

SPIRIT AND LIFE

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THE CATECHISM tells us that God made us to know Him, to love Him, and to serve Him in this world, and to be happy with Him in the next. The psychologist tells us that we cannot love anything unless we first know it. By faith we know that our perfection in heaven consist in seeing God face to face, in loving Him with a perfect love, and will be proportioned to the degree of our love of God while on earth. This love, we say, is founded upon our knowledge of Him.

It is true, of course, that we can know the existence of God, and even something of His perfections, by our own reason, but this is so difficult, and so few attain to it without error, that God Himself has provided two sources by which we may know Him and His perfection safely and easily. These are the two founts of Revelation, viz., Tradition and Scripture. Now no one knows God better than He Himself, and no one can tell us about God better than God Himself. This He did, especially in the seventy-two Sacred Books of the Bible. These Books, since they have God for their Author, are totally free from error. He inspired the sacred writers to write as they did for our sake, for our instruction and for our training in good works, "that the man of God," as St. Paul says, "may be perfect, completely equipped for every good work."¹ It would seem, then, since God has done this much, that any sincere seeker of heaven should make use of this provision of God by reading and studying the Bible.

Of course, it is not absolutely necessary for salvation that everyone read the Bible. There were many saints who could not even read; as a matter of fact, the Church has condemned the statement that it is necessary for everyone to read Sacred Scripture.² Though the Popes and Doctors have insisted on this through the centuries, they have never ceased to encourage the

¹ 2 Tim. 3, 16. Spencer version.

² Denz. 1429, sqq.

faithful to read the Sacred Word of God. This is not a contradiction, however, for their only motive was to foster greater love of God through better knowledge of Him. They did not say that one would go to hell for not reading the Bible, but did insist that one could love God more and have a higher place in heaven from a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures, a good intention being presupposed. The saying of St. Jerome is well known: "To be ignorant of the Scriptures is to be ignorant of Christ."³ Our Holy Father Pope Pius XII tells us in his encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* of 30 September, 1943: "This, the author of salvation, Christ, will men more fully know, more ardently love and more faithfully imitate in proportion as they are more assiduously urged to know and meditate the Sacred Letters, especially the New Testament."⁴ He also quotes St. Jerome: "If there is anything in this life which sustains a wise man and induces him to maintain his serenity amidst the tribulations and adversities of the world, it is in the first place, I consider, the meditation and knowledge of the Scriptures."⁵ Pope Benedict XV also wrote: "Our one desire for all the Church's children is that, being saturated with the Bible, they may arrive at the all-surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ."⁶

The Church has done more than merely encourage the faithful to read the Bible continuously. Loving Mother that she is, she has always taken every means to make this reading easier and safer for all the faithful especially in the training of biblical scholars. As far back as the fourth century Pope Damasus commissioned St. Jerome to make a good translation of the Bible from Hebrew and Greek into Latin. In order to fulfil his task more perfectly, St. Jerome went to live in Bethlehem, Palestine, where he was continually trying to perfect his knowledge of the Hebrew tongue. His translation became known as the Vulgate, since it was used by most of the faithful. Even passing over the many translations and versions from the Vulgate after Jerome's time, we can see the solicitude of the Church very clearly in just the last two generations.

³ *Prolog. in Isaiam*; PL 24, col. 17.

⁴ Translated in *Rome and the Study of Scripture*. Fourth edition, St. Meinrad, Indiana, 1946. p. 105. All references to Papal documents will be to this work, unless otherwise noted.

⁵ *Prolog. in Ephesios*; PL 26, Col. 439.

⁶ *Spiritus Paraclitus*, p. 78.

