keep learning how to stay in tune with God’s grace. Just as professionals require a certain amount of ongoing learning each year in their field, so Christians need a regular amount of intellectual stimulation to continue deepening our discipleship.

When I arrived at my current parish assignment, some of the parishioners asked me what I liked to do for fun. My predecessor went hunting and fishing and played golf. They were eager to know what I liked to do. I think I shocked them when I said that—on the rare occasions that I had free time—I would enjoy sitting down with a good book and some classical music playing in the background. I plead guilty to being “bookish”! (I even give up ordering books on Amazon as part of my Lenten penance.) I am writing this surrounded by walls of bookshelves containing some of my 5,000 books.

Maybe you’re not “bookish” but that doesn’t mean that you can’t enjoy reading. I am firmly convinced that people who say they don’t like reading just haven’t found the right books. There is no “one size fits all.” I’ve combed through my shelves of books to provide a sampling of spiritual books in this essay in an effort to tempt everyone with something to read that will resonate in your soul. You may even discover that you relate well to a particular author or topic so I have included some further reading suggestions along the way.

An important word about how to read: spiritual reading isn’t primarily about getting to the last page! These aren’t mystery novels to race through to see “whodunit.” I also enjoy Tom Clancy adventures but I read them in a profoundly different way. Spiritual reading is something we read slowly to discover little morsels of insight. Imagine the difference between guzzling a bottle of Gatorade as opposed to sipping a fine wine. So, be prepared to sip and savor! You may wish to keep a notebook handy to jot down what strikes you as you read—or to highlight text and scribble in the margins if that’s more helpful to you. Feel free to stop and reflect upon these illuminations as they happen. You can always continue to the next page tomorrow as there is no prize for finishing the book! The real prize is to grow spiritually through the wisdom you discover on each page. To help that happen, you may wish to say a brief prayer to the Holy Spirit each time before beginning to read.

Whether sitting on a plane on the way to vacation, relaxing on the beach, or even commuting to work by train/bus/subway, we can use these moments for spiritual growth. Delve into some of the wisdom God has given to others for our benefit! I have divided my recommendations into several categories to help you discern what might be the “right book” for you.

Books to rev the spiritual engine

Time for God by Fr. Jacques Philippe

Think you have no time in your busy life to dedicate to prayer and spiritual reading? This little book is the one for you! Short and very practical, it helps show both how to find time to pray as well as how to deepen the richness of your prayer life. Be careful! This book may hook you on spiritual reading and lead you to order Fr. Philippe's other books such as Interior Freedom, Searching for and Maintaining Peace, and In the School of the Holy Spirit.

Resisting Happiness by Matthew Kelly

Mr. Kelly was a business consultant who has now dedicated his considerable insights into human nature to help others grow spiritually. In this book, he focuses on the universal quest for happiness, how God is the answer, and how we too often become our own worst enemies. He avoids deep philosophical language in favor of a common sense approach. You may also want to give his Rediscover Catholicism to any fallen away Catholic friends or relatives or use his The Four Signs of a Dynamic Catholic for a parish book study.

The Lamb's Supper by Scott Hahn

What do we all do as Catholics? We go to Mass! Dr. Hahn is perhaps the most prominent convert who has enriched the Church with his passion for the Bible. In this book, he uses the Scriptures and experience of the early Christians to lead us to a deeper understanding of the Mass. If you have ever heard the complaint "I just don't get anything out of Mass" then this is the antidote!

Making Choices by Peter Kreeft

Too often the Commandments seem like a bunch of burdensome rules not quite in touch with our enlightened age. In a down-to-earth manner, Dr. Kreeft walks us through the sometimes daunting arena of moral theology. He illuminates the process of particular decision-making based upon greater clarity of the underlying, simple principles given to us by God. Even knowable by the pagan Greek philosophers through natural reason, the Church doesn't hand on arbitrary rules—so start to understand the "why" behind the "what" of the Church's teachings! Dr. Kreeft has honed his skills through decades of teaching undergraduates at Boston College and authored dozens of other books which are similarly practical. His recent I Burned for Your Peace is a wonderfully accessible commentary on the riches of St. Augustine's autobiographical Confessions.

Books with universal relevance

Mere Christianity by C.S. Lewis

Are you a Narnia fan? I have to admit that I love Lewis' non-fiction even more than his fiction! He was one of the greatest apologists for Christ in the twentieth century. This book is his short, simple masterpiece to explain the Christian faith. He treats rich spiritual mysteries in a way that both believer and non-believer alike can appreciate. Amazingly, he does so without watering down deep subjects or losing us in the theological conundrums.

