

“Good literature forms a worldview: It offers us insight into our families, our communities and ourselves. Great literature offers us insight into our relationship with God and the world.”

AMONG THE BOOKS. The Long Room in the Trinity College Library, the largest library in Ireland and home to The Book of Kells, in Dublin. MayaTheB / Shutterstock

# Sursum Corda: 10 Suggestions for Rekindling the Literary Imagination

Great men and women — great souls — are formed by great literature. Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt and Thomas Jefferson were voracious readers. St. Paul, St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas were steeped in the literary traditions of their times. St. John Paul II, canonized just last year, recalls that, in his youth, he was “completely consumed by a passion for literature.”

BY BISHOP JAMES CONLEY  
SPECIAL TO THE REGISTER

The men and women who have been most influential in my own life were readers, too. Professor John Senior, my teacher and godfather, seemed to have the whole canon of Western literature and poetry at his fingertips. Blessed John Henry Newman, my spiritual mentor, was a man of letters. My grandfather was an avid reader of American history, and my father was a reader and author — in his spare time, he wrote a book on our family's Wea Indian ancestry.

The Russian playwright Anton Chekhov said, “The business of literature is not to answer questions, but to state them fairly.”

I'm not certain that is true. Literature does raise questions, but it can also — in the witness of ideas or characters or stories — point us to the final answers, to the permanent things.

## Cultural Formation

Good literature forms a worldview: It offers us insight into our families, our communities and ourselves.

Great literature offers us insight into our relationship with God and the world.

Literature reflects culture and forms it. The history of Western culture can be traced in the stories we've told over the past millennia. Whether we read much or not, we've all been formed, at least in part, by the ideas and hopes expressed in the history of Western literature.

Today, we face an unprecedented crisis of culture. The family is disintegrating before our eyes. Women and children are objectified in new and dangerous ways. Pornography is ubiquitous. Abortion is pervasive. Civil and

moral discernment has become a lost art.

I talk about beauty a great deal. And I am sometimes asked, in the midst of our current crisis, whether paying attention to literature, music, poetry and art is a waste of time. I'm asked whether it would be more prudent to spend all of our energies fighting the political effects of secularism, rather than spending time in the library reading books. In a situation as grave as ours — for family life, for religious liberty and for the unborn — this is a legitimate question.

We need to be active in the political arena — each of us, as Christians. We need to propose policies that support the dignity of the human person and the institutions that animate and order society. We need to protect the unborn, the freedom of conscience, the traditional understanding of marriage and the sovereignty of the family.

But we won't be successful in the political arena if we don't first succeed in transforming culture.

The crisis we face today is a cultural crisis, with political consequences. Good policy is borne of good minds and good hearts, and bad policy is born of dull minds and small vision — of egoism, greed and lust.

Our battle is not just for policies. It is a battle for hearts and minds.

## Literary Crisis

Our crisis is, in some ways, a literary crisis — and thus a crisis of the imagination.

Very few people today are reading good books. We're busy with families and professions. Television sings a siren song, tempting us to spend mindless hours taking in sports or crass comedy or the over-scripted melodrama called “reality television.”

The Internet also demands our attention, and when we do read, we often do so in bite-size morsels, reading only email, tweets, blogs or inane and prattling lists. Or we read pornographic depictions of zombies and vampires — books which neither satisfy our intellects nor our imaginations.

And, finally, modern methods of education too often favor reading as a technical exercise — as a necessary skill to prepare us for a career, instead of as a way to become more fully human.

The cultural content we consume today is mostly uninspiring, at best. And the media itself — the technology by which we consume content — is very dangerous. While the technology we possess in our cellphones and tablets offers great potential, it can also have the effect of making us shortsighted: hooked on instant gratification, bored without immediate stimulation, lonely for real connections instead of text messages, tweets and Facebook “likes.”

When we aren't careful, our technology can make us flat-souled — very bored and very lonely.

Sometimes, in moderation, television can be worthwhile. And the Internet can be a source for great good. But we've lost the literary culture that formed the heroes of Western history. We've replaced it with noise. Literature, which once formed hearts and minds towards greatness, is forgotten.

But literature — and poetry, music and the fine arts — is the antidote to our flat-souled culture. And it is critical to solving our culture's real crisis.

We need to understand the humanity taught by Plato, Augustine and Shakespeare, because we need to understand our own humanity. In the darkness of elective illiteracy, it seems that we can too easily lose our sight, even of ourselves.

## ‘Born Anew in Wonder’

Literature opens our imaginations to wonder. Reading good books exposes the contemplative part of our humanity. Good books can spur in us a sense of justice, charity and generosity. They can expand our souls and inspire our hearts to strive for greatness. Just as the priest prays in the liturgy, addressing the faithful in the preface, *Sursum Corda* — “Lift up your hearts.” That's what our faith

does and what good literature can do.

If we want to solve the problems of Western culture, we need, desperately, a renewal of the Western mind.

All of us who wish to bring forward a renewal of Christian culture in our world should begin on our knees, in prayer.

But we must also begin with books in our hands, being formed in the great tradition of the classical mind.

In short, we need to be wise to defeat the father of lies. We can't propose wise policies if we have not cultivated wisdom and good judgment. And wisdom begins with the wonder of the literary imagination.

