

BRANDON VOGT

THE
SAINTS'
FAVORITE BOOKS

READ WHAT THEY READ
BECOME WHO THEY ARE



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ABOUT "THE SAINTS' FAVORITE BOOKS"

"Reading has made many saints." - St. Josemaria Escriva

Books change lives. They spark movements and birth hope, they lead to innovation and inspire us to greatness. We've seen this in history and we know it ourselves.

Books can also lead people to God. As the saints in this book show, the right book at the right time can inflame our spiritual lives, ushering us down the road of holiness.

All of these saints would, of course, claim Scripture as their favorite reading material. But here we'll examine the non-biblical books that profoundly impacted their lives.

So "take and read," as St. Augustine once obeyed, and together let's follow the saints!

ABOUT BRANDON VOGT

Brandon Vogt is an award-winning Catholic author, blogger, and speaker. He's been featured by several media outlets, including NPR, CBS, FoxNews, and EWTN. He's published three books including:

- [*The Church and New Media: Blogging Converts, Online Activists, and Bishops Who Tweet*](#) (Our Sunday Visitor, 2011)
- [*CATHOLICISM: The New Evangelization Study Guide*](#) (Word on Fire, 2013)
- [*Saints and Social Justice: A Guide to Changing the World*](#) (Our Sunday Visitor, 2014)

Brandon blogs at BrandonVogt.com, and also runs StrangeNotions.com, the central place of dialogue between Catholics and atheists.

He works as Content Director for Fr. Robert Barron's [Word on Fire Catholic Ministries](#) and lives in Orlando, FL with his wife, Kathleen, and their four children.



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ST. AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

LIFE OF ST. ANTONY - ST. ATHANASIUS

St. Augustine (354-430) was born in modern-day Algeria, and received a Christian upbringing. However, he fell away from faith as a boy. He instead pursued rhetoric, law, and pagan philosophy.

However, through the prayers of his mother, St. Monica, he converted back to Christianity in 386. Four years later he was ordained a priest, and in 395 he became Bishop of Hippo.

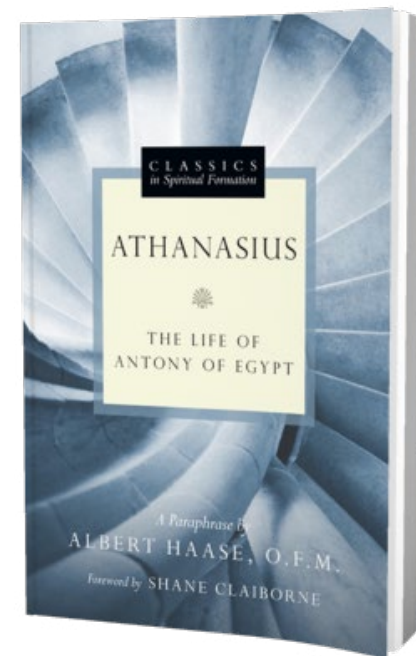
After his conversion, Augustine wrote profusely. Among his best-known works are his [Confessions](#), the first Western spiritual autobiography, and [The City of God](#), which proposed a new Christian philosophy of history. He also produced nearly two hundred treatises and three hundred sermons.

Today, Augustine is considered one of history's greatest minds and is recognized as a Doctor of the Church.

In his [Confessions](#), St. Augustine reveals how the conversion of St. Antony (251-356) played a key role in his own conversion from promiscuous party-life to Christianity.

It happened in 386 during the visit of a friend named Placianus. Placianus told Augustine about two men who had been suddenly turned to God by reading St. Athanasius' [Life of St. Antony](#). Augustine, wondering whether to follow their lead, suddenly heard a child chanting, "Take up and read! Take up and read!" He immediately recalled how Antony was converted by a single Bible passage at Mass. So he rushed to the nearest book of the Gospels and read the first verse he came across: "Let us conduct ourselves properly as in the day, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in promiscuity and licentiousness, not in rivalry and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the desires of the flesh" (Romans 13:13-14).

Those words seared Augustine's heart and became the hinge of his conversion. He later wrote: "No further would I read, nor did I need; for instantly, as the sentence ended—by a light, as it were, of security infused into my heart—all the gloom of doubt vanished away."



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“WHERE WERE YOU GOD?’ ANTONY ASKED, ‘WHY DIDN’T YOU EASE MY TEMPTATIONS AND PAINS?’ AND A VOICE CAME TO HIM: ‘ANTONY, I WAS HERE, BUT I WAITED TO SEE YOU FIGHT.’”

-ST. ATHANASIUS

THE LIFE OF ST. ANTONY

 TWEET THIS



ST. BENEDICT OF NURSIA *THE CONFERENCES* - ST. JOHN CASSIAN

As a young boy, St. Benedict of Nursia (480-543) fled the worldly pleasures of Rome for the hills of rural Subiaco, where he sought a prayerful and solitary life. Eventually, he attracted other likeminded contemplatives and established a monastery on the ashes of a pagan temple, which he called Monte Cassino. The monastery would quickly become known for its impressive virtue, sanctity, and hospitality.

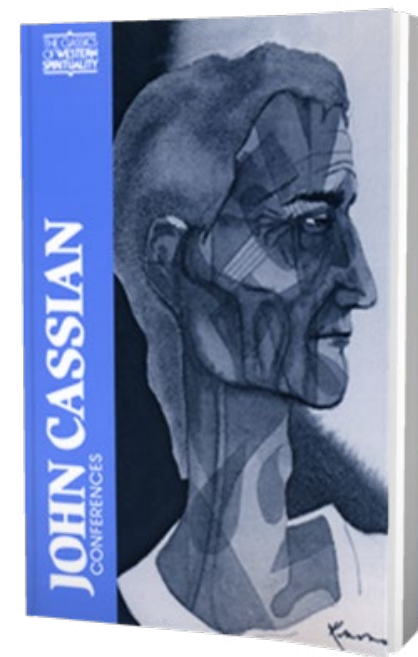
Early on, Benedict realized that he needed some organizing structure for his monastery, especially as the community expanded to other locations. That led to his revolutionary [Rule](#), a list of precepts and principles designed for monastic communities.

Benedict is still honored as the founder of Western Monasticism and his [Rule](#) continues to influence thousands of people around the world.

In formulating his [Rule](#), St. Benedict leaned on the writings of another saint, St. John Cassian (360-435). Cassian served as a bridge between the Desert Fathers of the East and early monasteries in the West. As a young monk he traveled widely, experiencing monastic life in Bethlehem, Egypt, Rome, Constantinople, and Gaul, the place where he eventually founded his own community in 415.

Cassian's most popular spiritual work was his [Conferences](#), a collection of stories and sayings from the Desert Fathers. The book influenced numerous saints, popes, and theologians. Gregory the Great's teaching on the seven deadly stems from it, and it was a favorite of St. Dominic, St. Francis de Sales, St. Alphonsus Liguori, St. Philip Neri, and Bl. John Henry Newman.

Few were influenced by the book more than St. Benedict. He referenced the book in his [Rule](#) and encouraged his monks to read selections from the [Conferences](#) each day. While Benedict didn't agree with everything in the [Conferences](#), such as Cassian's ideas on free will, he praised the book as "*speculum monasticum*"—a mirror of monasticism.



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"TO CLING ALWAYS TO GOD AND
TO THE THINGS OF GOD—THIS
MUST BE OUR MAJOR EFFORT."

