SPIRITUAL STUDY*

The subject of the spiritual life, which we embarked upon last Sunday, is a major one. We saw that the spiritual life is like a road which sets out from this life with the aim of reaching heaven. It is a life propelled by the wings of the Holy Spirit, because it’s not possible to arrive in heaven on foot. We can’t get there by means of our own abilities, by our own efforts, or on the strength of our personal virtues. We must be carried on the powerful and swift wings of the Holy Spirit. We must rely entirely on divine grace, while at the same time toiling and striving with all our strength, sacrificing all that we have for the sake of union with Christ.

We subsequently looked at one of the ways to live a spiritual life, namely, marriage, which we said was a sacramental sign of the presence of God. In marriage, the Holy Spirit unites the present with the future, as well as every moment of our lives, with eternity. Today let us look at a second mystical sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit: spiritual study.

Beginning from childhood, most people spend a lot of time reading. And today, in the age of science, literature, and progress, you have to read a lot. If you don’t, it’s like being blind. You read and you urge your child to read, so he won’t be a failure in life. Everybody reads in accordance with his training and specialization, or depending on his education, capabilities, and his social position - some less, some more.

Your child, if he goes to school, may read works of philosophy, or the writings of ancient classical authors, in order to cultivate his mind. And I imagine that you certainly urge

1. See “Spiritual Life*, below, pp. 147-163.
him to study foreign languages, because they say that knowing a foreign language is like having an extra pair of eyes. Your child reads books on society, encyclopedia articles, scientific books, and I don’t know what else, in order to be in touch with the world around him; to be able to understand and communicate with others; to have his feet firmly on the ground when dealing with the circumstances and demands of life; to be, in short, an upstanding member of society.

All this is useful. But it isn’t enough, and neither can all of us read and study such books. And here we are speaking of the spiritual life, and thus about books which we must necessarily read, because we need them on our journey to heaven. When you read these books, you sense at once that God is speaking to you. They are tools for the spiritual life, and without them it is impossible to find paradise.

What are these books, which are so central to the Christian life? They exist in great numbers. They are those which we call, in a word, spiritual books. And because our theme today is spiritual study, which is a mystical sign of the Holy Spirit’s presence in our lives, permit me to speak only about certain kinds of spiritual books. It isn’t possible for me to deal with them all, but only those which the Church has singled out - based on her history, her life, and her blood - and given us for our daily pleasure and delight. These are books in which you don’t read human thoughts, human criteria, or human logic, but rather encounter the judgment and the logic of God, the Spirit of God. God speaks in these books. Who wrote these books? The authors were divinely inspired instruments who became the servants of the Holy Spirit.

I will focus on those books given to you by the Church. You open them up, and right away you realize that God is talking to you. You feel at once the beating of the Spirit’s wings. You feel God answering your questions. You see him dispersing your darkness, clearing away old obstacles, opening up new pathways. Then, filled with joy, you cry out: “Behold, I have begun to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes” (Gen 18.27). I have begun to converse with God, with my Christ. And who am I to speak with God? I am ashes, I am clay. But God does me this favor.

If you don’t have these books with you on your journey, you’ll never reach your goal. It is through these books that God calls you. It is through these books that he shows you were to go. He says to you: “Come, my child, ascend to the heights”. You feel this. You feel it like the holy man who would excuse himself from company by saying: “Someone is waiting for me in my room”. They didn’t know who it was. They thought it was a person, but he went to his books, where God was waiting for him.

What, then, are these books? First and foremost are those which are called patristic books, that is, the writings of the Fathers of the Church, those men, who we said, were the instruments of the Holy Spirit, and who were like fire when they spoke and lightning when they wrote. Thanks to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have left us their immortal masterpieces. Truly, what would the world be like without the Holy Fathers? They lived by prayer, in vigils, and in fasting. They loved God with all their soul, and God loved them unreservedly, deeming them worthy to leave us their immortal writings, more precious than all the gold in the world (cf. Ps 18.11; 118.72).

