

. THE STUDY OF SACRED SCRIPTURE

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This article was first published in "Position Papers" by the Sheido Foundation Ashi-ya, It appeared in *L'Osservatore Romano*, May 15, 1975

I. Introduction

In the epilogue of his gospel, St. John the apostle points out to us: "Many other signs also Jesus worked in the sight of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name. 1 He is reminding us that the aim of his gospel, and, we might say, the aim of all the gospels and of the whole of sacred Scripture, is that we should have faith in Christ, the Son of God - true God and true man - and, further, that we should put that faith into practice. This is how it has always been interpreted in the life of the Church. Reading the sacred books is solid nourishment for the Christian in his task of moulding his conduct to the words of God himself found written in their pages. St. Augustine liked to call the books of sacred Scripture "letters which reach us from our distant homeland while we are away from it on our travels. 2

The Church has always encouraged those who read and study the holy bible to approach it with the proper dispositions of faith and piety, reminding us time and again that it is the written word of God, given in safekeeping to the Church to be watched over, defended, and authentically explained.

And yet over the years, there has been no shortage of opinions expressing an apparent ignorance of the divine character of sacred Scripture and of the duty of reverence and faith incumbent on those who read it, study, or interpret it. In fact, the last ten to fifteen years have witnessed a growing tendency among some Catholics specializing in scriptural studies to question the divine origin, authority, and contents of the holy bible. The divine element is sometimes denied or ignored, as if it were just a mere human work subject to the conditioning, limitations, and evolution of any revered document of antiquity. Its veracity and its literal and historical meaning are at times either refuted or given a twisted meaning. The exegesis of the Fathers of the Church is discredited; and there are even some who argue against the Church having the right to interpret the sacred books at all.

As will be explained later, Catholic doctrine is being undermined by various writers whom we would call the "modern exegetes." Whereas the correct Catholic interpretation draws on the immense wealth of Tradition, the declarations of the Magisterium, and the analogy of faith, compiled over two thousand years of prayerful scholarship, the "new exegesis" is based on research which turns its back on all that has gone before and plunges instead into a whole series of dangerous speculations based on a total commitment to philosophies diametrically opposed to faith and the supernatural. It is thus deeply influenced by naturalism and the rationalist criticism of liberal Protestantism, in which subsidiary data are stressed to the detriment of the content.

In the face of all this, it seems more opportune than ever to restate some of the main points of the doctrine of the Church on sacred Scripture

II. Some Doctrinal Aspects: Sacred Scripture, Tradition, Magisterium

According to the teaching of the second Vatican Council, "In his goodness and wisdom, God chose to reveal himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of his own will, by which through Christ, the Word made flesh, man has access to the Father in the Holy Spirit and comes to share in the divine nature. Through this revelation, therefore, the invisible God out of the abundance of his love speaks to men as friends, and lives among them, so that he may invite and take them into fellowship with himself." ³ God has revealed himself to us, and this revelation makes up a body of truths, a divine *depositum* entrusted to the safekeeping of the Church. "The doctrine of the faith which God has revealed has not been proposed as philosophical findings which should be perfected by human intelligence, but it has been given to the Spouse of Christ as a divine deposit to be faithfully guarded and infallibly declared." ⁴

This *depositum* is contained in sacred Scripture and Tradition: "This supernatural revelation, according to the faith of the universal Church declared by the holy Council of Trent, is contained in the written books and in the unwritten traditions which were received by the apostles from the lips of Christ himself and were passed from hand to hand down to us from those same apostles, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit ." ⁵ When the hierarchical Church received this *depositum* it was also given the promise of divine help for its safe-keeping and interpretation.

According to Catholic faith, therefore, there is an intimate union between sacred Scripture, Tradition and the Magisterium of the Church, so that it would be clearly against God's designs to seek his revelation in any one of them without also consulting the other two: "It is clear, therefore, that sacred Tradition, sacred Scripture, and the teaching authority of the Church, in accord with God's most wise design, are so linked and joined together and each in its own way under the action of the Holy Spirit contribute effectively to the salvation of souls." ⁶

A clear conclusion to be drawn from all we have been saying is that, for any interpretation of sacred Scripture to conform to Catholic faith, it has of necessity to be done in the light of and with the guidance of Tradition, always keeping as its touchstone all that the Magisterium has said so far. This after all, is nothing more than the old and reliable principle expressed in the sentence: The Church is the only authentic interpreter of the sacred books.

"If the heavenly doctrine of Jesus Christ, contained for the most part in the books inspired by God, had been given over to the thoughts of men, it could not on its own, unite their spirits: rather would it become the object of their differing interpretations. And this would happen not only because of the depth of its mysteries but also because of the diversity of the minds of men, and because of the turmoil that would result from the clash and struggle of opposing positions. For, from differing interpretations, there would inevitably spring differing sentiments, and these would provoke controversies, disagreements, and quarrels...In order, therefore, to unite spirits and to foster and preserve harmony of feeling, it was necessary for there to be another principle, in addition to the existence of sacred Scripture. The divine wisdom required it; for God could not have wished for the unity of faith without also providing the suitable means to preserve that unity" ⁷

Revealed truth is kept, transmitted, illustrated, and set forth by the Church chiefly through the organ of the sacred Magisterium. This role of the Magisterium of the Church has been repeatedly asserted in pontifical documents. "The task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the teaching office of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ...This teaching office is not above the word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously, and explaining it faithfully by divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit; it draws from this one deposit of faith everything which it presents for belief as divinely revealed." ⁸

Therefore the preservation of this unity between sacred Scripture, Tradition, and the Magisterium is essential, if exegesis is to give fruitful results leading to a better understanding of the word of God.

