The New Catholicism and the Bible

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One of the interesting developments in recent Roman Catholic theology is the importance given Scripture in theological statements and the changed attitude towards the wide-spread reading of the Bible in the vernacular. In order to appreciate what has been happening one must look back into the history of the church.

It is a little risky these days, and it sometimes seems uncharitable, to refer to the Council of Trent (1545-63) when discussing Roman Catholic theology, for in the last years Rome has moved far beyond positions taken at that time. Yet positions taken firmly by both the Roman Catholic and the Protestant churches in the sixteenth century have had immense consequences in the years following, as every student of the history of the church is aware. It is not our purpose to lament or to criticize the past but rather to rejoice in some of the new developments in our sister church which augur well for its future. The past is recalled—and it is being recalled constantly within the arena of Roman Catholic theological writing and debate—only to enhance appreciation for the biblical revival going on at present.

A fundamental difference between the Roman Catholic and Protestant parties during the religious upheaval of the sixteenth century was their response to the spread of the Bible in the language of the people. The time was ripe for a widespread dissemination of the Bible among the masses. The biblical and theological humanism of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries had laid the groundwork through linguistic and historical studies. Erasmus' Greek Testament (1516) and Cardinal Ximenes' Complutensian Polyglot (1521) further encouraged biblical studies. This scholarly work failed to touch the people, however. What was needed was Scripture in the language of the people and this was supplied by the Reformers.

Luther's translation of the New Testament (1522) reached almost one hundred editions within a decade, and between 1534 and 1620 about one hundred editions of the whole Bible came from Wittenberg alone. The aim of the Reformers was to make the Word available to the people and then to get it into their hearts. Pauck records that in explaining the Reformation to the people of Wittenberg after his return from Wartburg castle, Luther said

All I have done is to further, preach, and teach God's Word; otherwise I have done nothing. So it came about that while I slept or while I had a glass of beer with my friend Philip (Melanchthon) and with R.
Amsdorf, the papacy was so weakened as it never was before by the action of any prince or emperor. I have done nothing; the Word has done and accomplished everything. . . . I let the Word do its work.\(^1\)

Authorities within the Roman Catholic Church were well aware of what was happening in a large part of the Christian world, now undergoing reformation. It is little wonder then that the question of the advisability of the translation of Scripture into the vernacular should have occupied their attention during the important Council of Trent. The debates at Trent are a matter of record and not the least interesting is the one concerning the matter before us. There were essentially three positions taken. One favored making the Word of God available to all and strong arguments were advanced in favor of it. A second group opposed the translation of the Bible into the vernacular. Scripture was said to be a dangerous source of religious error for the faithful. It was not, therefore, to be read by them. Common people should hear the gospel from the clergy. The third group was neutral, neither favoring or opposing the vernacular and being most interested in adopting the Latin Vulgate as the authentic Bible for the church. When the final vote was taken there were twenty-two neutral votes, fourteen against translation into the vernacular, and ten for translation and dissemination among the people.\(^2\)

In 1559 the Pope had a catalog of forbidden books drawn up and published by the Roman Inquisition. Here one reads as follows:

> Since it is clear from experience that if the Sacred Books are permitted everywhere and without discrimination in the vernacular, there will by reason of the boldness of men arise therefrom more harm than good, the matter is in this respect left to the judgment of the bishop or inquisitor, who may with the advice of the pastor or confessor permit the reading of the Sacred Books translated into the vernacular by Catholic authors to those who they know will derive from such reading no harm but rather an increase of faith and piety, which permission they must have in writing. Those, however, who presume to read or possess them without such permission may not receive absolution from their sins till they have handed them over to the ordinary. Book dealers who sell or in any other way supply Bibles written in the vernacular to anyone who has not this permission, shall lose the price of the books, which is to be applied by the bishop to pious purposes, and in keeping with the nature of the crime they shall be subject to other penalties which are left to the judgment of the same bishop. Regulars who have not the permission of their superiors may not read or purchase them.\(^3\)

In his recent study entitled *Trent and Vernacular Bibles* Robert E. McNally, S.J., states that "It was cautious legislation such as this that was to prove influential in creating the unbiblical atmosphere of the post-Tridentine Church, an atmosphere which has only begun to clarify in our own day under the impact of the teaching

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of the Second Vatican Council." Confirmation of McNally's statement is found in the fact that slightly over a century ago, in *The Papal Syllabus of Errors*, issued in 1864, Bible societies which were engaged in the distribution of Scripture were condemned along with other "principal errors of our time."

II

It is generally recognized that Pope Pius XII's encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, issued in 1943, is the most important milestone in biblical studies in the Roman Catholic Church for the promulgation of this document opened the way for a scientific approach to biblical studies. Rather than coming to the Christian faith in a dogmatic approach, scholars of the church were now given official permission to come at Scripture through history, archaeology, ethnology, and other sciences in support of biblical exegesis. Moreover, they were encouraged to go back of the Vulgate to the original Hebrew and Greek texts of Scripture. With the church, through its pope, having officially opened the way to a more biblical approach to the Christian faith, it is only natural that some of the conservatives within the church would object strenuously. There were extreme positions taken on either side and the strife between the "liberals," or "progressives," and "conservatives," or "integrists," continued until Vatican II. Perhaps it is still going on. There are many indications of this struggle one of which is the encyclical *Humani Generis*, issued in 1950. Here the Pope stressed the importance of the old, Thomistic method in theological studies, in which a smooth synthesis of reason and faith is offered, the soundness of Roman Catholic dogma, and the need for careful supervision of the church's scholars by bishops and others in positions of authority. Pius XII lamented the fact that "certain of our sons" have challenged older positions and have called in question the way in which things have been done for many centuries in view of their enthusiasm for the newer biblical science. Other encyclicals and warnings were issued and books by liberal Roman Catholic biblical scholars were put on the Index. Some of Rome's best known and ablest theologians were forbidden to teach or publish. The biblical movement gained in strength, however, and the victories of the progressives during the Second Vatican Council have undoubtedly determined the direction in which the church will go for many years to come. At the very first session of the council the conservatives set forth a document on *The Two Sources of Revelation*, in which the position taken at Trent on Scripture and Tradition as being a double source of our knowledge of God, was set before the council fathers for consideration. Its summary rejection by the vast majority shows the deep change which had gone on beneath the surface of the church. The subsequent presentation of a new schema on revelation and its adoption brings the church closer to the position taken by the Reformers and enhances the prestige of Holy Scripture.