THE WORK OF RECENT POPES

There is, first of all, the encyclical of Pope Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus*, written in 1893. This famous encyclical is to biblical studies what *Rerum Novarum* is to economics. In this letter he not only taught many reasons for studying Sacred Scripture, but also laid down regulations for the courses of Sacred Scripture to be followed in all seminaries. He insisted that the clergy, unlike the body of the faithful, have a definite obligation to study the Sacred Books, for it is the duty of the clergy to expound the Scriptures to the faithful. Not satisfied with this, he approved and praised the newly founded Biblical School of the Dominicans in Jerusalem. In Rome he instituted the Pontifical Biblical Commission "a Commission of men of learning whose duty shall be to effect that in every possible manner the divine text will find here and from every quarter the most thorough interpretation which is demanded by our times, and be shielded not only from every breath of error, but also from every temerarious opinion."⁷ His successor, Pius X, continuing Leo's solicitude, established at Rome in 1909 a Pontifical Biblical Institute, which he confided to the care of the Jesuits. These two Popes, together with their successors, Benedict XV, Pius XI and Pius XII, have never failed to encourage bible societies, such as the Society of Saint Jerome, which strives to promote among the faithful, and to facilitate, the truly praiseworthy custom of reading and meditating on the holy Gospels.⁸ They have always encouraged better translations of the Bible into intelligible language, provided these were done in accordance with the regulations of the Church. Each of these Pontiffs has written at least one outstanding encyclical on the study of Sacred Scripture.

All of this, of course, is only by way of encouragement and exhortation. Since the reading of Sacred Scripture is not absolutely necessary for salvation, the Popes can only urge us to read the Bible, so as to live our Catholic faith more fully, to know and love God more. They can point out to us what they have done to help us to a better and easier understanding of the Bible. They can remind us of the strict regulations they have laid down for the training of scholars who, in their turn, will enlighten us from the pulpit and platform on the deeper problems of the Sacred Books. They can even point to the indul-

⁷ Encyclical *Vigilantiae*, p. 31.

⁸ Cf. *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, p. 8.

gences they have provided for the daily reading of the Bible. But they cannot make us read the Bible; nor can they do our reading for us. Each one of us, taking advantage of their labors, must read the Bible himself. Consider just the words of our present Holy Father:

Whosoever considers the immense labors undertaken by Catholic exegetes during well nigh two thousand years, so that the word of God, imparted to men through the Sacred Letters, might daily be more deeply and fully understood and more intensely loved, will easily be convinced that it is the serious duty of the faithful, and especially of priests, to make free and holy use of this treasure, accumulated throughout so many centuries by the greatest intellects. 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 in Christ Jesus" and "that the man of God may be perfect, furnished to every good work" (2 Tim. 3, 15, 17).⁹

THE BIBLE AND THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

For those who are striving for a perfection more than the bare minimum of the Catholic life there are held up countless instances of saints who had little more than the Bible (and, of course, the grace of God). It is said of St. Dominic that he always carried about with him a copy of the Gospel according to St. Matthew and the Epistles of St. Paul. St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Albert the Great wrote commentaries on the chief books of the Bible. St. Vincent Ferrer spent three years just studying the Bible, in preparation for his work as a preacher. How many times do we read in the life of the Little Flower of Jesus that she had recourse to the Bible in times of trouble and doubt, and the wonderful consolations she received from it. Every spiritual writer, whether for laity or religious, urges frequent reading of the Sacred Word of God as one means of becoming a better servant of God. As an instance of this, Fr. Reginald Garrigou-La-grange, O.P., says:

If with humility, hope, and love, we read the divine words of Scripture, which are spirit and life, they contain for us a special grace that daily inclines us more to imitate the virtues of Christ, His meekness, patience, and heroic love on the cross. Besides the Holy Eucharist, the true food of the saints is to be found in the Scriptures: the word of God, transmitted by His only Son, the Word made flesh. Hidden under the letter is the living thought of God, which, if we are docile, the gifts of understanding and wisdom will make us penetrate and taste more and more.

⁹ *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, p. 102.

New lights and new strength will be found in the Scriptures, especially in the Gospels, when they are often reread with respect and love. God has put inexhaustible virtue in His word. When a person who has read a great deal and is tired of almost all books, approaches the close of life, he turns again to the Gospel as to the true prelude of the light which enlightens souls in eternal life.¹⁰

THE BIBLE AND THE ROSARY

The late Fr. M. J. Lagrange, O.P., urged Rosarians to read the Bible so that they would have good fruit for their meditations on the mysteries of the Rosary:

The Rosary is a resume of the Gospel, turning us toward the end which the Incarnation and the Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ causes us to hope for.

