

Encyclical Letter

OF

OUR HOLY FATHER

BY DIVINE PROVIDENCE

POPE LEO XIII.

ON

The Study of Holy Scripture.

(CONTINUED.)

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.

At the outset of their studies they should examine into the nature of the intelligence of their disciples, cultivate it, in fact, so as to fit them at once to preserve intact the doctrine of the Holy Writings and to comprehend their spirit. Such is the object of "The Treatise on the Introduction to the Bible," which supplies the pupil with the means of proving the integrity and authenticity of the Bible, of searching and discovering the true meaning of passages, of boldly attacking and extirpating to the root sophistical interpretations. It is hardly needful to indicate how important it is to discuss these points from the commencement with order and in a scientific way, having recourse to theology, for, in verity, the study of the Scriptures is built upon this foundation and illuminated by these lights. The professor should apply himself scrupulously to make the most fruitful part of this science perfectly understood—that which concerns interpretation—and to explain to his auditors how they may utilize the riches of the divine word for the advantage of religion and piety. Assuredly, we understand that neither the extent of the subject nor the time disposable will permit the entire circle of the Scriptures to be gone over in the schools. But since it is necessary to possess a sure method fruitfully to direct interpretation, a wise master must avoid the mistakes of those who take up for study passages selected here and there in the books, and likewise the method of those who settle on a determined chapter of a single book. If in the majority of schools one cannot attain the same end as in higher academies—that is, that one book or another may be expounded in a consecutive and elaborate manner—at least every exertion should be exercised that the passages chosen for interpretation should be studied with a sufficient completeness. Pupils allured in a sense, and instructed by this mode of explanation, might be able to reperuse and relish the rest of the Bible for the duration of life. The professor, faithful to the preceptions of those who have preceded us, should use the Vulgate version. It is that, in truth, which the Council of Trent has designed as authentic and suitable to be employed "in public readings, discussions, preachings and explanations," and that which is also recommended by the daily practice of the Church. Nevertheless, we do not wish to say that no account must be taken of other versions which the Christians of the early ages adopted with eulogy, especially those of the primitive texts. In fact, as far as concerns the material points, the sense is clear according to the Hebrew and Greek editions of the Vulgate, nevertheless, if an ambiguous passage, or one less clear than usual is met, "recourse to the preceding language," as St. Augustine counsels, will be very useful. It is palpable that a great deal of circumspection must be brought to this task, for it is the duty of the commentator to indicate not what he thinks himself but that which was thought by the author whom he explains. After the reading shall have been carefully conducted to the given point, then the moment will arrive to search into and explain the sense. Our first advice on this subject is to observe the prescriptions commonly in use relative to the

interpretation, the more assiduously as the attacks of adversaries are more active. We must therefore cautiously weigh the value of the words themselves, the signification of the context, the similitude of passages and the like, and also improve the opportunity of the strange elucidations of the science opposed to us. Nevertheless, the master must beware not to bestow more time and care to these questions than to the study of the divine books themselves, lest too extensive and profound a knowledge of those topics should bring more trouble than strength to the intellect of youth. Hence it results that the sure course to pursue is the study of Holy Writ from the theological point of view.

On this subject it is necessary to remark that in addition to the causes of difficulty which present themselves in the explanation of no matter what ancient authors, others have to be supplemented which are peculiar to the explanation of the Sacred Writings. Inasmuch as they are the work of the Holy Ghost, the words conceal a number of truths which are far surpassing the strength and penetration of human reason—that is to say, the divine mysteries and all which belongs to them. The sense is sometimes wider and more veiled than would appear to be conveyed by the letter and by the rules of hermeneutics, and, furthermore, the literal sense itself sometimes hides other senses which serve to elucidate dogmas or to give rules for the conduct of life. Thus, it cannot be denied that the Holy Books are shrouded with a certain religious obscurity to such an extent that nobody should undertake their study without a guide. Thus God has desired—it is the common opinion of the Fathers—that men should study them with more ardour and carefulness, so that truths laboriously acquired should penetrate more deeply into their intellects and their hearts, in order that they might understand above all that God has given the Scriptures that in the interpretation of His words the Church should be accepted as the surest guide and master.