Divine origin

The excellence of sacred Scripture and the sacred character granted it by the Church is based on one fact alone: that God is its principal author. When we speak of "inspiration" we refer to that divine and supernatural action whereby God raised the human writer above his natural capacity in order to make him an instrumental cooperator in the composition of the sacred books.

This truth is affirmed in sacred Scripture itself. Thus St. Paul wrote to Timothy: "All Scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching, for reproof, for correcting, for instructing in justice; that the man of God may be perfect, equipped for every good work." ⁹ And, as if foreseeing that some would attempt to deny the divine origin of these books, St. Peter adds: "No prophecy is made by private interpretation. For not by the will of man was prophecy brought at any time; but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit." ¹⁰ This belief of the Church in the divine origin of sacred Scripture has figured again and again in documents of the Magisterium, and was solemnly proclaimed in the First Vatican Council. And Vatican II reaffirmed it once more: "Those divinely revealed realities which are contained and presented in sacred Scripture have been committed to writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit." ¹¹

The role of the human writer, the hagiographer, is clarified when he is considered as one who, "in composing his sacred books, is a living and intelligent tool or instrument of the Holy Spirit." ¹²

However, it is equally true that this divine inspiration does not deprive the human instrument of his liberty, while he remains perfectly attuned to the will of God, faithfully reproducing what God wishes to say. Benedict XV expressed this idea thus: "...the books of sacred Scripture were composed under the inspiration, suggestions, promptings, or even at the dictation of the Holy Spirit; and, furthermore, they were written and edited by the Holy Spirit himself; and yet, this does not call into question the fact that each of the human authors has cooperated with God's inspiration according to his own individual character and personal traits." ¹³

Another conclusion to be drawn is that God's action is present at the very start of the writing of each

and every one of the sacred books, and lasts throughout the entire period of composition. "For by supernatural power, he so moved and impelled them to write - he was so present to them - that the things which he ordered, and those only, they first rightly understood, then willed faithfully to write them down, and finally expressed in apt words and with infallible truth. Otherwise, it could not be said that he was the author of the entire Scripture." ¹⁴

The Magisterium of the Church has further stated that the divine inspiration applies to all the books in all their parts: "Anyone who does not accept these books as sacred and canonical in all their parts, as they are wont to be interpreted in the Catholic Church and as they are contained in the Latin Vulgate edition...will be excommunicated." ¹⁵ We also read in the documents of Vatican II: "...everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit..." ¹⁶

Unity

From the fact that it is inspired there immediately follows the unity of Sacred Scripture. Since all the books of both the Old and the New Testaments have but one author - the Holy Spirit - there is in them a unity of content. All the pages of both Testaments move toward Christ as to their center." ¹⁷ The constant teaching of the Fathers of the Church, as well as the doctrine so often given by the Magisterium, have fully clarified this unity between both Testaments. The Old Testament contains the realities of the New in prophecy and prefigurement. Only in the light of the latter does the former achieve fullness of meaning: "God, the inspirer and author of both Testaments, wisely arranged that the New Testament be hidden in the Old and the Old made manifest in the New." ¹⁸ The New Testament reveals explicitly and contains really what, in the Old, was only foretold. In short, then, The New Testament completes and perfects the Old.

This unity of sacred Scripture also implies a total harmony of content, so that the various texts illustrate one another. This is what is usually known as the analogy of scriptural faith. Vatican II teaches that "since holy Scripture must be read and interpreted according to the same Spirit by whom it was written, no less serious attention must be given to the content and unity of the whole of Scripture, if the meaning of the sacred texts is to be correctly brought to light. The living tradition of the whole Church must be taken into account along with the harmony which exists between elements of the faith." ¹⁹

Inerrancy

Inerrancy means that the sacred books are totally free from error in all their statements. This is very closely linked to the belief in inspiration, for, if sacred Scripture has God for its author, and God is the supreme truth, then obviously, there can be no error in the sacred books, for otherwise it would be tantamount to imputing the authorship of error to God himself.

The Magisterium of the Church has often referred to this truth of faith. Leo XIII says: "For all the books which the Church receives as sacred and canonical, are written wholly and entirely, with all their parts, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit; and so far is it from being possible that any error can coexist

with inspiration, that inspiration not only is essentially incompatible with error, but excludes and rejects it absolutely and necessarily as it is impossible that God himself, the supreme truth, can utter that which is not true." ²⁰ And Pius XII, after indicating these words to be the constant belief of the Church adds: "This teaching which our predecessor Leo XIII set forth with such solemnity, We also proclaim with Our authority, and We urge all to adhere to it religiously. No less urgently do We inculcate obedience in the present day to the counsels and exhortations which he in his day so wisely enjoined." ²¹

So, the Magisterium has never ceased to come out strongly against any theory which tries to resolve the apparent inexactitudes of the sacred books by chafing against the limitation placed, not by inspiration, but by inerrancy, as if errors were possible in an inspired passage. Everything written in sacred Scripture comes from God and, as such, is true. In other words, the formal reason for biblical inerrancy lies in the very nature of inspiration: "It follows that those who maintain that an error is possible in any genuine passage of the sacred writings, either pervert the Catholic notion of inspiration, or make God the author of such error." ²²

