



JESUIT
INSTITUTE
SOUTH
AFRICA

Take – and Read!

by Anthony Egan SJ

No, I am not going to reflect on St Augustine of Hippo – though I shamelessly quote words associated with his conversion. I am going to make the case for a different kind of conversion: reading!

But, some may object, in a time when we are faced with political corruption, global pandemic and the ongoing threat of environmental catastrophe, how can you be so irresponsible to talk about such trivia as books and reading?

But, I would counter, these are precisely the reasons why we need to talk about reading. Reading, widely and deeply, is the most powerful weapon the ordinary person has in the struggle to renew the world.

We live in an age where populist demagogues, pandemic paranoiacs, and climate denialists (not to mention religious ranters of every hue) seek to confuse and convince ordinary people into either embracing the nonsense they are peddling or bludgeon them into silence.

Reading, widely and deeply, arms us with information to refute and dispute, to clarify our thinking and inform our actions. It helps us to examine claims posing as ‘the truth’ and, better informed, to decide whether we actually believe what they say.

Reading, widely and deeply, takes us outside our individual worlds and see a much bigger reality. It confronts us with new possibilities and expands our imagination. In reading of other people, places, cultures, times, religions and ideas, we are called to see our perspective against a greater picture.

Reading destabilises us. Whether it is a novel about people who seem strange to us, a biography of someone important (or even someone like but unlike ourselves), a piece of political philosophy that challenges how we understand society, or a work of theology that calls us to understand God differently, we are unsettled. We begin to think differently. As we discover new ideas in books, our sense of our place in the world changes. We begin to imagine that a different world might be possible.

By the way, that’s what happened to the young philosopher Augustine, in a garden in Milan in 386AD.

That’s why authoritarian regimes of every political or religious stripe have historically tried to censor what humans read. Why they have frequently burnt books and smashed printing presses. Why writers of every kind – philosophers, journalists, poets, novelists, theologians and playwrights – have been persecuted. Indeed, such regimes start by burning books; they end up burning people.

Books and reading, and access to books in whatever form – print, electronic, even audiobooks (though I must admit I’m trad enough to feel they’re a bit of a cheat!) – is fundamental to living in a democratic society. I would dare to say that a reading society is a free society.

That’s why we need to read, widely and deeply.

Of course, reading isn’t just about this. It’s also fun. A disciplined kind of fun, I’ll admit, more work than just vegging out in front of the TV or YouTube. (Not that I’m against either, let me insist).

Take – and read

Tired and in need of rest?

4 - 12 September 2021

Xolile Keteyi House, Zinkwazi



JESUIT
INSTITUTE
SOUTH
AFRICA



www.jesuitinstitute.org.za



retreats@jesuitinstitute.org.za



011 482 4237

An individually guided EIGHT-DAY residential RETREAT
Spend time in silence and prayer to connect deeply with God,
listen for God's invitation at this moment in your life, and find rest and
rejuvenation.

The cost R12,000 per person (excl. travel)