

WHAT TO READ.

By Rev J H McMahon

With the spread of education and the multiplication of books, it becomes daily more perplexing and difficult, yet, withal, necessary to point out to people what to read. Whether we accept entirely or not at all the almost brutal definition of Ruskin that "Modern 'Education' for the most part signifies giving people the faculty of thinking wrong on every conceivable subject of importance to them," we cannot fail to observe the tendency of modern intellectual culture, where not sharply counterbalanced by explicit dogmatic belief, to produce a state of mind either positively irreligious, or at least confused as to its relations with and duty towards God, if not wholly or apparently oblivious of His existence. For Literature, formerly the handmaid, has now usurped the function of Religion, and books carry the message of the new revelation to the people. The novel, the poem, the book of science are well-defined theological treatises vastly more attractive for being less dogmatic. So that the history of one's reading may be taken as his *Summa*; and a catalogue of his books as a draft of his *Credo*. Dollinger's defection from the Church has been traced to his ill-advised reading in the philosophy of Anglican liberalism. Renan's insatiate fondness for reading led him into German idealism and made him a pantheist before he had begun his studies in theology. The sad fate of these two eminent scholars, one admittedly great as an historical student, the other unsurpassed in contemporary French literature, is at once an indication of the tendency of intellectual culture, and a proof of the necessity of some guidance in reading. While any examination as to the why of the fact would lead us too far afield, we shall accept it likewise as a further reason for the intervention of the pulpit in the selection of books. The study of literature for its own sake just now is a fetic, but if literature has any value it is not as an end but as a means to the possession of a power over others that will make for their good. It is therefore with a view to that influence that the following suggestions are made.

It will, I think, be conceded that in general the character of people's reading is growing year by year less serious. The rapid growth of the magazine and the newspaper and the enormous extent of their circulation have quite stopped the production of really solid works, and, in large part, account for the undue preponderance of the lighter forms of literature in the books that issue from the press. According to the law governing the relations of supply and demand, it must likewise be conceded that if the tone of our newspaper press is flippant and, morally speaking, growing more degraded, it is because there is a corresponding degeneration in the thought and degradation in the moral sense of the community. We shall not stop to discuss the independence of reactive influences of one upon the other. We are no better than the food we feed upon, and if filth is the aliment of our minds, we need not be surprised if corruption drags us down from the fair mountain to batten on the moor. If we can believe the evidences of our senses and the testimony of statistics, we are rapidly growing accustomed to the external signs of vice. While it is not logical to infer therefrom any correspondingly great decrease of virtue, it is a fair deduction to suppose that respect for virtue is on the wane. Neither the crimson peach nor the purple grape is so beautiful when the bloom has disappeared. It is certainly sad to enter one of our railway trains and, glancing about us, see the character of the journal or book in the hands of the ordinary passenger. Young men and young women are

greedily devouring column after column, page after page of scandal and the record of the worst crimes, becoming familiar with the sickening details that must have a corrupting influence on their minds, losing that dread of vice so easily dulled by contact. Pitch must surely defile. A noted journalist has spoken in no measured tones of the manner in which every law of decency and of right must be sacrificed to the Moloch of the successful daily newspaper. It would argue badly for our sense of moral rectitude and be a queer proof of our moral obliquity, were we without reason sufficient to excuse or at least extenuate our indirect co-operation, to assist with our patronage journals that every generous feeling promote us to denounce. Nor will you say that the necessity of knowing the daily history of the world is a valid excuse. For there are yet in every large city some reputable newspapers which, though often unjust to us Catholics, are always clean. The very violence of their injustice is its own antidote.

It is relatively a necessity for us to read newspapers. But it would be wise for us to consider the limits of that necessity before bringing, for example, into our home, sheets whose very presence is a contamination. Does the same necessity of business or of information press upon our wives and daughters, our sons and sisters? Their needs at least can be satisfied by our unpretentious American Catholic weeklies and the fascinating London *Tablet*. The very privations they and we may accidentally suffer will surely make us more eager for the day that shall see established a Catholic daily, clean, upright, sound and successful, as well as enterprising.

