***“So, which books are you reading?”***

I once had a priest who was also a university instructor, who typically greeted people with the words, “So, which books are you reading?” I can remember the first time I heard him ask that, and my mind went to the books that I had recently read, reread or was in the process of reading. What was amazing about his question, for me, was that it took me back to a time in Manhattan (NYC) when I was walking down the hallway (as a clerical “handler” that day) with Archbishop Michael Ramsey, the Archbishop of Canterbury. We were on the floor of the church where the “Rector’s Study” was, and he wanted to go into that room. He looked carefully at each shelf of books, and then turned to me and said, “I like to go into priests’ libraries so that I can see when their brain stopped working.” I simply had no words other than, “Yes, your Grace.”

His point, and also the point made by my priest, have stayed with me. The “Rector/Vicar/Dean’s Study” is almost now always called “The Office,” and with the reality of technology that has developed since the Archbishop made his comment to me in 1974, many clergy (and others) simply read whatever pops up when they Google a particular word. On one hand we can now discover more than we ever would have imagined, but I fear that we are becoming so utilitarian in our reading habits that we now depend upon what used to be called “newscasters,” who are now News Personalities, Wikipedia, and Blog Sites, for our information. It causes me to wonder how many sermons on Sunday have been researched online in a Google search. On one hand, that may be good if the researcher is discovering more and more resources that they formerly did not know. I am very suspicious of how so often today we are discovering clergy who have had no residential experience. Apart from the reality of formation, within the context of the Eucharistic Community, there is the other reality of not living a brief walk away from the Library. One may contend that what’s in a library is also on the internet, but that simply is not true. I can honestly say that some of the books that I need in my particular specialized areas of study are nowhere to be found on line. It is no wonder that the clergy now have “offices” instead of “studies,” because there is a definable, functional need to conduct the administration of a Church. The experience of a residential seminary environment allows for spaces of time for study and for reading books that often are on the “recommended reading” section of a course syllabus, but don’t usually make it to our desk.

Many of us were brought up with the principle that we should always have three books that we are working on - often on three different subjects, one of which is “light reading.” I fear that the computer screen and television screen now take up more space in our minds than books do. Books are friends. We can look on our library shelves and see a title that reminds us where we were and what we were doing when we first read the book. We treasure books, and we give them to our children, grandchildren and friends with a tug at our heart, hoping that they will enjoy our friend as much as we did. Reading books allows us to create a world of imagination where we can visualize the characters, and if we have heard the author speak, imagine that the author is right in front of us speaking to us.

The utilitarian nature of many disciplines today is such that many are of the attitude, educationally speaking, that they should only study and read books, and take courses, that relate to the narrow occupational/vocational choice they have made. Moreover all too often utilitarian means that we think almost exclusively in the language which we speak rather than in the language in which the book was written. Sadly, for most of us in the United States, that means that we use words in English that have deeper meanings in the languages which were used in the documents, and simply do not translate well into English. There are even seminaries, now, that no longer require some level of competence in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, and a review of the courses offered indicates that there is a greater emphasis on “experience.” Moreover, if we really ponder it, the Clergy as a “professional” category are one of the professional groups that does not require Continuing Education. Sadly, what that means is that if the clergy have had an excellent three years residential training, they may well have taken no more classes during their ministry. It reminds me of a story by the sometime Dean of Nashotah House and Sixth Bishop of the Diocese of Quincy, the Rt. Rev. Donald J. Parsons. It seems that while he was still Dean and Professor of New Testament and Ascetical Theology that a priest who had graduated about five years prior, came to Dean Parsons with a spiritual problem. He told the Dean that he was having a miserable time meditating. He said the Daily Office and celebrated Daily Mass, but he was having a terrible time meditating. Dean Parsons then asked him, “Tell me which of the Spiritual Classics you are currently reading.” The priest replied, “Oh, Father, I spent three years doing all of the required reading in seminary, and now that I am a parish priest, I simply don’t have enough time to read and reread books on the Spiritual Life.” The Dean looked at him and said, “Then you need to get on your knees and thank God that what you learned in three years about the spiritual life has lasted five years!” The follow up questions were always the difficult ones: “How often do you make your confession and how often do you see your spiritual director?” I have no reason to believe that the young priest was not a successful parish administrator or, as a priest, was not consoling in a pastoral way, but what was his treasure house? What was the pool that he drank from? It is far too simple to say, “I rely on the Holy Spirit, and I say and do what the Holy Spirit tells me.” I fear that we forget that others have encountered the Holy Spirit since Pentecost, and their witness throughout the ages has informed and inspired many. I fear that we live in a culture where we have limited God’s actions either to our own personal opinion of “The Golden Age” or tragically, even worse MY experience in MY lifetime. In fact, many of our “books” are treasures waiting to be discovered by us that will take us outside of our narrow view of God’s hand at work.

In the end, I am concerned that reading is rapidly becoming a lost art: grandparents and parents reading to children, Godparents giving a book each year to those whom they have promised to raise in the Faith, and people grabbing a remote device for their television before they would ever think of grabbing a book.

So…which books are you reading? Have you considered giving books as Christmas presents this year, with a special message in it written by you?