All the Fathers of the Church lived more or less the same way of life. If we take a look at one of them, St. Basil the Great, it will be as if we had before us a gathering of all the holy Fathers. St. Basil attended the greatest schools of his day, where he studied philosophy, rhetoric, astronomy, mathematics, and medicine. He became an orator. The future seemed to

smile on him, and his life was one success after another. But
what happened then? This beautiful soul, this shining mind,
this sensitive and God-enamored heart, was incapable of be-
ing enslaved to an earthly career. Thus he left his family and
friends and went to live in the deserts of Pontus. For five years
he lived a life of great hardship and deprivation, even though
he had been in ill health from his childhood, and many times
had come close to death. There he lived, in the mold and the
damp, under the most difficult conditions, in something like
a cellar, far away from the voices of men'.

One night, shortly after midnight, as his brother, St. Gre-
gory of Nyssa, tells us, there appeared to him an “outpouring
of light, and, by means of divine power, the entire dwelling
was illuminated by an immaterial light, having no source in
anything material”®. In his small hut, St. Basil was visited by
God. Divine lightning flashed forth, the darkness became like
day, and Basil himself became like the sun. All was a single
light, shining from a place nowhere in the world. Just as Christ
entered the upper room, although the doors and windows
were shut (Jn 20.26), so too did he enter into the room of St.
Basil the Great. And Basil saw him with the spiritual eyes of
his soul, and said: “What is more marvelous, more worthy of
love, than the beauty of God?”® On the basis of this divine il-
lumination, he wrote the masterpieces which he left behind
to illuminate us.

This is more or less how all the Fathers of the Church wrote
their books, through which they take us by the hand, and lead
us from one summit to another, from one peak to another,
passing beyond the stars, to the throne of God, and to the
friends of God, the saints. This is how St. Chrysostom wrote,
and this is how that eagle of the Spirit, St. Gregory the The-
ologian, wrote as well.

But, Father, you’ll say, all this is wonderful, but where are
we to find such books? Don’t worry. If you haven’t already
looked for them, you’ll see how easy it is to find them, and
read them, even if you’ve never gone to school, and have only
the most basic of educations. Today there are so many edi-
tions and translations of these books, that all of the Church
Fathers are readily accessible. Not long ago, your ever-mem-
orable Metropolitan, Dionysios, published two books con-
taining translations of the Church Fathers®. And there are
dozens of books containing the sermons of St. John Chrysos-
tom, and dozens more with the writings of Basil the Great,
Gregory the Theologian, St. Nikodemus of the Holy Moun-
tain, and so many other Fathers of the Church. And their mes-
sage is simple.

In reading them, your eyes will be opened (cf. Ps 18.9).
Imagine sitting in the dark, and suddenly I come near you,
and I shine a light in your face, and your eyes open wide and
are dazzled by the light – that’s exactly what will happen when
you read the writings of the Fathers of the Church. One could
also say that their writings are like lenses which enable us to
gaze steadily on the sun, on Christ himself.

Let’s turn now to another category of books, the lives of
the saints, the friends of the Church, who have bent down to
the breast of Christ, and live within his heart. They are Christ’s

4. St. Gregory the Theologian, *Funeral Oration on Basil the Great* 13, 14, 23 (PG 36.512-513, 525C-528); id., Letter 5 (PG 37.28C-29B).
7. I.e., Dionysios Charalambos, who became Metropolitan of Trikki and Stagon in 1959, and devoted himself to the revitalization of
monastic life in his Metropolis. Here the Elder is referring to the
family, and we must be with them, close to Christ. Do we know the saints of our Church? They are our brothers and sisters. We are members of the same family. We have the same father, God, and the same mother, the Church. We eat the same food, Holy Communion. We have all come forth from the same spiritual womb, have been nourished on the same milk, dined at the same table. Do we know our siblings, the saints of the Church?