I'm often asked for book recommendations. In fact, this essay was inspired by such a request from Catholic friends. Many of my friends know that I have had the benefit, entirely undeserved, of the kind of literary formation that has become too rare these

## Sursum Corda

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days. As a student in the Integrated Humanities Program at the University of Kansas, I read from the great books of Western culture and also from the thousands of good books that have some worthwhile story to tell. Those books began my journey to the Catholic Church and to Jesus Christ.

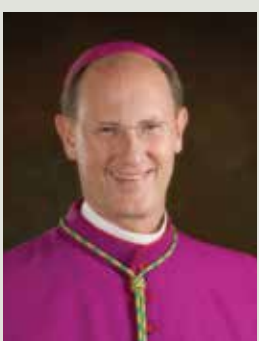
This essay includes a list of some of my favorite works and some favorite authors, following the trajectory of Western thought and culture. This list is not definitive, or authoritative, or even objective.

Instead, this list is deeply personal: reflecting the authors who have touched my heart or my mind or my imagination.

All good-book lists will necessarily be personal. This book list is by no means exhaustive — there are too many good books to list them all.

And the experience of reading proves that a good book may touch one heart very deeply and hardly touch another at all. Such lists may spark vigorous debate and deep

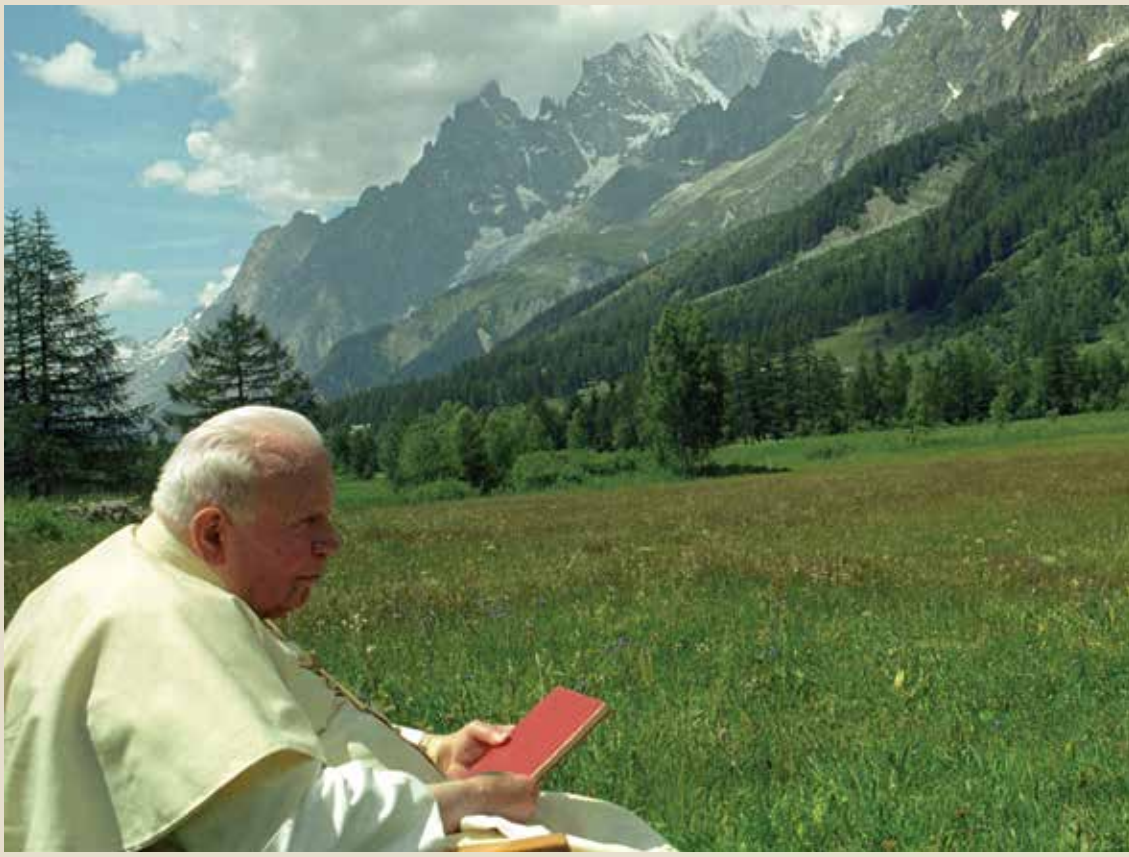
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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bishop James D. Conley is the shepherd of the Diocese of Lincoln, Nebraska.





L'OSSERVATORE ROMANO

## Leisure, the Basis of Culture by Josef Pieper

Josef Pieper was a German-Catholic philosopher, a professor of sociology and anthropology at the University of Munster. He was a student of St. Thomas Aquinas, Plato and Aristotle.

Pieper possessed the unique gift of clarity: He reflected on virtue and vice, sin and redemption, beauty and culture in books that could be easily understood and easily appreciated.

*Leisure, the Basis of Culture* was written in 1952. The book explains that leisure — the capacity to perceive, contemplate and celebrate the world we've been given — is a gift from God. To be fully human is to accept the gift of leisure from God and to cultivate serenity, joy and peace.

Leisure, says Pieper, is not about the absence of work — about idleness. Instead, leisure is about the cultivation of goodness in souls: about literature, music, celebration and wonder.

