BIBLE CHRISTIANS

IT may seem exaggerated to claim the Bible as a main remedy for the ills of the day. It smacks of a fanatical non-conformity. Catholics do not often run the risk of being called Bible Christians. Yet this is in fact the 'moral' of the important Encyclical on Biblical Studies issued by Pope Pius XII. at the end of September of last year[1]. His Holiness says that the true study of the Bible is more urgently needed than ever in these times of slaughter and ruin. 'Who else can heal these mortal wounds of human fellowship save Him whom the Prince of the Apostles thus addressed in the fullness of confidence and love: "Lord to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life"' (§57). The eternal Word is once again needed to bring form out of the chaos.

For there is little human hope of any form emerging from the seething waters of the post-war period we are so rapidly approaching. With each nation ultimately standing out for its own interests, with little or no sense of the common good, the 'ocean of calamities' of which the Pope speaks must continue to surround us even in 'peace' time. So long as the principle of the complete independence of sovereign states remains wars will increase in frequency and violence. It makes no difference whether those states are labelled Fascist, Communist or Democratic.

The task of straightening out the tangle is beyond human ingenuity and must be achieved by the Spirit working through the Word. This re-formation can, however, only come with our co-operation. We must be ready to continue to struggle and to suffer even when the war has ceased. We may no longer be called upon to suffer tanks and mines, guns and flying bombs for a cause dictated to us by those who hardly know Christ. But the fight will continue in a supernatural cause. Thus we may also apply the Pope's words to this future suffering: 'It is in the Scriptures that those who are weary and oppressed by adversity and sorrow will find true consolation and divine help to suffer with fortitude; it is here, in the Gospels, that Christ is shown to all as the supreme and perfect model of justice, charity and mercy; here that a lacerated and dismayed humanity finds access to the sources of that divine grace, which peoples and their rulers must not disdain or neglect if they hope ever to establish and maintain the peace and harmony of men. . .' (§58).

[1] The Encyclical 'Divino Afflante' is now available in an excellent English translation by Canon G. D. Smith, and published for 3d. by the Catholic Truth Society under the title 'Stand by the Bible.'

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In order to become Bible Christians of this sort Catholics of all states must read and study the Sacred Scripture with devotion and wisdom. The Encyclical makes an urgent appeal to the faithful to give themselves to this profitable work. So the Pope marks the end of an epoch, when Modernism has ceased to compel the Church to take certain repressive measures and to seem to lock the Bible away from an objective and free analysis. The fifty years from *Providentissimus Deus* which the present Encyclical was written to celebrate, have seen an increase in the misapprehension that the Church was obscurantist, not only witholding the Bible from the people (the old cry) but also preventing her Scripture Scholars from studying with any freedom new developments in exegesis. Ecclesiastical authorities did in fact have to retrench the position of the Bible to prevent unworthy hands being laid upon it; but the principles have never been denied and the Pope quotes literally from *Providentissimus Deus* to show how Leo XIII. encouraged a more extensive study and reading of the Scriptures at the beginning of the controversy. From that time onwards the Popes 'have, as occasion offered, highly recommended the study and preaching of the Sacred Scriptures and the devout habit of reading and meditating upon them' (§12). And a great deal has been achieved in the field of Biblical scholarship and general acquaintance with the Sacred Page.

The attack from rationalist modernism has practically ceased as may be seen in the absurdities of its discredited official organs. This has been not the senile decay of the opponent, but a victory for the studies and researches of Catholic scholars. It has been a triumph due in the main to the work of Père Lagrange, O.P., who was the leader for so many years of 'The Biblical School established through the zeal of the Master General of the Order of Preachers at the Priory of S. Stephen in Jerusalem, an institution of which he (Leo XIII.) said that "it had already rendered great services to biblical science and gave promise of even greater"' (§7). Père Lagrange was sent to Jerusalem in 1890, three years before *Providentissimus Deus*, twelve before the establishment of the Biblical Commission, and nineteen before that of the Pontifical Biblical Institute. It has been largely the triumph of his *Methode Historique* in textual criticism and exegesis, taking all the fruits of modern research in history and languages and using them in defence of the Scriptures, that has enabled the present Holy Father to encourage the true freedom of the sons of God in the study of the Bible (§§49 & 50). 'Catholic exegetes, using aright those very weapons of learning which their opponents were frequently abusing, have propounded interpretations which, while being in accordance with Catholic