Introduction to the Devout Life by St. Francis de Sales

This book is one of the great spiritual “classics” that has come down through the centuries. Some people shy away from old books, but I promise this one is relevant even today. St. Francis anticipates the Second Vatican Council with his insistence that everyone is called to be holy and that holiness looks very different in various states of life. A soldier and a monk are both called to be saints but the way they live out their lives will look very different. The same goes for a nun and a housewife. He has practical insights for everyone. (If this whets your appetite for classics, you may want to check out the more austere challenge of The Imitation of Christ by Thomas à Kempis. It used to be second only to the Bible in its popularity but is not for the faint of heart. Organized into bite-sized meditations, many saints took the five minutes to read a chapter a day to help them examine their consciences.)

I Believe in Love: A personal retreat based on the teaching of St. Therese of Lisieux by Fr. Jean d’Elbee

The “Little Flower” can sometimes seem sickeningly sweet. Just to look at some images of her can make my teeth hurt as cavities begin to form! Her writings can also seem inaccessible at first because of the jarring difference between our age and her 19th century French cloister. That said, there is a reason that Pope John Paul II declared her to be a Doctor of the Church. She has a message of trusting in God’s Love that is very relevant for today. Fr. d’Elbee has done a wonderful job of collating her thoughts into ten chapters relating her wisdom in a thematic manner. How much do I like this book? I buy copies of it by the dozen and hand them out—stop by my parish office in Minneapolis and I will save you a trip to the bookstore!

A Call to Mercy: Hearts to Love, Hands to Serve edited by Fr. Brian Kolodiejchuk

Mother Teresa is the epitome of Christian love in action. In this book, the postulator of her cause for canonization has gathered her simple thoughts, accompanied by spiritual reflections and firsthand testimonies, to present the traditional corporal and spiritual works of mercy. As members of the Order of Malta, we are dedicated to the works of mercy so this book can provide us great inspiration for our own service. For more about Mother Teresa’s spiritual life, check out Fr. Brian’s books Where There is Love, There is God and Come be My Light. For more heartwarming stories about Mother Teresa, read Fr. Leo Maasburg’s Mother Teresa of Calcutta: A personal portrait. And don’t neglect the early work that prompted a profound conversion in the heart of its sceptic author: Something Beautiful for God by Malcolm Muggeridge.

Heaven in Our Hands: receiving the blessings we long for by Fr. Benedict Groeschel

The Beatitudes are at the heart of the Christian message. Radically different from the worldly perspective, the Sermon on the Mount is where Jesus outlines a new way of looking at life. The eight points of the Maltese Cross stand for the eight beatitudes—so this is especially important for us in our Order’s spirituality! This book helps us to understand and internalize these challenging teachings. Other books by the holy friar include Spiritual Passages: The psychology of spiritual development and Arise from Darkness: What to do when life doesn’t make sense.

How to Love your Wife by John Buri

This book isn’t overtly religious but it is guaranteed to help you see your marriage in a more Christ-like way. Ladies, I’m sorry that I haven’t found the equivalent for you! As Dr. Buri explains, part of the challenge in marriage is that wives usually invest more energy in the relationship than husbands do. Using the tools of modern psychology, this book helps husbands

examine their behavior and find the path to contributing to a richer marriage. Wives can find helpful insights in it as well. For those who are still looking for their marriage partner, I highly recommend Dr. Buri's Intentional Dating: When you're ready to leave behind the liars, losers, and lemons.

Hold on—books that go deeper!

Fire Within: St. Theresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross and the Gospel on Prayer by Fr. Thomas Dubay

Fr. Dubay's book on the giants of the Carmelite tradition has been hailed as a modern classic on prayer. It will introduce you to the richness of Christian meditation and contemplation. Sometimes Christians seek out New Age or Eastern spiritualities because they don't know the real depths of our own encounter with God. Not sure if you are quite ready to jump into the deep end? Fr. Dubay's Prayer Primer: Igniting the Fire Within and Deep Conversion, Deep Prayer are handy to read in a complementary fashion.

Christ the Life of the Soul by Abbot Columba Marmion

Blessed Columba was the greatest spiritual writer of the first half of the 20th century. Happily, his work is now being rediscovered. It is a Christocentric masterpiece of the spiritual life. His theology is Thomistic, his insights are scriptural, and his worldview is liturgical. His posthumously published Union with God is a collection of advice from his letters of spiritual direction and is less theological and more eminently practical. He was Mother Teresa's favorite author—is that a high enough recommendation?

The Spirit of the Liturgy by Cardinal Ratzinger (aka Pope Benedict XVI)

I have not found any other modern theologian who has as profound a grasp of the mystery of the Holy Eucharist and the liturgical life of the Church. Heaven and earth meet at the altar and you could ask for no better guide to what it all means! To keep delving deeper, you can also read his later apostolic exhortation Sacramentum Caritatis or Pope John Paul II's encyclical Ecclesia de Eucharistia.