Does the Rosary then take the place of reading the Scriptures, and render it unnecessary? We should say, rather, that it calls for it, that it makes it necessary if we really wish to have before our eyes the mysteries that we are to meditate upon.¹¹

Fr. Lagrange goes on to say that the Rosary, as a reflection of the life of Jesus, is incomplete. It says nothing of the teaching of the Saviour. The child of Mary's Rosary should be drawn, according to his or her capacity and leisure, to follow the revelation of the Gospels through the Acts and the Epistles, especially of St. Paul. Then, having perceived with what firmness St. Paul affirms that the value of the Old Testament is to prepare souls for Christ, one who loves the Rosary will wish to know those prophecies to which the Evangelists and Apostles allude. He will go back through the course of time to Jeremias, the image of the despised and suffering Messiah, to Isaias who wished to tear open the heavens that Emmanuel might descend, to David, the type of the king anointed with the divine anointing, to Moses, the lawgiver whose work is now but a figure. Thus will the designs of God the Creator and Redeemer appear more living and hence more vital to himself from contact with the inspired book, which is a contact with the Spirit of God. The Rosary will then have borne all its fruits.

Later, when speaking of the study of St. Paul's Epistles, Fr. Lagrange brings out the point that it is not necessary for all as a means of salvation to read the Bible:

These two readings supplement one another, the reading of Paul is indispensable to those who wish to follow in themselves the consequences of the Re-

¹⁰ *The Three Ages of the Interior Life*, tr. by Sister M. Timothea Doyle, O.P. St. Louis, B. Herder Book Co., 1948. pp. 248-9.

¹¹ *The Bible and the Rosary*, by M. J. Lagrange, O.P., *Dominicana*, Winter, 1940, p. 240.

demption, whereas the Gospel suffices for docile souls who are captivated and carried along directly by Jesus. Let us repeat, for the consolation of the more simple, that they can be satisfied with the oral teaching of their pastors who are instructed in Scripture and in tradition. It is for each to gauge his strength. For that the best way is to try.¹²

DIFFICULTIES FOR BEGINNERS

This brings up another problem which the beginner will surely encounter. St. Athanasius, speaking of St. Paul's Epistle to the Hebrews, says: "Here, as indeed is expedient in all other passages of Sacred Scripture, it should be noted, on what occasion the Apostles spoke; we should carefully and faithfully observe to whom and why he wrote, lest, being ignorant of these points, or confounding one with another, we miss the real meaning of the author."¹³ The same will have to be said of all the Sacred Books; and, a certain sense, this is true especially of the New Testament. If you know that St. John wrote his Gospel many years after the other three had been well circulated, you will understand why he rarely mentions anything they do: he presumes they are well known, and wants to fill in some details to emphasize the divinity of Christ. If you are aware of the immoral condition of the city of Corinth, you will understand why St. Paul inveighs against such sins in his letters to the Christians of that city. If you know that the Thessalonians had misunderstood many of St. Paul's teachings regarding the Second Coming, you will appreciate why he writes, in his Epistles to the Thessalonians, that certain signs must precede this Second Coming.

Now, it is not necessary to take a course in Sacred Scripture in order to learn all these prerequisites—and, therefore, to begin reading the Bible. Practically all the popular versions now published in English contain some sort of introduction explaining such things as were just mentioned. Also, when there is a difficulty in the interpretation of a text, these versions usually explain it in a footnote, according to the analogy of faith. The Douay-Rheims version gives a short historical background at the beginning of each book, a summary at the head of each chapter, and maps for a better understanding of the places mentioned; present editions of this version also give the encyclical *Providentissimus Deus* of Pope Leo XIII. The version of Fr. Fran-

¹² *op. cit.*, Autumn, 1941, p. 161.

