

Encyclical Letter
OF
OUR HOLY FATHER
BY DIVINE PROVIDENCE
POPE LEO XIII.
ON
The Study of Holy Scripture.
(CONCLUDED.)

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.

Therein lies one of the duties of the priest, which St. Chrysostom establishes in magnificent terms: "Great zeal must be employed that the Word of God should dwell abundantly in us; we should not only be ready for one kind of combat, for the war is diversified and the enemies many; they do not all use the same arms, nor is it in the same manner that they propose to confront us. Therefore he who is to meet all should be acquainted with the manoeuvres and the methods of all; he should handle the arrow and the sling; he should be tribune and chief of a cohort, general and soldier, footman and trooper, apt to fight on sea and to overturn ramparts. If, in short, the defender is not provided by every means with every mode of fighting, the devil knows how to give his robbers admission by one side, if a single one be left without guard, and carry away the sheep."

We have already described the stratagems of the enemy, and the multifarious means he employs for attack. Let us now indicate the processes which should be utilized for defence.

In the first place, recourse must be had to the ancient Eastern languages, and particularly, and at the same time, to the science which is called critical. These two species of knowledge are today very much appreciated and esteemed; the clergyman who will possess them in a more or less extended fashion, according to the country he inhabits and the people with whom he is brought into relation, will be able better to sustain his dignity and fulfil his mission. The minister of God should, in fact, "make himself all things to all men, and always be prepared to satisfy him who demands the reason of the hope he entertains himself." It is therefore necessary to professors of Holy Writ, and it is fitting for theologians, to know the tongues in which the canonical books were primitively written by the sacred authors. It would be excellent that even ecclesiastical students should study those tongues, the more particularly those amongst them who are destined to academic grades in theology. Precaution should also be taken that in all academies there should be established—as, indeed, already has been done in some of them—chairs where the ancient languages, especially the Semitic languages, will be taught and their relations with science. These courses would, in the first place, be intended for those designed for the study of the Holy Writings.

For the same reason it is important that the same professors of Holy Writ should be instructed and exercised in the science of true criticism. Unfortunately, and to the great damage of religion, a system has appeared which parades under the honourable name of "high criticism" whose disciples affirm that the origin, integrity, and authority of every kind of book is traceable to their intrinsic characters alone. On the contrary, it is evident that where a historic question is concerned, or the origin and preservation of no matter what description of work, historic testimonies have more value than all others, and these are the testimonies which should be most carefully sought out and examined. As to intrinsic characters, they are, for the great part of the time, far less important,

so that they need not be invoked except to confirm a thesis. If other action is carried out, the result will be serious inconvenience. In fact, the enemies of religion will retain more confidence in attacking and battering in breach the authenticity of the Holy Books. Finally, this form of high criticism will arrive at the result that each one in interpretation will attach himself to his own tastes and prejudicial views. Thus the light sought on the subject of the Scriptures will not exhibit itself, and no advantage will result for science, but one will see conspicuously manifested that character of error which consists in diversity and contradiction of opinions. Already the behaviour of the chiefs of this new science prove it. Besides, the bulk of them are imbued with the maxims of a vain philosophy and of rationalism, nor are they afraid to expunge from the Holy Books the prophecies, miracles, and the other events which surpass the natural order. Again, the interpreter should struggle with those who, deluded by their knowledge of physical sciences, track the sacred authors inch by inch in order to expose the ignorance they had of such and such transactions, and to lower their writings on that account. As these complaints are made about sensible objects, they are thereby the more dangerous when they are spread among the crowd, especially among the youth attracted to letters. As soon as that youth has lost its respect in point for divine revelation, its faith relative to all the others will not be long before it vanishes. Hence it is only too evident that, inasmuch as the natural sciences are proper to manifest the glory of the Creator engraved on terrestrial objects, provided they are suitably taught, so much the more are they capable of wresting from the intellect the principles of a sound philosophy and corrupting manners when they are presented with perverse intentions to youthful spirits. Thus the knowledge of natural facts will be an efficacious succour to those who will teach Holy Writ, for, thanks to that information, they may more easily discover and refute the sophisms of all sorts directed at the Scriptures. No real discord can assuredly exist between theology and physics, providing both are kept strictly within their limits, taking care, according to the words of St. Augustine, "To affirm nothing at random, and not to take the unknown for the known (49)." If, nevertheless, they are in dissent on a certain point, what is the theologian to do? To follow the rule summarily indicated by the same Doctor, "As for all that our adversaries can demonstrate to us with the foundation of veritable proofs, let us show that there is in them nothing contrary to the acts related in Holy Writ. But as for that which they draw from certain of their books and invoke as, contradicting sacred literature—that is to say, the Catholic faith—let us show them that they are based on hypothesis, and that we have no manner of doubt of the falsity of these affirmations (50)."