Books about the Blessed Virgin Mary to help you go deeper

Hail, Holy Queen: The Mother of God in the Word of God by Scott Hahn

Here is Dr. Hahn again explaining Catholic belief through the Bible. Not only an exquisite defense of Marian doctrine against Protestant attacks, it is also a beautiful introduction to forming a close spiritual bond with Our Blessed Mother.

Walking with Mary: A Biblical journey from Nazareth to the Cross by Edward Sri

Dr. Sri provides a rich commentary on the Virgin Mary's appearances in Sacred Scripture. He brings out the spiritual lessons for own discipleship that we learn from Mary's example. There is no one better to lead us to Jesus than His first and perfect disciple: His own mother whom He gave to us from the Cross to be our spiritual mother!

A Woman Clothed with the Sun: Eight great apparitions of Our Lady edited by John Delaney
This book provides a short overview to each of the major Marian appearances. It includes Lourdes, Fatima, Guadalupe, Knock, and a few others approved by the Church which you might not have heard about!

Champions of the Rosary: The history and heroes of a spiritual weapon by Fr. Donald Calloway
This book provides a helpful overview to the history of the Rosary and the rich insights of theologians and saints through the centuries such as St. Louis de Montfort and St. “Padre” Pio among others.

33 Days to Morning Glory: A do-it-yourself retreat in preparation for Marian consecration by Fr. Michael Gaitley
When you are ready to move from reading to prayerful commitment, this is a day-by-day guide to preparing for consecration to Mary. Fr. Gaitley has provided a helpful sequel to the classic guide True Devotion by St. Louis de Montfort. Most people will find this book more easily intelligible and it includes the Marian teaching of modern figures such as St. John Paul II and St. Maximilian Kolbe.

Seeing the Spiritual Life in Action: Helpful biographies

Bernadette Speaks: A life of St. Bernadette Soubirous in her own words by Fr. Rene Laurentin
This book is for everyone who has made the Lourdes pilgrimage and wants to learn more about the little girl who saw the Blessed Virgin Mary. One of the best contemporary Marian theologians has taken the primary sources and made a comprehensive yet readable biography of this wonderful saint.

A Pathway under the Gaze of Mary by the Carmel of Coimbra
Even though the Order of Malta goes to Lourdes every year, we shouldn’t ignore Fatima in its centennial year! This is a biography of Sister Lucia, the only one of the shepherd children to live a long life. Her two companions were just canonized by Pope Francis and her own cause for canonization is underway. This book was written by the Carmelite sisters who lived with her so it is as authentic as they come. Note of warning: the message of Fatima is sobering! As with our earthly mothers, sometimes Our Lady is there to give us a big hug and comfort us. Other times, she has to lay down the law. Fatima is definitely the latter. If you need an incentive to get your spiritual life in order, this just might provide the “kick in the pants” to do so.

Brother Francis of Assisi by Fr. Ignacio Larranaga
Saint Francis is one of the most popular but easily misunderstood saints. This biography does him justice in a balanced and insightful way. G. K. Chesterton’s short St. Francis of Assisi also deserves mentioning—less of a biography and more of a color commentary by the witty English journalist. For purists, Fr. Augustine Thompson’s Francis of Assisi: A new biography strips away the pious legends and gives us a portrait using only accounts by those who knew him.

Witness to Hope: The biography of Pope John Paul II by George Weigel

If you drop this on the beach while reading it, there might be a tidal wave! You have to eat your Wheaties before picking it off the shelf as it weighs in at 1,000 pages. That said, it is not a dry read at all. The Holy Father personally asked Dr. Weigel to write this biography and he was given unprecedented access to materials in the Vatican and in Poland. It is the compelling story of a man who lived through all the great dramas of the 20th century. A lesser man would have given up but he relied on God and changed the world for the better. This is a powerful review of recent world history as the context for the making of a great pope and saint. Weigel's The End and the Beginning is a helpful sequel chronicling the end of Pope John Paul II's life and the transition to Pope Benedict XVI. And his Faith, Reason, and the War against Jihadism: A call to action is another pertinent analysis of contemporary events from the Catholic perspective.

Death comes for the Archbishop by Willa Cather

You need at least one work of fiction on your summer reading list even for spiritual reading! One of the greatest American authors of the 20th century has given us a fictionalized version of the hard missionary work in the desert Southwest. Her prose and storytelling are magnificent. That said, even more inspiring is the actual biography of the man on whom Cather based her story: Lamy of Santa Fe by Paul Horgan.

This essay was contributed by Father Joseph R. Johnson, A Magistral Chaplain from Minnesota.