When you read the lives of the saints, you have before your very eyes living translations of the Gospel, and you will be greatly inspired. Little by little you’ll get to know them. You’ll see how they were born, who their mother was, how they began life, how they poured forth sweat, sacred tears, how they blessed the earth with their precious, warm blood. And that blood was one with the blood of Christ. You’ll be inspired, and you’ll feel like leaping in the air to reach the heights of heaven. When you read their lives, you’ll have the feeling that they’re with you, that you can hear them breathing. It’s as if we’re all sitting around somewhere, and at one point I say: “Let’s go for a stroll”. And so we walk, and talk, and we’re all very friendly, just like a family. That’s how you’ll feel with the saints, when you get to know them, when you read their lives. You’ll immediately say to yourself: This saint was a man like me. How did he become a saint? I, too, can become a saint. You see their courage, their love of God, and your heart is set afire, you become inspired, and you want even to surpass them.

“Wondrous is God in his saints” (Ps 67.36). The saints glorified God. And there is a great cloud of thousands of saints (cf. Heb 12.1) who have yet to receive their crowns, because they’re waiting for us. Just like when your family gathers for dinner, and one of the children is late, and everyone waits for him, so it is with the saints, who are waiting for all of us, for me, and for you (cf. Heb 11.39-40). Have you ever thought what it means for you to delay your spiritual journey? Think about all the saints who are waiting for you, while you sit there wasting your time on meaningless things. Forget about those things. Wherever you are, lift up your heart! Whether you’re in your home, at your shop, with your children, or with your spouse. And if you’re in a difficult place, lift up your heart and hold it high. You’ll be able to do this if you read the lives of the saints, and immerse yourself in their boundless enthusiasm.

Third, let’s look at the books we use in church. What beautiful things we hear being read from the Psalter! And when you read the Parakletike, you feel a healing balm covering your soul. Reading the Triodion, which is chanted during Great Lent, you feel, even without wanting to, your eyes filling with tears. Not false, emotional tears, but those which come from the depths of the soul. When you read the Pentecostarion, your soul smiles, and you feel like you’re living in heaven. And if you don’t have all these books, you should at least have a Synekdemos, which is a synopsis of all of them. Get a Synekdemos and learn how to use it. You’ll see how much it will benefit you.

And if you’re educated, you should learn to read theological books, which speak about the Holy Faith of Christ. The Faith which the heretics trample on, but which you should shelter in your head and in your heart.

One more type of book, which I purposely left for the end, is the most important of all. Which one is that? Holy Scripture. The New Testament. The Old Testament. Do we read these books? I fear that we don’t, especially the Old Testament. But that is precisely where God speaks the most clearly: “Thus says the Lord”. God is speaking. And the most uneducated person can read Holy Scripture. If he doesn’t understand parts of it today, he’ll understand them tomorrow.

I remember when I was still a student, I had gone to a school in order to teach. Young man that I was, I went to speak with the students. Outside the school was a little old lady, who was
selling bread. She taught me much, and humbled me much! She was reading:

“What are you reading?” I asked her.


“Do you understand it?”

“If I read it twice. I read the passages a second time, and I understand them better than the first. And if I read the whole thing again from the beginning, I understand it all even better”.

God, forgive me, I said to myself.

“Did you know”, I said to her, “that there are translations of the Gospel that you can read?”

“Really? How much are they? I’ll borrow some money, give it to you, and you can bring me one”.

But she didn’t need one. I sent her one anyway, free, as a gift, but she didn’t need it. Her soul was on fire for God, and if you have that fire, God tells you everything.

Holy Scripture is the greatest gift which God has given to man. Let’s understand that! Remember the author, whose house was filled with hundreds of books, who said to his wife:

“Bring me my book”.

“What book?”

“My dear, do you have to ask? There’s only one, Holy Scripture”, answered the great author. He read from it every morning in order to light the lamp of his soul, to be illumined by God.

Now let’s look at what we need to do in order to succeed at our spiritual study, and let’s also see what its fruits are.

