

# The Importance of Spiritual Reading

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Notes from a Lecture by Fr. Timothy Pavlatos

(MP3 file available at <http://orthodoxinfo.com/praxis/the-importance-of-spiritual-reading.aspx>)

Our father among the Saints, John Chrysostom says:

“When you immerse your mind and heart in spiritual books, you will always be filled, for spiritual reading gives you a foundation in God” (Third Homily on Lazarus).

Speaking about spiritual practices, St. Theophan the Recluse says, “one must read for this is an ascetical activity” (*The Path to Salvation*, p. 214).

*“Developing a Christian intellect takes place when all the truths of Faith are impressed so deeply into the mind that the intellect’s whole existence is made up of these truths alone. When the mind begins to reason over something, it reasons according to what it knows of the Christian faith, and would never make the slightest move without first consulting it. The Apostle Paul calls this keeping the image of a sound mind (II Tim. 1:7).*

Today, many spiritual readings are available to us. Over the past 25 -30 years hundreds of books from the Holy Fathers have been translated into English, as well as the biography’s, works, and writings of contemporary elders from Greece, Russia, Romania, Serbia, and many other countries.

“In order for our spiritual reading to “echo in our soul” we have to be diligent and prayerful, for understanding comes from the Holy Spirit” (Archimandrite Amilianos)

Elder Ephraim of Katounakia says, “The holy fathers knew very well what they meant by saying that the eyes of our soul can be opened. That is why we should read both the patristic texts and the Scriptures. Do you think that you don’t have time to do it? Try and read even for a few minutes every day. The purification and enlightenment you will gain by reading the Holy Scriptures will remain with you day and night” (p. 232).

St. Isaac the Syrian mentions to, “Read often and insatiably the books of the teachers of the Church on divine providence, for they lead the mind to discern the order in God’s creatures and His actions, give it strength, and by their subtleness they prepare it to acquire luminous intuitions and guide it in purity toward the understanding of God’s creatures. Read also the Gospels, which God ordained for knowledge for the whole world, that you may find provisions for your journey in the might of God’s providence for every generation, and that your intellect may plunge deeply into wonder at Him. Such reading furthers your aim. Let your reading be done in a stillness which nothing disturbs” (p.34).

“Reading assists the soul when she stands in prayer”

“From reading the soul is enlightened in prayer”

“Without entering into temptation, no man will ever gain the wisdom from the Holy Spirit; and without perseverance in reading, he will know no refinement of thoughts” (ibid. p. 45).

“When ever it happens to you that your soul is shrouded by thick darkness from within and . . . for a brief time is deprived of spiritual comfort and the light of grace on account of the cloud of passions that overshadows her; and further, that the joy-producing power in your soul is curtailed for a little, and your mind is overshadowed by an unwonted mist: then do not be troubled in mind, do not lend a hand to despondency. But be patient, be engaged in reading the books of the Doctors of the Church, compel yourself in prayer, and expect to receive help (ibid. p. 81).

“Do not be surprised if sometimes when you are kneeling in prayer and your mind is concentrated upon it, your mind grows silent and ceases from prayer. You will find this to occur both in your office and in reading. At the time when your mind is scattered, persevere in reading rather than in prayer (ibid. p. 307).

“Give more honor to reading, if possible, than to standing, for it is a source of pure prayers” (ibid. P. 307)

“I run to stillness so that the verses of my reading and prayer should become sweet to me” (ibid. p. 320). This speaks to reflecting on what we’ve read.

“Let us then be diligent, my brethren, and long before we wish to go to sleep let us ponder on our psalm-readings from the Holy Scripture, keeping our souls from evil recollections and from every repulsive reflection, and let us furnish our treasury with every sort of beautiful thing” (ibid. p. 393).

### **A Sermon on Reading Spiritual Works Archbishop Platon of Kostroma**

“This is the commandment given by the holy Apostle Paul to his beloved disciple Timothy. The reading of holy writings is one of the main means of succeeding in the spiritual life. Following the Apostle, the Holy Fathers also command us to read continually the holy writings, since this is an important means to spiritual perfection. Such reading is absolutely necessary, especially in the present age, when worldly education and worldly habits threaten to stifle a taste for everything spiritual, and false teachings and ideas are spreading rapidly.

“If we read the Sacred Scripture with faith,” says St. Basil the Great, ‘we will feel that we see and hear Christ Himself. What is it we need, an actual voice or the One Who speaks to us through the Scriptures? It is all the same. In Sacred Scripture, God speaks with us just as truly as when we speak with Him through prayer.’ For this reason, prayer and the reading of sacred books must be our continuous occupation. Pray or read continually if you want to be with God at all times.

“The Saints talk with us when we read their writings. Through their writings, they guide us and speak to us and we, so to speak, resurrect through them after their death in order to talk with them. Thus, we have no reason to envy the contemporaries of Chrysostom, Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian, Athanasius the Great, Ambrose and others. From the holy ranks of the Fathers we may choose with whom it is best for us to converse. There is no better, more joyous, and more beneficial way to spend the time we have than in reading the writings of the Holy Fathers.

“By reading books, which are profitable for the soul, we enter into communion with all the dwellers of Paradise. ‘When I read books about God,’ says the hieromartyr Timothy, ‘then the angels of God surround me.’ What can give us more honor than conversing, through **reading of spiritual books**, with the holy Angels, with the souls of the blessed, and with

God Himself.

“When I read holy books,’ says St. Gregory the Theologian about the books of St. Basil the Great, ‘then the spirit and body are illumined and I become the temple of God and the harp of the Holy Spirit, played by divine powers. Through them I am corrected and through them I receive a kind of divine change and I am made into a different person.’

