

THE THIRD ORDER

Of the Society of St. Pius X



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Dear Postulants and Professed members,

Having now completed this year's series of 3rd Order Recollections for the major parishes, finishing recently with Oxley, I was very impressed with the effort made by both members and non-members to attend. These Recollections are obviously not designed to achieve anything close to what a week's Recollection can do, but are rather more of an opportunity for some real flesh-and-blood interaction between the chaplain and the members. May God reward you all for the sacrifice you made of your Saturday to attend.

The 3rd Order Rule does not explicitly demand that you as members do regular spiritual reading, going no further than mentioning "Recommended reading", which are "the acts of St Pius X, the Catechism of the Council of Trent, the New Testament, the Imitation of Christ, the lives of the saints".

It should be noted with regard to the above quote, that there is a big difference between reading something like an encyclical of St Pius X (especially something very doctrinal and like *Pascendi*), and the Imitation of Christ. The former is mostly directed to our intellectual development, while the latter primarily aims at our spiritual nourishment. It is a bit like the difference between achieving physical maturity in contrast to physical nourishment. Reading *Pascendi* is the solid bread to reach spiritual adulthood, while the *Imitation* provides us with the daily delicacies which keep up our appetite for food and give us something to look forward to. The former is necessary for the latter, like the foundation of a house comes before the furnishings, and there is a big difference between the two.

Reading which is mostly directed towards the **mind**, like *Pascendi* or the Catechism, does not usually lead to reflection upon one's own life and behaviour as much as something like the *Imitation* would, which is mostly directed towards our **will** and affections. It is unlikely that a perusing of *Pascendi* will warm your will to a love of God and heavenly things, whereas the *Imitation* or *Introduction to the Devout Life* do have this result, or are at least intended to.

In a world already too focused on the training of the mind to the neglect (if not total exclusion) of the will, we must beware that we do not become spiritual deformities having big heads and little hearts. It is much easier and more flattering to fill the head with much knowledge than to have that knowledge put into practise by a firm and selfless will. Let us remember that the **intellectual** virtues (wisdom, understanding, art and knowledge) *don't* necessarily make a person good, whereas the **moral** virtues (prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance) *always* do so by their very nature. A just man is always a good man, but this is not necessarily the case for a brilliant scientist or musician.

How important is *spiritual* reading (rather than study, or mere reading for curiosity), reading which is meant to nourish our hearts and wills more than our mind? Let us go to one of the masters of the spiritual life, as well as a great Saint, St Alphonsus Ligouri.

In his work *The True Spouse of Jesus Christ*, the first words of the chapter on spiritual reading are "To a spiritual life the reading of holy books is perhaps *not less useful than mental prayer*". This already shows clearly in what high regard this great Saint holds this practise. Considering that prayer is *the* way to sanctification, to esteem spiritual reading as no less necessary for the spiritual life may be a revelation to many.

He quotes St Bernard that this reading is the "arms" by which we conquer hell and gain paradise, and while *military* arms are meant, we could also see spiritual reading as 1 bodily arm, and mental prayer as the other, both of which are necessary to embrace the spiritual life. In fact, St Benedict was so aware of its importance, that he had monks go about the cells to *ensure* it was being done daily, with penances imposed for failure to do so properly.

St Alphonsus lists some of the great advantages to be gained by pious reading, recounting **firstly** that it fills the mind with "holy thoughts and good desires", just as bad reading fills it with "worldly and poisonous sentiments". Just as a mill only produces good flour in proportion to the quality of the corn that goes in, so our meditations,

Communions and other duties will only be done devoutly if prepared by spiritual reading. "Reading puts into the mouth the food that is afterwards masticated by meditation" says St Bernard. For those of you who struggle to meditate, try to see spiritual reading as the fuel which supplies your meditations, and don't hesitate to have your spiritual reading on hand during the meditation for words to feed your ideas and aspirations.

Secondly, it is a great help to ward off temptations, both before and after they afflict us. It will be more difficult for evil thoughts to enter if our mind is full of good thoughts, because there will simply be no room for them, and they will be repelled by what is contrary to them like oil and water. If the temptation has already entered, St Jerome says the presence nearby of a spiritual book is like a shield to defend us against evil thoughts.

Thirdly, it acts as a kind of spiritual mirror for the soul, revealing to us its stains as does a physical mirror for the body. Good spiritual books are written in a very personal and intimate way, making us immediately aware of our spiritual state and affections and how they differ from those of Our Lord and the Saints.

Fourthly, it is a channel whereby God can communicate many lights and divine calls. When we pray, it is us who speak to God, but when we read, it is God Himself Who does the talking. "We *address* Him when we pray: we *hear* Him when we read" says St Ambrose. Many great Saints changed their lives because of inspirations given to them via pious reading. The example of St Ignatius of Loyola is well known, who was divinely moved to strive for heavenly instead of military glory by reading the stories of the Saints in "The Golden Legend".

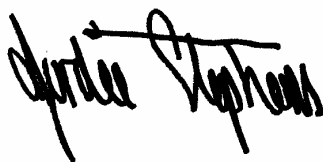
Try to settle on an author whose style suits your particular temperament and disposition, and don't force yourself to read an author who goes against your spiritual grain just because someone recommended it to you, or because you like the cover. No one else can choose your spiritual reading for you, just as no one else can decide arbitrarily what particular foods you should enjoy and which of them agree with your digestion.

Spiritual reading as opposed to intellectual study can be likened to condiments and the food we put them with. Most people eat and agree on the goodness of the basic food groups like meat, potatoes and fish, but they certainly *don't* agree on the innumerable sauces and spreads with which to garnish them. In a similar way, we *all* must feed on the principal truths such as the Catechism and the great Encyclicals, but we will all have a very different way of adding relish and flavour to them in the choosing of authors to incite our affections to holiness.

Lastly, St Alphonsus gives some advice on how to get the most out of this reading. After encouraging us firstly to begin by recommending ourselves to God to enlighten our mind while we read ("Speak Lord, for they servant heareth", I Kings 3:9), he then stresses that if we read merely to indulge our curiosity, "All the time devoted to such reading is *lost time*". Moreover, even more important is that our spiritual reading is done *slowly and with attention*, just as we only properly assimilate and receive nutrition from food that is properly masticated, rather than simply devoured in a few moments. But probably most important of all, when we read something that particularly moves us, we should stop and ponder over it, and even read it again. These little incitements to fervour should also be incitements to prayer, which is why we should often interrupt our spiritual reading with short prayers to God, and even prolonging them as long as the particular divine light or fervour lasts. But, someone may object, what if the whole time turns into a prayer, without getting past a few lines? Let us allow Saint Alphonsus to reply: "This we should do (ie. stop, ponder & pray), even though all the time prescribed for the reading should be spent in such acts; for thus the time is spent with *greater* spiritual profit. Sometimes it may happen that you draw more fruit from reading a single verse than from reading an entire page".

May your regular spiritual and pious reading become the happiest part of your day, providing both the savour and nourishment for the joyful and prompt performance of all your duties, as well as the ignition and hothouse for all your fervent daily prayers.

In the Sacred Heart, through the Immaculate heart of Mary,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jordie Stephens". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a horizontal line striking through the middle of the name.

Fr Jordie Stephens
Spiritual Director of the Third Order of SSPX for Australia

PS. The photos taken at the 4 Days of Recollection are posted on the website.