

Saturday after Sexagesima: Spiritual Reading

Summary of the Morrow's Meditation

We will meditate tomorrow upon spiritual reading, and we shall see: first, what is the excellence of it; second, how we must perform it. We will then make the resolution: first, to be exact in reading every day some spiritual book, and in order that we may do so, to fix the precise time in our rule of life; second, to derive from this reading, as we do in meditation, practical resolutions suited to render us better. Our spiritual nosegay shall be the words which history recounts of St Ephrem: "*He reproduced in his actions the pages he had read*" (Ennodius, *in Vita S. Ephrem*).

Meditation for the Morning

Let us adore the providence of God, who by means of spiritual books makes us enjoy the conversations of the saints, their counsels, and their experience, and thus gives us a share in the lights and the good sentiments with which the Holy Spirit favoured them during their lives. Let us thank His goodness for the great advantages which this kind of reading offers us.

THE EXCELLENCE OF SPIRITUAL READING

All the saints have esteemed this practice as one of the most important in regard to the spiritual life. St Paul exhorts Timothy to it. "*Till I come, attend unto reading, to exhortation, and to doctrine*" (I Tim. IV:13), he writes to him. St Jerome recommends the same practice to Nepotian. "*Every day*" he says, "*be faithful to the reading of some good book.*" In order to understand the importance of this advice, let us represent to ourselves a great monarch, who, wishing to introduce to his court one of his subjects who is a stranger to the customs of this new abode, deposes to instruct him some of his principal officers. With what zeal ought not the favoured subject to listen to the advice of the envoys of the prince! Now, spiritual books are precisely these envoys whom God sends us to correct in us what is incompatible with the life of heaven, and to render us worthy to take our place among the angels and saints. The reading of their writings makes these men of God, so worthy of all our respect, live again, in order to instruct us. We need not envy the happiness of their contemporaries; they speak to us by their writings as though they lived with us, and by a happy charm, by a divine enchantment, we enjoy them and their precious intercourse, with this difference: that in some ways we gain more by reading their writings than by listening to their discourses. Because, first, sermons are forgotten and cannot be recalled to memory, whilst, on the other hand, we can always have recourse to the books which contain what we have read; second, preaching passes away like a flash of lightning, and it is difficult to meditate upon it; but books remain before our eyes as long as we like, and we have leisure to meditate upon them in all their parts, to incorporate them, and to change them into our own proper substance; third, in listening to preaching, we only pass quickly before the sacred fire, and we have hardly time to warm ourselves at it; when reading, we remain as long as we like before the divine fire, we can be penetrated and heated by it as long as we like; fourth, when listening to sermons we often apply to others what we hear, without thinking of applying it to ourselves; when we are reading, on the contrary,

alone with our book, we apply holy truths much better to ourselves; fifth, a book descends into practical details which are not always in keeping with the more elevated style of a sermon. Hence it is that spiritual reading has changed so many sinners into saints. Witness the two courtiers of the Emperor Theodosius, who were converted by reading the life of St Anthony; and St Ignatius, who was converted by reading the Lives of the Saints. Witness, lastly, the experience of every day: a good reading well performed raises up the discouraged soul, consoles the desolate soul, encourages the languishing soul, fortifies the weak, makes the frivolous recollected, heats the cold and tepid, perfects the just, to such a degree that whoever is faithful to his daily reading sustains himself and advances in piety, and whoever is negligent in it goes back. Is it thus that we esteem spiritual reading? Are we faithful to it every day? Have we a time set apart for this exercise?

THE MANNER OF READING PROPERLY SPIRITUAL BOOKS

In order that this kind of reading should produce all its fruit in the soul, the book must, first, be well chosen. It ought not to be a scientific book, nor a book difficult to understand, nor an amusing and curious book, because that would distract the mind, and would dry up the heart. It ought to be a pious book, exact and solid in doctrine, suited to show us, as in a mirror, our duties and our failings. Such are: Rodriguez' *Christian Perfection*, *The Imitation of Jesus Christ*, *The Spiritual Combat*; the various works of Father de Grenade; St Francis de Sales' *Introduction to a Devout Life*, his *Spiritual Colloquies*, his *True and Solid Piety*; Lombez' *Interior Peace*. Such are also the Lives of the Saints, of St Vincent de Paul, of St Francis de Sales, of St Ignatius, of St Francis Xavier, of St Aloysius. Are these our books for spiritual reading? Second, the book being thus chosen, we must not read it either from curiosity, for that would be to fail in the object we have in view in reading it, and would close our heart to the operations of grace; nor for the sake of the beauties of its style, for that would be to imitate the fool who eats the leaves of the tree and leaves its fruit. We must read with the object and with the great desire to become better, to love and serve God better, and better to fulfil all our duties. Is this the object of our reading? Third, the intention being thus laid down, we must, before beginning to read, recollect ourselves before God in order to dispose ourselves to listen to His voice, and we must pray to Him to speak to our heart (I Sam. 1:9-10). Then we read quietly, appreciating and weighing what we read; pausing at passages where we are touched and as long as we are touched; applying what we read to ourselves, and deducting from it resolutions to reform such and such a particular defect in our life, according to what we read. By reading thus, we read little, but we read well, because we reflect much. Is it thus that we perform our spiritual readings?

Resolutions and spiritual nosegay as above.