¹³ *Contra Arianos*, I, 54; PG 26 col. 123.

cis A. Spencer, O.P., is a translation of the New Testament from the original Greek, and provides excellent introductions to all books of the New Testament, with a short life of the human authors and a division of the books; summaries are provided, even within the chapters, and texts are well explained. The same things can be said of the Confraternity and Westminster editions.¹⁴ So it is really not necessary to prepare for reading the Bible by a long course in scriptural background.

The main thing is to read the Bible, continually, daily. It is the Word of God, written by Him for us. We cannot be passive; we must actively take advantage of this great aid to love of God which He has Himself provided for us. As to the method of procedure in reading the books of the Bible, we have already seen the order proposed by Fr. Lagrange. Pope Benedict XV offers us an order given by St. Jerome. Writing to the Roman matron Laeta about her daughter's training, he says:

Every day she should give you a definite account of her Bible-reading. . . . For her the Bible must take the place of silks and jewels. . . . Let her learn the Psalter first, and find her recreation in its songs; let her learn from Solomon's Proverbs the way of life, from Ecclesiastes how to trample on the world. In Job she will find an example of patient virtue. Thence let her pass to the Gospels; they should always be in her hands. She should steep herself in the Acts and the Epistles. And when she has enriched her soul with these treasures she should commit to memory the Prophets, the Heptateuch,¹⁵ Kings and Chronicles, Esdras and Esther; then she can learn the Canticle of Canticles without any fear.¹⁶

Of course, such strenuous labors need not be exerted by all! It is enough to read the Sacred Scriptures often to be acquainted with them. It does, however, take a determined effort to choose continually to read the Sacred Books, especially in these days when new books (which do not have God for their author) are being produced by the thousands every month. There were over

¹⁴ Before the publication of the encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* in 1943, it was generally believed that the decree of the Council of Trent intended only translations from the Latin Vulgate to be used for the faithful. Pope Pius XII, however, denied this interpretation, and even encouraged translations from the original languages. For this reason, then, the translation of Fr. Spencer, published by Macmillan in 1937, should become more and more popular. Although the New Testament of the Confraternity edition is from the Vulgate, the members of the Catholic Biblical Association are using the oldest available Hebrew and Greek manuscripts for their edition of the Old Testament.

¹⁵ That is, the first seven books of the Old Testament, from Genesis through Judges, which were sometimes bound in one volume.

¹⁶ *Epist.* 107:9.

750,000 published in the United States last year alone. It is to be expected that at first the good-willed reader may not find delight in the Scriptures, especially when he or she compares them with other, non-divine books. St. Jerome was so determined to remove all obstacles to knowledge of the Bible that after his baptism he withdrew into the desert. But yet he later wrote of his first days:

Wretch that I was! I read Cicero even before I broke my fast! And after the long night-watches, when memory of my past sins wrung tears from my soul, even then I took up my Plautus! Then perhaps I would come to my senses and would start reading the Prophets. But their uncouth language made me shiver, and, since blind eyes do not see the light, I blamed the sun and not my own eyes.¹⁷

But in a brief space he became so enamored of the "folly of the Cross" that he replied to a man who quoted an apocryphal book: "A book I have never so much as read! For what is the good of soiling one's hands with a book the Church does not receive?"¹⁸ To this we might also add the testimony of St. Augustine:

Only those books of Scripture which are called canonical have I learned to hold in such honor as to believe their authors have not erred in any way in writing them. But other authors I so read as not to deem anything in their works to be true, merely on account of their having so thought and written, whatever may have been their holiness and learning.¹⁹

The Church, then, Our Mother, anxious to have us be more and more perfect like our Father in heaven, has never ceased to do all in her power to provide us with reliable and intelligible texts of the Sacred Scriptures. We, in our turn, reading and meditating on the Sacred Word, especially the New Testament, will realize very soon the truth of Our Lord's saying: "The words which I have spoken to you are spirit and life."²⁰

¹⁷ *Epist.* 22:30.

¹⁸ *Adv. Vigil.*, 6.

¹⁹ *Ep.* 82, *ad Hieronymum*, cited in *Summa Theol.*, I, q. 1, a. 8, ad 2.

²⁰ *John* 6, 64.