-SAINT JOHN CASSIAN
THE CONFERENCES

 TWEET THIS



ST. BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX

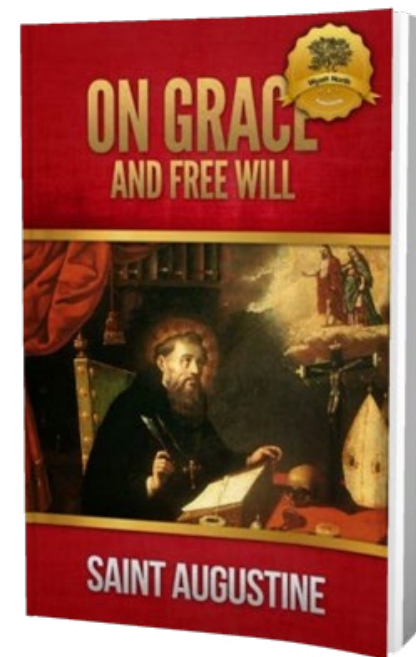
ON GRACE AND FREE WILL - ST. AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

In 1113, St. Bernard (1090-1153) became a Cistercian monk, and three years later he founded a new community called Claire Vallée, or Clairvaux. Around this time, he began writing the beautiful treatises that earned him the title “Doctor of the Church.” In his most famous work, a collection of sermons on “Song of Songs,” Bernard interprets the poem as an analogy for the love between God and the soul. God, represented by the bridegroom, is deeply in love with us, and wills our love in return.

In 1953, Pope Pius XII issued an encyclical on Bernard titled *Doctor Mellifluus*—literally the “Honey-Tongued Teacher”—in which he described Bernard as “strong in grace” and praised his writing as “fragrant with heavenly things and aglow with piety.”

St. Bernard’s writings drip with what St. Augustine (354-430), in his *Confessions*, called the “sweetness of grace.” It’s for this high, Augustinian view of grace that one theologian described Bernard as *Augustinus redivivus*—Augustine reborn. Perhaps no theologian influenced Bernard more than Augustine, and perhaps none of Augustine’s works more than *On Grace and Free Will* (427). This influence is evident in many of Bernard’s early works like *The Steps of Humility and Pride* (1119), *On the Love of God* (1126), and most especially, *On Grace and Free Choice* (1128).

St. Augustine wrote *On Grace and Free Will* in the fifth century in response to the Pelagians, who believed that original sin did not damage human nature and that men could still choose good and merit heaven without the help of God’s grace. Augustine’s treatise, which became one of the most influential texts in the early Church, emphasized the necessity of grace, but also showed how grace works together with our freedom to accomplish God’s purposes.



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"THERE IS IN A MAN A FREE
CHOICE OF THE WILL, BUT
GRACE RENDERS ITS HELP."

-ST. AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

ON GRACE AND FREE WILL

 TWEET THIS



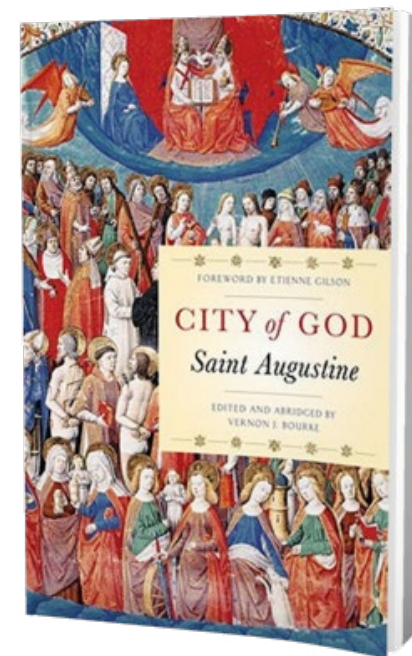
ST. THOMAS AQUINAS *CITY OF GOD* - ST. AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) was born in Roccasecca, Italy and at age five he began his education at Monte Cassino, the monastery founded by St. Benedict. At age 25 he was ordained a priest, in the Dominican order, and began teaching at the University of Paris. Then in 1265, he began his most famous work, the [*Summa Theologiae*](#), which he worked on for nine years.

Much of modern philosophy is based on, or in opposition to, Thomas' ideas and arguments, especially in the fields of ethics, law, metaphysics, and political science. It's hard to exaggerate Thomas' lasting influence, both on the Church and Western culture. He is recognized as one of Catholicism's greatest saints, a Doctor of the Church, and a preeminent model for theologians and philosophers.

St. Thomas left no explicit record of his favorite author or books, but we can make an informed assumption based on his writings. The best place to turn is his [*Summa Theologiae*](#), his masterpiece which spans four large books in print. Excluding biblical writers, Thomas cites no person more than St. Augustine (354-430), whom he mentions over 3,000 times. And he references no text more than Augustine's masterwork, [*City of God*](#), which he mentions over 400 times.

Augustine composed his lengthy treatise soon after Rome was sacked by the Visigoths in 410. The text compares the divine kingdom, the City of God, with the earthly rule of the Roman Empire, what Augustine called the City of Man, and was the first serious attempt at a philosophy of history. It became one of the most influential books in the Middle Ages, shaping the relationship between Church and state and assuring Christians that no matter what happens, the City of God would ultimately triumph.



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"THE HEAVENLY CITY OUTSHINES ROME BEYOND
COMPARISON. THERE, INSTEAD OF VICTORY, IS TRUTH;
INSTEAD OF HIGH RANK, HOLINESS; INSTEAD OF
PEACE, FELICITY; INSTEAD OF LIFE, ETERNITY."

-ST. AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

CITY OF GOD

 TWEET THIS



ST. IGNATIUS OF LOYOLA *THE LIFE OF CHRIST* - LUDOLPH OF SAXONY

St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556) was born the last of thirteen children. While growing up he developed a strong interest in military strategy. He loved the adventurous stories of El Cid and the knights of Camelot, and decided to join the army at age seventeen. However, in a battle in 1521, a cannonball wounded one of his legs and broke the other.

It was while recovering in the hospital that Ignatius experienced a profound conversion, resolving to serve God the rest of his life. He joined with six companions in 1534, including St. Francis Xavier and St. Peter Faber, to launch the Society of Jesus, also known as the Jesuits, a religious congregation dedicated to evangelizing and serving the pope.

Although virtually unknown today, [*De Vita Christi \(The Life of Christ\)*](#) by Ludolph of Saxony (1295-1378), was a popular book in the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries. Part biography of Jesus, part commentary from the Church Fathers, and part devotional work, it proposed a method of prayer which involved visualizing events from Christ's life and, through meditation, bringing oneself personally into the event.

If that sounds familiar, it's probably because St. Ignatius proposed the same method in his great [*Spiritual Exercises*](#). During his recovery from the cannon-ball wound, Ignatius asked for some novels to pass the time. But instead, the hospital staff handed him one book on the saints and one copy of Ludolph's [*Vita*](#). The latter book changed his life, led to his Christian conversion, and would forever remain a favorite text. Its influence is evident throughout Ignatius' writings.

St. Teresa of Avila and St. Francis de Sales also valued Ludolph's [*Vita*](#) and frequently quoted from it.



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"COME AND BE PRESENT AT CHRIST'S BIRTH, LIKE A
GOOD FOSTER PARENT WITH JOSEPH...
BE PRESENT AT HIS DEATH WITH HIS BLESSED
MOTHER AND JOHN, AND SHARE IN THEIR
SUFFERING AND CONSOLATION."

