

Stimulus package: Buy books

From the Editors in the [May 5, 2009](#) issue

If the economic recession has made people more receptive to spiritual concerns and theological insights, that interest has not translated into sales of religion books (see [Marcia Nelson's report](#) in this issue). In fact, religion book sales have gone down while sales of romance novels have gone up (by \$3 million in the last quarter of 2008). Apparently, when it comes to books, people are seeking escape more than spiritual support.

Book sales overall are down somewhat, though this doesn't necessarily mean that people are reading less, novelist Ann Patchett argues in an article in the *Wall Street Journal*. They may be using their local libraries more or sharing books with one another. The National Endowment for the Arts reported that interest in fiction is actually up for the first time in more than 25 years—even among the 18-to-25 age group, for whom the iPod is standard equipment.

We may not be able to do much about our economic circumstances these days, but we can do something about our spiritual response to them, and books remain a crucial resource. Historically, Christians, like Jews, have emphasized the role of the written word in edification and formation. There is more that we need to know about God's world and word. And while we have been saved by grace, there is much room for spiritual growth.

It seems fitting therefore that Christians have developed a spiritual discipline of slow reading called *lectio divina*, a way of reading meditatively in which the text examines our own lives as much as we examine the text. In *lectio divina* the texts don't merely pass into our minds; they seep into the very marrow of our being, shaping our lives toward greater Christlikeness.

St. Dominic (1170-1221) faced an economic crisis when he was a student. Out of compassion he sold some of his books to gain money to help the poor. But Dominic certainly didn't fail to appreciate the value of books. He went on to start an order known for its rigorous scholarship (think Thomas Aquinas). In one of the early Dominican constitutions, the monks were admonished to be "earnest in their study,

always reading or thinking about something by day or by night . . . striving to retain as much as they can in their minds.” For the Dominicans, book learning is always meant to serve both the preaching of the gospel and the doing of acts of charity.

Erasmus offered another perspective on books during tough times: “When I get a little money I buy books,” he said, “and if any is left I buy food and clothes.”

In her discussions with religion book publishers, Marcia Nelson heard one publisher quip: “We’re trying to have our inventory declared a toxic asset” so it can be “purchased by the U.S. government.” The government isn’t likely to bail out religion publishing. That industry depends on readers and buyers who will engage in their own stimulus program—a stimulus program sure to benefit both readers and publishers.

Buy books. Or borrow them from friends. Or borrow them from the library. Above all, read them.