

CATHOLIC SPIRITUAL READING

The importance of spiritual reading cannot be overstated. Along with prayer and the grace of the Sacraments, spiritual reading is what most and best nourishes the soul. A half, or even a quarter, of an hour a day of spiritual reading can feed the mind. As St Paul says, ‘whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things’ (Phil 4:8). And St Philip Neri (1515-1595) added that we should ‘always be reading books by authors whose names begin with the letter S, St Augustine, St Bernard, St Catherine, St Dominic, and so forth.’

But for many people the question is, Where to start? After all, there are many tens of thousands of books out there. The following list cannot cover everything, of course, but will include just a few suggestions broken down into different categories.

1. A FEW ALL-TIME CLASSICS (in chronological order of authors’ dates)

The Bible (see separate reading list for different editions)

Daily reading of the Scriptures is a must for anyone who is serious about spiritual growth.

St Augustine of Hippo (354-430)

One of the great Fathers and Doctors of the Church, his two most famous books are *Confessions*, which famously includes on its first page the words, ‘You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts shall not rest until they rest in Thee,’ and *The City of God*, a cornerstone of Western thought covering, amongst others, topics such as the suffering of the righteous, the existence of evil, the conflict between free will and divine omniscience, and the doctrine of original sin.

St Benedict (480-547)

One of the most famous books of Christian spirituality, *The Rule of St Benedict* also sets down many ordinary day-to-day practices for life in an abbey under the rule of an abbot. There are countless commentaries on the *Rule*, and it paved the way for many thousands of books on Benedictine spirituality.

St Francis of Assisi (1181/2-1226)

The Little Flowers of St Francis of Assisi The title might sound a little quaint in the 21st century but in this beautiful work are contained, as a line on the opening page explains, ‘miracles and pious examples of the glorious

servant of Christ, St Francis, and of some of his holy companions, to the glory and praise of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Anonymous (13th century)

The Ancrene Riwle. Don't be put off by the Old English title: there are readily available translations into modern English. A monastic rule or manual originally written for three sisters who were about to enter the life of anchoresses. A beautiful treatise on the interior life.

Richard Rolle (c.1300/30-1349)

Rolle studied at Oxford but left without a degree to become a hermit because, he said, 'Now-a-days too many are consumed with a desire for Knowledge rather than for love, yet all their study should have been directed to this end, so that they might be consumed by the love of God.' His most well-known work is *The Fire of Love*, but several other works also survive.

Walter Hilton (c.1340/5-1396)

The Scale of Perfection was, like other works, originally addressed to an anchoress although later sections appear to be addressed to a wider audience.

Julian of Norwich (1343-after 1416)

Revelations of Divine Love. The most famous spiritual book from the 14th century. Julian of Norwich lived as an anchoress, and you can still visit her restored cell in Norwich today. Her book is the earliest surviving English language work by a woman.

St Catherine of Siena OP (1347-1380)

The Dialogue of Divine Providence. Dictated while St Catherine was in a spiritual ecstasy, the dialogue is between a soul who rises up to God and God Himself.

Margery Kempe (c1373-after 1438)

The Book of Margery Kempe. Kempe was from King's Lynn and is known to have visited Julian of Norwich for advice and spiritual direction. Her book is in part an autobiography, in part a journal of pilgrimages, and in part an account of her mystical conversations with God.

Thomas à Kempis (1380-1471)

The Imitation of Christ is one of the most famous of all devotional books. It draws the reader into an interior imitation of Christ by focusing on a spiritual withdrawal from the world.

Anonymous (14th century)

The Cloud of Unknowing is one of the most well known pieces of spiritual writing to come out of the 14th century. Written by an anonymous English mystic, it is a book of contemplation in which the soul is drawn into union with God.

Anonymous (14th century)

The Book of the Poor in Spirit is another anonymously written book from the 14th century. The author is described simply as A Friend of God. Divided into four sections – On the Nature of Spiritual Poverty, God's Work and Man's Co-operation, How a Man Shall Attain to a Perfect Life, and How to Live a Contemplative Life – this small book seems to contain all that anyone would want to read on the spiritual life.