-LUDOLPH OF SAXONY

THE LIFE OF CHRIST

 TWEET THIS

ST. TERESA OF ÁVILA

THE SINNER'S GUIDE - VENERABLE LOUIS OF GRENADA

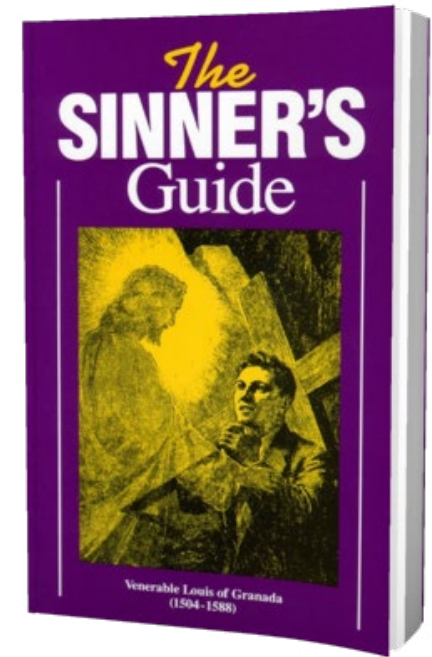
St. Teresa of Ávila (1515-1582) was born into a rapidly shifting world. In the early sixteenth century, Columbus had just opened up the Western hemisphere to European colonization and Luther launched the Protestant Reformation. To compound the uncertainty, Teresa's mother died unexpectedly when Teresa was just 14. The disharmony and pain led her to focus on her inner spiritual life.

In 1535, she entered a Carmelite monastery in Ávila, Spain. There she advanced quickly in the practice of contemplative prayer, becoming one of the Church's most prominent mystics and spiritual masters by her death. She is one of only four women to be named a Doctor of the Church.

If you were trying to guess the most influential Christian book in history, you'd probably guess [The Imitation of Christ](#) or [An Introduction to the Devout Life](#), and those would be strong contenders. But you'd be remiss not to include [The Sinner's Guide](#) by Venerable Louis of Grenada (1505-1588). Still popular today, it was among the favorites of St. John of the Cross, St. Francis de Sales, St. Charles Borromeo, St. Vincent de Paul, St. Rose of Lima, and St. Teresa of Avila. St. Teresa claimed that in her time, the book "converted over 1,000,000 souls to Christ." Whether that number is exaggerated or not, it's clear this book has exercised extraordinary influence.

Grenada's classic is a vivid, punchy expose of sin, stripping away its glamour to reveal its devastating effects. Walking through the Four Last Things—Death, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell—Grenada shows why Hell is worth avoiding and Heaven worth pursuing at any cost.

St. Francis de Sales cautioned readers not to rush through the book: "To read the book with fruit you must not run through it hastily; it must be pondered." But if you devote the necessary time and attention, you'll emerge with a stronger passion for holiness.



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"WE ARE ALL DESTINED TO ONE OR THE OTHER, EITHER TO REIGN ETERNALLY WITH GOD IN HEAVEN OR TO BURN ETERNALLY WITH THE DEVILS IN HELL."

-VEN. LOUIS OF GRENADA
THE SINNER'S GUIDE

 TWEET THIS



ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS

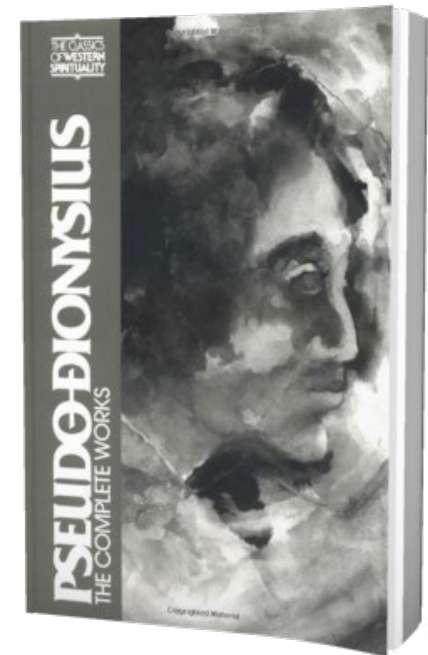
THE MYSTICAL THEOLOGY - PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS

St. John of the Cross (1542-1591) entered the Carmelite order in 1563 and, along with St. Teresa of Avila, instituted major reforms. Resistance to the changes led one group of his fellow Carmelites to imprison John and punish him with public lashing. However, during this imprisonment, John composed some of the greatest spiritual literature in Western history, including magnificent poems and spiritual treatises. Two poems, *The Spiritual Canticle* and *The Dark Night of the Soul*, are still considered masterpieces of Spanish poetry. A later work, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, presents a systematic study of spiritual union with God.

St. John's work deeply shaped later writers like St. Thérèse of Lisieux, St. Edith Stein, and Dorothy Day. St. John Paul II wrote his doctoral dissertation on St. John's mystical theology.

The overall structure of St. John's work, especially his language of the union of the soul with God, exhibits the influence of [*The Mystical Theology*](#). Traditionally the book was credited to Dionysius, the first-century bishop of Athens whom St. Paul converted at the Areopagus. However, most scholars today believe the name was a pseudonym used by a fifth or sixth century theologian, now commonly referred to as Psuedo-Dionysius.

[*The Mystical Theology*](#) influenced nearly every mystic and medieval scholar in the Church for ten centuries, both in the East and West. Emphasizing the "via negativa", or the negative way to God, it shaped the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas (who quoted Dionysius often in his [*Summa Theologiae*](#)), Meister Eckhart, Julian of Norwich, and the anonymous author of [*The Cloud of Unknowing*](#). In addition to St. John, the book also influenced his fellow Spanish Carmelite, St. Teresa of Avila.



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"WE PRAY THAT WE MAY COME UNTO THIS
DARKNESS WHICH IS BEYOND LIGHT, AND,
WITHOUT SEEING AND WITHOUT KNOWING,
TO SEE AND TO KNOW THAT WHICH IS
ABOVE VISION AND KNOWLEDGE."

-PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS

THE MYSTICAL THEOLOGY

 TWEET THIS



ST. FRANCIS DE SALES

THE SPIRITUAL COMBAT - DOM LORENZO SCUPOLI

Born in France to noble parents, St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622) was on track to become a magistrate like his father. But he experienced a powerful conversion at age twenty which led him to dedicate his life to God.

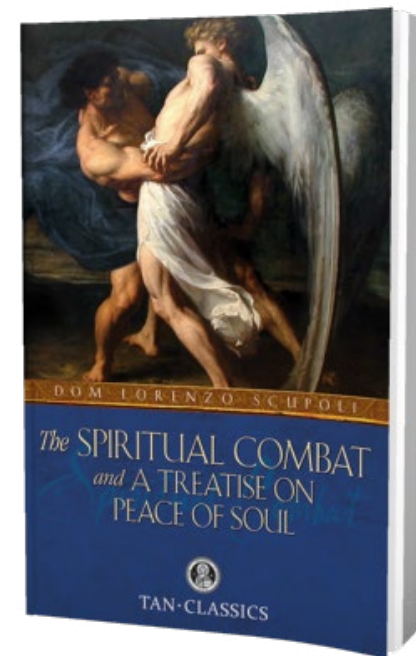
After his conversion, living in the heartland of the Protestant Reformation, St. Francis made it his mission to convert Swiss Calvinists back to Catholicism. For three years, he worked in rough conditions, escaping assassination attempts and bitter winters, to lead 40,000 converts back to the Church.

As a bishop, he became known for his gentle, effective approach to evangelization. He's remembered as a gifted spiritual director and the author of several classic works, including [*An Introduction to the Devout Life*](#) and [*The Treatise on the Love of God*](#).

