

16. Spiritual Reading

Reflective spiritual reading is an important aid to prayer. It helps to nourish our imagination and our mind, and so it helps to stimulate love. This in turn leads to a desire to penetrate more deeply into the mysteries of God. The Bible, and especially the New Testament, has a special place here. We come to know God by coming to know God's Son, Jesus. There is, however, an abundance of other writing that can also be a source of nourishment to our souls.

It is important to remember that spiritual reading is not a substitute for prayer. If we intend to take the reading into the times which we have set aside for prayer, we had best follow the advice offered by Father Marie-Eugène OCD in his book *I want to see God*:

The book to be chosen for reflective reading is not the book that is simply instructive or devotional, nor even the interesting book that holds one's attention, but the book that suggests and provokes reflection, arouses the affections, or better still that awakens the soul and keeps it in the presence of God. Simply reading is not reflective reading. It must be interrupted for deeper reflections in the presence of God, to express to God our love, to enter into conversation with God. It will be short or prolonged according to need and will be resumed only when one falls again into dreaminess or inertia (page 193).

A special kind of spiritual reading is often described by the traditional Latin formula *lectio divina*. What makes this kind of reading special is its long history in monastic tradition and our approach to it. We often read with our critical faculties on full alert, testing whether or not we agree with what we are reading and how it fits in with orthodox teaching or with other ideas with which we are familiar. In *lectio divina* we need our critical faculties to be involved, for we need to interpret and understand what we are reading. However, unlike other forms of spiritual reading, we choose a text that is of such standing that we can read it humbly, confidently and peacefully expecting to be nourished and wanting to learn as a disciple seeks to learn from a master. The Bible stands out in this category but there are other classical texts that we can use as well.

Another feature of *lectio divina* is that we do not pick and choose sections that might attract us or be of special interest to us. Rather, we commit ourselves to read the whole text for as long as it takes. Furthermore, our way of reading follows a well established method. We read until our heart is engaged and then we pause to meditate on whatever it is that has moved our heart and to allow ourselves to be taken by God into prayer-communion.

Spiritual reading has an especially important role to play in a culture that is bombarded with often trivial and inconsequential information. This bombardment harms the mind much as junk food harms the body. Spiritual writers recommend a regular diet of good reading as an antidote to distraction and so that we may bring to prayer an enriched mind and heart.

Some people find it useful to keep a journal of their responses to their reading. The time spent doing this can help deepen and clarify the movements of the Holy Spirit that were experienced during the reading. Furthermore, a perusal the following morning of what we have written can help induce in us a prayerful, reflective attitude with which to begin the

day. If we read yesterday's journal before beginning today's spiritual reading we might decide to repeat yesterday's reading rather than go on to the next section. Spiritual reading is to help nurture our communion with God. It is not primarily a matter of accumulating further information.