Life of the Spirit

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THE CHRISTIAN AND THE SCRIPTURES

By The Editor

THESE words are being written at the season when the whole world is celebrating, however thoughtlessly, the coming of the Word of God as brother and friend to man. And the air of joyful anticipation recalls the anticipation of Mary and of the little 'Remnant' who looked for the coming of salvation to Israel. It was then too a season of liturgical expectancy as the Jews poured out the water of fertile desire round their altar and waved the green boughs of the future, prayed-for harvest, looking for the renewal of their theocratic kingdom in the coming of the Creator's spring. At that time the remnant alone united the outward ceremonial prayer of expectancy with the inner anticipation of the wonderful work of God. And the reason why Mary and Simeon and the others of their mind were prepared for the graces that were so soon to be their immense treasure was because they had already 'heard the Word, and kept it'. They had been moulded by the Sacred Scriptures—our Lady's every phrase in the *Magnificat* was an echo of the Word she had heard, spoken aforetime in so many places by the prophets; and Simeon and Zachary are shown in their canticles to be men of the Book as well. These few had remained silent while they allowed God to mould their minds and wills—and, not separated from these, their imagination too—by the Word which was now to enfold all those human words, analogies, sweet flowing poetic images, within the flesh and blood and bones of a man, the Son of Mary.

That deep sense of the Word, derived from long and quietly meditated reading of the Book, remains today, as in the days of the conception and birth of the Christ-child, the essential preparation for the birth of Christ by grace in the soul. Truly we are blessed with the presence of the very flesh of the Word in our midst in the Eucharist. This treasure was the most prized of all from the beginning of Christianity, secretly preserved lest the

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very jeers of the unbelieving should to the slightest degree dim the joy of the Presence—for this is indeed Emmanuel, God with us for each new day as it is born. But the Fathers did not fail to point out that the bread of the Eucharistic Word cannot achieve that union with God of which it is the sign without the bread of the Scriptural Word. It were easy for a man ill-instructed and without a taste for the actual text of the two Testaments to make of the Blessed Sacrament a means to superstition. This was the failing of those Jews who relied solely on the liturgical anticipation of the rites of the Temple and who had not tasted the spirit of the word of their own Scriptures. To these there was no Emmanuel, for they rejected the Son of man; and to those who know not the divine Word of the Scriptures today there is likely to be a lessening of the Eucharistic presence within them, especially when they rely solely on the outward ceremony of the Mass and Holy Communion.

But the Mass in fact inculcates this reading of the Scrpitures. The Word of God is read in the Epistle and in the Gospel both as a preparation for a full share in the Calvary sacrifice of oblation and communion and as an encouragement to read further, to take up and read the context from which these excerpts are extracted. In earlier times this feeding on the Scripture was to a large extent undertaken by the literate who studied and prayed over the Sacred Text and finally delivered it to those who could not read. Their theology was always based on the true and literal meaning of the Bible. And in later ages we occasionally find evidence for a taste for the Bible. In this country, for example, Bishop Challoner could hardly provide editions of the Douai versions quickly enough for the English Catholics at the end of the eighteenth century, so that some had a thirst for the streams of sacred doctrine. It is strange that in the last century in particular Catholics gave the ring of truth to the accusation of non-Catholics that they do not know the Scriptures. And we are, for this very reason, often spiritually starved—left to build our Christian life on external worship and private 'devotions'.

This indeed is not merely a question of getting to know the sources of revelation as something for the intelligence. St Paul writes of the Scriptures not merely as necessary for our learning, but also for our 'comfort', our strengthening in the Spirit (Rom. 15, 4). The reading of the Word of God is part of the formation

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of the whole Christian. It is thus of the greatest importance that the Christian's imagination should from his earliest years be formed in the poetic mould of Prophet and Psalter. Especially today do men need the irrigation of this great river of the Spirit of God's Word, for their imaginations are become waste lands blown on by the scorching breaths of newspaper, cinema and television. What chance of life and growth have these few grains scattered on a Sunday morning during a duty call at the Lord of Hosts?

There is every reason therefore to give to some issues of a journal devoted to the fullness of Christian life a Scriptural turn. There are journals which are exclusively dedicated to Scripture; on their territory we do not trespass, for their work of elucidating the text is of the greatest urgency and is the foundation of future theology as well as of many other sciences. But we would build on their foundation to encourage readers to base their Christian life on the Scriptures as well as on the Sacraments. It has been said that a true contemplative is discerned not by his reading of the 'mystics' and of 'high spirituality'—often such a student feeds only his pride—but in his devotion to the Word of God which feeds his life in God. And to conclude we may quote the words of a very great contemplative, preaching many years ago on Christmas Eve; listen to St Bernard:

> Bethlehem means the 'House of Bread'.... Consequently if thou fillest thy soul with the food of Sacred Scripture, if also thou faithfully and with all possible devotion receive that living Bread which cometh down from heaven and giveth life to the world (I mean the Body of the Lord Jesus) ... if, finally, thou livest by faith and art never obliged to avow with tears that thou hast 'forgotten to eat thy Bread', thou art now become a Bethlehem. (English trans. of *Sermons*, I, 325.)

NOTE

The *Bible de Jerusalem* mentioned in the articles by Father Reginald Ginns and Richard Kehoe and in the Reviews, may be obtained from Blackfriars Publications, 34 Bloomsbury Street, London, W.C.1. The full list of the volumes available will be sent on request.

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