

# The Intelligent Catholic's Guide™ to Catholic Reading

Before he died, the well-known Catholic publisher Neil McCaffrey created a list of his personal favorite books. We quote him here. “This is not meant to be a list of the best Catholic books (a task beyond my competence), nor is it even confined to books by Catholics,” he wrote. “It is simply a list of many of my own favorites, books I think will be instructive and heartening to Catholics in these grey days.”

The list is a good point of departure to help Catholics discover not only good Catholic literature, but good reading in general. It contains both fiction and non fiction, and will lead a reader beyond simply these books to explore other books by the authors included below.

The following is a sample of what Mr. McCaffrey wrote:

## **John Henry Newman**

The most original religious thinker and the finest preacher in the English-speaking Catholic world. [*About to be beatified at a Mass that Pope Benedict himself will say – Ed.*] Of some forty volumes of Newman's works and another thirty hefty volumes of letters and diaries, these stand out:

**PAROCHIAL AND PLAIN SERMONS.** These eight volumes, written in Newman's Anglican days, were reissued decades after his conversion and required only a few footnoted corrections to flag beliefs he no longer held. Extraordinary for their insight into our weaknesses and the prescriptions for how we might improve – the whole flavored by an astonishing ability to cite the apt Scriptural text at every step. Michael Davies collected in **NEWMAN AGAINST THE LIBERALS** twenty-five of these that are particularly good for Catholics today.

*Ed. note: Ignatius Press keeps PAROCHIAL AND PLAIN SERMONS in print in one missal-sized volume.*

**AN ESSAY ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE.** Liberals claim this seminal work as their justification for dismantling Catholic doctrine. Either they haven't read it, or they're playing loose with the truth. Newman was fiercely orthodox, and showed why orthodoxy requires that we distinguish defined doctrine from its corollaries and from pious beliefs. Most important today, he gives the seven norms for distinguishing true and false developments.

THE IDEA OF A UNIVERSITY. Why these interminable conferences on the meaning of education? This is the definitive book on education, and on Catholic education.

APOLOGIA PRO VITA SUA. Not to be read as a complete autobiography (it isn't detailed enough, and in any case Newman lived another twenty-five years), this is rather an extraordinary revelation of a subtle mind and a sensitive soul.

THE PILLAR OF THE CLOUD/THE LIGHT IN WINTER. Meriol Trevor's two-volume life of Newman, though sometimes argumentative, is much the liveliest, best researched, most detailed biography.

A NEWMAN TREASURY. An anthology of Newman's writing by category, along with the essential biographical background. The best Newman sampler for those who want to see whether they'd like to read more of Newman.

## **Evelyn Waugh**

BRIDESHEAD REVISITED. My choice for the richest Catholic novel ever written, this powerfully recalls a Catholic culture now in ashes. The characters are as unforgettable as those of Dickens – and more deeply drawn by far.

HELENA. A novel about St. Helena and the finding of the True Cross, under Waugh's hand it becomes a tour de force mingling modernity and the Age of Constantine. Waugh's portrayal of the Arians foreshadows the behavior of their heirs in the postconciliar Church – uncannily, because he wrote the book in 1950 and never dreamt what was in the offing.

SWORD OF HONOR. Waugh's trilogy about World War II is based, loosely of course, on his own experiences and is by common consent the finest novel to come out of the conflict. And certainly the most satisfying, because the themes are Catholic, conservative and anti-communist.

RONALD KNOX. Waugh's life of his good friend, the stylish writer and eminent preacher of the preconciliar English Church, is not only a fascinating biography but also, in retrospect, the evocation of a golden period in the history of the Faith.

## **Ronald Knox**

ENTHUSIASM. Knox's masterpiece, a learned, sophisticated study of what in 1950 seemed a curious byway of Christianity, the religious emotionalism and quackery that flares up periodically over the centuries, always claiming the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

LET DONS DELIGHT. Another tour de force, and one only Knox could have written: conversations in an Oxford common room, every fifty years from 1588 to 1938. They

capture the religious and political currents of each period – *in the language and style of each*. A dazzling performance.

