



Franchi, L. (2017) The importance of reading. *Chéile: A Catholic School Ethos Journal*, 28, pp. 15-16.

This is the author's final accepted version.

There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/154244/>

Deposited on: 21 December 2017

Enlighten – Research publications by members of the University of Glasgow

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk>

The Importance of Reading

Not that long ago, people went to university to ‘read a subject’. This neat phrase encapsulated the primary task of the student: first to read then reflect, critique and, in due course, write. My abiding memory of studying in the Faculty of Arts at one of Scotland’s ancient universities is of a deep and critical reading of wonderful literature from Spain and Italy: Calvino, Cervantes, Dante, Petrarch, St John of the Cross...

We should not overstate the importance of education. How could we when we hear daily of the pressure piled on schools to produce excellent results and meet pre-set targets. Such focus on, for example, learning outcomes, while not wholly negative, runs the risk of burying the need to read quietly and leisurely under the smothering blanket of activity, weakening the charmed conversation across the generations which serious reading encourages.

Catholic educators are heirs to a tradition rooted in the monastic communities of the early medieval period. The Benedictine focus on the Word of God made the practice of *lectio divina* a guiding light for the Church. This gave us, albeit at times slowly, an appreciation of how words could accompany the light-filled images adorning medieval Christendom.

The present age, marked by social media, rapid transient images and fleeting relationships must recapture the joy of reading. This is where Catholic educators can lead the way. How can we do this? Some suggestions follow.

Professional Development

- Professional development, intrinsic to the life of Catholic educators, should encourage depth of subject knowledge and skill in pedagogy. All educators must be at home in the history of their subject and familiar with current developments. Professional development for Catholic educators includes close familiarity with Church teaching on education. The post-Vatican II corpus on Catholic education is a jewel awaiting discovery, offering insights and guidance which go beyond simple guidance on the strictly religious aspect of Catholic education.

Faith Development

- In terms of faith development, spiritual reading must be part of the life of the Catholic teacher. Scripture, especially the Gospels, forms the core of spiritual reading. A daily reading of a Gospel passage is an encounter with the living presence of Jesus; it makes the reader Gospel-shaped, opening our eyes and hearts to the parables and miracles of Jesus. To know the Gospels is to feed oneself in preparation for the feeding of others.
- Prayerful engagement with Scripture can be accompanied by wider spiritual reading. This includes the lives of the saints and spiritual classics: *The Imitation of Christ* (Thomas à Kempis), *Story of a Soul* (St Thérèse of Lisieux) and *Christ is Passing By* (St Josemaria Escrivá) are examples of accessible books with deep spiritual insights.
- Faith development requires a gradual awareness of Catholic theology. We need illumination on key ideas and guidance in matters both complex and profound. Essential texts here are the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and the *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*. How often do we make use of them for study and, indeed, prayer?

Cultural Enrichment

- The sensible teacher knows when to stop work and begin reading for pleasure. Good literature, for example, offers more than just escapism from work and daily routine: it provides a window into many other worlds, enriching our imagination and, ideally, widening our horizons. The ‘classics’ provide a cultural thread connecting past to present. To read the work of Charles Dickens is not a flight from reality but an opportunity to think deeply about justice, love and the good of society. And let’s not forget poetry: ‘Miss Jean Brodie was reciting poetry to the class at a quarter to four, to raise their minds before they went home’.

How to Read

- The advent of myriad electronic devices has made reading more accessible and, on occasion, more comfortable. Hefty classic novels are now easily portable and the various interfaces available provide opportunities for note-taking and sharing with other readers. This has the potential to enhance the way we read.
- Nonetheless, there is much to be said for the timeless pleasure of reading a well-bound and finely-illustrated book. We can also mention the joy of browsing second hand book stores and finding old books annotated and dated by previous readers. (I have one such collection of poetry which I picked up, a prize to a school leaver in the late 19th century!) Traditional books, we might now argue, could become the ‘new technology’ of those weaned on electronic devices.

Teachers are, of course, busy people. To ensure that time is set aside for reading, a light touch plan could be drawn up: five minutes a day to Scripture and the Catechism; 15 minutes a day to a novel, for example. Why not start up informal reading groups in schools for teachers? Go for it.