There is no margin for distinctions within the sacred Scriptures which would allow inerrancy to some texts and deny it to others, be it on account of their content, because of their ultimate aim, or for whatever reason. Scripture is the word of God and is true because it is inspired; that is, not only because (and insofar as) it is revealed; nor only insofar as it is a matter of faith and morals. In this context Pius XII wrote: "A number of things are proposed or suggested by some even against the divine authorship of Sacred Scripture. For some go so far as to pervert the sense of the Vatican Council's definition that God is the author of holy Scripture, and they put forward again the opinion, already condemned, which asserts that inerrancy extends only to those parts of the bible that deal with God himself, religion or morals. They even wrongly speak of a human sense of Scripture, beneath which a divine sense, which they say is the only infallible meaning, lies hidden." ²³ These errors were again denounced by Vatican II: "Therefore, since everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching firmly, faithfully, and without error that truth which God wanted to put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation." ²⁴

Historicity

One particular area of inerrancy, and one that has a special relevance these days, is that of freedom from error in historical matters. This is not to say that everything written in the sacred books is an actual historical event, because there are scores of allegories, parables and the like, which have no need of an historical basis, since they belong to a different type of instruction. But, with these exceptions (which must be established on the grounds of substantial evidence and a careful avoidance of sweeping generalizations), the historical truth of sacred Scriptures is a principle to be taken as a starting point for all work of interpretation of the sacred books; it is not, therefore, a conclusion or end-product of critical research. Judging by the results of modern hypotheses, it is quite clear that this point has often been ignored. Nowadays in fact, it seems as if the *onus probandi* [burden of proof] is being placed on the defenders of the historical truth or literal meaning...

The Church's thinking on the matter is made clear in the answer given by the Pontifical Biblical Commission to this question:

"Is it possible to admit as a principle of sound exegesis that books of Sacred Scripture which are regarded as historical, at times do not relate, either wholly or in part, history properly so-called and objectively true, but present only the appearance of history with the purpose of expressing some meaning differing from the strictly literal or historical sense of the words?"

"*Answer:* In the negative. Except in the case neither easily nor rashly to be admitted, in which, the mind of the Church not being contrary and without prejudice to its judgment, it is proved by solid arguments that...under the guise and form of history, a parable, an allegory, etc. is set forth." ²⁵

With reference to the historical truth of the gospels, we have a particularly strong and unanimous tradition, expressed and approved in numerous documents of the Magisterium. In these it is unequivocally affirmed that these inspired books quite rightly demand our unwavering belief in their historicity. ²⁶ The latest statement in this regard comes in the dogmatic constitution on Revelation, of Vatican II: "Holy Mother Church has firmly and with absolute constancy held, and continues to hold, that the four gospels just named, whose historical character the Church unhesitatingly asserts, faithfully hand on what Jesus Christ, while living among men, really did and taught for their eternal salvation until the day he was taken up into heaven." ²⁷

III Present-day Deviations

The Protestant principle of *sola Scriptura*

Of the many doctrinal deviations now being adopted by some so-called Catholic exegetes, perhaps the most harmful is the Protestant principle of *sola Scriptura* or "Scripture alone." Those who uphold this principle assert that the only source of revelation is the bible itself and completely ignore Tradition and the Magisterium of the Church. But this assertion is incompatible with the unity of holy Scripture. It is as if they were trying to wrench the Holy Spirit that wrote the books from the same Holy Spirit that interprets them through the organs of Tradition. The falsity of this stand shows itself in two main tendencies:

1. *Exegetical research is considered to be beyond the pale of the authority of the Magisterium.*

One comes across references to a so-called "scientific investigation" of sacred Scripture, as being in opposition to a "Catholic interpretation," almost as if the Magisterium and Tradition of the Church were superfluous to a correct understanding of the bible. Similarly, the term "scientific or theological Magisterium" as a rival of the "Magisterium of the Church's authority." Consequently, total reliance is placed on critical and historical methods of study, while Catholic interpretations are regarded as mere impositions.

This approach, in practice if not in theory, denies the Magisterium its right to guard, interpret, and explain Sacred Scripture. ²⁸ The important word here is interpret, for it is the Magisterium's supreme task to do this with the truths of faith in its care. The exegete, then, should do his work with the Magisterium as his support, directed by it, defended by it, in the sure knowledge that it is the Magisterium which maintains and has always maintained the continuity of the Church's teaching.

This last point is worth emphasizing, especially in reference to the interpretation criteria, for the Magisterium always proceeds in strict continuity. It would therefore be going against its very essence for the Magisterium to look on one of its documents in isolation from all the others that came before it, as if presented a brand new principle ignoring or disregarding the way things had always been understood previously. The only theological meaning possible for any given text of the Magisterium is one that links up with all that the Magisterium has declared previously, with Tradition, and with the analogy of faith.

2. The opinions of contemporary exegetes, and particularly those of Protestants, are rated higher than those of the Fathers of the Church, and of Tradition.

