

# A "Back to Sanity" Book List For Modern Catholics

*A dead thing can go with the stream, but only a living thing can go against it*

-G.K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*



Recommended reading lists are unavoidably arbitrary. There is always "one more" that could have been added. In many cases there are *many* more that could have been added. Such is the case with this list.

Insanity entered the world many, many years ago. It all started in a Garden. The first act of insanity was the original sin, when man put himself above his Maker. "A measure of your insanity," writes philosopher Peter Kreeft, "is the size of the gap between what you think you are and what you really are."

When we sin we forsake the real world. Willingly or unwittingly, we forget that God is not like us; we are like Him, which makes God wholly *other*. It is easy to forget the fact is that we are nothing without God. He creates and holds us in existence because he wants to; not because he has to. God is perfectly good; we are not. God is infinitely intelligent; we are not.

Thus there lies an infinite gap between what God is and what we are, while only a finite gap lies between what we are and, say, what a bird is. I suppose that means (hearkening back to Dr. Kreeft's definition of insanity) that when we prefer our will to God's—when we live as though we *were* God—we are

more insane than the man down the street who dresses in feathers and self-identifies as a chicken.

We as a civilization must face the fact that we have, by and large, lost touch with the real world. Many have chosen the way of moral relativism. At least as many have chosen the way of religious indifferentism. Accordingly many have reduced God to the universe or something akin to an impersonal force field, while others have reduced Jesus to a Jewish Mr. Rogers. Post-Reformation division has led to the propagation of thousands of dissenting Christian denominations. We still can't all get along, it seems, and too many people are okay with that. Furthermore, at the most fundamental level of society the family is under attack from every angle. And while "safe spaces" proliferate on university campuses throughout the Western World, the most *unsafe* space on the entire planet is the womb of a mother. Insanity abounds.

This reading list is important because of the hard times we Christians live in. It seems that the days of comfortable Christianity are over. Thus every one of us, every morning, is confronted with the same choice all over again: will we walk the way of holiness today? Or will we give our consent to the Culture of Death, the anti-culture? Will we walk the line of sanity or cross it? Reality in all its inconvenient truths beckons us and awaits our response.

But the Church always thrives in hard times. It is like its Founder. You can try kill it—you might even have every illusion of succeeding—but in the end it will always come back stronger. Tertullian was *not* insane when he observed that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church. He was simply stating an empirical fact.

I am confident that they will help to strengthen you spiritually, making you stronger in mind and will. I hope you will have the opportunity to read many

of them. The list is in no particular order, and represents some of the best books I have read, or started to read, over the last year or so. Each of them has been particularly helpful in keeping me grounded in the real world.

So here are 25 (or so) books to help you stay sane by. And if you happen to be a sinner, here are 25 (or so) books to help you back to sanity.

### 1. [The Bible](#)

This is the most powerful, life-changing book on the list. Must read daily, even for a couple minutes. I prefer the [Ignatius Study Bible](#) because of its vast footnotes, word studies, and essays.

### 2. [The Power of Silence: Against the Dictatorship of Noise](#) – Robert Cardinal Sarah

“If I were a physician, and if I were allowed to prescribe just one remedy for all the ills of the modern world, I would prescribe silence,” wrote Søren Kierkegaard. After the Sacred Scriptures, this is probably the most important book on the list.

### 3. [Interior Freedom](#) – Jacques Philippe

Fr. Philippe is a master of Catholic spirituality. His books are short and very easy to read. If you like this book, follow it up with [Searching For and Maintaining Peace](#).

### 4. [Out of the Ashes: Rebuilding American Culture](#) – Anthony Esolen

Of all modern writers Professor Esolen is among my top three. He comes closer than anybody else, I think, to being a modern day Chesterton. If you have small children then you should start with his [Life Under Compulsion: Ten Ways to Destroy the Humanity of Your Child](#) and [Ten Ways](#)

[To Destroy the Humanity of Your Child](#), then read *Out Of The Ashes*.

