

# Spiritual reading

From “Means of Grace, Hope of Glory”

Wednesday, July 22, 2020 at 9:37AM



Spiritual reading is a practice designed to nurture a reflective spirit, “an inner core of silence.”<sup>[i]</sup> It’s a slow, meditative reading of scripture or other writings. The practice is a method that can assist us in the primary cycle between inner renewal and external action. It may help us develop the capacity for a gentle oscillation between receptivity and action. In the one we are being transformed into the likeness of Christ. In the other we are actively cooperating with God’s grace in human life.

## What to read?

The oldest tradition is to read the Scriptures and Patristic writings. Some prefer to stay with that tradition. They may quietly read a passage and sit in silence for a bit. Others will use [Lectio Divina](#), a structured process of reading that takes you through a series of steps.

Others favor reading spiritual classics such as Julian of Norwich’s “Showings” or more recent guides for the spiritual life by Martin Thornton or Julia Gatta. At the moment I’m reading *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* by John Lewis.



In recent years I’ve used:

- *Concerning the Inner Life*, Evelyn Underhill
- Various pieces by Martin Luther King
- *The Memories of a Sister of S. Saviour’s Priory*
- *Seeking God* by Esther de Waal
- The art of Allan Crite

Others have read fiction, history, or the stories of the saints.

One of the decisions you need to make is whether to read broadly or in a more focused way? For those in the Anglican tradition it can be fruitful to read within your own tradition allowing yourself to be influenced by God speaking through writers such as Evelyn

Underhill, Julia Gatta, Desmond Tutu, Martin Thornton, Kenneth Leech, Frank Griswold, and Esther deWaal. Or you could decide to focus on a saint. For a time, I read Julian's writing and several books reflecting on her writing.

## How?

The practice is one of slow prayerful reading, a small amount each day, and a bit of silence after. It's best done at a time when we are alert, in a quiet and restful place, and when you have time enough so there is no sense of being hurried.

I've found that to maintain the discipline of reading small sections I need to use a book I've already read. It helps me to stay with the meditative approach and not drift into getting caught up in finishing a chapter because something sparked my interest. At times when I've been part of a parish that has a public daily office, with a third reading on the spiritual life, I'd rest in the corporate discipline of taking half a year to get through a book.

At the moment I'm using John Lewis' *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement*. I read it several years ago. A dozen or so markers indicate underlined paragraphs I found meaningful. I will read one of them each day for the next couple of weeks.

I know some people make use of the collections of readings that provide a segment for each day.

Some engage in spiritual reading every day; often before or after saying Morning or Evening Prayer. The tradition of monastic communities to have meals in silence while a brother or sister reads can be adapted to doing the reading at your coffee shop or, if you have a meal when you are alone, read a segment as you eat.

My own practice has been to do it for season. I've also used Lectio Divina as my preparation for the Sunday Eucharist. I'd arrive early enough to look at the readings for the day, select one, and move through the steps.

Father Roland Walls describes his way,

*The deep things that God has for us are for those who, like Mary, "keep these things and ponder them" in their hearts. I found I could feel silence with the slow reading of the Gospels. I found that the Gospels belong there, not primarily in my mind and thought, but in that waiting, aching death of my heart. Try the experiment. Take one of those unfilled 15 minutes, half an hour, fill the room, your heart, with expectancy and read slowly a page of any Gospel--Slowly, as if it was all addressed to you. Let each word sink into the depth of your heart. You will find, perhaps for the first time, that you have heard them where they were meant to be heard, in the silence and the void, the waste and void where God is waiting to enter, where the Spirit hovers over the waters of the well of loneliness.<sup>[ii]</sup>*

Remember spiritual reading is about nurturing a reflective spirit, "an inner core of silence. So, we must give ourselves to that purpose. For that time of reading we set aside other ways of reading, all useful in their place, but for now learning subject matter, critical analysis, and leisure--are on the shelf. Spiritual reading is us placing ourselves in the pathways of grace.



However you decide to do spiritual reading you will find it more sustainable if you attend to your temperament, gifts and circumstances. That's true for all forms of personal devotions.

## Resistance

*So even before we endeavor to find a space for solitary prayer, or decide how we will use this time apart, we can expect to encounter considerable resistance both within and outside of ourselves. Our culture is afraid of silence and bombards us with stimuli at every turn.* Julia Gatta

Mother Julia's point applies to spiritual reading. It helps to take note of that resistance, reflect on it, and manage ourselves in a gentle but persistent manner.

## The threefold rule of prayer

Spiritual reading is a form of personal devotions. In our tradition it is a companion along with our faithful participation in the Sunday Eucharist and saying the Daily Office. [The Prayer Book Pattern](#) of Eucharist, Daily Office and Personal Devotions is a commitment to the rhythm of corporate worship, spiritual reading and life in community.

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[i] Father Ken Leech, in a meditation during the Order of the Ascension retreat 1988.

[ii] Roland Walls, "From Loneliness to Solitude," [The Sisters of the Love of God Press](#). 2001