Anonymous (14th – 17th centuries)

Ancient Devotions to the Sacred Heart of Jesus were written by unknown Carthusian monks of the 14th to 17th centuries, and long before our modern devotion which was rekindled by St Margaret Mary Alacoque and St Claude de la Colombière in the seventeenth century.

St Ignatius Loyola SJ (1491-1556)

The Spiritual Exercises, available in many different translations. Sound reading, but most fruitful if used as part of a proper and organized retreat run by a Jesuit.

Ludovicus Blosius OSB (1506-1566)

Sometimes known as François-Louis de Blois, was the abbot of Liessies. His book, *A Book of Spiritual Instruction* rivalled à Kempis' *Imitation of Christ* in popularity for a time.

St Theresa of Ávila OCD (1515-1582)

The two most significant works are *The Interior Castle* and *The Way of Perfection*, but she also wrote a famous autobiography and some lesser known poems.

Lorenzo Scupoli CR (1530-1610)

The Spiritual Combat. St Francis de Sales carried this little book, by a Theatine priest, with him for eighteen years! Looks at the spiritual life as a battle.

St John of the Cross O.Carm (1542-1591)

Along with his *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, St John's writings most famously include his poems, particularly the *Spiritual Canticle* and the *Dark Night of the Soul*.

St Robert Bellarmine SJ (1542-1621)

The Art of Dying Well. St Robert helps us to see death through the same lens through which God's sees it. So, instead of running away from death, we can learn how to live this life well and thus experience a form of spiritual liberation.

St Robert Southwell SJ (c.1561-1595)

An Epistle of Comfort. Another local, born and raised in Norfolk, his *Epistle* was written to Philip Howard, the Earl of Arundel, as a work of consolation for those who were enduring persecution for the Faith during the Reformation. St Robert is one of the few martyrs on our list, as is St Philip Howard.

St Francis de Sales (1567-1622)

One time member of the Oratory of St Philip Neri, and Bishop of Geneva, St Francis is a Doctor of the Church. Most famous for his *Introduction to the Devout Life* and his *Treatise on the Love of God*, his writings are aimed specifically at lay people and at helping ordinary people grow in sanctity. A good starting place may be the little book edited by Jean Pierre Camus called, *The Spirit of St François de Sales*.

Dom Augustine Baker OSB (1575-1641)

Holy Wisdom or Directions for the Prayer of Contemplation was originally published in 1671 under the title *Sancta Sophia* by Fr Serenus Cressy after Baker had died. Dom Austin, as the author is sometimes known, was a convert to Catholicism during the tumultuous Reformation period before becoming a Benedictine monk.

St Claude de la Colombière SJ (1641-1682)

Trustful Surrender to Divine Providence comes from the same school of thought as Jean-Pierre de Caussade's book (see below), and in fact was written before it.

Jean-Pierre de Caussade SJ (1675-1751)

Abandonment to Divine Providence. A spiritual study of how all things work towards the good because God's providence is continually working to ensure that everything and everyone is ordered towards the end for which it or he was originally created. We must, therefore, rest in God's grace. This is not an argument in favour of passivism or Quietism (the idea that we do not need to do anything because God will sort it out). On the contrary, we must be active in our surrender to God's will just as the Blessed Virgin's *fiat* ('Let it be done unto me according to Thy will') was an active surrender to God's will. Mary was docile (allowing herself to be easily taught and led) not passive.

St Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort (1673-1716)

Most notable for his writings on the Blessed Virgin Mary, especially his *Secret of the Rosary* and his *True Devotion to Mary*.

St Alphonsus Liguori CSsR (1696-1787)

The Way of St Alphonsus Liguori is a collection of his writings including his Meditations on the Incarnation, Meditations on the Blessed Sacrament, Novena to the Holy Spirit, The Glories of Mary, On the Love of God and the Means to Acquire It, and so on. He is considered the Father of modern moral theology and is a Doctor of the Church.

John Nicholas Grou, SJ (1731-1803)

The book, *How to Pray*, is made up from the chapters on prayer from Grou's longer work, *School of Jesus Christ*. An excellent series of meditations on what pray is, and on how to pray. See also Grou's *Manual for Interior Souls*.

Jean Baptiste Chautard OCSO (1858-1935)

The Soul of the Apostolate. Written by a Trappist monk, this little book shows how activism won't accomplish much on its own. If we wish to work for God and His Kingdom we must first establish a healthy and strong interior spiritual life.

