Great men and women — great souls — are formed by great literature. Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas were steeped in the literary traditions of their times. St. John Paul II, canonized in Nebraska, is the shepherd of the world today, Bishop James D. Conley of the Diocese of Lincoln, about the Author, offers us insight into our families, our communities and ourselves. Great literature offers us insight into our relationship with God and the world.

BY BISHOP JAMES D. CONLEY

The men and women who have been most influential in my own life were readers, too. Professor John Senior, my teacher and spiritual mentor, was a man of letters. My grandfather was an avid reader of American history, and my father was a reader and writer — in his spare time, he wrote a book on our family’s Irish ancestry. The Russian playwright Anton Chekhov said, “The business of literature is to capture and revive the past.” I’m not certain that is true. Literature does those things, but it can also — the witness of ideas or characters or stories — point to us 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 values 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. Photography is ubiquitous. Abortion is routine. Civil and moral decadence 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 efforts of socialism, rather than spending time in the literary reading rooms. 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 suburbs, 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 borne of dull minds and small humanity. In the darkness of elective illiteracy, we’ve replaced the ideas and values that have informed Western history. We’ve replaced it with modern methods of education — too often favoring 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 crisis we consume today is mostly unexamining, at best. And the media itself — the technology by which we consume content — is very lonely. While the technocrats of our age presume to offer us our daily bread, and tablets offer great potential, it has been the effect of making so shuttered hooked on instant gratification, boxed within our 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-socketed — 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 literature, which once formed hearts and minds towards goodness, with garbage.

But literature — poetry and the fine arts — is the antidote to our flat-socketed culture. And it is critical to sustain our culture’s real vision. This essay includes a list of some of the books that have some worthwhile story to tell. Those books helped me in my journey to the Catholic Church and to Jesus Christ. I’m often asked for book recommendations. In fact, one reader was inspired by such a request from Catholic friends. Many of my friends know that I have had the benefit, undoubtedly, of an ordered literary formation that has become too rare these days. As a student in the Integrated Humanitas 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.

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Suggested Books

1. “Literature opens our imaginations to wonder. Reading good books exposes the contemplative part of our human dignity. Good books can spur us in 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 Laurentian Culta: “Let up your hearts.” That’s what 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 the renewal of Christian culture in our world should begin on our knees, in prayer. But we must also fight with books in our hands, being formed in the great traditions of the Christian mind.

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Leisure, the Basis of Culture by Josef Pieper

Josef Pieper (1900–1994) was a German philosopher, a professor of sociology and anthropology at the University of Münster, and a student of St. Thomas Aquinas, Plato, and Aristotle. 

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

Leisure, the Basis of Culture was written in 1952. The book explains that leisure—the capacity to perceive, contemplate and collaborate the world we’ve been given—is a gift of God. To fully humanize it is to accept the gift of leisure from God and to cultivate, preserve and share it. 

Leisure is, says Pieper, not about the absence of work—about idleness, leisure is about the cultivation of goodness in works about literature, music, cultural, and art. 

In 1959, Mortimer Adler wrote, “Leisure comes in activities about which I either will not play, but rather the expressions of moral and intellectual virtues—the things that a good man does because they are intrinsically good for him and for his society, making him a better 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 our children and our grandchildren can grow in wisdom. 

But leisure is open to 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 carrying our huge amounts of time to write a little book on our family’s history. He didn’t write the book for money or fame. He only had been read by my family. He did it, I think, as an act of leisure—a priest of quiet intellectual effort that brought him much pleasure and joy and pointed him to a deeper appreciation of his family. It was a project that helped him to see the sea, then you should not read 

... Those who read great works will read the same book many 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 community. I pray for Catholic book clubs and literary cir- 

cles, comprised of ordinary, everyday Catholics reading and reflecting on important ideas and beautiful stories. I pray that in our earth, a community, and in our world, a soluble nature. I hope for our struggle for leisure, and leisure has used it as the thin- 

side of the Christian life... 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 his family. It was a project that helped him to see the sea, then you should not read 

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 consider our life, work, family and home. It may be enough to read it and to imagine the spirit, stouter, the edge of the world until and the battles of Homer’s Odyssey. 

