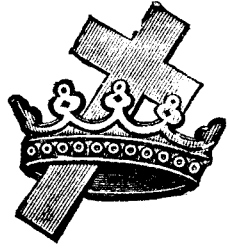


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## Bible Reading.

Rev. Father Drummond

REPLIES

To Ven. Archdeacon Fortin's Remarks on his First Sermon

ON HOLY SCRIPTURE.

Continued from last week.

**FORTIN:** If the word of God is obscure, how is it a light and a lamp? St. Peter says that the word of God is a light that shineth in a dark place.

**DRUMMOND:** If electricity, when used in a certain way and properly connected with good lamps, gives light, how is it that the incandescent lamps in this building all went out this evening a quarter of an hour before the service? Because there was something wrong in the machinery. So is it with the word of God: even the most difficult passages "in the entire canon" are not giving in themselves, but many do not give that light, because they are either unlearned or unstable, that is, because they have not been taught to keep up the traditional connection with that divine light.

**FORTIN:** The Bible is so plain that the Saviour in a burst of joyous enthusiasm exclaims: "I thank thee, O Father, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent and revealed them unto babes" (Matt. XI. 25).

**DRUMMOND:** This text is quoted by the Archdeacon as a proof that the Bible is very plain. Therefore, according to his view, the words "these things" must be the Scriptures. Let us see if that is the case, in other words, let us again look at the context. The words occur near the end of the eleventh chapter of St. Matthew just after Our Lord has been upbraiding Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum for their unrepentance in spite of the miracles worked there. The parallel passage in the tenth chapter of St. Luke (v. 21) occurs also directly after he has admonished the seventy-two disciples to be humble and to rejoice not that they work miracles by casting out devils, but that their names are written in heaven. "In that hour Jesus rejoiced in spirit"—I continue to quote from the Authorized Version, the Catholic Bible here reads "rejoice in the Holy Ghost"—"and said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes." Once more, what are these things of which the Saviour speaks? Certainly not the Scriptures; there is no single word about Bible reading in the whole chapter. No; it is clear that what Our Lord refers to is the gospel he is preaching and especially the way his hearers can ensure their having their names written in heaven. "These things" means all the truths necessary for salvation; but the words have not the remotest reference to the plainness or obscurity of the Bible. All the truths of the Gospel of Jesus Christ have always been taught especially by word of mouth by truly Christian preachers. And they have been revealed more particularly "unto the babes" of the Catholic Church, that is, unto simple folk who do not pretend to understand the most difficult books "in the entire canon."

**FORTIN:** Clearly these here meant are the wise and prudent in the things of this world; those who lean on their own understandings and apply secular methods to the study of divine things. Human wisdom is little accounted of in this realm.

**DRUMMOND:** Yet it seems that the Archdeacon, towards the end of his sermon, contradicts the statement just made "that human wisdom is little accounted of in this realm;" for he maintains that the Bible "makes statesmen, philosophers, critics; it is the best business book in the world; it is the corner stone of the empire." Just think of it! Critics, business men, statesmen, philosophers! Surely, all such persons, especially the critics, make much account of human wisdom.

The fact is, human wisdom is one of God's best natural gifts, and should therefore be reverently applied to the study of divine things. I hold with St. Ignatius that in all supernatural pursuits, such as undoubtedly ought to be the study of the Bible, we should use all natural helps as if the issue depended upon them, and at the same time rely upon divine grace with the full persuasion that success will come therefrom. This is merely an expanding of the well known proverb, "Help thyself and God will help thee."

**FORTIN:** Sometimes men say it is a crime to place the Scriptures in the hands of fools and dunces.

**DRUMMOND:** What I did say was that the Church has too much reverence for the Bible to make a jest of it by flinging the interpretation of it to the curiosity and impertinence of any and every fool.

**FORTIN:** It is to be observed that God's estimation of a fool is different from that of man. We read "the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God" (I Cor. III. 19) and that "by wisdom the world knew not God" (I Cor. II. 21). Men may be learned in worldly things and yet be very ignorant of God's lore, and on the other hand a simple man in the eyes of the world, being instructed by the spirit, may be mighty in the scriptures. Voltaire was, and many another intellectual giant has been a fool in the things of God; and when Peter said that the ignorant and unstable wrest the scriptures to their own perdition, depend upon it he was speaking of the spiritually ignorant and unstable.