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teaching and true traditional thought, appear at the same time to have met the difficulies which have either arisen from recent research and recent discoveries or had been left for our solution as a legacy from ancient times' (§44). By these means confidence in the authority and historical truth of the Bible has been wholly restored among Catholics (§45). There is a great deal yet to be done and by divine Providence the Bible will never lack its obscurities (§§46, 47), but now that scholars, freed from the restrictions of a particular controversy, can rely on the freedom of the word of God —knowing that 'the word of God is not bound' (2 Tim. ii, 9)—they will readily accept the serious obligation to foster a more thorough and complete understanding and deeper love of His word (§51).

One of the foundations upon which the study must be based is the true understanding of divine inspiration and of the *literal* meaning. Many had forgotten the traditional doctrine and spoke as though the human authors of the Bible were as dead in the hands of God as a typewriter or fountain pen, and the literal meaning was that of the words themselves without reference to the context or the author. The traditional teaching as found in St. Thomas and re-established by Père Lagrange has always been that the human author is a living and rational instrument of the divine author, that, therefore, 'he uses his own faculties and powers in such a way that from the book which is the fruit of His own labour all may easily learn the distinctive genius and the individual characteristics and features of each author' (§37). Moreover, the literal meaning is '*what the author meant to say*'—a principle which S. Thomas applies, for instance to the Book of Job with interesting results. Thus, although the saint believes Job to have been a real person, he regards the historicity of Job to be an irrelevant question since the primary intention of the author and therefore the literal meaning of the book is not to tell a history but that 'by likely reasons he may show how human affairs are governed by divine providence' (Prologue of St. Thomas's commentary).

It is, therefore, very important to use every means to discover what was the 'idiom' or mental background of the authors and 'what they intended to signify by their words.' Thus 'it is absolutely necessary for the interpreter to go back in spirit to those remote centuries of the East, and make proper use of the aids afforded by history, archaeology, ethnology and other sciences in order to discover what literary forms the writers of that early age intended to use. . . .' (§38, 39). To encourage, rather than to restrain, the zeal of students of these biblical sciences is the main purpose of this encyclical.

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This professorial conning of ancient documents and remains, this dry, almost indifferent, cataloguing of comparative religions, must seem very remote from the urgent needs of the day, the need of powerful 'Bible Christians.' It would indeed be so if these studies were to be left in the refrigerator of academic libraries and lecture halls. This danger must be avoided if the living word of God is to be given as food for the people. 'For God did not grant the Sacred Books to men to satisfy their curiosity or to provide them with an object of study and research' (§ 57). These studies must be assimilated by prayer and meditation and so brought into the life-flood of the Mystical Body, pouring out into a preaching that is not built up on fanciful conceits of 'accommodation,' but grounded in this essential, literal meaning, a preaching concerned principally with the theological aspect of the subject. The Holy Father does not leave in the air his encouragement for this linking of the recondite studies with the life of the Church and the regeneration of society. He makes some concrete suggestions in a paragraph the importance of which demands its complete reproduction here:—

> Let Bishops take every measure to foster and increase this veneration among the faithful committed to their charge, by promoting all those undertakings through which men of apostolic zeal are laudably striving to arouse and encourage among Catholics the knowledge and love of the Sacred Books. Let them favour and assist those pious associations whose object is to circulate copies of the Bible, and especially of the Gospels, among the faithful and to encourage Christian families in the habit of reading them devoutly every day; let them, so far as the liturgical laws allow, effectively commend in word and in practice the modern vernacular translations of Sacred Scripture made with the approval of ecclesiastical authority; and let them either themselves hold, or cause expert preachers to hold, public dissertations on biblical subjects (§53).

The Holy Father goes on to speak of Biblical reviews and the teaching of Scripture in Seminaries. Many projects are already under way in this country, and Catholics must take all these means of becoming more vital Bible Christians according to their circumstances; there are indeed few families where the daily reading of Holy Writ could not find its place together with family prayers as regularly as breakfast, dinner or supper. The world is starving for the bread of the Word of God. The modern tribes, if they are not soon nourished by this manna from heaven, will perish in the desert they have made for themselves.

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