

Encyclical Letter

OF

OUR HOLY FATHER

BY DIVINE PROVIDENCE

POPE LEO XIII.

ON

The Study of Holy Scripture.

To our Venerable Brethren, all Patriarchs, Primates, Archbishops and Bishops of the Catholic World, in Grace and Communion with the Apostolic See, Pope Leo XIII.

Venerable Brethren, Health and Apostolic Benediction.

The Providence of God which, by an admirable device of love, raised at the beginning the human race to share in the divine nature, which afterwards re-established in his primal dignity man relieved from original sin, and snatched him from destruction, has brought to that same man a precious support that there may be opened to him by supernatural means the concealed treasures of its divinity, wisdom and mercy.

Although it should be understood that in the divine revelation of truths, which are not inaccessible to human reason, and which consequently have been revealed to man, "in order that all may recognize them easily, with a firm certitude, and without mixture of error; nevertheless, this revelation cannot be declared necessary in an absolute fashion, but because God in His infinite mercy has destined man to a supernatural end. This supernatural revelation, according to the faith of the Universal Church, is enclosed as much in unwritten traditions as in the books called holy and canonical, because, written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God for author, and have been delivered as such to the Church."

This has not ceased to be taught and professed publicly on the subject of the Book of the Old and the New Testament. Very important ancient documents are familiar which indicate that God spoke first by the prophets, next by Himself, afterwards by the Apostle, that He also gave us written matter styled canonical, which is none else than divine oracles and words; that it constitutes, as it were, a message vouchsafed by the Heavenly Father to the human race journeying far from their country, and which have been transmitted to us by their sacred authors.

This origin plainly shows what is the excellence and the value of the writings which, having for author God Himself, contain indication of His most exalted mysteries, designs and works. Hence it results that the portion of theology, which concerns the preservation and interpretation of these divine works, is of the highest importance and utility.

We have it at heart to secure the progress of other sciences, which appeared to us suitable to the aggrandisement of divine glory and the salvation of mankind. Such has been the text of frequent letters and numerous exhortations on Our part which, with God's aid, have not remained without result. For a long time We have had the idea of reviving and recommending the noble study of the Holy Writings, and of directing it in a fashion more conformable to the necessities of the actual epoch.

The solicitude of Our Apostolic charge binds us, and in a sense pushes us, not only to wish to open more surely and largely, for the advantage of Christian people, this precious source of Catholic revelation, but still more not to tolerate that it should be troubled in any manner, either by those who are urged by an impious audacity openly to attack the Scripture or by those who abet deceitful and imprudent innovations.

We do not ignore, Venerable Brethren, that, as a fact, certain Catholics, rich in science and in talent, consecrate themselves to the ardent defence of the Holy Writings or to the better circulation and understanding of them. But whilst naturally praising their labours and the

results they obtain, We cannot fail to exhort others whose ability, science, and piety promise splendid success in the same department to discharge the sacred task and merit the same eulogy. We fervently desire that a greater number of the faithful should undertake, as becoming the defence of the Holy Writings, and attach themselves to it with constancy; and, above all, We desire that those who have been admitted to the Holy Orders by the grace of God should daily apply themselves more strictly and zealously to read, meditate, and explain the Scriptures. Nothing can be better suited to their state.