In 1958, Mortimer Adler wrote, "Leisure consists in activities which are neither toil nor play, but are rather the expressions of moral and intellectual virtue — the things a good man does because they are intrinsically good for him and for his society, making him better as a man and advancing the civilization in which he lives."

Pieper believes that leisure is the basis by which we can grow in wisdom — and therefore, the basis by

which we can form a truly Christian family, and a truly Christian culture.

The exploration of great literature is a form of leisure. Today, in our "down time," we too often shut off our minds, our hearts or our imaginations.

But real leisure is the use of our minds and hearts to form deeper relationships with Christ and his Church. I think often of my father, working each day, providing for our home, but carving out huge amounts of time to write a little book on our family's history. He didn't write the book for money or fame. It has only been read by our family. He did it, I think, as an act of leisure — a pursuit of quiet intellectual effort that brought him much pleasure and joy and pointed him to a deeper appreciation of our family. It was a pursuit that helped him to see reality.

The rest of this list is comprised of mostly fiction. Even the dialogues of Plato are dramatized accounts, whose historical accuracy is open for debate.

But Pieper's book can be understood as a kind of a key — a broad sketch of the ways the literary imagination can form and renew Christian culture.

If we want to transform culture, we must begin by cultivating our minds for Christ. Leisure, real leisure, is the practice of putting our minds, bodies and hearts at the service of God. Josef Pieper understood this, and so must we.

## Intro

CONTINUING PAGE C1 INTRODUCTION disagreement, which is a sign of the way good books can wiggle into our hearts and remain there forever.

This is not a list of the books that contain all of the ideas that have shaped me or even all of the most important ideas. It is not a list of spiritual classics. It is a literary list. The list is subjective and aesthetic — the books on this list are among those which I consider to be particularly beautiful; and thus, particularly compelling.

In 1999, St. John Paul II wrote, "Faced with the sacredness of life and of the human person, and before the marvels of the universe, wonder is the only appropriate attitude."

I share the literature that has moved me to wonder.

I also share the books that I have simply enjoyed — characters, adventures and stories I have loved. My good friend, author Anthony Esolen, says that books open the doorways to possibility.

"If you are not reading novels to make new friends," he says, "or to wander across the fields, or to sail the sea, then you should not read them at all."

Finally, this list was not designed to be a "top 10" list. I'm not sure such a project would be possible — I've left off far many more beloved books than I've included.

Instead, I've chosen particular books on this list because I hope they will be a branching-off point — a place from which to begin exploration of the classics of Western literature. In a certain sense, they represent various genres, and they come from the vast history of Western culture.

If you have read any of the books on this list, I pray you might consider reading them again.

C.S. Lewis wrote, "The sure mark of an unliterary man is that he considers 'I've read it already' to be a conclusive argument against reading a work. ... Those who read great works will read the same work 10, 20 or 30 times during the course of their lives."

I also pray that you might read these books — and many others — with your families, in your parishes and in your communities. I pray for Catholic book clubs and literary circles, comprised of ordinary, everyday Catholics, reading and reflecting on important ideas and beautiful stories.

Reading is, in the modern world, a solitary pursuit. But for most of our history, books have been read aloud, and stories have been told by the fire-side or at the dinner table or on a walk. Ideas germinate best when they are shared, and they tend to matter most when a community shares them.

The language of these books can be awkward or seem foreign to our modern ears. Please do not be discouraged. Please persevere! You might not understand everything you read. You might be tempted to put these books down and go on to something else.

But plowing forward through good literature has its own rewards. The more often we undertake challenging works, the stronger our intellects and imaginations become — ever more clearly unlocking the beauty of characters, stories and God's abundant providence.

My hope in this essay is to spur the imagination, to open the mind and to encourage you, each of you, to be "born anew in wonder," to marvel, in your heart and your imagination, at the glory of the Lord.



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## Homer's *The Odyssey*

Odysseus was a pilgrim — a husband, a father, a soldier and a man on a journey home.

The ancient epic poem of Homer, coming from the Greek world and composed almost 3,000 years ago, is the story of a man who is taken captive, who fights battles with gods and men, who is tempted, shipwrecked and nearly drowned. It is the story of a man who never loses sight of his journey home.

Odysseus is prideful, vengeful and cunning. He is not perfect. He sins — and does so with spectacular aplomb. But despite his sinfulness, he presses onward, to his wife, his family and his home.

The story is adventurous and dangerous. The battles are vivid. The travels are trying. The temptations are real. It is an instructive story. Almost 3,000 years ago, Homer recognized the dangers our modern culture faces: apathy, escapism, lust, vanity and anger.

But the story of Odysseus is the story of a man who overcomes temptation and, with fortitude, reaches his destination.

*The Odyssey* may remind us of the Christian life or of the arduous challenges of daily life. It may be a reminder of the most important things, the first things, around which we should order our lives: work, family and home. Or it may be enough to read it and to imagine the siren singers, the edge of the world itself and the battle of brave Odysseus.

*The Odyssey* is a companion to *The Iliad*, the epic poem depicting a few weeks of the Trojan War. *The Iliad* is the story of the "rage" of its hero, Achilles, and his feud with the warrior-king Agamemnon. It is a story of pride, honor, loyalty and fate.