**DRUMMOND:** Precisely so, and similarly, when I spoke of fools I meant, as any simpleton could see, the fools of the world, the spiritually foolish, and not that sublime folly of the cross of which St. Paul is speaking throughout the two chapters from which the Ven. Archdeacon's texts are taken. A man endowed with that wisdom of the Holy Ghost which is foolishness to the natural man can be trusted to read even the most obscure passages of Holy Writ with great profit to his soul.

But, although the Archdeacon has proved—what Catholic preachers say all over the world—that "the wisdom of the world is foolishness with God," he has not attempted to prove that the foolishness of the world is wisdom with God, and until he does so, his remarks bear no relevancy to my remark about flinging the Bible to men who are naturally fools. "A simple man in the eyes of the world" may be a person of sound but uncultivated mind and such a one is certainly in no sense a fool.

**FORTIN:** It was a mistake to imagine that the common people cannot profitably study the scriptures. In this regard experience was the best guide and to point to lands of the open Bible was to show lands of progress and development, lands where there was a general upward movement both in material and spiritual things. In a bible land conscience finds its wings, it is no longer in another man's keeping. On the other hand, to see stagnation, ignorance, vice and general moral decrepitude, look to those countries where the Bible is unknown, such as Mexico, South America, Spain, Italy, Austria.

**DRUMMOND:** As no Catholic ever expressed the opinion that the common people cannot profitably study the scriptures, this mistaken notion cannot be fathered on us. At the beginning of many editions of the Douay Bible there appears a letter from Pope Pius the Sixth, to the then Archbishop of Florence, who had translated the Holy Bible into Italian. In this letter, written almost one hundred and twenty years ago, His Holiness says: "The Holy Scriptures are the most abundant sources which ought to be left open to every one, to draw from them purity of morals and of doctrine, and to eradicate the errors which are so widely disseminated in these corrupt times." Evidently the Pope not only thinks that the common people can profitably study the scriptures, but actually exhorts them to do so.

"In a Bible land conscience finds its wings, it is no longer in another man's keeping." Clearly, this is intended to imply that in Catholic countries the conscience of the laity is in the keeping of the priests. If this means that the conscience of the laity is continually kept enlightened by those who watch and must give account for their souls (Heb. XIII. 27), the assertion is true; but if it means that in Catholic countries conscience has no wings with which to fly to God, it is manifestly false, since there are no more conscientious and God-fearing people in the world than pious Catholics. On the other hand, in what the Ven. Archdeacon calls Bible lands, conscience often has wings to fly to the destruction of the owner of those wings.

But, really, there is no Christian land where the Bible is unknown, and thus the Archdeacon's contrast between Bible lands and lands without the Bible is baseless. He is alluding, as is plain, to Catholic countries, where he imagines the Bible is unknown. In this he is strangely mistaken. I maintain and will presently prove that the Bible is far better known in all Catholic countries than in any Protestant country.

Of course lay Protestants far surpass lay Catholics in their knowledge of the

externals of the Holy Book. They often read it from cover to cover. Frequently they can give you pieces of reconcilable information about it. I remember a minister of the New York Dutch Reformed Church, with whom I once travelled, catching me with this riddle: "If Solomon was the son of David and Joab was the son of Zeruiah, what relation was Zeruiah to Joab?" I naturally answered that Zeruiah is the name of Joab's father, and I was told I was wrong, because Zeruiah is the name of Joab's mother, this being the only instance in which a man is known in Scripture by his mother's name. I confess that I never ascertained and do not know to this day if this information be or be not correct. What in the world have such trifles to do with really knowing the Holy Book?

What, then, is the standard by which we are wont to measure a person's knowledge of a book or an author? I should answer briefly that he may be said thoroughly to know a great writer who knows and is deeply penetrated with his leading thoughts, with the finest passages in his greatest masterpieces. These passages are few even in the case of the most prolific writers. To have read them over and over again is a much surer way of grasping the author's mind than to read every single line that he has written.

Take Shakespeare, for instance. Some bookworms are wonderfully well versed in the technicalities of that immortal poet. They can explain offhand all his archaic expressions, they know all the different readings of uncertain texts, they have read every line that bears Shakespeare's name; but they have never fathomed his great thoughts. Such men cannot be said to really know Shakespeare. All they know is the outside, the adjuncts of a genius; his mind they have never grasped.