5. [The Noonday Devil: Acedia, the Unnamed Evil of Our Times](#) – Jean-Charles Nault, O.S.B

Father Nault received from Pope Benedict XVI, then Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, the first Henri de Lubac Prize for his thesis on acedia, *La Saveu de Dieu*. This book is based on that thesis, and offers not just a diagnosis but practical ways to eliminate the unnamed evil of our times.

6. [Collected Poetry of G.K. Chesterton](#)

Even the late Christopher Hitchens [acknowledged](#) to the “high quality” of Chesterton’s poetry, referring to “his magic faculty of being unforgettable.” Why read poetry? Because as Gilbert himself tells us: it expresses the inexpressible. In other words, poetry has a unique capacity to teach us about the most important of things.

7. [The Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins](#)

To see clearer the extraordinary in the ordinary, read Hopkins’s poetry and relish in it.

8. [Theology For Beginners](#) – Frank Sheed

One of the greatest Catholic apologists of the twentieth century. I wish every Catholic would read at least *this* book by Sheed. It is short but rich, and neatly organizes the disorganized heap of Catholic doctrine that so many of us have been handed. Sheed puts it all together into a neat, logically fitting package. After this, read his [Theology and Sanity](#).

9. [Answering Atheism: How To Make The Case For God With Logic and Charity](#) – Trent Horn

The best popular work of apologetics out there when it comes to addressing skepticism towards the existence of God.

#### 10. [7 Secrets of the Eucharist](#) – Vinny Flynn

The Catechism tells us that the Eucharist is “the source and summit of the Christian life” (1324). Here is a short, powerful book to rekindle a Eucharist-centred spirituality within you.

#### 11. [The Lord of The Rings](#) – J.R.R. Tolkien

“The Lord of the Rings is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work,” wrote Tolkien. Yet even non-Catholics have found Tolkien’s trilogy majestic and powerful (read C.S. Lewis’s [review](#) of *The Fellowship of the Ring*). And even atheists (read Holly Ordway’s [Not God’s Type: An Atheist Academic Lays Down Her Arms](#))

#### 12. [The Philosophy of Tolkien](#) – Peter Kreeft

Read this gem during and after you read *The Lord of the Rings*. And read everything else by Kreeft, a modern day C.S. Lewis. If you’re not sure where to start, start with these: [Jesus Shock](#) and [Fundamentals of the Faith](#).

#### 13. [Dynamics of World History](#) – Christopher Dawson

Dawson is a critically important figure of modern Catholic scholarship. Historian Brad Birzer recommends starting with Dawson’s essays in *Dynamics of World History*.

#### 14. [Tales From Shakespeare](#) – Charles and Mary Lamb

Many consider Shakespeare, Dante, and Homer to be the greatest writers of Western Civilization. When reading any of Shakespeare’s plays, it is a helpful

strategy to read Lamb's short "children's" version first, then read the real deal. Make sure you get the [Ignatius Critical Editions](#) which come with helpful footnotes and essays.

#### 15. [The Way](#) – Saint Josemaria Escriva

Saint Josemaria, founder of Opus Dei, had a real knack for distilling deep truths into small nuggets of catchy wisdom. Let's just say he was not afraid to apply a swift kick to one's spiritual rear end, when necessary. *The Way* is a classic work of Catholic spirituality, especially for the layman.

#### 16. [Why I Am A Catholic \(And You Should Be Too\)](#) – Brandon Vogt

Brandon Vogt has become a good friend; but I was a big fan of his work long before we were ever acquainted. Anything you read (or watch, or listen to) from Brandon is going to be top quality, a reflection of his gifted intellect and creativity. He is also the most voracious reader I know (I still suspect he has been endowed with the spiritual gift of bi-literation).