St. Francis de Sales was famously well-read, but he prized no book more than [*The Spiritual Combat*](#). He described it as "the favorite, the dear book" and elsewhere as "golden." He carried a copy in his pocket for eighteen years, which, according to some accounts, he received personally from the author, Dom Lorenzo Scupoli (1530-1610). He read from it every day and recommended it to all under his direction.

The origins of the book are shrouded in mystery. The first known edition was published in Venice in 1589 and contained 24 chapters, and most historians attribute it to Fr. Scupoli. But later editions contained more chapters, and were published under different names.

However it came about, the resulting book is a wellspring of wisdom. For more than four centuries it has provided readers sensible advice on fighting spiritual battles and attaining victory. Fr. Scupoli offers special help for conquering lust and laziness, and making constant progress toward virtue.



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"GOD NEVER CEASES TO HELP HIS
SOLDIERS, ALTHOUGH HE SOMETIMES
SUFFERS THEM TO BE WOUNDED.
ONLY FIGHT, FOR ALL DEPENDS ON THIS."

-DOM LORENZO SCUPOLI

THE SPIRITUAL COMBAT

 TWEET THIS



ST. JOHN EUDES

TREATISE ON THE LOVE OF GOD - ST. FRANCIS DE SALES

For St. John Eudes (1601-1680), the entire spiritual life revolved around one thing: the love of Jesus Christ. And that love was made especially clear through a new devotion in his day, the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Thanks to John, who gave theological substance to the expressions of visionaries like St. Gertrude and St. Mechtilde, the devotion spread quickly and became one of the most widely-practiced in the Church.

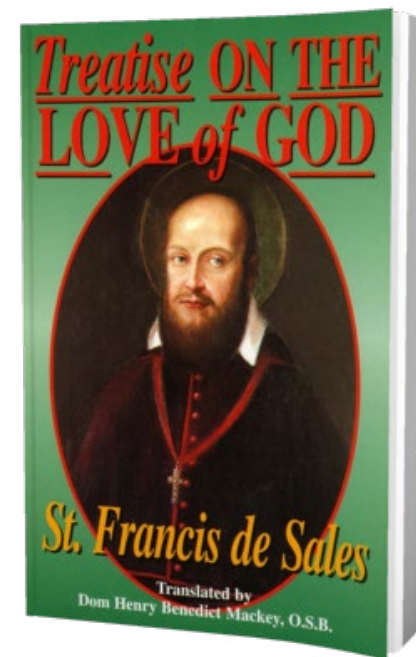
He helped expand it from a private devotion to a communal celebration, creating a special Mass and a set of prayers dedicated to Jesus' Sacred Heart. Pope Clement XIII approved both in 1765 and then, in 1856, Pope Pius IX established an official liturgical feast celebrating the Sacred Heart.

The [*Treatise on the Love of God*](#) by St. Francis de Sales heavily influenced John's devotion to the Sacred Heart. While promoting the devotion, John aimed to mimic the gentleness and warmth found within Francis' work.

Francis begins his [*Treatise on the Love of God*](#) by saying, "It is truly my intention to represent simply and naively, without art, still more without false colors, the history of the birth, progress, decay, operation, properties, advantages, and excellences of divine love."

Although Francis wrote his other masterpiece, [*An Introduction to the Devout Life*](#), for spiritual beginners, he intended the [*Treatise*](#) for slightly more advanced pray-ers

Francis focuses on three forms of love, each of which progress from one to the other: God's love for humanity, our love for God, and our love for all persons. This framework has led many to describe his spirituality as the Way of Divine Love.



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"LOVE THEN IS NO OTHER THING THAN
THE MOVEMENT, EFFUSION,
AND ADVANCEMENT OF
THE HEART TOWARDS GOOD."

-ST. FRANCIS DE SALES

TREATISE ON THE LOVE OF GOD

 TWEET THIS

ST. THÉRÈSE OF LISIEUX

THE IMITATION OF CHRIST - THOMAS À KEMPIS

Although she died at just 24 years old, a cloistered nun known only to a few dozen people, St. Thérèse of Lisieux (1873-1897) has become one of the most influential spiritual masters of the last 200 years.

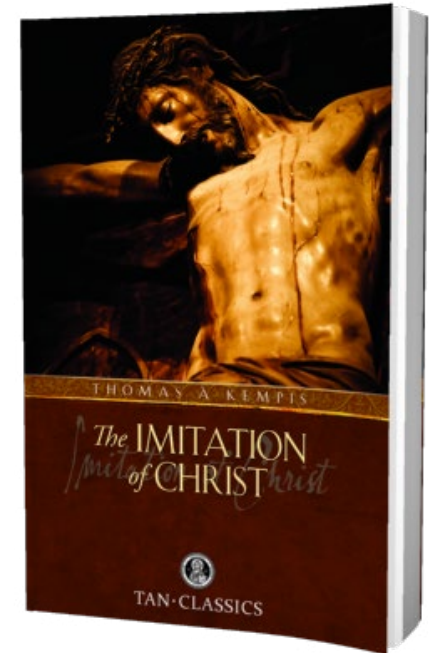
Thérèse entered the Carmelite community in Lisieux in 1888, at the early age of fifteen. From there she developed her foundational path toward sanctity known as “the Little Way.” It places an emphasis on performing small deeds with great love, instead of heroic acts of holiness.

St. Thérèse is known today thanks to her autobiography, [*The Story of a Soul*](#), which was published after her death. In 1997, Pope John Paul II declared her a Doctor of the Church, one of only four women so named.

Perhaps no book influenced St. Thérèse’s spirituality more than [*The Imitation of Christ*](#) by Thomas à Kempis (1380-1471). She first read the book at age fourteen, and from that point forward she kept it with her constantly. She was so attached to it, and read it so many times, that she could eventually quote long passages from memory. Her autobiography contains many such references.

No book outside the Bible has been translated into more languages than [*The Imitation of Christ*](#), and it’s widely believed to be the most-read devotional work in Church history. The text emphasizes the interior life and withdrawal from the world, encouraging practices like contemplative prayer, spiritual reading, and Eucharistic devotion.

Besides Thérèse, many other saints favored the book, including St. Thomas More, St. Ignatius of Loyola, and Venerable Fulton Sheen, who carried a small copy in his pocket throughout his entire priesthood.



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"JESUS HAS NOW MANY LOVERS
OF THE HEAVENLY KINGDOM BUT
FEW BEARERS OF HIS CROSS."

-THOMAS À KEMPIS
THE IMITATION OF CHRIST

 TWEET THIS

BL. PIER GIORGIO FRASSATI *THE DIVINE COMEDY* - DANTE ALIGHIERI

Pier Giorgio Frassati (1901-1925) was born to wealthy Italian parents. Before his untimely death at age 24—the same age Thérèse of Lisieux died—he lived an active and spiritually rich life.

