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THE STUDY OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

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ON NOVEMBER 18, the Catholic world will celebrate the golden jubilee of *Providentissimus Deus*, the great encyclical on biblical studies. It is difficult, even after fifty years, to judge accurately the influence which this brilliant pronouncement of Pope Leo XIII has exerted upon the course of scriptural studies. In 1893, the year in which it came forth, the attacks of "higher criticism" had become so violent and widespread that J. A. Howlett lamented: "Many Catholics are uneasy at the progress that is being made in science and history these days, as if these branches of learning were destined to subvert the Word of God. . . A restlessness and dread of what is coming prevails outside the Church of God; it is not unnatural that some little of this anxiety should find its way inside the fold."¹ Pope Leo XIII had already written important letters on matters political, social, and economic. Realizing that his flock was in danger, and that telling blows had already been struck against the faith by those to whom the accounts narrated in the Bible were stupid fables, mere myths, or natural phenomena, the Holy Father presented to his children a clear-cut exposition of the Catholic position in regard to the Holy Scriptures.

Catholic scholars welcomed enthusiastically the Pope's encyclical, for it gave to Catholic Biblical studies two things which were sadly lacking: direction and impetus. *Providentissimus Deus*, the Magna Charta of scriptural studies, began a new era in the history of Biblical scholarship. Harkening to the appeal of Pope Leo XIII like an army responding to the battlecry of its leader, scholars from many

¹ *Some Recent Views on Inspiration*. Dublin Review, 1893, vol., 113, p. 547.

lands joined forces to present a strong front against the attacks of those who were trying to destroy the belief in a supernatural order. During the past fifty years, valuable scriptural works have been published in various languages, schools devoted exclusively to biblical studies have been founded, and the number of societies for the promotion of biblical knowledge is steadily becoming larger. One of the most recent of such societies is the Catholic Biblical Association of America whose *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* is the only periodical in English devoted exclusively to the study of the Bible.

While we rejoice in commemorating the anniversary of so important a document as *Providentissimus Deus*, we must confess to ourselves that the present status of scriptural studies in our country is far from satisfactory. This encyclical gave us sound principles and clear directions to aid us in our devotion to Holy Scripture, but from there on the task of restoring the Bible to the high place it held in the hearts of the early Christians is ours. It is obvious to everyone that the reading of Holy Scripture is sadly neglected today. To make the reading of the Bible an integral part of every Catholic's spiritual life it is necessary to have a clergy that is zealous for the reading and study of Holy Scripture. The problem, then, of leading the faithful back to a love of Bible reading is a problem, first of all, of teaching seminarians to love the Word of God. Too often seminarians complain that the Scripture class is as dry and as dusty as the manuscripts they read. The complaint is too widespread to be considered merely the protest of a disgruntled group of students. Most students are eager to possess a good knowledge of Biblical science. What can be done to furnish the faithful with priests who have been taught to love and read their Bibles?

His Excellency, the most Reverend Francis P. Carrol D.D., Bishop of Calgary, offered some very valuable suggestions to scripture professors in an address before the meeting of the Catholic Biblical Association of America at Toronto, August 28, 1940. Bishop Carrol pointed out that the object of the Association was the promotion of biblical knowledge, and since the aim of the professor is to induce his students to love and read the Bible, he must use the best possible means to attain that end if he expects to contribute to this promotion through his work in the classroom. First of all, the teacher must take the seminarian as he is. The average student who enters the seminary in our country knows little Greek, and no Hebrew. He has only very vague notions about the content of Holy Scripture. Why not, asks the Bishop, bring the presentation to their level? In teaching theology to the children we try to bring it to their mental

capacity. "We use every trick in the pedagogical field to simplify and popularize, and to bring the children to a love and practice of their religion." Why not use the same principle in teaching our seminarians? Is not the object the same: to teach them to love the Word of God? The professor of Sacred Scripture must remember that he is not training experts. It is not necessary to make each student as proficient as the teacher.