Where God has placed His treasures there truth should be sought. The men in whom resides the succession of the Apostles, as St. Irenaeus has already taught us, explain the Scriptures without danger. It is his doctrine and that of the other Fathers which the Vatican Council adopted when renewing a Decree of the Council of Trent on the interpretation of the Divine Written Word. It decided that in things of faith and morals, tending to the settlement of Christian doctrine, that should be regarded as the exact sense of the Scriptures which our holy mother the Church has regarded and regarded as such, for it is her province to judge of the sense and interpretation of the Sacred Books. Consequently, no one is permitted to expound the Scriptures in a fashion contrary to this meaning or the unanimous consent of the Fathers.

By this law, full of wisdom, the Church does not arrest or retard in the slightest degree the researches of Biblical science, but maintains them in the shelter of all error, and powerfully contributes to their veritable progress. Each doctor, in short, sees open before him a vast field wherein, by following a sure direction, his zeal may be exercised in a signal manner and with profit to the Church. Of a truth, as to those passages of Holy Writ which await a certain and well-defined explanation, thanks to the benevolent design of the Providence of God, it may be that the judgment of the Church will find itself ripened by preparatory studies. But, touching those points which have been already settled, the Doctor may play an equally efficacious role, either in more clearly expounding them to the crowd of the faithful or in a mode more skilful to the educated, or in defending them more strongly from the adversaries of the faith. The Catholic interpreter should accordingly, as a most important and sacred duty, explain in the fixed sense these texts of Scripture whose signification has been authentically indicated, whether by sacred writers whom the guidance of the Holy Ghost inspired, as occurs in many passages of New Testament, or by the Church, assisted by the same Holy Ghost and by the means of a solemn judgment, or by its universal and ordinary authority. He should be convinced that this interpretation is the only one that can be approved by the laws of sacred hermeneutics. Upon other points he must follow the analogy of the faith and take for model Catholic doctrine as it is indicated by the authority

of the Church. In fact, it is the same God who is the author of the Holy Writings and of the doctrine of which the Church is the storehouse. It absolutely follows, then, that a signification attributed to the former and differing, however little, from the latter cannot be produced from a legitimate interpretation. Hence, it evidently results that every interpretation which puts the sacred authors in contradiction with themselves, or which is opposed to the teaching of the Church, is foolish and false.

He who teaches Holy Writ should also merit the eulogy that he is a thorough master of theology, that he is perfectly conversant with the comments of the Holy Fathers, the Doctors, and the best interpreters. Such is the doctrine of St. Jerome and St. Augustine, who justly complain in these terms, "If every science, however unimportant and easy of acquisition, demands, as is evident, to be taught by a learned man, by a master, what could be more arrogantly rash than not to seek the knowledge of the Holy Scriptures after the teaching of their interpreters?" Such was likewise the testimony of other Fathers, who confirmed it by examples. They explained the Scriptures, not after their private opinions, but from the writing and authority of their predecessors, because it was evident that these had received in succession to the Apostles the rules for the interpretation of Holy Writ.

The testimony of the holy Fathers, who, after the Apostles, have been, so to speak, the gardeners of the holy Church, its builders, its pastors, have nourished it and made it grow, has also a great authority every time they explain, in one and the same manner, a Biblical text as concerning faith or morals; for it is clear from their agreement that, according to Catholic doctrine, this explanation has come in its form by tradition from the Apostles. The advice of the same Fathers is also worthy of being taken into very serious consideration when they treat of the same subjects as Doctors and as giving their private opinion. Indeed, not only their knowledge of revealed doctrine and the multitude of the acquirements necessary to interpret the Apostolic books powerfully recommend them, but, moreover, God Himself has bestowed freely His succour and His lights on these men, remarkable for the sanctity of their lives and their zeal for the truth.

Let the interpreter learn, then, that he is bound to follow their footsteps with respect, and avail himself of their labours with an intelligent discrimination. Nevertheless, he must not believe that the road is blocked, and that he cannot, where a reasonable doubt exists, go farther in the line of research and explanation. It is allowable for him, provided he always follows the sage precept of St. Augustine, "not to stray in the slightest from the literal and plain sense unless when there is some reason which forbids him to agree with it or renders it necessary to be abandoned." This rule should be observed with more firmness, that, in the midst of the great ardour of innovation and the freedom of opinion, there exists a very grave danger of going wrong. He who teaches the Scriptures must take care not to neglect the allegorical or analogical sense attached by the holy Fathers to certain words, particularly when the meaning naturally flows from the literal sense, and is supported by a large number of authorities.

