

Elder Paisios on Spiritual Study

An Excerpt from Spiritual Awakening

— **Geronda, what books should be read by those who are beginning their spiritual search?**

— First, they should read the New Testament to learn the meaning of Christ, to be shaken up a little; later they can read the Old Testament. Do you know how hard it is when they have read nothing and yet they come to ask for help? It is like an elementary school child going to a university professor and saying, “Help me.” What can the professor tell him? “One plus one equals two”? Others, again, are not spiritually restless; they come and say, “Father, I have no problems and I am just fine; I only dropped by to see you.” Man can never say that he has no problems, no concerns; he will have something. The struggle for the spiritual life never ends. Or some people come and tell me, “Tell us spiritual things.” It is as if they went to the grocery store and said, “Give us some groceries.” The grocer is at a loss and needs to know what they need. They need to say, “I want so much sugar, so much rice, and so on, but they only say, “Give us groceries.” It is like going to the pharmacy and saying, “Give us medicines,” without first saying what their illness is, or whether or not they went to the doctor, and what he advised them to do. Go figure! You see, whoever is seriously concerned over his spiritual condition knows, more or less, what he is lacking, and once he seeks it, he benefits.

As a novice, when I read something I liked, I wrote it down so as not to forget it, and I would try to apply it to my life. I didn't read just to pass my time pleasantly. I had a spiritual restlessness and, when I could not understand something, I would ask for an explanation. I read relatively little, but I checked myself a great deal on what I read. “What point am I at? What must I do?” I would sit myself down and go through such a self-examination. I did not allow what I read to pass me by untaxed.

Today with so much reading people end up like tape recorders, filling up their cassettes with superfluous matters. According to Abba Isaac, however, wisdom not based on righteous activity is a deposit of disgrace. You see, many who are interested in sports read sports magazines and newspapers while they are sitting. They may be like the fatted calf, but they still marvel at the athletes. “Oh, he is marvellous! He is great! Bravo!” But they don't work up any sweat, and they don't lose any pounds. They read and read about athletic events, and then they go and lie down; they gain nothing. They are satisfied with the pleasure of reading. Some worldly people read newspapers, others romantic literature or an adventure novel, still others watch a football game at the stadium and pass their time. The same thing is done by some people who read spiritual books. They may spend the whole night reading spiritual books with great intensity and be content. They take a spiritual book, sit comfortably, and begin reading. “Oh, I profited from that,” they say. It would be better to say, “I enjoyed myself, I spent my time pleasantly.” But this is not profit.

We profit when we understand what we read, when we censure ourselves and discipline ourselves by applying it: “What does this mean? Where do I stand in relation to this spiritual truth? What must I do now?” After all, the more we learn, the more responsibility we have to live up to what we have learned. I am not saying that we should not read so that we can plead ignorance and therefore be free of responsibility, for this is a cunning deception; I am saying

that we should not read merely to pass our time pleasantly. The bad thing is that if someone reads a lot and has a strong memory, he may remember many things and may even talk a lot about what he has read, and thus deceive himself into thinking that he also personally observes the many things he reads. So he has created an illusion toward himself and others. So don't be comforted by the thought that you read a lot. Instead, turn your attention to applying what you have read. Much reading alone will only educate you encyclopedically. Isn't that what they call it?



— **Yes, Geronda.**

— The goal, however, is to be transformed in a God-centred manner. I am not aiming to be a university professor where I would need to know many things. But if I ever need something from this worldly knowledge, I can easily learn it once I have acquired the God-centred knowledge. Do you see what I mean?

— **When one has a distraction, is it beneficial to concentrate through study?**

— Yes, one should read a little, something very demanding, in order to warm the soul. This keeps distractions and concerns under the lid, and the mind is transposed into a divine realm. Otherwise, the mind is diverted by whatever task is preoccupying it.

— **Geronda, when someone is tired or upset, he usually wants to read something light and easy, a short story or a novel, perhaps, or something like that.**

— Is there no spiritual book that is appropriate for such times? The purpose is not to forget one's worry, but to be redeemed. Such light reading does not redeem. Novels, newspapers and television have no value in developing a spiritual life. Quite often even some religious periodicals are damaging to Christians, because they stir a foolish zealotry that leads to confusion. Take care. Do not read unnecessary things during your free time. Some reading matter is completely hollow, like a water-pumpkin; it is like looking in a haystack to find a kernel of wheat. Some people say, "Yes, but they relax me." But how can they be relaxing, my good man, if they make you dizzy and cause your eyes to ache? It is better to rest by sleeping. You can learn much about a person's spiritual state from what he reads. One who is very worldly will probably be reading indecent magazines. One who is less worldly will read less indecent magazines and newspapers. One who is religious will read religious periodicals, or contemporary religious books or patristic texts, and so on.

— **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. Patristic texts reveal the inner spiritual condition of the soul, much as axial tomography reveals the inner structures of the body. Each sentence of the patristic texts contains a multitude of meanings, and each person can interpret them according to their own spiritual state of being. It is better to read the ancient text rather than a translation, because

the translator interprets the original verse according to his own spirituality. In any case, in order to understand the writings of the Fathers one must constrain oneself, focus and live spiritually, for the spirit of the Fathers is perceived through and by the spirit only. Especially helpful are the Ascetical Homilies by Saint Isaac the Syrian, but they must be studied slowly so that they can be assimilated little by little as spiritual food. The Evergetinos is truly of great benefit, because it gives us insight into the whole spirit of the Holy Fathers, it is helpful because it describes the struggles of the Fathers against each and every one of the passions, and, by learning how they worked on the spiritual life, the soul is greatly assisted. Also, the Synaxaria, the Lives of the Saints, are sacred history and very helpful, especially for young people, but they should not be read as stories.

We do not need great knowledge to be devout. If we concentrate and meditate 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.