First, in order to read spiritual books, and for them to find an echo in your soul, you have to work hard and you have to pray. Let’s admit it, we’re lazy. I imagine you’ve seen homes where the bookshelves are false, and are lined with the painted spines of books! When you first see these things you say, What a marvelous library! What classics! Homer’s Iliad, Thucydides’ History, the Orations of Demosthenes ... but when you try to take one off the shelf, you can’t, because they’re not books at all, but simply paintings of books. Such people don’t read, but simply want to show others how cultivated they are.

We should realize, though, that our souls don’t need food, but spiritual books, because these contain the word of God. You should read “day and night”, as Scripture says (Ps 1.12), whether you’re “standing, sitting, or lying in bed” (cf. Deut 6.7). At every opportunity, go off to a quiet corner of your home. Leave the noise outside, close the door behind you, open up a book, and enjoy it. And if you can read spiritual books at night, even if it’s only once a week, then you’ll really experience God’s blessings. “In the night my spirit rises to you like the dawn, because your commandments are a light upon the earth” (Isa 26.9). At night, light your godly lamp, and light up the world.

Make an effort to find some quiet time, and you’ll find that you’ll come to know God, that all of your doubts will disappear, all of your troubles. When the sun rises, as the ancients say, it should always find you with a book in your hands. Before reading, though, you should pray, so that God can open your mind and your heart (cf. Ps 118.18-19). He can do that.

Whatever you read, make sure you read all of it. Let’s say, for example, you’re reading the Gospel. Read everything, even that which you think seems superfluous or difficult. Perhaps in some corner of the Gospel, or of the Old Testament, you’ll

10. See the work On Virginity 12 (PG 28.265A), attributed to St. Athanasios.
come across a little pearl. But that little pearl, small though it is, will be of greater value to you than a mountain.

Don’t try to find in Holy Scripture prescriptions and rules for your life. At the same time, rid yourself of the desire to insert your own thoughts into the text. You should be reading to learn what God says, and God will inspire you. And you should accept whatever God tells you. But perhaps now you’re thinking to yourself that all of this is a bit naïve; that such things don’t have a place in the modern world. What you say might be fine for people living in monasteries, you’ll tell me, but we’ve got things to do, jobs to go to, problems to deal with. I see. So the Christian life is only for monks and nuns? But what did we say? We open our homes for Christ to enter them”. The notion that it’s no longer possible to apply the truths of Christianity to our lives is like nitric acid. I’ve heard that if you throw a little of it onto a flower, it will shrivel up and die. That’s how such a notion affects our life. The Holy Scriptures are for us, the writings of the Fathers are for us, not simply for monks. They have their peace and quiet, they have their safe harbor, they have everything taken care of for them. We’re the ones in the middle of the fight, in the middle of the storm, we’re the ones pursued by the devil. And it is to us who Christ comes, in the midst of all our difficulties, to provide us with these spiritual weapons, which are called spiritual books. To us he says: “Study these things, and devote yourself to them” (1 Tim 4.15).

And we know everything! We know the names of dozens of actors and celebrities by heart, backwards and forwards. The same thing with soccer players and sports stars. Should we take a brief survey? Should I call on one of you? How many are here right now? I need only one of you. Here’s a better idea, let’s do something else. When you go home tonight, open up your church calendar. It has 365 days, although there are many more saints than that, there are thousands of them. Count and see how many of their lives you know. We said that they’re our brothers and sisters, that we’re all members of the same family. After that, open up your Synedemos to the Great Canon which we chant during Lent. They’re you’ll find the names of just about everyone mentioned in the Bible. Look and see how many you recognize. I’m not sure this is a test we’ll do very well on.

And why shouldn’t we read? Don’t tell me it’s because you don’t understand. That’s a matter for the Holy Spirit. If you really want to understand, the Spirit will enlighten you. It is the Spirit who initiates and teaches the Church. Little by little, you’ll learn the keys which open the secrets of these books, which open paradise. Or else you’ll have someone special in your life, your spiritual father, who will be “initiated into these things by experience”, as the Fathers say”. Soon you’ll acquire your own experience, and you’ll see that all things will be opened to you. But it takes work, study, and prayer.