Some Catholic workers in the field of biblical studies seem to take as their yardstick the commonly held opinions of their contemporary Protestant counterparts, in preference to what has at all times and in all places been the unanimous belief of the Church. It follows, then, that the exegesis of the Fathers, when not openly ridiculed, is considered worthless and outdated. In doing so, they appear to be influenced by a certain inferiority complex which makes them oblivious to Leo XIII's words: "The holy Fathers...are of supreme authority whenever they all interpret in one and the same manner any text of the bible as pertaining to the doctrine of the faith and morals;...The opinions of the Fathers is also of very great weight when they deal with these matters in their own personal capacity as private doctors; not only because they excel in their knowledge of revealed doctrine and in their acquaintance with many things which are useful in understanding the apostolic books, but because they are men of eminent sanctity and of ardent zeal for the truth, on whom God as bestowed a more ample measure of his light" ²⁹

These words, however, are systematically ignored by those who prefer to accept the authority of the "modern exegetes" as supreme. This situation also seems to have been foreseen by Leo XIII when he wrote: "It is most unbecoming to pass by, in ignorance or contempt, the excellent work which Catholics have left in abundance, and to have recourse to the works of non-Catholics, and to seek in them to the detriment of sound doctrine and often to the peril of faith, the explanation of passages on which Catholics long ago have successfully employed their talent and labor. For...the sense of holy Scripture can nowhere be found incorrupt outside the Church, and cannot be expected to be found in writers who, being without the true faith, only gnaw the bark of the Sacred Scripture and never attain its pith" ³⁰

To overvalue the work of the "modern exegetes," then, betrays a lack of faith as well as a faulty methodology. It amounts to rejecting material of superior quality in favor of an inferior product. It would be naive indeed to accept some of these "new" views simply because they are talked about and frequently appear in print. The propaganda campaign behind them may be stronger than the scientific proofs that

would seem to support them.

Another false approach is that of considering the exegesis of the Fathers of the Church merely as a pious exegesis. It is good to remember that "by reason of the office assigned to them by God in the Church, they are distinguished by a certain subtle insight into heavenly things and by a marvelous keenness of intellect, which enables them to penetrate to the very innermost meaning of the divine word and bring to light all that can help to elucidate the teaching of Christ and promote holiness of life" ³¹

A peculiar product of this situation is the proliferation of "ecumenical bibles" written in cooperation with non-Catholics. It should be obvious, however, that such versions are bound to involve certain compromises not in conformity with our faith, for any version of the holy bible necessarily involves a certain interpretation of the divine word. Aside from footnotes and additional explanations (if and when these are included), the version is apt to contain error if it is not done strictly in the light of the faith professed now and at all times by the One Church of Jesus Christ.

A mistaken notion of inspiration

The notion of inspiration in the hands of the "modern exegetes," has lost its supernatural and dogmatic value, and has acquired in its place a somewhat vague content derived from rationalistic reflection. Thus:

a) Faith tells us that God is the principle author of the sacred books. But the "modern exegetes" approach the bible as if the inspired authors were the chief authors, and as if the books themselves were just good, religious works.

They will not, of course, deny outright the divine origin of the inspired books, but it is obvious from their writings that they rely on exclusively human methodology - philology, historical research, sociology as if this were the correct way to show their true content. In other words, the production of these sacred books is looked upon as the result of a purely human effort. This effectively precludes the mention of God's inspiration as something positive, as a supernatural charisma elevating the powers of the writer and making him an instrument of God to write all that God wanted him to write, and only that.

In this outlook, we find ourselves once again facing the *a priori* anti-supernatural argument of the rationalists. Any biblical passage, any institution or action due to the supernatural intervention of God in history is explained away in a human fashion (even when such explanation happens to go against the obvious meaning of the words, or against the whole context of a passage), by appealing to "ancestral taboos," or a "centralizing mentality," or by saying that the sacred writer "personifies" God or ascribes to God words that really come from other sources.

b) Our faith affirms that God inspired the hagiographer so that he should first rightly understand, and then faithfully write down those things which he ordered, and these only. "Modern exegetes" would have us believe that the writer's inspiration really came from his community. According to them, the sacred book is

thus not the fruit of a supernatural gift from God, but the result of evolutionary elements at work among the people of Israel.

c) Since God is the author of both the Old and New Testaments, there is a profound unity between them. The Old contains the realities of the New in prophecy and prefiguration (as was pointed out before) and, in its light, achieves fullness of meaning. The "modern exegetes," on the other hand, speak of interpreting the New Testament in the light of the Old.

According to them, the characteristics of Christ's preaching should be interpreted in harmony with the historical setting he lived in, namely, that of the Old Testament, with its collective responsibility, social determinisms, punishment or reward dealt out to the nation as a whole, and so on. They try to present Christian doctrine as an antidote to an exaggerated acceptance of collectivity and things temporal, and in no way as the fullness of revelation, or as the redemptive intervention of God. Some even go so far as to claim that Marxism has come to remind Christians of the need for a synthesis.

This places the New Testament no longer at the end and as the fullness of revelation, but merely as one of its stages, historically conditioned and intrinsically in need of revision is at last being effected. Note that we are not told why it should be particularly now, nor are we informed as to whether this is the definitive step, or whether it is just one more phase in the dialectic of history.

d) Another sign of this twisted view of inspiration is the excessive value given to the influence of other nations and to social background as the key to understanding the literal meaning of the sacred books, their literary genres, and the origin of the institutions of the people of Israel. The "analogy of faith" existing in Scripture is replaced by a "cultural and ethnical analogy."