His Excellency also points out that "among the things to be eliminated is the professor's laudable desire to teach his class Hebrew and Greek. This sounds like a reflection on the science. But we are not training scientific experts. We are merely trying to induce our seminarians to use and love their Bible. . . In the History of the Texts and Versions, technicalities of textual criticism and the history of those texts and versions seldom encountered in the pastoral ministry should be ruled out, no matter how important they may loom in the mind of the professor. But the glorious history of how the Bible reached us should be given all the charm and romance it really possesses." From these few suggestions of Bishop Carrol it is obvious that simplification must be the object of the scripture professor who would lead his students to a love of Holy Scripture. For those students who desire to specialize in all the knotty problems concerning the Bible, a special class could be conducted which could consider these problems without interfering with the regular classes. In fine, the seminary course, if it must be crowded, should be crowded with exegesis, and by exegesis Bishop Carrol means "a commentary which gives the best results of the best scholars, not the reasons for their results. . . Père Lagrange has done for the Gospels in his *L'Evangile de Jesus Christ*, what I am attempting to describe for the whole exegetical content of a seminary course." I have quoted the address of Bishop Carrol at length in this paper because he frankly faced a problem which has held the attention of all those who zealously desire to promote interest and love in God's Word, and because he realizes that the combined strength of our Scripture professors can successfully solve the problem. A priesthood imbued with a love for the Bible will guarantee real priestly spirituality, fervent preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and earnest reading and study of Holy Scripture among the faithful.

But what is demanded on the part of the student who earnestly desires to profit from his study of the Bible? How can he be sure that his heart will burn as did the hearts of those disciples who met Our Divine Lord on the road to Emmaus? No heart will burn when reading the Scriptures unless they are opened as Our Lord opened

them to the disciples. The Scriptures will never be opened to us unless we constantly beg the Holy Spirit to help us. We must ask the Father in the name of His Divine Son to help us to understand the message He wishes us to receive. Because we forget that without Almighty God we can do nothing, we sometimes try to study the Bible as if it were not written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. If we should pray earnestly for help from God in all other works, how much more should we beg for light to read the inspired Word. Why do we neglect to read and study the Word of God prayerfully? The principal reason, I think, is failure to realize what we are reading. We have never had in our age the reverence which the Middle Ages and the Patristic age had for the Scriptures. We forget the dignity and beauty of this book which God wrote for us. No other book can claim God for its author. No other book can speak with such authority. "It comes into the palace to tell the monarch that he is a servant of the Most High, and into the cottage to assure the peasant that he is a son of God."²

Once upon a time the Emperor Constantine wrote a letter to St. Anthony. The monks were astonished that a Roman Emperor condescended to write to a simple religious. Noting their amazement the saint turned to them and addressed them reproachfully. Was it so wonderful that a Caesar had written a letter to him? Had they forgotten that the ruler of heaven and earth had already written to them? Crestfallen, the monks turned back to their tasks. Yes, they had forgotten, but fortunately they had their leader to remind them. The attitude of St. Anthony was the attitude of all those giants of the Patristic period. St. Augustine, St. Jerome, Origen, and many other great warriors of the early Church stood in awe before the Word of God. They considered it an honor to prayerfully study the Scriptures. They also realized the beauty of Holy Scripture considered in its literary attire. They were not ignorant of the fact that the Bible is a masterpiece of literature, literature more beautiful and influential than that of any other nation. St. Jerome, who was as well informed on the classics as any man of his time, would not compare them with the Holy Scriptures: "Homer cannot compare with the Psalter, Virgil with the Evangelists, or Cicero with St. Paul." When we catch some of the spirit of these giants of the early Church, we too will learn to cherish the Bible. The source of that spirit must be a clergy which loves and reads Holy Scripture. *Providentissimus Deus* has really given us a splendid start. We must pray that we may drink

² *Companionable Books* by Henry Van Dyke. Charles Scribner's Sons, p. 11.

deeply of the sublime thought and heavenly doctrine which Almighty God has given to us in His Inspired Word.

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