Second, it requires desire, exile, interest and lack of interest. What does that mean? Can you fill up a glass that’s already full? For divine meaning to enter your mind, for divine grace to enter into you, you have to empty your heart of its passions, of your self-centeredness, your selfishness, your hate, envy, and negative feelings; you have to purify your heart of these things, and fill it with virtues. The passions are like static. You turn on the radio to listen to a station, and all you hear is static. You don’t understand a thing the announcer is saying. If you want to hear, you’ve got to eliminate the static. And how can you hear the voice of God, when the passions are boom-


ing away and growling loudly within you? You've got to free yourself, because if you don't, you'll remain a fleshly, carnal person, and a “carnal person cannot receive”, does not understand, “the Spirit of God” (1 Cor 2.14).

Such static, moreover, can also be coming from outside. It can be caused by some problem or difficulty, that is, when you try to read in the midst of some problem, without trying to find a quiet moment. When you go swimming, you remove your clothes, or else they'll get soaked, become heavy, and you'll sink. In the same way, you need to remove all those things which fill up your life: distractions, desires, and all the clamorings of the world. Leave them all outside the door. Be solely with God for a few moments. You have all day to be caught up in those other things. During these moments, you should be alone with the only God.

In this space which you've now created, in this place of indifference, in this place of the heart's abandonment of the world, in the space opened up by your distance from all things - precisely there you will find your desire for Christ. Let us be determined, let us make the decision, to understand all these things, because we are called to become saints. Like the blind man who cried out “Lord, I want to see you” (Mk 10.51; Lk 18.41), so you should cry out, too. Just like a hungry infant grabs its mother’s breast and takes milk, that’s how you should lay hold of your spiritual books.

Just like Zaccheus, who we heard about in this morning’s Gospel, we must climb up into the sycamore tree to see Christ (Lk 19.1-4). When you pick up your book, you should say to yourself: “This book has something to say to me”. And that is what you should seek to discover, and drink of it with all your heart, as a parched field soaks up rainwater.

There are many people in life like Zaccheus! I've read that in atheistic countries, where it is forbidden to read Holy Scripture, there are soldiers who, in order to elude their superiors, read the Gospel under their blankets with a flashlight. What desire, what longing! They're putting their life at risk, and yet they do it anyway. This is an incredible thing! But alas there's no need to look so far away, for right here in Trikala, there are households where children are forced to read the Gospel under the covers. And there are even some children - what has happened to us Christians? - children, I say, who are forced to read the Gospel ... in the bathroom! Their father or their mother keeps a close eye on them, and if they find spiritual books, they take them away and burn them. One tore a Gospel into pieces with his own hands - we're talking about people who are baptized Christians! Should we say more? No. Better to keep silent about these things. Perhaps God will overlook, and spare us the punishment that we deserve.

Do we read the Gospel? Glory to God! When we read spiritual books, we should read them with openness of heart, with a sense of trust, in a spirit of heroism, as if we were saying: “O my Christ, I’m reading your book, and whatever you tell me, I’ll do it”. “Morning by morning God wakens my ear”, says the Prophet Isaiah, “and I hear him and obey. I am not rebellious” (Isa 50.4-5). That's what it means to read a spiritual book.

Now that these conditions are in place, I mean first toil and prayer, and second desire, longing, heroism and decisiveness, we can turn to the results of spiritual study. But before we do so, I'd like to make a confession. When I began this series of sermons, I was afraid that the subject matter was not something you’d easily understand, and thus I hesitated. I thought I was tiring you. I see now, though, that your degree of participation indicates that you understand what I've been saying, because there is a thirst within your soul. I've also heard
that you’ve been discussing these things outside of church, and are asking about how you can learn more. That shows how great your interest is, and that gives me special joy.