On the contrary; let an intelligent man listen to a few of Shakespeare's greatest plays as interpreted by first-rate actors like Sir Henry Irving, let him drink in all the world-wide sympathy, all the practical philosophy, all the startling apothegms, all the wondrous music and imagery of the matchless thinker and poet. Such a hearer may truly be said to know Shakespeare very well, although he may never have opened a volume of his works, although the very names of "Timon of Athens" and "Titus Andronicus" may be unknown to him.

This is the principle on which I maintain, not only that the Bible is not unknown among Catholics, but that, as a general rule, Catholics are far better acquainted with the Bible than Protestants are. After all, though every word of the Holy Scripture may conduce to edification, yet the Bible resembles other books in this that there are in it a comparatively small number of cardinal truths upon which all the rest hinge; and it is precisely these cardinal Biblical truths which Catholics lay hold of much more firmly than Protestants do.

To refer once more to the comparison with Shakespearean masterpieces, just as he who thoroughly appreciates the marvellous perfection of one single passage such as Mark Antony's address to the Romans over the head body of Caesar has a deeper knowledge of the author of that passage than the mere omnivorous critic can ever have, so the Catholic who is filled with the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount has a deeper, wider, truer knowledge of the Bible than the average Protestant Bible reader who diligently peruses the sacred volume but without any real grasp of its fundamental principles.

In the specimens of Bible readings which we read periodically in some of the secular newspapers, it is a noteworthy circumstance that the Sunday school selections are so made as to deliberately avoid those classic texts which contain the Messianic prophecies or the dogmatic teachings of the New Testament. Nor can it be otherwise. As these selections are meant for the general Protestant public, among whom doctrinal divergences are so common, it becomes a matter of policy to dwell on comparatively unpractical texts, so that the reader's preconceived notions may be left undisturbed. Thus the public is treated to the mere surface ornaments of Holy Writ, while its vital essence is carefully eschewed.

Not so with Catholics. Their knowledge

of the Bible is systematic. All its teachings are grouped about the central truth of the Incarnation of the Son of God. Sunday after Sunday they hear their pastors developing with the Scriptural proofs the Gospel sayings and doings of the Saviour of the world or the doctrinal and moral lessons of the Epistles. Thus the most important and really fundamental texts of the Old and New Testament become part and parcel of their religious life. They are thoroughly familiar not only with the letter but above all with the spirit and full practical import of such texts as the following: "I will put enmities between thee and the woman, and thy seed and her seed: she shall crush thy heel and thou shalt lie in wait for her heel" (Gen. III. 15); "the sceptre shall not be taken away from Juda, nor a ruler from his thigh, till he come that is to be sent, and he shall be the expectation of nations" (Gen. XLIX. 10); "the Lord hath sworn, and he will not repent: Thou art a priest for ever according to the order of Melchisedech" (Ps. cix. or cx. 4); "behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel" (Isa. vii. 14); "for a virgin is born to us, and a son is given to us, and the government is upon his shoulder and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, God, the Father of the world to come, the Prince of peace" (Isa. XI. 6); "and after sixty-two weeks shall Christ be slain" (Dan. IX. 26); "and thou, Bethlehem Ephrath, art a little one among the thousands of Juda; out of thee shall He come forth unto me that is to be the ruler in Israel" (Micah, v. 2); "behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed" (Luke I. 48); "Joseph, son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife; for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost; and she shall bring forth a son and thou shalt call his name Jesus; for he shall save his people from their sins" (Matt. I. 20, 21); "and she brought forth her first born son, and wrapped him up in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn" (Luke II. 7); "not in bread alone do men live, but in every word that proceedeth from the mouth of God" (Matt. IV. 4); "if thou wilt be perfect, go, sell what thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me" (Matt. XIX. 21); "Amen, I say to you, whatsoever you shall bind upon earth, shall be bound also in heaven; and whatsoever you shall loose upon earth, shall be loosed also in heaven" (Matt. XVIII. 18); "and I say to thee that thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it; and I will give to thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatsoever thou shalt bind upon earth, it shall be bound also in heaven, and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth, it shall be loosed also in heaven" (Matt. XVI. 18, 19); "the Lord said, Simon, Simon, behold Satan hath desired to have you that he may sift you as wheat; but I have prayed for thee that thy faith fail not; and thou, being once converted, confirm thy brethren" (Luke, XXII. 31, 32); "feed my lambs... feed my sheep" (John, XXI. 15, 17); "when Jesus therefore had seen his mother and the disciple standing, whom he loved, he saith to his mother: Woman, behold thy son; after that he saith to the disciple: Behold thy mother" (John XIX. 26, 27); "This is my body which shall be delivered for you; this is my blood of the New Testament which shall be shed for many unto remission of sins" (I Cor. XI. 24; Matt. XXVI. 28); "whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them; and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained" (John, XX. 23); "a faith also, if it have not works, is dead in itself" (James, II. 17).