In addition to the excellence of such knowledge and the obedience due to the Word of God, another motive impels us to believe that the study of the Scriptures should be counselled. That motive is the abundance of advantages which follow from it, and of which We have the guarantee in the words of Holy Writ, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, correction, for instruction in righteousness that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works." It is with this design that God gave man the Scriptures; the examples of our Lord Jesus Christ, and His Apostles show it. Jesus Himself who conciliated authority by miracles, merited faith by authority, and gained the multitude by faith, was accustomed to appeal to the Holy Writings in testimony of His divine mission. He employs the Sacred Books on occasion to declare that He is sent by God and God Himself; He borrows arguments from them to instruct His Disciples and to enforce His doctrines; He invokes their evidence against the calumny of His enemies; He opposes them to the Sadducees and the Pharisees, and turns them against Satan himself, who impudently makes appeal to them; He employs them again at the close of His life, and, when resurrected, explains them to His disciples until He ascends to the glory of His Father. The Apostles were faithful to His word and to the teaching of the Master, and although He Himself had granted that signs and miracles should be operated by their hands, they depended on the Holy Writings as a great means of action for spreading afar among the nations Christian wisdom, overcoming the stubbornness of the Jews, and crushing incipient heresies. This circumstance is patent from their discourses, and foremost from those of St. Peter. They composed them in great degree from the words of the Old Testament as furnishing the firmest support of the new law. This is not the less evident from the Gospel of St. Matthew and St. John and the Epistles called Catholic, and, above all, from the testimony of Him who glorified Himself before Gamaliel for having studied the law of Moses and the Prophets in order that, fortified with spiritual arms, He might say with confidence, "The arms of our troops have nothing of earthly force; they are the power of God." It is our aim that all, particularly the soldiers of the sacred host, should understand from the example of Christ and His Apostles the respect they owe to the Holy Writings, and with what zeal and reverence they should approach, so to speak, this arsenal. In short, those who wish to spread either amongst the learned or the ignorant the truth of Catholicity will find nowhere else more lavish and spacious information about God, the supreme and perfect good, and upon the works which put in a strong light His glory and His love. As to the Saviour of the human race, no text is more fruitful and more stirring, regarding the subject, than those to be found in the entire Bible, and St. Jerome was right when he stated that ignorance of the Scriptures was ignorance of Christ. There one sees, vivid and animated, the image of the Son of God, and this spectacle in an admirable manner relieves misfortune, inclines to virtue, and invites to divine love.

As far as regards the Church, her institution and character, her mission and her gifts, there are in her favor arguments so solid and appropriate that St. Jerome could say with reason, "He who confidently relies on the evidences of Holy Writ is the buttress of the Church." If precepts touching morals and the proper conduct of life are sought, apostolic men will find magnificent and valuable resources in the Bible, advice full of goodness, exhortations combining benignity and energy, examples illustrating every form of virtue, to which are

added the promise of eternal rewards and the threat of punishment in the other world, promises and threats made in the name of God and on the basis of His words. This is the special and most remarkable virtue of the Scripture, arising from the divine breath of the Holy Ghost, which confers authority on the speaker in sacred places, inspires him with an apostolic liberty, and equips him with a vigorous and convincing rhetoric. Whoever imparts to his sermons the spirit and strength of the divine word, speaks not only in the word, but also in the Holy Ghost and in much assurance. In like way, it may be said that they act in an awkward and careless manner who treat of religion and enounce divine precepts without invoking other authorities than those of science and human wisdom, confiding on their own reasoning rather than on divine arguments. In fact, their eloquence, although brilliant, is necessarily feeble and cold, inasmuch as it is deprived of the fire of the Word of God, and lacks the virtue which is conspicuous in the language of the Most High, "For the Word of God is quick and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing of soul and spirit."

On the other hand, even the learned must themselves agree that there exists in the sacred literature an eloquence varied, rich and worthy of the highest object. St. Augustine understood and proved that beyond cavil, and experience bears him out in the pronouncements of pulpit orators. Their reputation is due to their constant study and meditation on the Bible, and they have testified their gratitude for it to God. Thoroughly acquainted with the riches of these sources, and largely utilizing them, the holy Fathers never tired of panegyric of the Sacred Scriptures and the benefit they draw from them. In many passages of their works they speak of them as the precious treasure of heavenly doctrines, the eternal fountains of safety, and compare them to fertile meadows and delicious gardens where the flocks of the Lord find vigor and pleasure. These are the words of St. Jerome to the clerk Nepotian, "Often read the Holy Scriptures; better still, never lay aside the Holy Book; learn what you should teach; the language of the priest should always be founded on the reading of the Scriptures." Such is likewise the sense of the words of Gregory the Great, who more than pointed out the duties of the pastors of the Church. "It is necessary," said he, "that those who apply themselves to the office of preaching should never neglect the reading of the Holy Scriptures." Here, nevertheless, it pleases us to recall the advice of St. Augustine, "He will never be a true preacher of the Word of God who does not hear it within himself." St. Gregory also counselled ecclesiastics to examine themselves and not to be neglectful while taking notice of the actions of others of how they stand themselves. That is requisite before one carries the divine word to others. This had already been put into relief by the word and the acts of Christ, who began by acting and teaching, and by the voice of the Apostle who, addressing not only Timothy but all classes of ecclesiastics, enounced this precept, "Take heed unto thyself and unto the doctrine, continue in it, for in doing this thou shalt save both thyself and them that hear thee." Assuredly, both for one's own sanctification and that of others there is a precious resource in Holy Writ, particularly in the Psalms. All the same, those only can profit who not only give a docile and attentive ear to the divine word, but edifying piety and a perfect good-will. These books, dictated by the Holy Spirit, contain very important truths hidden and difficult to interpret in many points. In order to understand and explain them we shall always need the presence of the same Spirit—that is to say, of His Light and His Grace, which, as the Psalms warn us, can only be implored by human prayer accompanied by a holy life.