St John Henry Newman Cong. Orat. (1801-1890)

St John Henry's *Meditations and Devotions* are a good place to start, but almost everything he wrote would be good spiritual reading. Try his *Apologia pro Vita Sua*, a sort of spiritual autobiography which traces his religious thoughts and beliefs or his *Parochial and Plain Sermons*. Or, as another possible starting point, try *The Heart of Newman*, a series of excerpts from his writings put together and edited by Erich Przywara SJ.

Dom François de Sales Pollien O.Cist. (1853-1936)

The Interior Life. Originally published as having been written anonymously, *The Interior Life* was in fact the work of Dom François de Sales Pollien, a Carthusian monk of La Grande Chartreuse. The book, edited by Fr Joseph Tissot and first published in 1894, soon became a classic and contributed significantly to the renewal of ascetical and mystical doctrine in the first quarter of the 20th century drawing heavily, as it does, on the writings and spirituality of St Francis de Sales.

St Therese of Lisieux OCD (1873-1897)

The Story of a Soul. This little book needs no further comment!

2. CISTERCIAN FATHERS

Unlike Benedictine monastic literature, which tends to be published by a wide variety of publishers, the writings of the Cistercian Fathers, and commentaries on Cistercian spirituality and history, have, since 1968, been increasingly gathered together by **Cistercian Publications** which comes out of the Liturgical Press in Collegeville, Minnesota, USA.

There are three series of titles: **Cistercian Fathers (CF)**, which contains works by the early Cistercians such as St Bernard of Clairvaux and St Gertrude the Great; **Cistercian Studies (CS)**, which contains translations of other writers such as the Desert Fathers, St Gregory the Great, Hildegard of Bingen, and so forth, as well as scholarly studies; and **Monastic Wisdom (MW)**, which contains works exploring the spiritual life, and includes works on more recent figures such as Thomas Merton.

I. CISTERCIAN FATHERS (CF)

William of Saint-Thierry (c.1075/80-1148)

A friend of St Bernard, William's works include *The Golden Epistle*, *The Nature and Dignity of Love*, and *The Mirror of Faith*. The CF series also includes a single volume containing the three works, *On Contemplating God, Prayer, and Meditations*.

Guerric of Igny (1070/80-1157)

Abbot of the monastery in Igny in France (founded in 1128, dissolved in the French Revolution, re-established some years later, destroyed in 1918, reopened about ten years later, and recently – 2008-12 – modernised, and is still thriving), Guerric's main works are sermons for the liturgical year.

St Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153)

A Doctor of the Church (the 'Mellifluous Doctor'), St Bernard is considered the last of the Fathers of the Church. A prolific writer, his most famous works include his *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, his *Sermons on the Liturgical Year*, and his *Sermons on Different Topics*. His other works include *The Steps of Humility and Pride*, *On Grace and Free Choice*, *Homilies in Praise of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, and *On Loving God*.

Isaac of Stella (c.1100 – c.1169)

Born in England, he became abbot of the monastery in Stella near Poitiers in France, Isaac also published a series of liturgical sermons.

St Amadeus of Lausanne (c.1110-c.1150)

Married, he entered the Cistercian order after his wife died. He later became bishop of Lausanne in Switzerland. His *Homilies in Praise of the Blessed Mary* are beautiful.

St Aelred of Rievaulx (1110/12-1167)

Abbot of Rievaulx in Yorkshire, St Aelred's works include, most famously, his *Spiritual Friendship* as well as numerous sermons for the liturgical year.

Baldwin of Forde (1125-1190)

Abbot of Forde in Dorset before becoming Archbishop of Canterbury, Baldwin's *The Commendation of Faith* looks at faith in the light of reason.

E. Rozanne Elder (editor)

Mary Most Holy presents thoughts and brief meditations on the Blessed Virgin Mary from a selection of the early Cistercians gathered according to various episodes in the life of the Blessed Virgin.

II. CISTERCIAN STUDIES (CS)

Pope St Gregory the Great (540-604)

Forty of his Gospel Homilies are published in a single volume as part of the CS series. With each sermon just nine or ten pages in length, and preceded by the Gospel passage to which it refers, they make for easy spiritual reading.