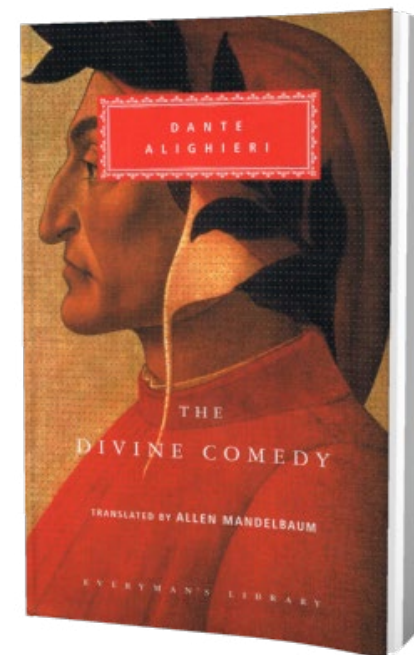
Besides being an avid mountaineer, skier, and political activist, he was intensely devoted to the Eucharist and the poor. He spent hours as a teenager praying with the Blessed Sacrament, and many more serving the poor on the streets of Turin. He would regularly visit poor families as a member of the St. Vincent de Paul Society, bringing food, gifts, and a listening ear.

This well-rounded life of holiness led Pope John Paul II to deem Pier Giorgio “a man of the Beatitudes” at his beatification in 1990.

Pier Giorgio was a very cultured young man, enjoying museums, art, and music. His favorite work was [*The Divine Comedy*](#) by Dante Alighieri (1265-1321). As a young man, he committed large passages to memory and would spontaneously recite them for family and friends. Townspeople remember him walking happily through the streets with Dante on his lips.

On his bedroom door, Pier Giorgio tacked St. Bernard's prayer to the Virgin from Dante's [*Paradiso*](#): “Lady, you are so great and accessible, that anyone who wants grace and fails to ask your intercession, his desire tries to fly without wings.”

Perhaps the most telling anecdote comes from a married friend, who once turned to his wife and noted: “This morning Pier Giorgio was in the villa's cupola sitting at the window. He had a big book in his hand. I don't know if he was learning his lesson out loud. All I could hear was ‘God...stars...Dante.’”



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"BUT ALREADY MY DESIRE AND MY WILL
WERE BEING TURNED LIKE A WHEEL, ALL AT
ONE SPEED, BY THE LOVE WHICH MOVES
THE SUN AND THE OTHER STARS."

-DANTE ALIGHIERI

THE DIVINE COMEDY

 TWEET THIS



ST. TERESA BENEDICTA OF THE CROSS *THE LIFE OF ST. TERESA OF ÁVILA* - ST. TERESA OF ÁVILA

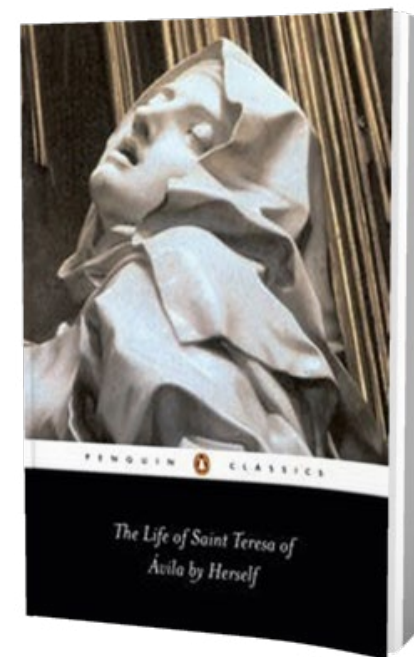
Edith Stein (1891-1942) was born into a devout Jewish family, but became an atheist during her teenage years. She studied philosophy at the University of Göttingen under the philosopher Edmund Husserl, the renowned founder of the school of phenomenology, and appeared set to follow a long, successful career in academia.

But plans changed in 1921 when she converted to Catholicism. She soon became a Carmelite nun in Cologne, taking the religious name Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, and devoted her philosophical gifts to bridging the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas with her mentor, Husserl.

To avoid the growing threat of Nazism, Edith's superiors transferred her to the Netherlands on New Years Eve, 1938. She was arrested a few years later—a result of her Jewish heritage—and martyred at the Auschwitz concentration camp.

In the summer of 1921, before she was a Christian, Edith spent several weeks at the country estate of a friend named Hedwig. One evening, while browsing Hedwig's library, she spotted the autobiography of St. Teresa of Ávila (1515-1582). Intrigued, Edith grabbed the book, took it back to her room, and read the whole thing overnight. She later recalled, "When I had finished that book, I said to myself: This is the truth."

We don't know why the book so deeply affected her. When asked about it later, Edith replied, "That is my secret." But it's clear the book played a pivotal role in her conversion. The day after finishing it she went out and bought a missal and a Catholic catechism. Then on January 1, 1922, Edith was baptized, wearing a white wedding cloak that belonged to Hedwig, now her godmother, later entering the same Carmelite order as her guide, St. Teresa.



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"ALL THINGS FAIL; BUT YOU,
LORD OF ALL, NEVER FAIL!"

-ST. TERESA OF ÁVILA

THE LIFE OF ST. TERESA OF ÁVILA

 TWEET THIS



SERVANT OF GOD DOROTHY DAY

THE STORY OF A SOUL - ST. THÉRÈSE OF LISIEUX

Dorothy Day (1897-1980) was born to a poor, non-religious family. Growing up on the streets of Chicago, she encountered homelessness and despair almost daily. Yet in that darkness she discovered her life's purpose: to unite with and help those on the margins of society.

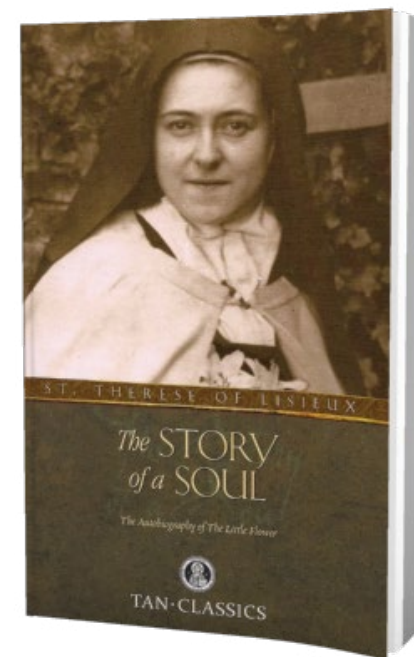
As a teenager, she began participating in strikes for social causes. That activism soon led her to the Catholic Church, which she discovered to be “the Church of the poor.” In 1926, Dorothy became Catholic alongside her newborn daughter, Tamar, and continued the faithful activism for which she's remembered.

Perhaps her greatest legacy is *The Catholic Worker*, a newspaper and movement she co-founded with the itinerant philosopher Peter Maurin, which aimed to put Catholic social teaching in ordinary terms and to promote the transformation of society.

At first glance, Dorothy Day and St. Thérèse of Lisieux (1873-1897) could hardly be more different. Thérèse grew up religious, entered a cloister at fifteen, and died early at twenty four. Dorothy found God later in life, was a relentless activist, and lived well into her eighties.

Yet when Dorothy discovered Thérèse's autobiography, [*The Story of a Soul*](#), she recognized an expression of her own spiritual longings. It didn't happen immediately. When Dorothy first read the book a year after her baptism, she “found it colorless, monotonous, too small in fact for my notice.” She dismissed the book as “pious pap.”

However, two decades later, upon returning to it, she underwent a complete reversal of attitude: “In these days of fear and trembling of what man has wrought on earth, in destructiveness and hate, Thérèse is the saint we need.” Over the following years, Dorothy became an ardent proponent of Thérèse's “Little Way” and completed a full-length book about the saint, simply titled [*Thérèse*](#).



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"MY GOD, I CHOOSE ALL!
I DO NOT WANT TO BE
A SAINT BY HALVES."

