



Do You Read?



Do you read? Reading involves you intimately with the word, and the word is the definitive means of communication between man and man, and between God and man. Remember, the Son of God Himself is called the Word in the holy Scriptures. The Scriptures themselves form a record of God's revelation to mankind, written in the form of a book. For millennia words have been the measure of culture. Man has elevated himself above the mundane activities of the world, which he shares with other creatures, by speaking, telling stories, listening, writing and finally reading.

Literacy has always been regarded as the distinguishing characteristic of an educated person. The well-educated man is the well-read man. Our troubled age, in which the pace of change greatly exceeds the need for change or the capacity of men to adjust to change, is witnessing an assault on the culture of the word. The mass media of television and film surround us. Though they employ words, they make a greater impact through non-verbal audio-visual images, which require less thought to be assimilated, which make fewer demands on our minds and provide stronger stimulation. Surveys indicate that fewer people are reading. Those who are not spending their free time in front of that chief icon of contemporary culture, the television, may be engaged in leisure activities (is that a contradiction in terms?) such as sports, travel or games, which are even less dependent on words and provide more direct forms of stimulation. While we are not obliged to reject television or sports outright, as Christians we must cherish, protect, preserve and nurture the culture of the word, which is something God-given. We must recognize danger in order to deal with it. If we spend all our free time watching television or engaged in other forms of activity whose primary goal is entertainment, there will be little or no time left to read and reflect. If we allow our children to grow up in a way determined by social trends, we risk producing a generation which is so used to strong forms of stimulation that it will not exercise its ability to read.



What do you read? Of people who actually read at all, many confine themselves to the lowest form of reading matter. Book stores are full of popular fiction written to cater to the taste of television watchers. Newspapers, which demand our time and attention, are filled with filth, scandal and banalities, in addition to whatever valuable information they may provide. They often devote more space to coverage of entertainment and sports than they do to more serious matters. By the time we have waded through the foul swamp of the newspaper, we may have no time or energy left for reading history, poetry or literary classics, not to mention books which speak to us of God, which are the most sublime form of literature. Do you spend time in spiritual reading? I can think of nothing more helpful for spiritual life than the reading of religious books. Of course, the essential element in our spiritual lives is prayer. Spiritual reading is not a substitute for prayer. There is a difference between reading about God and talking to God, which is what prayer is. Reading an article about some delicious gourmet meal can whet the appetite for food, and a cookbook can tell you how to prepare food; neither will actually feed you, but they will supply an encouragement to eating. Similarly, the function of spiritual reading is to prepare us for prayer. Let's take a hypothetical situation. It's evening. Your day is winding down. You know you should say your evening



prayers, but you don't feel like praying. You pick up a religious book or magazine and begin reading, almost casually. Soon you come across something striking, something inspiring. Maybe you read of God's sometimes miraculous ways of dealing with men, and are uplifted. Maybe you read about the life of someone pleasing to God, and learn a lesson for your own life. Maybe you read about the heroism of the saints and feel humbled because of your own sins and limitations. In any case, your mood has been changed. It's as if the air has been freshened and purified. You get up from your couch with the resolve to pray for a little while, no matter how tired you think you are. You go before the holy icons, which ever remind us of the presence of God, and confess your sinfulness, and ask God's help. You resolve to do some act of charity the next day, and to spend a little more time in studying the things of God. This scenario, one not at all unrealistic, illustrates how spiritual reading can benefit us.

What should you read? The answers to that question are as numerous as its subjects. Certainly, all Christians should be familiar with the Holy Scriptures. Have you actually read through the four Gospels? Are you acquainted with the Epistles? Have you ever sampled the Old Testament, which supplies the framework for the New? Perhaps you find the Bible difficult to understand, but that doesn't excuse you from reading it. To answer the question more practically, each person should read that which provides him with spiritual nurture. If you undertake the reading of a great work of some holy father, but cannot understand it and derive no profit from it, you should read something else. The lives of the saints are often recommended as the best spiritual reading for beginners (that includes most of us). Here again, not all lives of saints will appeal equally to everyone. I find that the stories and sayings of the Desert Fathers are a mine of perennial wisdom, and that the biographies of more recent saints are more instructive than the stylized lives of some ancient saints. If you find that it takes too much effort and commitment to pick up a whole book, then try reading Orthodox magazines, of which there are many available in English, Russian, Greek and other languages. Their arrival in the mail on a more-or-less regular basis serves as a reminder to read, and by subscribing you support those who labor to produce worthwhile Orthodox periodicals. Keep the issues in a place where you can reach them, and dip into them frequently. You may be pleasantly surprised by how much you can benefit from reading them.

To derive spiritual profit from reading, you don't have to read only works which are specifically meant to be spiritually profitable. You can gain much wisdom and inspiration from novels, if you look in the right places, which are sometimes unknown or unexpected. For example, I first encountered the contemporary American writer Thornton Wilder in high school through his fantasy-drama, *The Skin of Our Teeth*, which did not impress me. Years later, a Russian friend of mine recommended that I read Wilder's novel, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, which she had read in a Russian translation. Reading it left an indelible impression on my mind, and I frequently recall it. Wilder is not regarded as a specifically religious writer, and his work does not contain passages of religious philosophy such as are found in Dostoevsky or Bernanos, but *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* is a profoundly spiritual story, one that I could best describe as a novel of divine providence and disinterested love. It begins with "Perhaps an Accident": "On Friday noon, July the twentieth, 1714, the finest bridge in all Peru broke and precipitated five travellers into the gulf below," and then investigates the lives of these five through the eyes of an inquiring Franciscan friar, till it finds "Perhaps an Intention," as an old abbess, reflecting upon the tragedy of the bridge, contemplates love the highest ideal in life. This is a novel, not a work of history or theology, not a defense of the Church. But for us worldly readers, who may sometimes find the Holy Fathers too rich for our taste, too sublime for our minds, such novels can serve as spiritual reading. Your soul is the highest and best part of you. The life of the spirit is what ennobles man, setting him apart from mere animals. Our bodies are condemned to death and decay, while our souls will live forever. Certainly your soul deserves at least as much attention as you



give to your body. Read!

Source: [Orthodox America](#)