“Cleave to reading spiritual writings. It will lead you to that wonderful change which took place in so many saints. Through these works we receive great and holy enlightenment. Through them we learn of the path to salvation, we learn what kind of temptations await us on this path, and about the means by which we may be delivered from them.”

**Excerpts from *The Arena* on Reading Spiritual Books  
St. Ignatius (Brianchaninov)**

**Chapter 10  
On Discretion in reading the Patristic books on the Monastic Life.**

“The books of the holy Fathers on the monastic life must be read with great caution. It has been noticed that novices can never adapt books to their condition, but are invariably drawn by the tendency of the book.

For example, “If a book gives counsels on silence and shows the abundance of spiritual fruits that are gathered in profound silence, the beginner invariably has the strongest desire to go off into solitude, to an uninhabited desert. Or, if a book speaks of unconditional obedience under the direction of a spirit-bearing father, the beginner will inevitably develop a desire for the strictest life in complete submission to an elder.

“God has not given to our time either of these two ways of life. But the books of the holy Fathers describing these states can influence a beginner so strongly that out of inexperience and ignorance he can easily decide to leave the place where he is living and where he has every convenience to work out his salvation and make spiritual progress by putting into practice the evangelical commandments, for an impossible dream of a perfect life pictured vividly and alluringly in his imagination.”

**On Spiritual Study**

**An Excerpt from *Spiritual Awakening*  
By Elder Paisios the Athonite (+1994)**

“Geronda, which spiritual books are the most helpful?”

“The various patristic texts, which thank God are available by the thousands today, are very helpful. One can find whatever one needs and desires in these books. They are authentic spiritual nourishment and a sure guide on the spiritual path. However, in order to be of benefit to us, they have to be read with humility and prayer.

“We do not need great knowledge to be devout. If we concentrate and ponder on the few things we know, our heart will be spiritually embroidered. One may be profoundly affected by a single hymn, while another may feel nothing, even though he may know all the hymns by heart, as he has not entered into the spiritual reality. So, read the Fathers, even one or two lines a day. They are very strengthening vitamins for the soul.”

**The Place of Lives of Saints in the Spiritual Life  
by Hieromonk Damascene**

A talk delivered at the Annual Assembly of the Serbian Orthodox Diocese of Western  
America, February 16/March 1, 2002.

**How to Make Use of the Lives of the Saints**

“First, we look to the Saints as our examples, *be imitators of me, even as I also am of Christ* (I Cor. 11:1), the Saints say to us along with the Holy Apostle Paul.

“As Christians, we want to grow in the likeness of Christ, to have that likeness shine in us. For this to occur, we need to look often to the Saints to see that shining likeness: we must look to them for real, practical examples of how to live. St. Basil the Great gives this analogy:

‘Just as painters, in working from models, constantly gaze at their exemplar and thus strive to transfer the expression of the original to their own artistry, so too he who is eager to make himself perfect in all kinds of virtue must gaze upon the Lives of the Saints and make their excellence his own by imitation.’ [4]

“Secondly, we must look to the Saints as our heavenly friends, as our brothers and sisters in

the Faith. As we read the Lives of the Saints each day, we will discover little by little those Saints whom our hearts go out to. They will become our close friends, those whom we pray to most of all, those in whom we confide our joys and sorrows.

“As Archimandrite Aimilianos, the former Abbot of the Holy Monastery of Simonos Petras on Mount Athos, writes: "These close friends will be the guides of our choice and a great comfort to us along the strait and narrow way that leads to Christ. We are not alone on the road or in the struggle. We have with us our Mother, the All-Holy Mother of God, our Guardian Angel, the Saint whose name we bear, and those close friends we have chosen out of the Great Multitude of Saints who stand before the Lamb (Rev. 7:9).

“When we stumble through sin, they will raise us up again; when we are tempted to give up hope, they will remind us that they have suffered for Christ before us, and more than us; and that they are now the possessors of unending joy. So, upon the stony road of the present life, these holy companions will enable us to glimpse the light of the Resurrection. Let us search, then, in the Lives of the Saints, for these close friends, and *with all the Saints* let us make our way to Christ. [5]

As we study the Lives of the Saints, humility must be our safeguard. We need to *soberly* apply what we read to our own conditions and circumstances, realizing our own infirmity, not thinking too much of ourselves, not dreaming of ascetic feats that truly *are* beyond us. In other words, we must take spiritual life step by step, and not expect to make one great leap into sanctity.

### *Endnotes*

1. St. Justin Popovich, *Orthodox Faith and Life in Christ* (Belmont, Mass.: Institute for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, 1994), pp. 35-36.
2. St. Justin Popovich, *Orthodox Faith and Life in Christ*, p. 36.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
4. Quoted in Constantine Cavarinos, *Holiness: Man's Supreme Destiny* (Belmont, Mass.: Institute for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, 2001), p. 35.
5. *The Synaxarion*, vol. 1 (Ormylia: Holy Convent of the Annunciation of Our Lady, 1998), pp. xiii-xiv.

**Prayer of St. John Chrysostom - Before reading:**

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit: O Lord Jesus Christ, open the eyes of my heart, that I may hear Your word and understand and do Your will, for I am a sojourner upon the earth. Hide not Your commandments from me, but open my eyes, that I may perceive the wonders of Your law. Speak to me the hidden and secret things of Your wisdom. On You do I set my hope, O my God, that You will enlighten my mind and understanding with the light of Your knowledge, not only to cherish those things which are written, but to do them, that in reading the lives, works and sayings of the Saints I may not sin, but that such may serve for my restoration, enlightenment and sanctification, for the salvation of my soul, and the inheritance of life everlasting; For You are the enlightenment of those who lie in darkness, and from You comes every good deed and every gift. Amen.