-ST. THÉRÈSE OF LISIEUX

THE STORY OF A SOUL

 TWEET THIS

BL. TERESA OF CALCUTTA *LIFE OF CHRIST* - VEN. FULTON SHEEN

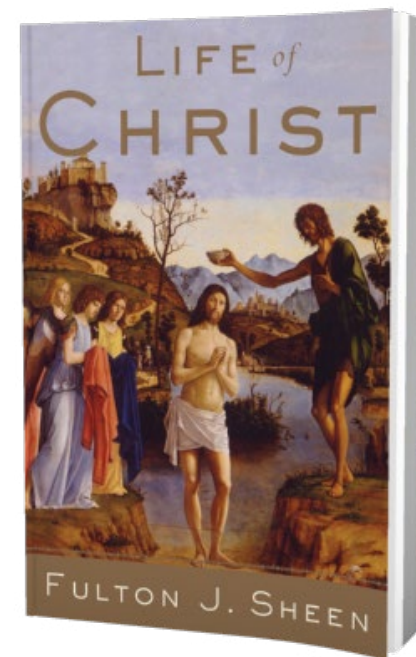
Bl. Teresa of Calcutta (1910-1997), more popularly known as Mother Teresa, was born in Albania. At age 18 she left home to join the Sisters of Loretto in India. One day, while taking a train to from Calcutta to Darjeeling for her annual spiritual retreat, she felt jolted by an interior summons. The prayerful “call within a call” beckoned her to leave her convent and live among the poor.

She obeyed and set out for the slums of Calcutta. Over the next two decades, word spread about the nun’s extraordinary work serving, feeding, and caring for the poor and dying street people. She eventually founded a new order, the Missionaries of Charity, dedicated to similar work. In 1999, two years after her death, Americans voted her the “Most Admired Person of the Twentieth Century.”

Bl. Teresa kept a close watch on the spiritual development of her sisters, and that meant a consistent regimen of prayer, worship, and reading. Usually the sisters were able to select their own study material, but according to Fr. Andrew Apostoli, C.F.R., every Lent, Mother prescribed Venerable Fulton Sheen’s [Life of Christ](#) to all her sisters. (Fr. Apostoli remained a close friend of Sheen after Sheen ordained him in New York.)

Teresa admired Sheen’s work as head of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith. The two met on more than one occasion, including in 1973 when they spoke together in Philadelphia for the World Day of Prayer for Vocations. She especially valued Sheen’s [Life of Christ](#), so much that she carried a copy whenever she traveled abroad. Considering how lightly she traveled, that’s a powerful testament.

In [Life of Christ](#), Sheen traces the life of Jesus from his birth, to his infancy, and on to his death and resurrection. There are many other books on the life of Jesus, but few match the eloquence, insightfulness, spiritual depth, and wit of Sheen’s.



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"SOME RELIGIONS DRAW BY FORCE OF ARMS; HE WOULD DRAW BY FORCE OF LOVE. THE ATTRACTION WOULD NOT BE HIS WORDS, BUT HIMSELF."

-VEN. FULTON SHEEN

THE LIFE OF CHRIST

 TWEET THIS

BONUS APPENDIX

THE POPES' FAVORITE BOOKS



POPE LEO XIII

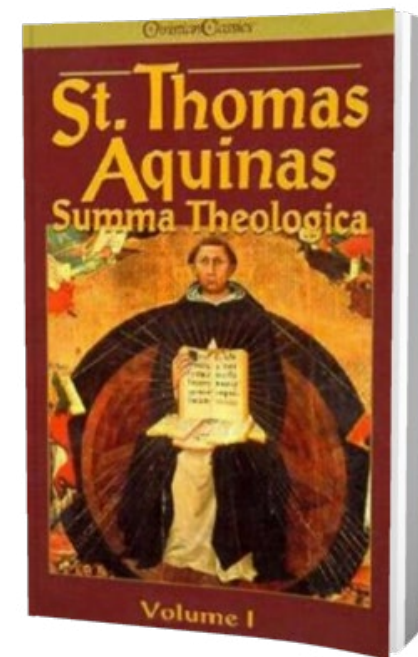
SUMMA THEOLOGIAE - ST. THOMAS AQUINAS

Vincenzo Pecci (1810-1903) was an extremely bright child, studying at Viterbo's Jesuit College as a boy and becoming fluent in Latin by age eleven. He went on to receive doctorates in theology, civil law, and canon law before entering the priesthood on New Year's Eve, 1837.

Less than six years after his ordination he became an archbishop and soon a papal assistant. It was little surprise, then, when Pecci was elected Pope Leo XIII in 1878. His pontificate lasted until 1903, making it the third longest in history. When he died at age 93, he was the oldest reigning pontiff ever. Pope Leo is probably best remembered for his social encyclical, [*Rerum Novarum*](#), and his eleven encyclicals on the rosary.

In addition to Pope Leo's influence on Catholic social teaching and Marian devotion, he also heralded a revival of Thomism, the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). In 1879, Pope Leo promulgated [*Aeterni Patris*](#), an encyclical which cemented Thomism as the official philosophical and theological system of the Catholic Church. The text hailed Aquinas as "the chief and master of all [Scholastic teachers]." The pope rejoiced that Aquinas' masterwork, the [*Summa Theologiae*](#), was specially honored at the Council of Trent when the fathers placed it on the altar alongside the Scriptures and papal encyclicals.

Pope Leo's love for the text shines especially clear in his exhortation to his brother bishops: "We exhort you, venerable brethren, in all earnestness to restore the golden wisdom of St. Thomas, and to spread it far and wide for the defense and beauty of the Catholic faith, for the good of society, and for the advantage of all the sciences."



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"GOD'S TRUTH, POWER, AND GOODNESS OUTREACH
ANY MEASURE OF REASON. WE CAN CERTAINLY
NEVER BELIEVE, TRUST, OR LOVE GOD MORE THAN,
OR EVEN AS MUCH AS, WE SHOULD.
EXTRAVAGANCE IS IMPOSSIBLE."

-ST. THOMAS AQUINAS

SUMMA THEOLOGIAE



TWEET THIS



POPE ST. PIUS X

THE SOUL OF THE APOSTOLATE - JEAN-BAPTISTE CHAUTARD

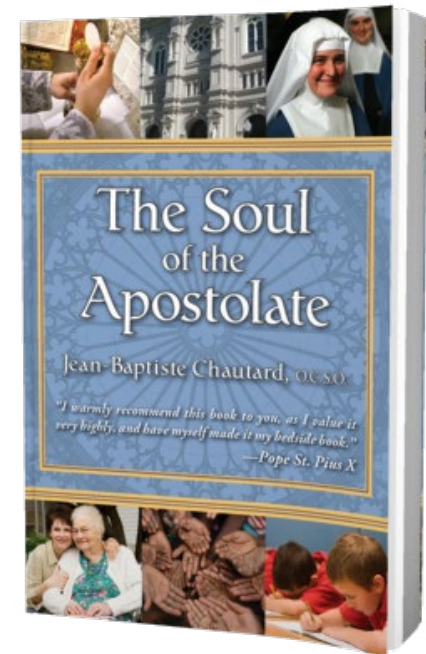
Giuseppe Melchiorre Sarto (1835-1914) was born in poverty, which helps explain the strong compassion he exhibited upon becoming Pope Pius X in 1903. As Pope, he filled the Apostolic Palace with refugees after a devastating earthquake and once said, "I was born poor, I have lived poor, and I wish to die poor."