Virgil's *The Aeneid*, whose poetry is beautiful, relates the aftermath of the sack of Troy and the founding of Rome by Aeneas. This epic poem, which transitions from the Greek world to the Latin world, takes up many of the same characters and considers many of the same themes as Homer's works. These books influenced St. Paul, St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, and, through them, they have influenced us. Together, *The Odyssey*, *The Iliad* and *The Aeneid* form the basis for almost all of Western literature and for much of the Western imagination.



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— Bishop Conley

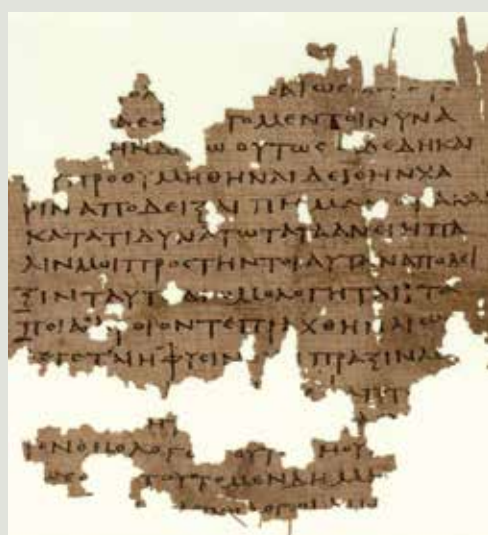


'The School of Athens' fresco by Raphael (1483-1520) Public domain / Wikipedia

### Bishop Conley's Recommended Plato Reads

- *Apology*
- *Euthyphro*
- *Phaedo*
- *Crito*
- *Gorgias*
- *Republic*

Parts of Oxyrhynchus Papyri, third century, containing fragments of Plato's *Republic*.  
Wikipedia



## The Dialogues of Plato

I can't suggest a favorite or a most important work of Plato. Plato's philosophy is unfolded in the drama of Socratic dialogue: Plato constructs and records conversations between his teacher, Socrates, and his fellow students.

The dialogues of Plato initiate the great questions of philosophy: What is knowledge? What is wisdom? What is goodness? Who, what and where am I? What is truth?

Among the most important and most touching dialogues of Plato are the *Apology*, in which Plato defends the contemplative life and the search for truth; *Euthyphro*, which explores the meaning of piety and religious devotion; *Phaedo*, which reflects on the soul and tells the story of the death of Socrates; and *Crito*, which deals with justice and injustice and the proper response to injustice in the world.

*Gorgias* is a particularly valuable dialogue today, because it provides insight into the relationship between politics, justice and natural law; Plato insists that political ethics must always be rooted in objective truth. *Republic* is a much longer work, among Plato's best, in which Socrates explores the nature of justice, the state and the soul.

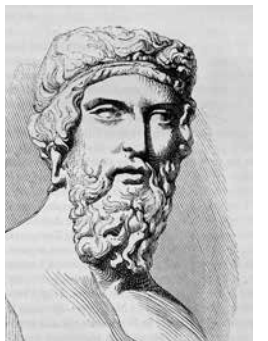
Plato was not a Christian. In fact, he wrote 350 years before the birth of Jesus Christ.

But his ideas — about being, about justice and about virtue — have some similarities to the Christian worldview, and they have influenced many of Christianity's most important thinkers — among them St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas and Pope Benedict XVI.

Plato is not always easy to understand, but reading his dialogues and reflecting on them is an encouragement to consider life's most important questions.

"A man who is good for anything," wrote Plato, "ought not to calculate the chance of living or dying; he ought only to consider whether in doing anything he is doing right or wrong — acting the part of a good man or of a bad."

If we wish to become good men and women, Plato's dialogues have a great deal to teach us.



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### Socratic Method

"The method of inquiry and instruction employed by Socrates, especially as represented in the dialogues of Plato and consisting of a series of questionings, the object of which is to elicit a clear and consistent expression of something supposed to be implicitly known by all rational beings."

—Merriam-Webster.com





At right, Don Quixote and Rocinante, after the battle with the windmill, from *The History of Don Quixote* book, published in 1880 in London; drawings by Gustave Dore. Shutterstock Below, depiction of the end of the 1381 peasant's revolt, during the time Chaucer was writing. Included are two images of Richard II: One looks on while the other is talking to the peasants. Date c. 1385-1400 unknown / Wikipedia



### 'Tilting at Windmills'

Together, Dante Alighieri (at right, top), Geoffrey Chaucer (at right, middle) and Miguel de Cervantes (at right, bottom) are probably the greatest patriarchs of modern literature. Their work spans 300 years, from the early 14th century until the early 17th century. Their work represents a bridge between the epic poetry of ancient cultures and the modern novels of the contemporary world. Each of them helped to cement the use of the written word in vernacular languages. And together they represent the incredible use of narrative fiction to tell the stories of pilgrim souls — journeying, with flaws, weaknesses, delusions and sin, towards Jesus Christ.

Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* and Cervantes' *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha* are not always easy reads, but they are worthwhile. *The Divine Comedy* is the account of a pilgrim journeying through the realms of the dead: through hell, through purgatory and into the glory of paradise. *The Canterbury Tales* contain dozens of tales, told by a group of pilgrims journeying together to a holy shrine. And *Don Quixote* is a story both tragic and glorious all at once. It is the story of a man who sets off, with great zeal, to perform heroic deeds — but who doesn't see the reality of the world around him. For example, thinking them to be giant marauders, he jousts with windmills, never realizing the pitiful futility of his undertaking.