Let’s see, then, the results of spiritual study, without which there can be no spiritual life, and so that you can know what you should be looking for, when you open up a spiritual book. And if I have succeeded, either with this or with the preceding sermons, in lighting even a tiny spark in your heart, then I will be happy indeed.

When you feel the results of spiritual reading, you’ll say: “Blessed is the Name of the Lord!” (cf. Ps 112.2; Job 1.21). Truly, God bestows great gifts upon us! Do you know what power is hidden within the word of God? And spiritual study, spiritual books, are the word of God. It falls like a seed into our souls and bursts open sending forth its shoots. The word of God conceals within itself the power of God, the power of Christ. And when you immerse your mind and heart in a spiritual book, you will always be filled when you come forth from your reading. And the jar will never empty, but will always give, and give. Spiritual study will always open new horizons for you. It is the best set of tools you have in your home, a supply of weapons for the spiritual life.

What, then, do spiritual books give us? They give us, first of all, a foundation in God. The power of the word of God conquers our sins and defeats the devil, as St. John Chrysostom says. The word of God, spiritual study, is like an instrument which punctures the hardness of our heart. It is like a charge of dynamite which blasts our passions to the left and to the right. It purges our heart and fills it with virtues. And this is what it means to have a foundation in God. We lay the foundation stones for the spiritual structure of our life. We acquire love for those around us, repentance, compunction, illumination. In studying spiritual books, we feel like Christ feels. We think like Christ thinks. We hear like Christ hears. We acquire the “mind of Christ” (Rom 11.34; 1 Cor 2.16), and feel him close to us. And if we’re sad, if we have some problem, if we’re upset, if a storm is passing through our life, you’ll see Christ and he’ll say to you: Wait, don’t be afraid, I am with you. And so, in the shelter of his wings, we’ll continue to move forward.

Afterwards, spiritual study gives us divine knowledge and desire for God. In reading such books, by the grace of God, you learn, you understand, you acquire divine knowledge. God becomes active and starts to work within you. You learn the teachings of our Faith. You learn who God is, what he did for you, and what you should do at every moment of your life.

The word of God is a sharp knife, the sword of the Spirit (Eph 6.17). It cuts out and removes all that is false and vain within us, and enthrones the truth in its place. And the truth sets us free (Jn 8.32). In this manner we enter into the light of truth, onto the road of eternal life. This is why it is said of Holy Scripture that: “It is your life” (Deut 32.46-47). Your true life is the Holy Scripture, along with every spiritual book.

This knowledge is a source of power which becomes active within us and gives us the love of Christ, divine love. In time, little by little, you feel a change within yourself, and the desire for Christ is imprinted in your heart like the stamp of a seal.

Just as the martyrs longed for Christ, and wanted to throw themselves into flames in order to be with him, so too will you feel the love of Christ being ignited within you. And if your desire is limited, you will be given greater zeal, because, as the Lord says, “to everyone who has, more will be given” (Mt 25.29). This is why a certain saint, when he was invited somewhere, said, “I’m not at leisure to come.” Why not? Because


he did not want to be deprived of his spiritual study, which was his means of acquiring divine knowledge and love.

All of the above leads us to the third element, namely, experiences of the divine. What are experiences? The things we live. When there's an earthquake, for example, I live the experience of stress and anxiety. The telephone rings, and it's my wife who's calling from far away. I'm coming home, she says, and at once I'm filled with joy, I live the experience of joy. Spiritual study gives us similar experiences. What does that mean? My dear friends, if you wish, forget all that I've told you up until now, but listen to this. If you forget everything else I've said, and remember only this, it will be enough. Spiritual books, and especially Holy Scripture, provide us with spiritual experiences. How? The spiritual book you read is the word of God, it is what God has said. If you're sitting there reading, and happen to hear a voice you recognize, you say: I know that person. The voice reveals the person. Where God's voice is, there is God, hidden within the voice. The spiritual book, in other words, is a mystery, a sacrament, a sign which conceals the presence of God himself.