Pope Pius X is probably best known for his opposition to modernism, a progressive attempt to "update" Church doctrine in light of contemporary opinions and philosophy. He also published the first Code of Canon Law, which gathered and formalized the Church's laws. As a result of his extensive pastoral experience at the parish level, he was a strong advocate of lay spirituality. Two effects were his encouragement of frequent communion and his promotion of catechesis in the vernacular language.

Pope Pius once wrote, "I can offer you no better guide than [*The Soul of the Apostolate*](#). I warmly recommend this book to you, as I value it very highly." In fact, he even revealed, "I have myself made it my bedside book."

The pope's bedside book, written by Dom Jean-Baptiste Chautard (1858-1935), should also be on the nightstands of many Catholics today. In our very active age, where "being busy" is sought and valued for its own sake, Christians should especially be wary of the dangers of undisciplined activism. Dom Chautard's classic demonstrates that the foundation of all apostolic ministry must be the interior life. The active and contemplative lives are interdependent. The former cannot fully flourish without the latter.

[*The Soul of the Apostolate*](#) teaches how to cultivate a strong interior life amid the bustle of everyday activity and become a true channel of God's grace to the world.



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"LET US REPEAT IT ONCE AGAIN, THE
ACTIVE LIFE CAN AND MUST ONLY BE,
IN ANY SOUL, THE OVERFLOW
OF THE INTERIOR LIFE."

-DOM JEAN-BAPTISTE CHAUTARD

THE SOUL OF THE APOSTOLATE

 TWEET THIS



POPE PIUS XI

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE DEVOUT LIFE - ST. FRANCIS DE SALES

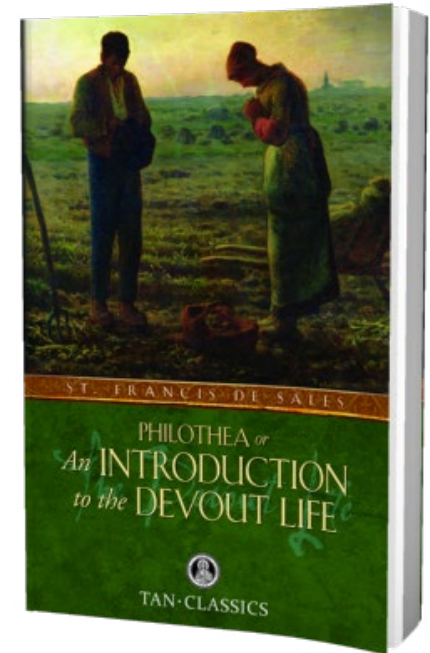
A gifted scholar and trained librarian, Ambrogio Damiano Achille Ratti (1857-1939) was elected Pope Pius XI in 1922. It was a time of immense change for the Church and the world. Pope Pius became the first sovereign of Vatican City in 1929, after its creation as an independent state. He fostered a number of concordats with other countries, including the *Reichskonkordat* with Germany. And he was charged with helping the Church navigate tense relations with Italy, Mexico, Spain, and the Soviet Union.

In 1931, he issued a major encyclical on the social order of modern society, *Quadragesimo Anno*, published forty years after Leo XIII's groundbreaking *Rerum Novarum*. Like other twentieth-century popes, he placed a strong emphasis on personal holiness, notably among the laity.

It's not often that a pope devotes an entire encyclical to one particular saint. But it happened in 1923 when Pope Pius XI published *Rerum Omnium Perturbationem*, an encyclical on St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622). The Pope hailed St. Francis as "a model of sanctity" and admitted, "It would be impossible to exaggerate the value of his books and pamphlets [which] ought to be distributed as widely as possible."

That especially includes St. Francis' masterwork, *An Introduction to the Devout Life*. Written in 1608 for a lay audience, which was extremely uncommon at the time, the book teaches readers how to attain holiness by sanctifying their everyday activities.

According to Pope Pius, the writing is "easy to understand and can be read with great pleasure." That breezy style, combined with practical spiritual advice, led Pope Pius to plead "that this book be read now as it formerly was by practically everyone. If this were done, Christian piety certainly would flourish the world over and the Church of God could rejoice."



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"BE PATIENT WITH EVERYONE, BUT ABOVE ALL
WITH YOURSELF. DO NOT BE DISHEARTENED
BY YOUR IMPERFECTIONS, BUT ALWAYS RISE
UP WITH FRESH COURAGE."

-ST. FRANCIS DE SALES

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE DEVOUT LIFE

 TWEET THIS

POPE ST. JOHN PAUL II

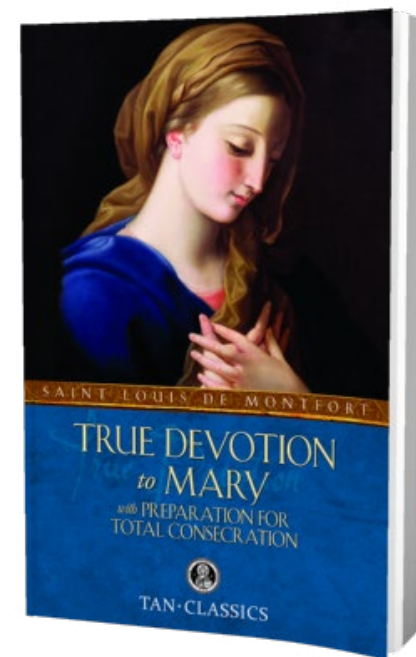
TRUE DEVOTION TO MARY - ST. LOUIS DE MONTFORT

Karol Joseph Wojtyla (1920-2005) faced many challenges growing up. When the Polish boy was nine years old, his mother died of kidney failure. Three years later, he lost his only brother to scarlet fever. Then a few months before his twenty-first birthday, his father died of a heart attack. In 1939, as he attended university in Kraków, Nazi troops invaded and threatened to stomp out religion.

But that suffering produced remarkable resolve. After being elected Pope John Paul II in 1978, it helped him stand valiantly against communism and what he deemed the “culture of death.” His twenty-six year papacy was the second-longest in modern history, and his noted sanctity led to his swift canonization just nine years after his death.

During Karol's studies in seminary, his spiritual director suggested he read [*True Devotion to Mary*](#) by St. Louis de Montfort (1673-1716), which he later described as a “decisive turning point” in his life. Throughout seminary, Wojtyla “read and re-read [the book] many times and with great spiritual profit.” He continued turning to it when the Second World War forced him into factory work: “I remember carrying it on me for a long time, even at the sodium factory, with the result that its handsome binding became spotted with lime. I continually went back to certain passages.”

One of those passages inspired his papal motto, “*Totus Tuus*” (All Yours), an allusion to St. Louis' doctrine of total consecration. Throughout his papacy, Pope John Paul II vigorously promoted [*True Devotion to Mary*](#). He quoted from the book in an apostolic letter on the Rosary, and in the encyclical [*Redemptoris Mater*](#), he specifically commended St. Louis as an imitable witness of Marian spirituality.



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"WE NEVER GIVE MORE HONOR TO JESUS
THAN WHEN WE HONOR HIS MOTHER, AND
WE HONOR HER SIMPLY AND SOLELY TO
HONOR HIM ALL THE MORE PERFECTLY."