But Don Quixote is, in his own way, a pilgrim. He is seeking after holy greatness. Like all of us, his own perceptions mar his efforts, despite the purity of his intentions. But we can learn from Don Quixote the value of tenacity and fortitude, of pursuing noble ideals even when we might be seen as pitiful or tragic.

In Chaucer's work, we're exposed to the reality of humanity — exposed to its brokenness and its glory, to its desolations and its hopes.

In Dante's work, we're exposed to the glory of God — and to the gravity of damnation and redemption.

Dante, Chaucer and Cervantes have influenced me profoundly. Together, in some sense, they pave the way for the modern world. In another sense, they are the antidote to the modern world — reminding us of how good the world is when seen through the eyes of faith, looking towards Providence and rooted in hope.



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*"This mountain is so formed that it is always wearisome when one begins the ascent, but becomes easier the higher one climbs."*

— Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio*



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### Confessions by St. Augustine

*"Late have I loved you, O Beauty ever ancient, ever new; late have I loved you! You were within me, but I was outside, and it was there that I searched for you. In my unloveliness, I plunged into the lovely things which you created. You were with me, but I was not with you. ... You called, you shouted, and you broke through my deafness. You flashed, you shone, and you dispelled my blindness. You breathed your fragrance on me; I drew in breath, and now I pant for you. I have tasted you; now, I hunger and thirst for more. You touched me, and I burned for your peace."*

St. Augustine's *Confessions* is a work of beauty and a work of genius. The book is the spiritual autobiography of Augustine of Hippo, the fourth- and fifth-century Christian convert, theologian and bishop.

*Confessions* is a love story, really — the story of a soul created by God, loved by God and transformed by God.

It is also an account of the realities of sin; the story of sin altering our perceptions and hopes, drawing us far from the happiness to which God has called us. Above all, Augustine's *Confessions* is a witness to the intimate friendship God desires with each of us and the degree to which he will pursue us in love and friendship.

There is one student of Augustine, in particular, whose work is also worth attention for all readers. Boethius was a Roman senator in the sixth century after Christ. He read Augustine carefully, as well as Plato and Aristotle. He wrote excellent works of philosophy and theology. He also wrote on music, astronomy, geometry and arithmetic.

In 523, Boethius was falsely accused of treason, imprisoned and eventually executed. While in prison, he wrote his most famous work, *The Consolation of Philosophy* — a short series of reflections on justice, happiness and goodness.

Pope Benedict XVI wrote that, while writing *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Boethius "learned not to sink into a fatalism that extinguishes hope. He teaches us that it is not the event but Providence that governs, and Providence has a face. It is possible to speak to Providence because Providence is God."

The goodness of God's providence is a lesson Augustine teaches well. Boethius learned it in prison. And we, too, in reading the work of St. Augustine, can learn to recognize the face of God's providence.



Fresco of St. Augustine and his mother, St. Monica, in Basilica di Sant'Agostino (Augustine) by Pietro Gagliardi, 19th century. Renata Sedmakova / Shutterstock

*"You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."*

— St. Augustine

### Make Time to Read

- Challenge yourself to read for five, 10, 15 or 30 minutes a day.
- Choose a worthy book, and have the whole family read a chapter a day and discuss what you read at the dinner table.



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### Literary Company

Interested in starting a book club or literary circle? Gather some friends together at church or at your local library, choose some good reads, and enjoy! Literary journals can offer inspiration: Check out *Dappled Things* (DappledThings.org), *Image* (ImageJournal.org), *Pilgrim* (PilgrimJournal.com), *Second Spring* (ThomasMoreCollege.edu/books-lectures/second-spring-journal/) and *St. Austin Review* (StAustinReview.com). Other solid resources are the American Chesterton Society, with chapter information at [Chesterton.org/local-societies/](http://Chesterton.org/local-societies/), and the book clubs found at [CatholicMom.com/book\\_club.htm](http://CatholicMom.com/book_club.htm) and [FathersforGood.org/ffg/en/fathers\\_bookshelf/index.html](http://FathersforGood.org/ffg/en/fathers_bookshelf/index.html).



**THE GLOBE THEATER.** A reconstruction of the Globe Theater, an Elizabethan playhouse in the London borough of Southwark, on the south bank of the River Thames, was originally built in 1599. It was destroyed by fire in 1613, rebuilt in 1614 and then demolished in 1644. The modern reconstruction is an academic approximation based on the 1599 and 1614 buildings. It was founded by the actor and director Sam Wanamaker, built near the site of the original theater and opened to the public in 1997, with a production of *Henry V*. Lance Bellers/Kamira/Shutterstock

### William Shakespeare's Plays

If you know the characters of Shakespeare — Shylock, Hamlet, Lear, Henry, Macbeth, Puck, Ophelia, Falstaff, Rosencratz and Guildenstern — they can seem as real as the people you've known your entire life.

William Shakespeare was a master playwright and poet of the English language — and his genius was creating characters and stories that reflect what is best about us and what is worst.