For these writers, the days are gone when the bible can be seen as the work of one author, God, which is to be interpreted under the guidance of the Magisterium and the Fathers of the Church by comparing what is said in one passage with the contents of another, so as to attain a deeper understanding of God's message; the supernatural revelation necessary for the salvation of men. Instead it is to be seen as the purely human work of many authors of a politically and economically unimportant nation, who were influenced by the cultural, political, and economical policies of more affluent neighboring states; so that what they wrote and the way they wrote it did not basically differ from the literature of their contemporaries. From this they deduce the need to study first and foremost the history and approach to literature of these neighboring peoples, so that the literal meaning of the bible can be found through comparative philology, and the interpretation of the facts of Israel's history discovered through comparative sociology.

Mistakes in inerrancy

A natural consequence of this mistaken view of inspiration is the error that arises in the notion of inerrancy. These "modern exegetes" will accept without flinching the possibility of falsehood in the bible while insisting that this does not detract from inerrancy. It is as if they were saying: "Surely, there are errors: but let's not call them that way, because it

sounds a little shocking; instead, let's say that they are aids to the word of salvation..." Hiding behind the mask of euphemism, they undermine the authenticity, historicity, and the very truth of Scripture.

This way of thinking leads to the urge to make a critical examination of the bible, so as to draw a line between what can be deemed truthful and what is due to the imagination of the sacred writer or to the influence of the social background of his times.

This is only the thin end of the wedge, but it is enough to let in a host of doubts, so that no one now seems to know which things to consider true and which not. As the breach widens, there will inevitably follow the claims of the critic who, because of his modicum of research, considers himself superior to twenty centuries of Church history during which some of the greatest intellects among God's intimate friends have sought to penetrate the unfathomable riches of his wisdom, being all the time humbly aware of their insufficiency.

The moderns also draw a line between fundamental and secondary elements in the bible and consider inerrancy as applying only to the former in such a way that it is not affected by the "inaccuracies" in the secondary elements. Yet, the teaching authority of the Church has quite clearly disapproved of "those who distinguish between the primary or religious element of scripture and the secondary or profane element, and quite openly admit that inspiration affects all the sentences, even every word of the bible, yet who restrict its affects, and above all its immunity from error and its absolute truth, to the primary or religious elements only." ³²

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This is only the thin end of the wedge, but it is enough to let in a host of doubts, so that no one now seems to know which things to consider true and which not. As the breach widens, there will inevitably follow the claims of the critic who, because of his modicum of research, considers himself superior to twenty centuries of Church history during which some of the greatest intellects among God's intimate friends have sought to penetrate the unfathomable riches of his wisdom, being all the time humbly aware of their insufficiency.

The moderns also draw a line between fundamental and secondary elements in the bible and consider inerrancy as applying only to the former in such a way that it is not affected by the "inaccuracies" in the secondary elements. Yet, the teaching authority of the Church has quite clearly disapproved of "those who distinguish between the primary or religious element of scripture and the secondary or profane element, and quite openly admit that inspiration affects all the sentences, even every word of the bible, yet who restrict its effects, and above all its immunity from error and its absolute truth, to the primary or religious elements only."³²

Repercussions which go against the historicity of sacred Scripture

a) Faith tells us that everything in sacred Scripture which appears as historical narrative should be understood in its literal meaning unless there are sufficient and proven reasons for thinking otherwise, in which case, it should be submitted to the judgment of the Church. In contrast, these exegetes think that the reader should put no trust in this literal and historical reading, but should rather go in search of whatever historical nucleus the probings of philological and historical investigations might happen to bring to light.

b) The faith of the Church particularly maintains a firm belief in the literal historicity of the gospels. Yet the "modern exegetes" talk of the need to discover what the gospels try to tell us about Christ.

c) It is the doctrine of the Church that, since the faith is one, there must be a perfect adequacy or similarity of content between the way an ordinary Catholic with no theological training understands the bible,

and that in which a scholar of exegesis understands it.³³ The plea of the "modern exegetes" is that the advances made in exegesis have left the ordinary Christian behind and now only the experts are qualified to understand Scripture.

And so as in the case of liberal Protestantism and Modernism, the bible ends up appearing as a double history. Firstly, there is the historical version that a straightforward reading of the books would give; but this, they say, is riddled with dramatic personifications, epic historications, and borrowed myths. The true history, according to them, can only be reached by a delving beneath the surface with their own particular critical tools.

When faced with errors like the ones we have been outlining here, we must remember that sacred theology cannot come to conclusions at variance with the doctrine of the Church. Faith is not a conclusion to be reached; it is the premise to use as a starting point. Theological research does not discover faith, but rather it studies it more deeply, and not in any new sense, but in the way it has always been understood by all the faithful. Theologians in general, and exegetes in particular, should make it very clear to the faithful that their conclusions in no way change or increase the content of our faith, but simply attempt to clarify further what has always been believed.

The abuse of "laboratory" exegesis

Among the analytical instruments characterizing the methodology of the liberal Protestant inspired new exegesis, three in particular stand out as being mainly responsible for the doubts and confusion sown by its exponents. These concern new uses of literary genres, over reliance on historical criticism, and the arbitrary use of internal criticism.

a) Literary genres put to new uses.