-ST. LOUIS DE MONTFORT

TRUE DEVOTION TO MARY

 TWEET THIS



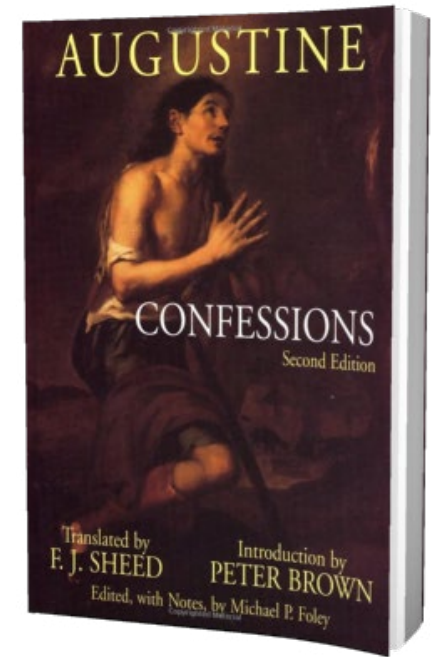
POPE BENEDICT XVI *CONFESSIONS* - ST. AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

Few people have shaped the Catholic Church over the last century more than Pope Benedict XVI (1927-). Born Joseph Ratzinger in 1927, he established himself as a highly esteemed theologian, playing a key role at the Second Vatican Council. That led to a long academic career, during which he taught in several German universities. In 1981, he settled in Rome after Pope John Paul II appointed him Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. His decades-long work earned the admiration of the pope, who considered Ratzinger one of his closest confidants.

Ratzinger was elected pope himself in 2005, three days after his seventy-eighth birthday. He served for eight years before resigning the papacy on February 11, 2013 due to “lack of strength of mind and body.”

Pope Benedict XVI was once asked, “Which two books would you take with you on a deserted island?” He answered, “The Bible and Augustine’s [*Confessions*](#).” That’s no surprise to those familiar with his work. As a student, then-Joseph Ratzinger wrote his doctoral dissertation on “The People and the House of God in Augustine’s Doctrine of the Church.” As pope, he often quoted Augustine (354-430) and devoted five sermons to the saint in a series on the Church Fathers. Upon reflection, Pope Benedict concluded, “I have developed my theology in a dialogue with Augustine.”

He especially enjoyed Augustine’s [*Confessions*](#), the first autobiography in Western history. The book let’s us “follow, step by step, the inner journey of this extraordinary man who was passionate about God.” From a pagan life of lust and social renown, through a gripping spiritual quest, to his baptism by the great St. Ambrose, the book remains a powerful and beautifully written story of conversion.



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"LATE HAVE I LOVED THEE,
O BEAUTY SO ANCIENT AND SO NEW,
LATE HAVE I LOVED THEE!"

-ST. AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO
CONFESSIONS

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POPE FRANCIS

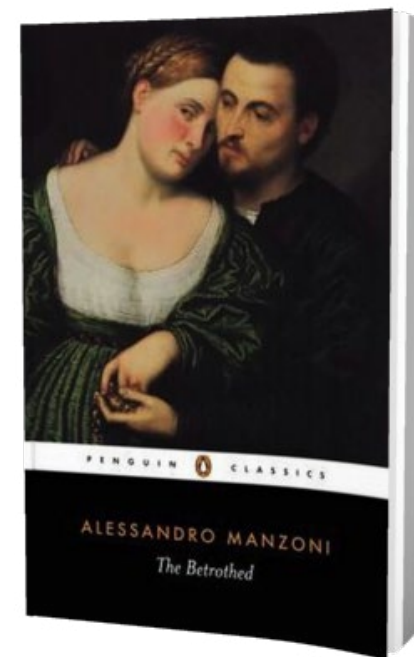
THE BETROTHED - ALESSANDRO MANZONI

You could almost hear a pin drop when Jorge Bergoglio was announced pope on March 13, 2013. Few expected the Argentinian bishop to succeed Pope Benedict XVI. But as soon as the crowds encountered him, gently waving his hand and asking for their prayers, he quickly won them over.

Deemed the “Pope of Firsts” by many commentators, Pope Francis is the first Jesuit pope, the first pope from the Southern Hemisphere, and the first non-European pope since Pope Gregory III. He took his name after the simple saint from Assisi and it’s easy to see why. The two share a strong emphasis on mercy, facilitating true encounters, and serving the poor, evident in the pope’s call for a “poor Church for the poor.”

In a groundbreaking interview with *America* magazine, Pope Francis was asked which artists and writers he prefers. He spoke of his love for a “diverse array of authors,” naming Dostoyevsky and Holderlin as two favorites. But then he added, “I have read [*The Betrothed*](#), by Alessandro Manzoni, three times, and I have it now on my table because I want to read it again. Manzoni gave me so much. When I was a child, my grandmother taught me by heart the beginning of [*The Betrothed*](#): ‘That branch of Lake Como that turns off to the south between two unbroken chains of mountains....’”

Americans might not be familiar with the book by Manzoni (1785-1873), but in Italy [*The Betrothed*](#) is held alongside other European masterpieces like Hugo’s [*Les Misérables*](#) and Tolstoy’s [*War and Peace*](#). Bruce Penman, the English translator of [*The Betrothed*](#), clarified its influence: “If Dickens had written only one novel...then we would have a book that would stand out in our literature in the same way that [*The Betrothed*](#) does in Italy.”



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"CERTAINLY THE HEART ALWAYS HAS SOMETHING
TO TELL ABOUT THE FUTURE TO THOSE WHO
LISTEN TO IT. BUT WHAT DOES THE HEART KNOW?
VERY LITTLE OF WHAT HAS ALREADY HAPPENED."

-ALESSANDRO MANZONI

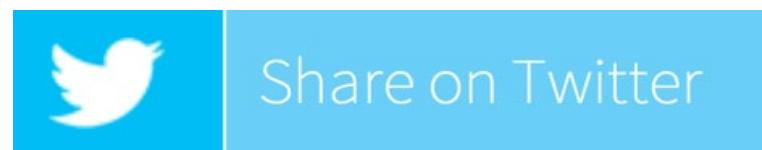
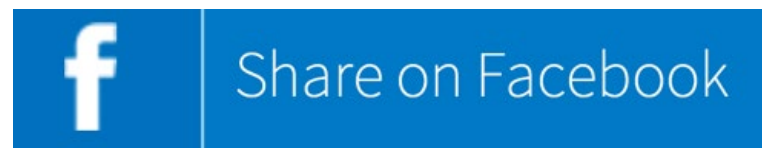
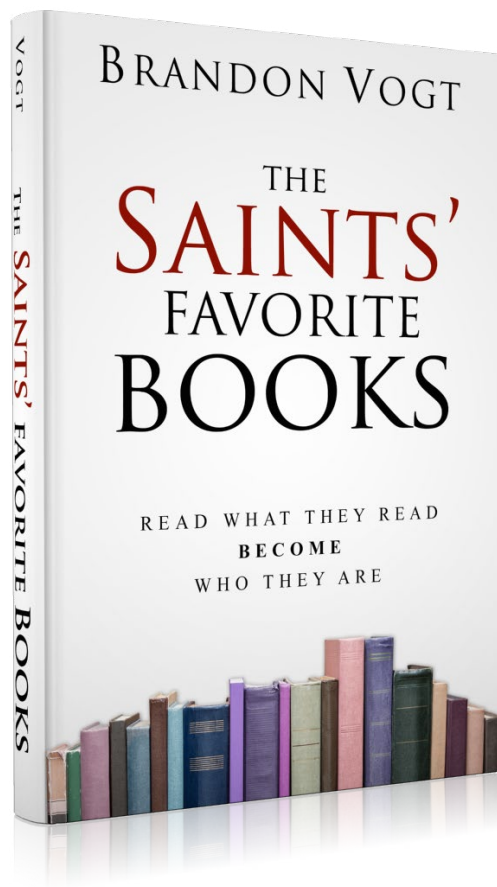
THE BETROTHED

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