Most people have had some brush with Shakespeare in high school or college literature classes. But the plays of Shakespeare seem to have more meaning each time they're read or faithfully performed. Catholic author and speaker Benjamin Wiker rightly says that "a single sentence of Shakespeare is filled to overflowing with layers of meaning integrated into the larger play."

To understand the deepest meaning of Shakespeare's plays, we need to read them often. But even a person who has never read Shakespeare will be riveted by the playwright's understanding of the human person: of real temptations, real desires and real choices — and of their consequences.

There is considerable evidence to suggest that Shakespeare was probably a Catholic. If this is true, it gives a lens through which to understand the meaning of his work. But even without that lens, principles of Christian virtue are evidenced in all of Shakespeare's work. In fact, the Catholic literary critic Joseph Pearce says that Shakespeare is "a tradition-oriented Christian moralist whose works represent a sublime response to ... modern and postmodern errors."

To begin reading Shakespeare, I recommend five of his most powerful plays.

*King Lear* tells the tale of a flawed father abandoned by his daughters, but ultimately redeemed in suffering and in love.

*Hamlet* is the story of a young prince, haunted by his father's murder and driven towards a tragic path of revenge.

*Macbeth* is the story of a husband and wife, consumed and destroyed by a quest for power.

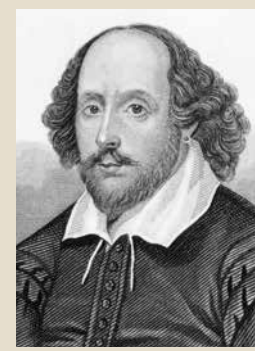
*Henry V* tells the complicated history of the Battle of Agincourt and displays the glory and the tragedy of warfare.

*The Merchant of Venice* is a fascinating story of friendship, of mercy and of heroism — and it includes some of the most vivid Shakespearean characters.

Reading Shakespeare — and especially the plays above — can be a moving experience. Other plays, like *Twelfth Night* or *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, are wonderful poetry and riotously funny. Still more, like *Measure for Measure*, are meaningful morality plays.

And Shakespeare is particularly well-suited to be read aloud. A few friends, with a few hours to spare, can read a play together, aloud, and experience the drama of Shakespeare's work. "Shakespeare is not great because he is free from such lowly things as religious belief and the moral law," says Anthony Esolen, "but because he makes compelling their beauty."

The world is compelling and beautiful. Shakespeare helps us to see and understand that beauty.



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*"The love of heaven makes one heavenly."*

— William Shakespeare

### Shakespeare's Plays

Bishop Conley's favorite Shakespeare plays are: *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Henry V* and *The Merchant of Venice*.

- *All's Well That Ends Well*
- *Antony and Cleopatra*
- *As You Like It*
- *The Comedy of Errors*
- *Coriolanus*
- *Cymbeline*
- *Hamlet*
- *Henry IV, Part 1*
- *Henry IV, Part 2*
- *Henry V*
- *Henry VI, Part 1*
- *Henry VI, Part 2*
- *Henry VI, Part 3*
- *Henry VIII*
- *Julius Caesar*
- *King Edward III*
- *King John*
- *King Lear*
- *Love's Labour's Lost*
- *Macbeth*
- *Measure for Measure*
- *The Merchant of Venice*
- *The Merry Wives of Windsor*
- *A Midsummer Night's Dream*
- *Much Ado About Nothing*
- *Othello*
- *Pericles*
- *Richard II*
- *Richard III*
- *Romeo and Juliet*
- *The Taming of the Shrew*
- *The Tempest*
- *Timon of Athens*
- *Titus Andronicus*
- *Troilus and Cressida*
- *Twelfth Night*
- *Two Gentlemen of Verona*
- *Two Noble Kinsmen*
- *The Winter's Tale*



*Shylock and Jessica* by Maurycy Gottlieb (1856-1879) Wikipedia





An engraving in *A Tale of Two Cities*, titled 'The Sea Rises' by Hablot K. Browne (Phiz), published by Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1894. Wikipedia

### Dickens' Dramas

Bishop Conley recommends: *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Great Expectations*, *David Copperfield* and *Bleak House*.

#### Novels

- *Barnaby Rudge*
- *Bleak House*
- *David Copperfield*
- *Dombey and Son*
- *Great Expectations*
- *Hard Times*
- *The Hated Man and the Ghost's Bargain*
- *Little Dorrit*
- *Martin Chuzzlewit*
- *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*
- *Nicholas Nickleby*
- *The Old Curiosity Shop*
- *Oliver Twist*
- *Our Mutual Friend*
- *The Pickwick Papers*
- *A Tale of Two Cities*

#### Christmas Books

- *A Christmas Carol*
- *The Chimes*
- *The Cricket on the Hearth*
- *The Battle of Life*



Marley's ghost from *A Christmas Carol*; illustration by John Leech. Public domain/Wikipedia

## A Tale of Two Cities by Charles Dickens

I must confess that I like Charles Dickens very much. I've read his works since college, and I expect I'll continue to read his works. His novels are clever, interesting, often funny and very moving. Dickens wrote about the things he knew — the poverty he knew, the struggles he knew and the characters he knew.

He wrote for ordinary men and women who lived lives much like those of his characters: full of hard work, high hopes and great love.