This is why an ecclesiastical writer said once said that the words and lines of Holy Scripture are the garments of Christ. Just as I am covered by my clothing, so too do the pages of spiritual books cover Christ himself. I open the New Testament and I read: “The Epistle of Paul to the Romans”. Is it Paul who speaks here? No. It is Christ who speaks. “The First Catholic Epistle of Peter”. Is it Peter who speaks here? No. Here we find Christ, and it is he who speaks. Just as in Holy Communion, you see bread and wine, but when you receive it, you believe that, through the bread and wine, you're receiving Christ, you believe that Christ is present in it mystically. The same thing happens here. By means of letters and words, through the paragraphs and the pages, you commune mystically with Christ. But perhaps you'll tell me that you don't believe this. Perhaps you'll tell me it seems strange. But don't try to explain it. Can we explain the Faith? If we could, it wouldn't be spiritual. And don't forget that the Church is a place of miracles. Heaven and earth, body and soul, and human beings and angels and God, are all together here. All things are united in a single reality we call the Church. We are one with Christ. How then, in such a reality, is it possible for what I'm describing not to take place?

It follows, then, that when you're reading a spiritual book, Christ is present behind the lines. When you open such a book, it's like you're saying: “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are present here”. Seeking to understand the meaning of a passage is like saying: “Come, Lord Jesus” (cf. Rev 22.20); come, my Christ, come into my heart. Thus, when I study a spiritual book, and especially the Holy Scripture, it means that I commune with Christ.

The same Christ who once went about teaching in a corner of Palestine, is now mystically present with you. And I emphasize that “mystically present” means truly present. Because Christ is present behind every line of every spiritual book, it's as if he's calling you and saying: “Come, my child”. And if you have the desire to understand what he's telling you, you'll respond and say: “I'm coming, Lord. And you come too, come to me, Lord”. And thus we have a dialogue between two persons, face to face. Christ and I are conversing by means of the book. You don't see him? Neither do you see the person on the other end of the telephone, and yet the two of you speak to each other.

The reading of a spiritual book is a revelation, a theophany. It is the presence of Christ. It is an encounter with Christ, a mystical union with Christ. Christ and I are united. And Christ, moreover, is never without his spiritual army. At the head of
an army you see the general, followed by all his soldiers. In the same way, Christ is always in the company of his saints and his angels. This means that your union with Christ is also a mystical union with all the saints. If you have spiritual eyes and spiritual senses, you'll feel what such a union with Christ means. When we have the word of God in our heart, and in our mouth, we'll feel what a saint once said: “Though we live on earth, we celebrate a feast in heaven”.

Now I understand my childhood friend, who used to read the Holy Scripture while kneeling in front of the icon screen. And I knew someone else who never read it without tears in his eyes, and a chant on his lips. They understood more than the rest of us.

I want you to live like St. Seraphim of Sarov, who, every week, read the entire Gospel. Toward the end of his life, the saint knew that he had celebrated his final New Year’s Day. In the early weeks of January, he made haste to go and meet his Lord and his God. He directed his disciples to make ready for the journey. The saint awaited Christ like the wise virgins (Mt 25.1-13). He lit his lamps in order to show Christ that he was waiting for him. He sat up and waited all night, as was his habit. He never slept at night.

At dawn, a monk who was passing by noticed smoke coming from the saint’s cell. He knocked on the door. He knocked again. No answer. Pushing the door open, he entered the cell and looked around. There was St. Seraphim, kneeling at prayer with his eyes closed. The monk tapped the saint’s shoulder, but there was no response. His soul had taken flight. Another monk had seen in a vision the saint’s soul being escorted to heaven by angels. In front of the saint was an open Gospel book, the pages of which had been scorched by the lamp. All around him were his spiritual books, and these two were beginning to burn. They had just caught fire the moment the saint fell asleep, the moment he died. Did he die? No. He was born into the other life. The monks put out the fire, but the image endures, and can never be extinguished.

My beloved friends, we too should live like this, with our hearts longing for Christ, and with our lamps lit, and our spiritual books open before us.