In order the better to penetrate ourselves with the justness of this rule, let us, in the first place, consider that the sacred writers, or, more accurately, "the spirit of God which spoke by their mouths, did not wish to teach men truths concerning the intimate constitution of visible objects, because they did not in anyway serve for their salvation" (51). In this wise these authors, without applying themselves to acute observations of nature, sometimes described objects or spoke of them either in a sort of metaphor or as the language in use at the period suggested, similar to the practice at present on many points, in daily life, even amidst the most learned of men. In the vulgar language one alludes to the objects which fall under the sense in the proper terms. The sacred writer (and the Angelic Doctor reminds us of it) in the same manner attached himself to sensible characters (52) that is, to those which God Himself, after the habit of men, employed in addressing them so that He might be understood by them. But to secure the vigorous defence of the Holy Writings, it by no means follows that one must preserve the entire sense that every one of the Fathers or the interpreters who succeeded them made use of to explain the Scriptures. Given, in short, the opinions in vogue at the epoch, they may not always have been able to judge according to the truth or avoid emitting certain principles which are now anything but proven.

Extreme care must be exercised therefore in discriminating in their explana-

tions between that which is given regarding the faith or bound with it and which they affirm of a common accord. In truth, on that which is not the essence of the faith the saints, as well as ourselves, might have held different opinions. Such is the doctrine of St. Thomas. In another passage he expresses himself with great wisdom in these terms: "Touching the opinions commonly professed by philosophers, and which are not contrary to our faith, it seems to me that it is more sure not to affirm them as dogmas, although they are sometimes introduced in reasoning in the name of these philosophers, and not to note them as contrary to the faith, lest we should furnish the sages of this world occasion to despise our doctrine."

For another motive, although the interpreter should show that there is nothing contradictory in the Scriptures well explained in the truths which those who study physical science give as certain and sustained by firm arguments, he should not forget that occasionally several of these truths cited as certain have been subsequently cast in doubt or laid aside. If writers who treat physical facts go beyond the limits assigned to them in the sciences, they are discussing, and trespass on the terrain of the philosopher by propagating noxious principles, the theologian can appeal to the philosophers for their reputation. We would that the same doctrine should be applied to sciences of a similar kind, and more particularly to history. There is good need to be afflicted when many men who study to the roots the monuments of antiquity and the manners and institutions of peoples, and give themselves up to laborious treatises on these themes, have frequently for aim to find out errors in Holy Writ in order to weaken and completely shatter the authority of Scriptures. Some behave thus with dispositions genuinely hostile, and judge in a manner which is not sufficiently impartial. They have so much confidence in profane volumes and in documents of the bygone that they invoke them as if it were not possible for mistakes to exist, while they refuse to trust to the Holy Books, and reject as erroneous the faintest appearance of inexactitude, and that without even discussion. Of a truth, there may be sundry passages in the issues of different editions which may not be reproduced in a fashion absolutely correct. But this must not be readily admitted, except on those points where the fact has been suitably proved. It may also happen that the sense of some phrases may remain doubtful. To determine them the rules for interpretation will be of valuable assistance; but it would be positively fatal either to limit inspiration to some portions of Scripture or to assume that the sacred author himself was deceived.