The Church, in fact, has received from the Apostles the mode of interpretation, and has approved of it by its example, as shown by the liturgy. It is not that the Fathers pretended to demonstrate by themselves the dogmas of faith, but that they experienced that this method was good to nurse virtue and piety. The authority of other Catholic interpreters of a truth is less, nevertheless, since Biblical studies have made a continuous progress in the Church, the honor which is their due should be rendered to these Doctors, and one can borrow from their works many arguments useful for repelling attacks and clearing up points of controversy. But that which is unsuitable is that the interpreter, ignoring or despising the excellent volumes which our co-religionists have left us in considerable numbers, should prefer heterodox works, and that to the imminent risk of sound doctrine, and too often to the detriment of the faith, he should search in them for the explanation of passages on which Catholics have long and valuably exercised their talents and multiplied their labors. Although, undeniably, the studies of the heterodox, wisely

utilized, may sometimes aid the Catholic interpreter, it is needful for him, notwithstanding, to recollect, after the numerous proofs given by the ancients, that the unaltered sense of Holy Scriptures is to be found nowhere outside the holy Church, and cannot be given by those who, deprived of the true faith, cannot reach the marrow of Holy Writ, but only nibble at the rind. It is especially necessary that the practice of Scriptures should spread itself all over theology and become in a manner its soul. Such has been at every age the doctrine which they have supported by their example. They devoted themselves to the establishing and strengthening by the Holy Books all the verities which are the object of faith, and those which flow from them; and it is these Holy Books, as well as divine tradition, which they have employed to refute the novel inventions of heretics, to discover the *raison d'être* (cause of being), the explanation and the interdependence of Catholic dogmas.

There is nothing surprising in that to him who reflects on the immense space the Holy Books occupy among the sources of divine revelation. To such a measure is this true that, without their study and daily usage, theology could not be treated in a way appropriate and worthy of such a science. No doubt it is good that young people in the seminaries and universities should be trained to acquire an understanding and knowledge of dogmas, and that, starting from the articles of faith, they should deduce their consequences by ratiocination, established on the rules of tried and solid philosophy. All the same, the serious and instructed theologian should not neglect the interpretation of dogmas based on the authority of the Bible. In fact, theology draws its principles from other sciences, but immediately from God by revelation. Furthermore, it has not recourse to these sciences as its superior, but employs them as its inferiors and its servants. This method of teaching the sacred science is imitated and recommended by the prince of theologians, St. Thomas Aquinas. In addition, he showed how the theologians familiar with the character of the science he cultivated could defend its principles did any one attack them. "In reasoning, should the adversary accord some of the truths which are transmitted to us by revelation, it is through the means of Holy Writ we should carry on discussion with heretics, and use one article of faith against those who deny another. On the contrary, if the adversary believes in nothing which is divinely revealed, there remains no longer to prove to him articles of faith by reasoning, but to oppose his reasonings against the faith.

We should, then, be solicitous that our young people march to the combat properly instructed in Biblical knowledge, in order that they may not frustrate our legitimate hopes, nor—what would be much more serious—that they thoughtlessly run the risk of falling into error, led away by the false promises of rationalists and the phantom of a superficial erudition. But they will be completely ready for the struggle if, after the method which we ourselves have indicated and prescribed, they cultivate religiously and profoundly the study of philosophy and theology, under the guidance of St. Thomas Aquinas. Thus they will be certain to make sure progress not merely in Biblical science but in the domain of theology called positive.

Certes, it is much that the truth of Catholic doctrine has been proved, and that doctrine has been explained and elucidated, thanks to the legitimate and accomplished interpretation of the Bible; but there remains to be established another point as important as the work necessary to arrive at it is considerable—that the complete authority of the Scriptures should be demonstrated as solidly as possible. This object cannot be obtained in a full and complete manner except by the proper and ever-enduring magistracy of the Church, which, "by herself, by her admirable diffusion, her eminent holiness, her inexhaustible productivity of every species of good, her Catholic unity and invincible stability, is a grand and perpetual motive of credibility and an irrefragable proof of the divine mission."

But since the divine and infallible magistracy of the Church reposes on the authority of Holy Writ, at least human belief in it must at the outset be affirmed and revindicated. From these books, in fact, as from witnesses, the most experienced of antiquity, the divinity and mission of the Christ-God, the institu-