The doctrine outlined by Pius XII in his encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* to the effect that any literary genre may be postulated as long as it is not opposed to the truth and sanctity of God,³⁴ is no longer accepted by the new exegetes. They have replaced it with the arbitrary assertion that any literary genre is possible, whether it goes against the sanctity and truth of God or not, as long as it conforms to the mentality of the ancient Middle East. (This, of course, is but the logical outcome of their opposition to the supernatural event of God's intervention in the history of one particular people in that area.)

The whole question of literary genres as dealt with in the new exegesis is closely bound up with the question of the historical truth of the sacred books. The Fathers and Doctors of the Church were, of course, very much aware of the different literary genres of the bible, and had much to say on the subject in terms of historical books, psalms, canticles, parables, etc. But what some writers are now affirming is not only without precedent, but also in direct opposition to what the Church has always understood and believed. In the name of the so-called mentality of the ancient Middle East, they multiply the number of literary genres, and sheltering under the apparent scholarship of such terms as midrash, etiological narrative, historical epic, lament, etc., they proceed to question the historical truth of the books of Josue, Judges, Judith, Esther, and

Daniel, as well as the childhood of Christ as narrated in the gospels, and even go so far as to cast doubt on the whole framework of the prophecies and miracles throughout sacred Scripture. They would say, for example, that in the gospel account of the annunciation, Mary's question and the archangel's answer would not imply that such an exchange actually took place, but rather are to be understood as a literary device of the author in order to describe the virginal conception of the Messiah. There are countless examples of such pseudo-scientific nonsense.

It was with a note of sorrow that Benedict XV wrote: "Holy Scripture is assailed by detractors of every class. We speak particularly of those who abuse certain principles - which if rightly used, would be legitimate - to the point where the foundations of the truth of the bible are whittled away, and the Catholic doctrine taught by all the Fathers is destroyed." ³⁵

b) Abuse of historical and critical methods.

Prominent among these methods are the theories concerning the history of forms (*Formgeschichte*) and the history of composition (*redaktiongeschichte*). The first dwells mainly on the creative role of the community, and the second on the creative genius of the writer.

In practice, these methods take their origin and growth from rationalistic conceptions of philosophy and theology, which are opposed to the supernatural character of sacred Scripture. So it is only natural that they should be out of focus with respect to the object upon which they are supposed to be used, namely, a book written by God via human instruments, which is not simply a record of the history of a people, but rather a narrative of the intervention of God in that history.

Let loose upon the gospels, these theories have remarkable effects. The first theory leads to the suggestion that the authors of the gospels were no more than editors who more or less arbitrarily pieced together the creations of the primitive and impersonal community. According to this, the only things we can know about Jesus Christ are what the primitive community thought about him. Then, again, the second theory presents the idea that the evangelists were really theologians who added their own opinions, interpretations, and philosophies of life to the gospels to give them a theological unity. The net result is that inspiration, authenticity, and historical accuracy all go by the board.

To mention but one example: the fact that Christ was born in Bethlehem is known to us because St. Luke says so in his gospel; and this we know for a fact regardless and independently of whether or not the same fact is confirmed by other non-biblical sources, and with a greater degree of certainty than that which the other sources can afford. It is also known to us as an historical fact, and not as some notion contrived by the early Christian communities, or even by the very witnesses of the resurrection who, having finally believed in Christ as the Messiah, then took for granted that he must have been born in Bethlehem, in keeping with the prophecies.

c) The disruption caused by internal criticism.

In the name of "internal criticism" the sacred books have been torn apart. Their integrity is sometimes accepted, sometimes rejected; and the order of the passages is radically changed because of mere hypotheses affecting the dating. Thus for example, chapters 40-66 of the book of Isaias are no longer considered to be written by the prophet; the author of the second epistle of St. Peter is no longer supposed to be St. Peter; similarly St. Paul is robbed of the authorship of his letter to the Hebrews; and in St. John's gospel the passage about the woman taken in adultery is thought to be out of harmony with the rest of his message.

Leo XIII spoke out strongly against this high-handed procedure as unacceptable not only for the study of the sacred books but even for that of any purely human work: "It is clear that in historical questions such as the origin and the handing down of writings, the witness of history is of primary importance and that historical investigation should be made with the utmost care and that, in this matter, internal evidence is seldom of great value except as confirmation." ³⁶

In other words, when it is a question of authenticity and integrity, the weight of argumentation ought to lie on external evidence: Christian tradition, the liturgy, Jewish tradition, manuscripts; and not, for instance on the computer analysis of the occurrence rate of the Greek particle *kai* in one of the sacred books...This is a basic rule of scholarship even for a non-believer who sees the bible as nothing more than a human document.

IV. Origin of these Deviations

The root causes of this new slant on sacred Scripture studies are to be found among those that underlie all of the present doctrinal confusion. Firstly, there is the influence that liberal evolutionist rationalism has had on theological thought; secondly, the sway of "modern philosophy" based on subjective premises, which has penetrated various areas of thought, even in the field of theology. Both of these have favored a gradual impoverishment of Christian life in general, even to the stage where a sense of faith and of the supernatural is entirely lost.

A closer examination of this school of thought reveals three main currents:

a) A philosophical and theological current which invests "modern thought" and "its vision of the world" with the importance of a major guideline.

One cannot forget how the encyclical Pascendi condemned the attempt to adapt faith to the demands of "modern thought." It showed that its consequent vision, based on the "principle of immanence," was necessarily agnostic and opposed to the supernatural. In fact, the campaigners for this false position would consider the supernatural as only a particular way in which the evolution of religious feeling manifests itself.