Dickens wrote from his experience, from his imagination and from his Christianity — he worshipped devoutly as an Anglican and worked for years on a retelling of the Christian story. The hope of Dickens' work was that everyday people would be seen for what they were: beloved sons and daughters of God, endowed with an unshakeable dignity.

*A Tale of Two Cities* is among Dickens' best work, as are *Great Expectations*, *David Copperfield* and *Bleak House*. *A Tale of Two Cities*, the first book by this author I ever read, is a classically Dickensian novel. A summary of the twisting plot would fail to do the book justice. The novel takes place during the French Revolution, across Paris and London, and among characters, good and evil, who experience death and life, darkness and light and, ultimately, redemption and resurrection.

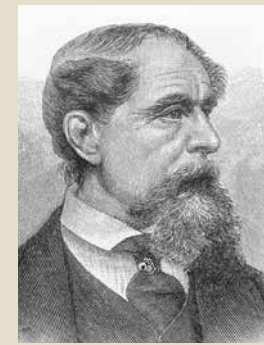
*A Tale of Two Cities* is not Dickens' funniest novel, nor his most tragic. Certainly, it contains humor and tragedy. But *A Tale of Two Cities* is a story of humanity — of real people, confronting difficult situations, sometimes at their worst and sometimes at their best. It is a story of families and of friendship. It is a story of our own human hearts, longing and striving, and the surprising grace of God.

Before his death, Dickens wrote: "I have always striven in my writings to express veneration for the life and lessons of Our Saviour; because I feel it."

Dickens' work can be thought of as a kind of literary social commentary. He gave faces and names to the social classes that comprised his world. He showed the poor what it was to be aristocratic, and he showed the aristocracy what it was to be poor. He demonstrated that vice has broad consequences, and so does virtue. His work calls for awareness that society can undermine the humanity of real people, in ways that are often unintended but are nonetheless profound.

Many believers have written compelling social commentary. Fyodor Dostoevsky, who wrote *The Brothers Karamazov*, among other things, examined sin, grace and redemption in the context of families, the Church and the state. And Sigrid Unset, a Norwegian convert who wrote just decades after Dickens, is the author of *Kristin Lavransdatter*, a beautiful trilogy that demonstrates the way in which Christian culture leads to justice and holiness for its citizens.

Each of these novels can point out injustice — and point the way to justice and to the source of justice in Jesus Christ.



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## Death Comes for The Archbishop by Willa Cather

Last year, I had the opportunity to visit Willa Cather's home in Red Cloud, Neb. The plains outside of Red Cloud are what Cather called "the material out of which countries are made." Red Cloud is a beautiful place, and standing there makes it obvious why the open skies of Nebraska were the inspiration for one of America's greatest authors.

But growing up in Red Cloud, in the 1880s and 1890s, Cather was touched by more than just the scenery of Nebraska prairie. She was touched by the people who had come from many places to farm that prairie. She was touched by people who set out from foreign cities with their families to sow seeds and harvest crops in land they had never seen. She was touched by their hope, their optimism and their fortitude — and by the losses they endured as they traveled to new lives.

*Death Comes for the Archbishop* is a historical novel. It is a fictionalized account of the first missionary bishop of Santa Fe, whom Cather names Jean Marie Latour. The story is his journey west, his struggle to proclaim and live the Gospel, his friendship with a brother priest and, ultimately, his quiet death.

The story is familiar to me, because it parallels the story of Santa Fe's real bishop, Jean Baptiste Lamy, and his good friend, the first bishop of Denver, Joseph Projectus Machebeuf.

What animates the book is the incredible scenery Cather describes and the compelling sense of mission the friends share. Together, they are working to build the kingdom of God, and Cather captures their motivation perfectly. She drew from the stories she'd heard about them and from those she'd known in Red Cloud, who had also made improbable journeys motivated by hope and by confidence in God's will.

Cather captures their sorrow and their triumph. In spare prose, she writes real meaning.

Consider the triumph, the friendship and the joy she portrays when the pair arrive in Santa Fe:

"The young Bishop was not alone in the exaltation of that hour; beside him rode Father Joseph Vaillant, his boyhood friend, who had made this long pilgrimage with him and shared his danger. The two rode into Santa Fe together, claiming it for the glory of God!"

*Death Comes for the Archbishop* is a particularly meaningful work for Christians. And its imagery is particularly poignant for those who love the American West. Its characters depict the truest virtues of loyalty, fraternity and friendship.

But *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is a story of struggle and hope, failure and victory — a story of living and dying for things far more important than ourselves.

## Conclusion: 'Renewal of Minds'

Books form culture. Good books, well-read and well-reflected, form good and holy culture.

Good books form good minds and good hearts. Good books form good lives. Good poems do the same thing. So do good pieces of music, good paintings and good plays.

It would be a worthwhile project to list some of those as well, and one I might accomplish — after rereading the books I've suggested to you.

The books and authors I've listed are a place to start the formation of your literary imagination and all that comes with it.

I will pray they will lead to more books, more authors and more genres — to more discoveries in library stacks and bookstores. I pray they will lead to wisdom.

May these books be a source of joy, and may they be a source of wonder. May each of us, as St. Paul prays, "Be transformed by the renewal of our minds."