Neither can the method be tolerated of those who escape from these difficulties without hesitating to accord that divine inspiration does not extend beyond truths concerning faith and morals—that and nothing farther. They are wrong who think that when the veracity of events is to be investigated that which God said must not be inquired into, but examination rather must be made what reason there was that He should have thus spoken. In fact, all the books without exception which the Church has received as sacred and canonical in all their parts have been written under the dictation of the Holy Ghost. So far from any error attaching itself to the divine inspiration, not only does that of itself exclude all error, but it is still more repugnant to it of necessity, because God, who is necessarily the Sovereign Truth, could not be the author of any error. Such is the ancient and constant belief of the Church, solemnly defined by the Councils of Florence and of Trent, and ultimately confirmed and more expressly set out in the Councils of the Vatican, which passed this absolute Decree: "The entire books of the Old and New Testament in all their parts, as enumerated by Decree of the same Council of Trent, and such as are contained in the ancient Vulgate edition in Latin, should be regarded as sacred and canonical. The Church holds them as sacred and canonical, not because they were edited by human science alone, and were afterwards approved by the authority of the aforesaid Church; not because they contain truth only without error; but because, written under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, they have God for author."

Almost no account should be paid to

the circumstance that the Holy Ghost should have taken men as the instruments to write as some false opinion might be emitted, not certainly by the first author, but by inspired writers. In fact, the Holy Ghost has by His virtue excited them to write, assisted them whilst they conceived exactly, that they were anxious to report faithfully, and that they expressed with an infallible truth that which they had been commanded to write, and only that which they had been commanded.

Such has been always the sentiment of the holy Fathers. "Thus," said St. Augustine, "since those wrote what the Holy Ghost showed and enjoined them to write, it must not be said that the Holy Ghost did not write it. They, as the members, operated what the Head dictated." St. Gregory expressed himself in these terms: "It is more than superfluous to seek to know who wrote those books, since it is firmly believed that their author is the Holy Spirit. He in truth wrote who dictated what was to be written; He wrote who inspired the work." It is to be concluded that those who think that in authentic passages of Holy Writ some false idea may perhaps be comprehended assuredly pervert Catholic doctrine or make God Himself the author of error. All the Fathers and all the Doctors have been so fully persuaded that the Scriptures, such as delivered to us by the sacred writers, are exempt from all error that they ingeniously and conscientiously applied themselves to bring about concordance and conciliation in numerous passages which seemed to present some contradiction or divergence. (And these passages are the same which are opposed to us by the science of today.)

The Doctors have been unanimous to believe that the books in their totality and their parts are equally of divine inspiration; that God Himself has spoken through the sacred authors, and there could not be enounced anything antagonistic to truth. Here a general application of the words transmitted to St. Jerome by St. Augustine should be made: "I avow, indeed, to thy charity that I have learned to accord to those books of Scriptures alone which are at present called canonical the reverence and honor of implicitly believing that their authors could not commit an error in writing them. And if I found in these Holy Writings any passage which appeared to me contrary to the truth, I would not hesitate to affirm either that the manuscript was defective, or that the interpreter did not closely follow the text, or that I myself did not rightly understand." But to struggle fully and perfectly, by means of the most important sciences, to establish the sanctity of the Bible is certainly much juster than to expect everything from the erudition of theologians. For that cause it is desirable that Catholics, having acquired some authority in foreign sciences, should propose to themselves the same goal and try to attain it. If the glory which talents confer has never been wanting to the Church, grace to the beneficence of the Almighty, certes He will not be wanting to her at the moment. May this glory go on ever increasing for the protection of the faith. It is of the highest importance that we believe that the faith should rear up many and solid defenders; and nothing is more calculated to make the crowd accept the truth than to see distinguished men of science attach themselves to it freely. Moreover, the hate of our opponents will easily disappear, or, at least, they will not dare to affirm with so much assurance that faith is the enemy of science when they perceive the learned rendering this faith the greatest honour and entertaining for it the liveliest respect. Since those can do so much for religion to whom Providence has liberally granted a happy talent and the grace to profess the Catholic faith, it is meet that in the midst of this violent controversy, excited by the sciences which border in any way on the faith, each should choose a group of studies appropriate to his intelligence, endeavour to excel in them, and repel, not without glory, the bolts directed against Holy Writ by an impious science.

It is agreeable to us to praise here the conduct of some Catholics, who, to enable the savants to give themselves up to such studies and achieve progress, furnish them with aid of every kind, and form associations on which they bounteously bestow abundant contributions. That is an excellent employment of fortune, and one most suitable to the requirements of the epoch. The less, in