Nearly all the Modernist errors condemned by St. Pius X boiled down to an open profession - by a handful of Catholics - of the theories of schools which sprang from the seedbed on nineteenth century liberal

Protestantism. For several decades it appeared that this tide had been stemmed. But in the last ten or twelve years, perhaps partly due to the feeling of revision which attended many of the debates of Vatican II, the hermeneutical principles of liberal Protestantism and Catholic Modernism have again raised their heads. This time they appear mainly in the work of some Catholic exegetes who write essay-type articles for magazines and reviews of wide circulation.

The job of exegesis is now seen to be demythologization. This means that everything in the sacred books which implies the supernatural is dubbed as a myth, a relic of the primitive mentality, which is said to be repulsive to the modern mind. In principle they reject any divine intervention in the history of the chosen people. "Demythologization" may be a new name, but the idea behind it is as old as Christianity itself. Even St. Peter had occasion to condemn it when he wrote: For we were not following fictitious tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his glory .³⁷

b) "Modern existentialist philosophy" is raised to the category of a fundamental hermeneutical principle for the interpretation of Scripture.

By observing how some moderns now explain our Lord's resurrection, we can clearly see how the criteria of modern philosophy (existentialism and rationalism in particular) are being used to banish supernatural elements from the bible. This is alluded to in a letter from the German bishops: "The words in the gospel which affirm that Jesus has risen from the dead are, they tell us, the results of the pious reflection of the primitive community in their attempts to explain their Paschal experience, a "happening" that cannot be expressed in precise historical terms. It expresses their conviction that the cause of Jesus had not ended with the cross, but that it continued. This somewhat vague experience had been first understood as the missionary task entrusted to the apostles. Later, it was termed as a vision of the Risen One; and finally, it stabilized into the formula "Jesus has risen from the dead".³⁸ It is clear that this amounts to a denial of the faith of the Church which definitely affirms and professes that the resurrection of Jesus was a real fact. It cannot be understood as the result of an inner experience, conditioned by time and expressible in other terms.

c) A new-styled gnosis.

In the type of interpretations we have just been discussing, all coming from ideas opposed to faith, one thing stands out clearly, and that is that the truths of faith revealed by God, which ought to be the starting point and objective for everything, have been entirely lost. When supernatural reality is demoted to a mere by-product of evolutionary factors and inner experiences of the community, then truths are replaced by human "thoughts" or "decisions." Thus, instead of objective truth, the "modern exegetes" put forward explanations which they know are not fully satisfactory and which, consequently, can be justifiably replaced by new ones as human knowledge progresses.

How Scripture should be read, studied, and explained

Reading and meditation

Now Jesus, having come into the district of Caesarea Philippi, began to ask his disciples, saying "Who do men say the Son of Man is?" But they said, "Some say, John the Baptist, and others Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered and said, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." Then Jesus answered and said, "Blessed art thou Simon Bar Jona, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to thee, but my Father in heaven".³⁹

In his own time, afterwards, and up to our own days, we men have taken various attitudes towards Jesus. Sometimes it is one of human esteem, or admiration; or we regard him as a man with a prophetic religious mission. But there is only one attitude which Jesus Christ praised, and that is Simon Peter's. Only the man who confesses that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, true God, has grasped the truth; only he has fully understood. But to do so requires two things. The first is beyond the reach of purely human effort; for it is the free gift of faith, a grace of God. The second is the human cooperation with that grace of God, man's noble and sincere acceptance of it.

From this we can draw the following consequences for the dispositions of those who read and study the sacred books:

Obedience to faith

Any Christian, whether he is an ordinary member of the faithful or a theologian, must necessarily begin by having obedience to the faith⁴⁰ of the one Church of Jesus Christ in order to penetrate the written word of God. This means the faith of the Church in the canonicity, the inspiration, the inerrancy, the historicity, and the authenticity of the holy bible. Faith, in other words, in God's being the principal author of the sacred books, and in their containing truth unmixed with error.

This faith, however, cannot be attained outside the Church, nor is it compatible with error. Through it, we accept what God revealed to us, and which is proposed by the Magisterium as such, "not by the intrinsic truth of things, viewed in the light of reason, but by the authority of God who reveals them and who can neither deceive nor be deceived."⁴¹

A saintly life

Since faith is a free and supernatural gift of God, man can neither make himself worthy of it, nor can he acquire it with his human strength alone. As he grows in the knowledge of the written word of God, man should so dispose himself in prayer that he will be able to receive the light which comes to us freely from the Holy Spirit. We read in the book of the prophet Daniel: "In the first year of Darius,...I, Daniel, understood by books the number of the years, concerning which the word of the Lord came to Jeremias the prophet, that seventy years should be accomplished of the desolation of Jerusalem. And I set my face to the Lord my God, to pray and make supplication with fasting and

sackcloth and ashes...Now while I was yet speaking and praying and confessing my sins and the sins of my people of Israel and presenting my supplications in the sight of my God, for the holy mountain of my God: as I was yet speaking in prayer, behold the man Gabriel, whom I had seen in the vision at the beginning, flying swiftly, touched me at the time of the evening sacrifice. And he instructed me and spoke to me and said: O Daniel, I am now come forth to teach thee, that thou mightest understand. From the beginning of thy prayers the word came forth; and I am come to show it to thee, because thou art a man of desires. Therefore, do thou mark the word and understand the vision." ⁴²

In this spirit, anyone who reads, studies, or meditates upon sacred Scripture should seek the meaning of the holy word in earnest prayer and in his contact with God. Understanding of the secrets of the divine words is not to be found in philology, sociology, psychology, or any other branch of human knowledge, but quite simply in holiness of life.