*Why I Am A Catholic*, his most recent book, is a refreshing defence of the Catholic faith from the point of view of a Protestant convert. Read it. Then read Trent Horn's latest book [Why We're Catholic: Our Reasons For Faith, Hope, and Love](#) (which has apparently been selling by the cratefuls).

#### 17. [Orthodoxy](#) – G.K. Chesterton

My favourite book of all-time. Read anything by Chesterton, who has the gift of simultaneously overwhelming his readers, confusing them, and compelling them to underline almost everything they read by him. For beginning Chestertonians, you may want to start with [In Defense of Sanity: The Best Essays of G.K. Chesterton](#) – Selected by Dale Ahlquist, et al., or [any book by Ahlquist on Chesterton](#).

## 18. [Hannah Coulter](#) – Wendell Berry

Wendell Berry is fast becoming one of our household's most treasured authors.

## 19. [The Awakening of Miss Prim](#) – Natalia Sanmartin Fenollera

Both this book and *Hannah Coulter* were books put in my hand by my wife. Here's a valuable lesson I have learned: if your wife hands you a book – read it. Don't ask questions. You will be better for it.

## 20. [A Severe Mercy](#) – Sheldon Vanauken

Another book that my wife has handed me. *A beautiful* book. And a good source of wisdom and insight when it comes to the problem of evil and suffering.

## 21. [Father Elijah: An Apocalypse](#) – Michael D. O'Brien

Read anything by Michael O'Brien. He is something of a modern day Dostoevsky, and yet someone wholly unique. This book, *Father Elijah*, is great in the fullest sense of the word. According to Stratford Caldecott, "O'Brien has produced a prophetic work and a manual of spiritual warfare. This compelling masterpiece will stretch your imagination in the right direction. Read it and pray."

Also, he has recently released a sequel, [Elijah in Jerusalem](#).

*Father Elijah* is the first of [six novels](#) written by O'Brien which together he says "examine the spiritual and moral struggles of our times."

## 22. [Christianity and the Crisis of Cultures](#) – Pope Benedict XVI

This book is short and, as always with the Pope Emeritus, rich in wisdom,

scholarship, and readability.

### 23. [The Dialogues of Plato](#)

“The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato,” wrote philosopher Alfred North Whitehead. It therefore makes sense to start your philosophical reading here. Plato is surprisingly clear and fun to read, even for the most amateur philosopher. Elsewhere, Peter Kreeft has recommended starting with Boethius’s [The Consolation of Philosophy](#).

### 24. [The Story of an Exorcist](#) – Fr. Gabriele Amorth

One of the most devastating heresies of our time is the denial of sin and evil. But the devil does exist: just ask any exorcist. Or read this book. The late Father Amorth, former chief exorcist of Rome, shares about his experiences of ministering to those who have been oppressed, even possessed, by demonic spirits.

An interesting side note: a friend of mine knew Father Amorth personally, who was a dear friend of his family in Italy. The chief exorcist of Rome’s advice to him was this: *go to confession frequently*. It cannot be understated, he emphasized, how important it is in our times to remain in the state of grace.

### 25. [Crossing the Threshold of Hope](#) – Saint John Paul II

Good answers to tough question from perhaps the sanest man of modern times.

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*Okay, just one more:* [\*\*Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less\*\*](#) – Greg McKeown

Over the last couple years my wife and I have been particularly intrigued by the minimalist concept. Basically, we recognized that much of life's noise consists in technology, clutter and "things" that really only take up space in our home.

We are not anti-technology. But we have also become acutely aware of where any excesses lie and the unwelcome effects those excesses can have on family life. One strategy we have undertaken is to eliminate our television, especially for our children's sake (reserved only now for special occasions). My wife, Amanda, has blogged about our screen-free strategy [here](#).

Every action begins with a choice. McKeown's book on essentialism is a perfect starting point for anyone interested in reducing the material "noise" in their life—and any other unnecessary noise for that matter.

If you want to make better, more intentional choices in your everyday life (an essential skill for any saint-in-the-making) – read this book too.