It is in this that the foresight of the Church is luminously apparent. She has multiplied at all times institutions and precepts that the treasure of Holy Writ, which the Holy Spirit granted to men with a sovereign liberality, should not be neglected. She has decreed not only that great portion of the Scriptures should be read and meditated by clergymen in the daily Office but that the Scriptures should be taught and interpreted by properly instructed men in the cathedrals, in the monasteries, and in the convents, where training could be profitably carried on. She has

also ordained by Rescript that on Sundays and days of solemn festival the faithful should be nourished by the saving words of the Gospel. Thus, thanks to the wisdom and vigilance of the Church, the study of the Holy Scriptures is kept up flourishing and fecund in fruits of salvation.

To strengthen Our arguments and Our exhortations, We are gratified to recall how all the men remarkable for the sanctity of their lives, and for their knowledge of the divine truths, have always assiduously cultivated the Holy Scriptures. We see that the nearest disciples of the Apostles, among whom We shall cite Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp, then the Apologists, especially Justin and Irenæus, have in their letters and their books, either tending to the preservation or the propagation of the divine dogmas, introduced the teaching, the force, and the piety of the Holy Writings.

In the schools of catechism and theology, which were founded near so many episcopal sees, the most celebrated of which were those of Antioch and Alexandria, the teaching given consisted, so to speak, only of the reading, the explanation, and the defence of the written Word of God.

From these establishments came out the greater number of the fathers and the writers, whose profound studies and remarkable works succeeded each other for three centuries in such abundance that this period has been called the golden age of Biblical exegesis.

Amongst those of the East, the first place belongs to Origen, a man admirable for the quickness of his intellect and his uninterrupted labors. It is to his various writings and his immense work of the *Hexaples* that all his successors have gone for their sources.

It is necessary to mention several who have extended the limits of this science, thus: amongst the most eminent, Alexandria produced Clement and Cyril; Palestine Eusebius and the second Cyril; Cappadocia, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzen, and Gregory of Nyssa; and Antioch, John Chrysostom, who was equally renowned for his ripe erudition and lofty eloquence.

The Church of the West had no less glory. Amongst the many doctors who distinguished themselves in her bosom the names of Tertullian and Cyprian, of Hilary and Ambrose, of Leo the Great, and of Gregory the Great, but, above all, of Augustine and Jerome are illustrious.

One showed himself of admirable penetration in the interpretation of the Word of God, and of consummate ability in deducing from it arguments in support of Catholic truth; the other possessed an extraordinary knowledge of the Bible, and made such magnificent comments upon it that he is honored by the Church with the title of the Very Great Doctor.

From that epoch to the eleventh century, although studies were not so ardently cultivated, nor so fruitful in results as in preceding times, nevertheless, they were flourishing, thanks particularly to the zeal of the priesthood.

In fact, these took care either to gather the works left by their predecessors on so important a subject, or to circulate them after having studied them profoundly and enriched them with their own additions. It was thus that Isidore of Seville, Bede, and Alcuin acted among others. They either illustrated the Sacred Writings with glossaries as Valerius Strabo and Anselm of Laon, or they endeavored by new processes to maintain the integrity of texts as Peter Damianus and Lanfranc. In the twelfth century the most of them undertook with much success the allegorical explanation of the Holy Writings. St. Bernard easily signalized himself in this sphere, his sermons being almost entirely based on Holy Writ.

But new and considerable progress was made, thanks to the method of the Scholastics. These, although they expressly applied themselves to researches as to the veritable text of the Latin version, as the corrected Bibles which they brought out demonstrate, expended still more zeal and care on the interpretation and explanation of the Holy Books. With as much learning and clearness as any of their predecessors they discriminated the different meanings of the Latin words, established the value of each from the theological point of view, noted the different chapters of the books and the subjects of the chapters, went into the signification of Bibli-