Bede the Venerable (c.673-735)

The CS series publish two volumes of Bede's sermons on the Gospels.

Guigo I (1083-1136)

The 5th prior of the Grande Chartreuse, his meditations – mostly in pithy sentences or short paragraphs – are also published in the Cistercian Studies series.

Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179)

A polymath (writer, composer, philosopher, mystic, visionary, and a medical writer and practitioner) Hildegard was also abbess of Bingen not far from modern-day Frankfurt. As abbess, she wrote sermons on a number of Gospel passages.

Guigo II (d. 1188 or 1193)

The 9th prior of the Grande Chartreuse, his best known work is the *Ladder of Monks*, a consideration of reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation which, together, make up the rungs of the ladder which lifts the monk from earth to heaven.

Ludolph of Saxony (1295-1378)

Ludolph's *Vita Christi*, 'The Life of Christ,' is published in this series in four volumes, but is rather pricey. It is the most comprehensive series of meditations on the life of Christ from the 14th century, an age not short of such meditations.

The CS series also includes writings by a number of 20th and 21st century writers.

Pathway of Peace: Cistercian Wisdom According to St Bernard

By Charles Dumont OCSO. Includes chapters with titles such as, 'God and His Spiritual Creature Seeking One Another,' 'Christ, the Sacrament of Encounter. The Mediation of the Incarnate Word,' and 'Wisdom of the Heart on the Pathway of Peace.'

Turning Into Grace: The Quest for God.

By André Louf, retired abbot of the Cistercian monastery of Mont-des-Cats in France. Chapters on 'Continuing on One's Conversion,' 'Our Idols and God,' 'Growing by Being Tested,' and 'Growing in Grace through Prayer.'

The Hermitage Within

By an anonymous monk. Not everyone can, or should, live as a hermit, yet all Christians need to develop an interior hermitage, a place apart where we can encounter the living God, and listen to His still small voice.

Praying the Word

By Enzo Bianchi. An introduction to Lectio Divina, the Benedictine form of meditating on the Scriptures.

No Moment Too Small

By Norvene Vest, a book for those outside the cloister who wish to follow the basic elements of The Rule of St Benedict through regular prayer, meditation, and regular attention to work within the silence that enables us to listen.

The Spiritual Meadow

'I have plucked the finest flowers of the unmown meadow and worked them into a row which I now offer to you', wrote John Moschos as he

began his tales of the holy men of seventh-century Palestine and Egypt. This translation offers readers contemporary insights into the spirituality of the desert.

Lectio Divina: The Medieval Experience of Reading

By Duncan Robertson. During the Middle Ages the act of reading was experienced intensively in the monastic exercise of *lectio divina*--the prayerful scrutiny of passages of Scripture, savoured in meditation, memorized, recited, and rediscovered in the reader's own religious life. The rich literary tradition that arose from this culture includes theoretical writings from the *Conferences* of John Cassian (5th century) through the 12th century treatises of Hugh of St. Victor and the Carthusian Guigo II. It also includes compilations, literary meditations, and scriptural commentary, notably on the Song of Songs.

III. MONASTIC WISDOM (MW)

Inside the Psalms: Reflections for Novices

By Maureen McCabe OCSO. Looks at nineteen individual psalms as well as a number of themes taken from groups of psalms.

In the School of Contemplation

By André Louf. Spiritual conferences delivered by the one-time abbot of Mons-des-Cats to members of his community.

Truly Seeking God

By Bernard Bonowitz, OCSO. Recounts the ways in which the monk actively seeks God in all the practices and places of the monastic life--in silence and liturgical prayer, work and leisure, solitude and community, spiritual direction and fraternal friendship, the encounter with nature and the encounter with the unsuspected recesses of his or her own heart.

The Way of Simplicity

By Esther de Waal. An exploration of the Cistercian tradition and its relevance today, drawing on the writings of, amongst others, St Bernard of Clairvaux, St Aelred of Rievaulx, Thomas Merton, and many contemporary Cistercians.

3. CARMELITE SPIRITUALITY

The **Institute of Carmelite Studies (ICS)** does for Carmelite spirituality what Cistercian Publications does for Benedictine and Cistercian spirituality.

List forthcoming.

4. 20TH CENTURY AND CONTEMPORARY SPIRITUAL WRITINGS

List forthcoming.