THE MASS IN SLOW MOTION. Msgr. Knox was Newman's heir as the great British Catholic preacher. Always the choice for great occasions at Westminster Cathedral, he was equally at home, as here, preaching before teenage girls. These are graceful, enlightening talks on each part of the Mass.

*Ed note. Roman Catholic Books has reissued this book.*

MEMORIES OF THE FUTURE: BEING THE MEMOIRS OF THE YEARS 1915-1972 WRITTEN IN THE YEAR OF GRACE 1988 BY OPAL, LADY PORSTOCK. Yet another tour de force, actually written in 1922, as Knox becomes an upper middle class English lady selecting from her diaries toward the end of our century. Delicious spoof, and sometimes remarkably prescient about social and moral trends.

## **Miscellaneous**

THEOLOGY AND SANITY, Frank Sheed's best. The first third is probably the clearest exposition of the Blessed Trinity and the nature of God ever written.

*Ed note. Ignatius Press has reissued MAP OF LIFE and TO KNOW CHRIST JESUS, also by Sheed.*

THE MOULDING OF COMMUNISTS, Frank S. Meyer. Probably the best analysis of how and why they get that way. Nobody who must deal with them, from popes to presidents on down, should dream of undertaking the chore without having mastered this book. Frank **knew**. He was a Communist in the 30s and early 40s, in charge of training recruits. (Later he became literary editor and keeper of the tablets at *National Review* during its best years, and friend to a thousand conservatives of every shade. He was received into the Church on his deathbed in 1972).

THE SCREWTAPE LETTERS, C S Lewis' most popular, and deservedly so. No book offers keener insights into our frailties, and how the tempters prey on them.

THE TEACHING OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH. Edited and assembled in 1948 by Canon George Smith from the earlier, prestigious TREASURY OF THE FAITH series, this two-volume compendium by some dozen solid British Catholic writers like Father D'Arcy and Martindale is weighty, reliable and comprehensible.

THE CHURCH IN COUNCIL, Philip Hughes. A popular survey of all the councils, written on the eve of Vatican II by the great British Catholic historian. Useful for those tempted to think that all the pronouncements of all the councils are the work of the Holy Ghost.

BY WHAT AUTHORITY?/THE KING'S ACHIEVEMENT/THE QUEEN'S TRAGEDY/ODDSFISH/COME RACK, COME ROPE. These, some of the better and better-known historical novels of Robert Hugh Benson, are wonderful stories that give a vivid picture of English Catholics in the centuries of persecution.

THE MAN ON A DONKEY, H.F.M. Prescott. Superb novel of English Catholics in the reign of Henry VIII.

KRISTEN LAVRANSDATTER, Sigred Unset. Powerful, earthy three-volume Catholic novel of medieval Norway that won its convert author the Nobel Prize.

SUICIDE OF THE WEST, James Burnham. Not a religious book, this is incomparably the best analysis of the liberal mind – in politics, religion, whatever. Essential reading for a world blighted by liberalism.

CATHOLICISM IN ENGLAND, David Mathew. Stylish, sophisticated historical survey by a remarkable man – **and** an archbishop. Will the English-speaking Church ever produce men like him again?

LIBERTY OR EQUALITY/LEFTISM, Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn. Challenging and original ideas (*thousands* of them) by the provocative Austrian Catholic conservative. He ranges across theology, politics, history, economics, sociology, just about everything, with a vision permeated by the Faith and illuminated by travel and wide-ranging reading.

MITRE AND CROOK, Bryan Houghton. An imaginative, boldly original novel about the crisis in the Church. Unlike so many books on this theme, Fr. Houghton's is a work of style and verve, more than a touch of wit, and deep feeling.

To add to and expand on this list, we suggest looking at Dr John Senior's list of 1000 Good Books. The list appears in DEATH OF CHRISTIAN CULTURE, originally published by Arlington House Publishers in the late 1970s, and recently reissued. It is available from Roman Catholic Books ([www.booksforcatholics.com](http://www.booksforcatholics.com)). The list is not a list of Catholic books, but rather a list of good books every Catholic can profit from.