— Bishop James Conley



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## The Betrothed by Alessandro Manzoni

Pope Francis is astoundingly well-read. In interviews, he reports reading the classics: writer Fyodor Dostoevsky and poet Gerard Manley Hopkins — and he often makes references to modern novelists and poets. He has expressed, in homilies and letters, the importance of literary beauty. And one of his favorite books, Alessandro Manzoni's *The Betrothed*, published in 1825, is one I also treasure.

I lived in Italy for 10 years. While I was there, I discovered that every Italian high-schooler reads *I Promessi Sposi* (*The Betrothed*). The book is a rite of passage; it is truly Italy's national novel. And the book can give us real insight into the heart and mind of Pope Francis.

Last year, in an interview printed in *America*, Pope Francis said, "I have read *The Betrothed*, by Alessandro Manzoni, three times, and I have it now on my table because I want to read it again. Manzoni gave me so much. When I was a child, my grandmother taught me by heart the beginning of *The Betrothed*: 'That branch of Lake Como that turns off to the south between two unbroken chains of mountains ...'"

As the Holy Father remembers, *The Betrothed* begins with a beautiful description of the countryside around Lake Como in northern Italy. It is the story of a young couple, Renzo and Lucia, who live in that region during the 17th century.

Renzo and Lucia want to be married. But a local nobleman, who wants Lucia for himself, does everything he can to stop the wedding. He intimidates the local priest. He partners with a shadowy villain. He plots to ruin Renzo and Lucia's kindly friends. And he kidnaps Lucia and hides her in a mountain castle.

Renzo, though, is unable to rescue Lucia. He is exiled, and then caught up in a riot and then a plague. He ends up very far from Lucia, working hopelessly in a factory.

The young couple is not reunited by anyone's heroics. Renzo is not able to save the day. Instead, they are saved by an unmistakable act of God's grace.

*The Betrothed* hangs on the power of God's mercy to transform hearts in a radical way. The story demonstrates how God can work — and how much our prayers and our sacrifices might impact others.

*The Betrothed* is not popular in the United States, but it should be. The book is an extraordinary story for our times.

It is very tempting for us to view those with whom we disagree as our enemies. It is also tempting to believe that we have the power to save ourselves — that with hard work and ingenuity we can resolve any problem.

*The Betrothed*, in a beautiful, adventurous and often funny story, reminds us that the real enemy is Satan and that the truest victor is Jesus Christ.



*Venetian Lovers* by Paris Bordone, from between 1525 and 1530, oil on canvas. Wikipedia



Jorge Bergoglio taught literature and psychology at the Immacolata College in Santa Fe between 1964 and 1965; and then, in 1966, he taught the same subjects at the University of El Salvador, in Buenos Aires. Giulio Napolitano / Shutterstock

## The English-Catholic Literary Revival

For a little more than 100 years, between 1850 and 1960, British authors produced great Catholic literature and poetry at an astonishing rate. Some of them — like J.R.R. Tolkien, G.K. Chesterton and Blessed John Henry Newman — are very well known. Others, like Robert Hugh Benson and Hilaire Belloc, are not as universally appreciated. Some, like Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh, struggled with the meaning of Catholicism until their deaths. One — who produced literature thoroughly imbued with Catholic principles — was not even a Catholic: C.S. Lewis.

This group of writers, and many of their friends and contemporaries, produced books with insight into our modern problems and perspectives and to the eternal source of grace in Jesus Christ. They were imaginative, clever, forthright and strong.

Books like Greene's *The Power and the Glory* or Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* produce characters with constitutions and weaknesses very much like our own. Other works, like Tolkien's Middle Earth epics or Lewis' *Space Trilogy*, produce entire worlds that point us to Christ. The poetry of Belloc, the essays of Chesterton and the sermons of Newman depict that Christ moves in our own world and in our own hearts.

There are too many works to recommend. Pick up these authors, and prepare to laugh heartily, but also to see clearly, with stunning insight, the power, the order, the love and the glory of God. I was first introduced to this world of the English-Catholic Literary Revival during my undergraduate years in college, and it was reading these authors that finally made me a Catholic.



J.R.R. TOLKIEN / AP PHOTO



G.K. CHESTERTON / WIKIPEDIA



JOHN HENRY NEWMAN / WIKIPEDIA

### Who Were the Inklings?

The friendships among the English Catholic Literary Revival were mostly fostered among the Inklings, an informal group of writers who gathered in Oxford pubs, most especially *The Eagle and the Child*, which they called "The Bird and the Baby." Most of the Inklings were serious Christians, and many of them were very serious Catholics. They read their work together and offered commentary, suggestions and support. Mostly, they were friends who understood the power of telling stories — a power to build common virtues and a common culture. The Inklings are a model for nurturing the Catholic intellectual life. The spirit of their group — friendship, Christian unity and high and noble imagination — is precisely what brings joy to the Catholic mind.

The regulars included:

- J.R.R. Tolkien
- Tolkien's son, Christopher Tolkien
- C.S. Lewis
- Lewis' elder brother, Warren Lewis



Picture of *The Eagle and Child* pub facade, in Oxford, England, where the Inklings would meet. Wikipedia

*"I was first introduced to this world of the English-Catholic Literary Revival during my undergraduate years in college, and it was reading these authors that finally made me Catholic."*

— Bishop Conley