Would it not, in like manner, be wise for us to exercise great discretion in bringing into our families the secular magazines? Here at least our own Catholic press can be put in fair competition. It is the judgment of an impartial observer that the average literary excellence of the Catholic magazine is at least as high as that of a secular magazine. The superlative artistic excellence of some of these, on the other hand, but badly compensates for the many flagrant deviations from historic and religious truth. These to young, untrained minds are all the more dangerous by reason of the very excellence of their presentation to eye and mind. While not holding a brief for our Catholic magazines, I am of opinion that if the many who find fault with them would help to increase their subscription lists, their defects could soon be remedied, and efforts made to surpass their more favored rivals. Certainly with the *Ave Maria*, the *Messenger of the Sacred Heart*, the *Rosary*, the *Catholic World*, the *Month*, *Merry England*, the *Illustrated Catholic Missions*, the *Lyceum*, the *American Catholic Quarterly*, and the *Dublin Review* at command, our English speaking Catholics need not be at a loss for instructive, edifying, entertaining and erudite reading for the home circle, while a knowledge of French and German opens up surpassing treasures of the best magazine literature in the world.

The subject of reading for the young must naturally engage most of our attention. Bad as has been the decadence in other classes of literature, the viciousness apparent in much of the prevailing literature for children has been so appalling as to provoke open condemnation from a judge who was trying a boy for a murder proven to have resulted directly from the character of his reading. That this should be the case speaks badly for the supervision exercised by parents over the reading of their children. When we consider how fatal to the innocent soul of a child are the consequences of evil reading, this parental neglect becomes criminal. The ex-

cellent children's literature produced in late years by some of the best writers and artists in this country and in England, render inexcusable parents who will permit their children to read either what is inferior or unhealthy. Much of this, unfortunately, is unsuitable for our Catholic children, but there is still left an abundant supply. Our Catholic writers are now turning their attention to this department of literature, and already we possess a number of Catholic books for Catholic children sufficient to render unnecessary the weak translations of unsympathetic tales so odious to recall.

The multiplication of free circulating libraries is not an unmixed blessing as far as children are concerned. The manager of a large library recently told me that with a comparatively small number of books they were able to attain an enormous circulation, because they purchased only such books as they knew their patrons would like. It will readily be perceived that as an educator such a library is sure to be a failure; and considering the carelessness of parents, it is as sure to constitute a snare for the children, who form usually the large majority of its patrons.

The bait of the young, however, is the novel. Our Catholic people, at least such is my experience, are not much given to reading novels that are positively bad. Indeed where there is supervision, intelligent and astute enough to point out the abundance of excellent Catholic and other fiction instead of obstinately opposing a taste that can be extinguished only with the utmost difficulty and some injury to complete mental development, there is no danger of that sort to be apprehended. It is beneficial rather than otherwise for our young people to read in moderation such books as "Dion and Sybils," "Fabiola," "Armure," "Palms," "A Sister's Story," "The Betrothed," to name only a few. For nourished on tales so pure as these they will learn to despise the sensuality and earthiness that characterizes mere secular novels. The danger of excessive novel reading, apart from its evil intellectual effects, lies in the formation of an artificial, unreal view of life. The intimate companion of lords and ladies, heroes and heroines, is not apt to relish a sudden descent to stern realities. Commonplaces both in persons and in places are apt to become distasteful. Sordid punishment for mean offences grates upon one who has but now been enacting the heroic. Poetic standards will likely be substituted for common sense; romance will usurp the place of fact; and life will become ideal inasmuch as unreal, not, therefore, noble or elevated. Seductive style and charming delineation of character will allure to false standards of right and wrong. Justice will give place to sentiment, love to passion; and so by degrees the whole moral being becomes warped and out of harmony with the really true, the beautiful, the good. Of novel reading it is true that the appetite doth grow with what it feeds on. There is again danger to faith to be apprehended from modern novels; but this danger is slight unless the heart be previously corrupted.