Humility

Through his relationship with God in prayer, a man becomes humble and learns to walk in the dazzling light of faith without being blinded. Only the love of God can bring him this familiarity with things divine, for they cannot come through neat rationalist formulae.

This, too, is of the very nature of sacred Scripture, "for the sacred books were not given by God to men to satisfy their curiosity or to provide them with material for study and research, but, as the apostle observes, in order that these divine oracles might instruct us to salvation by the faith which is Christ Jesus, and that the man of God may be perfect, equipped for every good work (2 Tim 3:15-17)." ⁴³

Humility and love must be shown by the Christian, especially in the work of exegesis, in his prudence in not even considering injudicious opinions which are at variance with what the Magisterium of the Church and Tradition have always taught. He must be firmly convinced that he can never actually demonstrate truths of a supernatural order, and that it is not a question of getting to the bottom of what God has revealed, but of joyfully accepting it exactly in the way it is interpreted by the teaching authority of the Church. These virtues must also be shown in the way he firmly rejects any new opinions which are not in line with the doctrine of faith and morals. Finally, he should give an example of humility and Christian charity when in his work, done in full realization of his duty to God and to souls, he refrains from publishing theories which may seem brilliant but are also imprudent and would only lead to confusion. In short, when a Christian exegete makes the bringing of souls to God the first aim of his work, then he can be sure that he is doing that work as God would wish it to be done.

Research and interpretation

Everything that has been said above also applies to the attitude of those who cultivate scriptural studies.

- Faith as a science

The exegete makes of faith a science, that is, he seeks a better understanding of what he believes. It would be ridiculous for him to argue with faith, since faith is the first principle of his science. If he does not begin his work in obedience to faith, then he can never by rational dialectic come to the true pillars of his science, which are the dogmas of the faith.

It is not the job of the theologian or exegete to change the faith, to pick away at the truths in the depositum by denying them and offering other "truths" in their place. It is their job to make more explicit the truths that have always before been believed, but perhaps in a more general sense. With the light of their knowledge they should pinpoint what was before believed and admired for its beauty; they should try to clarify things that were believed but not truly understood; they should strive to make more precise the language used to express truths which have always been wholeheartedly believed. This last point, especially, merits careful consideration, for theologians in general and exegetes in particular should avoid false novelties which would render their work ineffective. To forfeit the terminology which the patient work of centuries has succeeded in making precise, and to replace it by a new one on the pretext that it is more evangelical would be sheer folly.

Exegesis and theology

From what has been said, it should be clear that it is essential for the exegete to have a wide, deep, and mature knowledge of theology. If his work were that of a philologist, he should be noted for his flair for oriental and semitic languages. If he were a historian, he should be renowned for his knowledge of the dynasties of the Pharaohs of Egypt, of the kings of Assyria, etc. But, since his work is to research into the written word of God, which is inseparable and, indeed, complementary, to the word of God transmitted orally and by the Magisterium of the Church, then "the professor of holy Scripture...must be well acquainted with the whole circle of theology and deeply read in the commentaries of the holy Fathers, the Doctors, and other interpreters of note." ⁴⁴

When, therefore, there is no authentic interpretation of the Magisterium on a certain passage, it is up to the exegete to go into the writings of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church, and to set forth their conclusions in continuity with the doctrine commonly held by those holy men. He should not suggest something in opposition to what they would have unanimously affirmed in matters of faith and customs, and he should always work with the analogy of faith.

Logically, the exegete should make correct use of all the human means within his reach. But, if, for example, he limited himself to only a philological analysis of some words used in sacred Scripture, or to the social background of a particular hagiographer, then he would end up knowing practically nothing of the sacred books. They are the living word of God, not even fully understood by the inspired writers themselves. Their theological content is both deep and precise, and only accessible to those to whom God chooses to reveal it. They are for this reason inseparable from the Tradition of the Church, and from the living, constant, and universal Magisterium. Critical, historical, and philological procedures alone stand no chance of attaining their true meaning. They are the word of God, which can only be understood in the light

of the infallible help of his Spirit and his Church.

Explaining sacred Scripture

If the above are the criteria which guide the exegete in his research work, how much more firmly should he adhere to them in the publication of his findings and in teaching. Hence, the really essential part of an exegete's work is showing the theological content of each passage or book, and how the doctrine of the Church is contained in sacred Scripture.

The words of Pius XII addressed to Scripture teachers can be fittingly quoted here by way of conclusion:

"With special zeal should they apply themselves not only to expounding exclusively these matters which belong to the historical, archaeological, philological, and other auxiliary sciences - as, to our regret, is done in certain commentaries - but...their exegetical explanation should aim especially at the theological doctrine, avoiding useless discussions and omitting all that is calculated rather to satisfy idle curiosity than promote true learning and solid piety. They should expound what is called the literal meaning and most especially the theological meaning so carefully, explain it so clearly, and implant it so deeply, that in their students there might take place in a certain way what happened on the way to Emmaus when, having heard the words of the Master, they exclaimed: Was not our heart burning within us while he was speaking on the road and explaining to us the Scriptures?"

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