The foregoing are a few of the classical texts that Catholics are, so to speak, fed upon from week to week. To realize their obvious meaning is to realize the whole scheme of Redemption and at the same time the scriptural basis of the Catholic Church.

I trust I may be allowed here to instance by my own experience, one is not by any means an exceptional one among Catholics. As far as I can ascertain, I am not aware that any of my ancestors on the paternal or maternal side were Protestants; hence my Scripture training is not due to Protestant influence.

Brought up at my grandmother's knee. I remember how she always had within easy reach her folio edition in two volumes of the Rheims and Douay Bible which she had brought with her from Coleraine in the north of Ireland, and how she used to read it every day and many times a day, regaling us children with the beautiful stories and teachings of Holy Writ, and inspiring us with the greatest reverence and love for the world of God, and for the Catholic Church as the only safe exponent of that written word. Later on, when I went to college, I was advised by my Catholic professors to make a practice of reading the New Testament, and as much as ten years before I became a priest, my director, who was an Italian, urged me to read the Bible first from beginning to end so as to have personal knowledge of its contents, and afterwards to read each book with the help of a good commentary. This was my experience as a layman.

Then, if we go on to consider the regularity and completeness with which every Catholic priest is obliged to read the Holy Scriptures daily, we shall see that Bible reading is more systematically practiced among Catholics than among Protestants. For even among the latter, does it not often happen that the leader of a Bible class is the only one in that class who reads the Scriptures with some attempt at method and regularity? Well, each Catholic priest is far more at home with the Scriptures than any Protestant Bible reader: for each priest is obliged under pain of mortal sin to read his breviary during about one hour every day. Now the breviary is chiefly made up of selections from the Bible, and these selections are so arranged that the whole of the Bible is read in one year. Just at this time, for example, all Catholic priests are reading the prophet Isaiah. Hence it is that priests have the classical texts of the Bible ever on their tongues and hand them on in sermon and familiar talk to those of the faithful who have not the time to make a special study of Scripture.

Consequently it is not true, as the Ven. Archdeacon says, that the Bible is unknown in Mexico, South America, Spain, Italy, Austria. The facts are exactly the other way. The true spirit and essence, nay even the very words of the most important texts of the Bible, are better known in each and all of the countries mentioned than in any Protestant community.

The Ven. Archdeacon asserts that the above-named countries are the homes of stagnation, ignorance, vice and general moral decrepitude, which he attributes to their ignorance of the Bible. As I have just shown that they are far from ignorant of the Bible, his entire contention drops out of sight and, strictly speaking, I might pass over in silence his slanders against these countries. I prefer, however, for the sake of leaving none of his affirmations disproved, to say a word against these Catholic countries.

And first of all let me register a plain-blank negative. Mexico, South America, Spain, Italy and Austria are not more stagnant, ignorant, vicious and morally decrepit than Bible-observing lands, such as, to quote striking instances, Great Britain and the United States. In making this counter-assertion I am speaking of all these countries taken as a whole. No country can be said to be moving upward even materially, and still less spiritually, in which a large portion of the population are sunk in extreme want of the necessities of body and soul. Now this extreme want for soul and body is, to say the least, as great among the poorer classes of Great Britain and the United States as among the same classes in Mexico, South America, Spain and Austria. Italy I omit from this comparison, because its present deplorable financial status is due to Catholic influences, and can in no way be attributed to the religion of its people. I might go further and affirm that there is far more contentment among the masses in the Catholic countries mentioned than in the Protestant ones, the intensely Catholic Tyrol, for instance, being one of the most virtuous and prosperous countries in the world; but for the purpose of our present argument it is enough to say that the former have nothing to envy the latter in the line of stagnation, ignorance, vice and moral

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