The effort on the part of all those who have supervision of the young should be to direct their reading principally in the lines of history, biography, travel and science. Our literature, fortunately, is rich in these departments; and to children, more particularly boys, such books are vastly more interesting than works of mere fiction. Do not be afraid of asking children to read the lives of saints, young saints such as St. Aloysius, St. Agnes, St. Stanislaus, etc. These books are frequently sacramental, for from them spring the germs of many vocations and of great virtue. Especially get

young people to become familiar with the history of the Church of both the Old and the New Dispensations. If the Old Testament is in every part the history of God's Providence over His people visibly manifested, the history of the Church of Christ is no less so. To a young man, a young woman, of generous impulses, the reading of the history of the Church will impart a patriotism and enthusiasm for his mother that will outlive any other sentiment.

What shall we elders read? I shall not speak here of ascetic reading. So peculiar is the disposition of every soul that the divine afflatus of the Holy Spirit is needed to discern the special needs of each. One word of caution about our spiritual reading. Some such reading is relatively necessary if we would not have the flame of prayer flicker and perhaps go out. It is the fuel on which the fire of love feeds. It is the tinder which catches the spark. It is the light by means of which God designs to illumine our soul. It is the mirror in which we can continually behold the presence of God. It is the point of contact between the natural and the supernatural. No wonder, then, that the dull page is oftentimes illuminated with the splendor of the divine effulgence as the mountains are changed into gold deepest in the heart of the dying sun.

Then the reading of the Sacred Scriptures! What joy to be brought in contact with the Word of God, that Word that was made flesh! Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, that Word will make our hearts burn. Not content with reading the text, strive after deeper knowledge, for its mine of meaning is exhaustless, deep as God Himself. Commentators abound now in English. These are McDevitt on the "Introduction to the Scriptures," Dixon's "Introduction," Mullen's "Canon of the Old Testament," Formby's "Introduction," Humphreys' "Written Word," Bridgett's "Ritual of the New Testament," the "Commentaries of a Lapide, Maldonatus, McEvilly, McCarthy, Kenrick, 'The Triple Exposition' of a Piconio, Bellarmin on the 'Psalms,' St. Alphonsus on the 'Psalms and Canticles,' Father Cole-ridge's 'Life of Our Lord,' Didon's 'Jesus Christ,' Fouard's 'The Christ,' and 'Life of St. Peter,' and Maas' 'Life of Christ'—almost a complete course in exegesis.

Moreover Catholic philosophy is now within the reach of every one by means of manuals. The translation of Wilhelm's "Manual of Catholic Theology," Hattinger's "Natural Religion," Schanz's "Christian Apology," Jouin's "Evidences of Religion," give us a course of dogmatic theology in English. Ward's "Clothes of Religion" and "Wish to Believe," Mynell's "Light of Reason" and Clarke's "Existence of God" almost complete our theological outfit. Then there are Rickaby's translation of the second part of St. Thomas Allie's magnificent works on "The Formation of Christendom," Lilly's books on "Ethics" and "Ancient Religion," Mivart's "Essays," Bridgett's, Gasquet's and Morris' books of historical fields, Anotobus' translation of Pastor's "History" and numerous excellent manuals of Church history. With these before us, we shall not be at a loss for something to read, and the reading of them would beyond peradventure strengthen our faith, increase our piety, and magnify our love for the glorious Spouse of Christ, "the pillar and ground of Truth."—Rev. Joseph H. McMahon, in *The Seminary*.

The great lung healer is found in that excellent medicine sold as Bickle's Anti-Consumptive Syrup. It soothes and diminishes the sensibility of the membrane of the throat and air passages and is a sovereign remedy for all coughs, colds, hoarseness, pain or soreness in the chest, bronchitis, etc. It has cured many when supposed to be far advanced in consumption.