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 “Ilios,” of its heroes, Achilles and his friend with the warlike king Agamemnon. It is a story of pride, honor, and fate. 

Virgil’s The Aeneid, whose poetry is beautiful, relates the aftermath of the fall 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 many of the same themes as Homer’s work. 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 of almost all of Western literature and for much of the Western imagination. 

Homer’s The Odyssey

Odysses was a pilgrim — a husband, a father 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, fights to liberate his men and wife, and makes his way back across the sea. 

The story is adventurous and dangerous. The battles are vivid. The trials are real. It is an instructive story. Almost 5,000 years ago, Homer recognized the dangers our modern culture faces: apathy, escapism, lust, vanity and anger. 

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

But Plato’s book can be understood as a kind of a key— a broad sketch of the ways the literary imagi-

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“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.”

— Bishop Conley

The Dialogues of Plato

I can’t suggest a favorite or a most important work of Plato. Plato’s philosophy is unfolding 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? What, who and where are I? What are values? 

Among the most important and most touching dialogues of Plato are ones in which Plato defends the contemplative life. In The Symposium, the search for truth, beauty, and love, which explores the meaning of beauty and religious experience, Nations, which reflects on the soul and the nature of death of Socrates, and Crime, which deals with justice and justice and the proper way to live in the political world. 

Gorgias is a particularly valuable dia-

logue to provide insight into the relationship between politics, justice and natural law. Plato invites his students to consider whether the city-state is the only good form of government — in objective truth, Republic is a much lon-

ger and ultimately more persuasive book. In it, Socrates explores the nature of justice, morality and the common good. 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 resonance to the Christian world and they have influenced many of Christianity’s most important thinkers — Aquinas, St. Thomas, and the rest. 

Plato is not always easy to understand, but reading his dialogues and reflecting on them is an encouragement to us of something beyond ourselves. The good life. 

“Who are you who are 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.

Socratic Method

"The work of inquiry and instruction enables for societies, especially as rendered in the dialogues of Plato and constituting a whole chain of questions, the object of wisdom in this life to form a great good man or of a bad."
The History of Don Quixote was writing. Included are two images of Richard II: One looks like "This mountain is so formed that it is always a theater and opened to the public in 1997, with a production of Shakespeare's work. "Shakespeare is not great because he is free from such lowly reality—what is worst. They're read or faithfully performed. Catholic author and speaker Ben Berens 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 routed by the playwright's understanding of the human person: 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 evident in Shakespeare's work. In fact, the Catholic literary critic Joseph Pearce says that Shakespeare's "Christian-inspired Christian morality works upon a sublime response to... and postmodern pessimism." Shakespeare is the story of a young prince, haunted by his father's murder and drawn toward a tragic path of revenge. Hamlet is a story of a husband and wife, consumed and destroyed by a quest for power. Every VHS is the complicated history of the Battle of Agincourt and plays the glory and the tragedy of warfare. The Merchant of Venice is a fascinating study of friendship, of mercy and of honor—and it includes some of the most vivid Shakespearean characters. The King Lear is a study of madness—a and especially the play’s depiction of battle and war. Other plays, like The Tempest or Macbeth have their own moral perplexities. But Shakespeare is particularly well-suited to read aloud. A few friends, with a few hours to spare, can read together a play, aloud and experience the drama of its language. Shakespeare is not great because it is "from such lofty things as religious belief and the moral law," says Anthony Esolen, but because he makes compelling beauty. The world is compelling and beautiful. Shakespeare helps us to see and understand that beauty. For more information at Chesterton.org/local-lectures/second-spring-journal/) and St. Ignatius (PilgrimJournal.com), or the book itself found at St. Augustine Press (www.fathers-basketofbooks.com). Make Time to Read Shakespearean Plays Make Time to Read Shakespearean Plays Shakespeare, the English poet and playwright, is one of the most widely read authors of all time. "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." — St. Augustine Shakespearean Plays Shakespeare, the English poet and playwright, is one of the most widely read authors of all time. 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I was first introduced to this wonderful world of the English-Catholic Literary Revival during my undergraduate years in college, and it was reading these authors that finally made me Catholic.

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