A number of discussions show the importance of the debate at Vatican II on

Scripture and tradition. It had been thought by many that the official Roman Catholic teaching was that Scripture and tradition stand equal in authority and that they are coordinate as two sources of God's revelation to his people. That this should be challenged was preposterous to many. The fact is, however, that this position was not only challenged but attacked and discussed with vigor. After a long discussion on the matter a vote was taken to see whether the council should proceed with the question. In spite of a negative vote of 1368 to 822 the discussion was continued inasmuch as the necessary two-thirds majority was not attained. At a dramatic moment, Pope John XXIII halted the debate and named a new commission to review the matter and write a new schema on revelation. This was considered by many observers a victory for the more liberal wing within the church inasmuch as the majority appointed to the new commission appeared to be progressive. The new commission and the whole council was reminded that the aim of the gathering of Roman Catholic churchmen was pastoral and ecumenical and that scholastic statements might fail to achieve the desired result. The desirability of bringing in a report which would show appreciation for the labors of exegetical theologians and biblical scholars was stressed, as was the hope of creating discussion with non-Roman Catholic Christians. By the close of the first session of the council it was evident that the progressives had won great victories. That is why Hans Küng, one of Rome's brilliant younger theologians, could write at the conclusion of that session,

Many of us Europeans had to make a thorough and very positive revision of our notion of the Church in, say, South America. The open readiness for bold reforms of the episcopates of continents outside Europe is one of the great and joyful surprises of Vatican II. It is thus that the "insignificant minority," as it was thought of at the beginning of the Council, has established itself as the Council's overwhelming majority.  

Professor Berkouwer has expressed himself similarly:

The discussion in the council revealed the striking influence that the new theology was having in the Church. Prior to the council the new theology was written off by some as a small school of radical theologians with no real echo in the actual life of the Church. Now it appeared that the new theology was far more influential than most had realized. Not all who voted against the continuation of the discussion, and hence against the report for which the council's approval was being asked, voted with a keen insight into the significance of the new theology. Not everyone present was fully informed of the things being written in the French and German journals almost every day for the past several years. But many of these were impressed and encouraged by the voices of the new theology as they were raised in council meetings calling for a renewal of the Church and a reorientation to new streams of thought, along with a plea for greater pastoral and missionary concentration, to say nothing of more ecumenical contacts. In the midst of all these questions which touched so sensitively upon the spirituality of the Church, the


acute problem of the sources of revelation arose and quickly became a point of intense concentration.\(^7\) The result of the entire discussion was that whereas Trent had stated that God’s revelation is given “in the written books and the unwritten traditions,”\(^8\) Vatican II refused to restate the two-source theory. Instead, it teaches the centrality of Scripture as being the heart of the entire tradition which God has given his people. The relation of Scripture to tradition seems to be that of two concentric circles, one within the other, rather than two coordinate sources of knowledge of God. There is an interplay between Scripture and tradition and the teaching office of the church, with all three functioning together in the actual life of the church.\(^9\)

III

More important than any other single factor in the evaluation of the new place which the Bible has in Roman Catholic theology is its integration into the documents of the Second Vatican Council. One thinks in particular of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, and the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, the first three, and probably the most important, documents in the published proceedings of the council. Here one finds the most important theology which has been written in our time from the standpoint of the impact that it will have on the lives of millions of Christian people. And here one finds a laudable orientation to Scripture and use of it. It is aside from our present purpose to describe the biblical nature of these documents or to seek to evaluate them in any way. We wish only to stress the fact that one finds here a use of the Word of God which should be noted with thanksgiving by all who are interested in the well-being of the Christian church. If one doubts this let him read the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, paragraph seven, or fifty-one, or twenty-four. But the documents must be read in their entirety and then studied, if an impression of their true character is to be felt.

What the result of the attempt to integrate the Bible into the life of the Roman Catholic Church will be remains to be seen. Vatican II has stated that “easy access to sacred Scripture should be provided for all the Christian faithful,” and “ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.”\(^10\) Whether this ideal will be realized among the masses is an open question. It is too early perhaps to expect much. One of the most astute observers, Olivier Beguin, General Secretary of the United Bible Societies, writing in 1963, affirms that it would be erroneous “to assume that the biblical movement has yet reached the masses.”\(^11\) However, his book gives ample evidence of his own stated conviction that the biblical movement in the Roman Catholic Church is spreading and that it may well transform the life of that

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\(^7\) Berkouwer, *op. cit.*, p. 91.


communion. He cites Roman Catholic translations of the Bible on mission fields, the use of the Bible in Roman Catholic schools, and the efforts of many prelates and theologians to make the Bible a book of the common man. Periodicals, instituted for the purpose of furthering Bible reading and study, are mentioned and excerpts from leading editorials or statements of purpose are offered to support the claim. Moreover, the vast amount of exegetical work being done by Roman Catholic scholars is cited as evidence of the seriousness with which the Bible is being taken by thought leaders of the Church of Rome. The result is the remarkable fact that Protestantism can no longer claim itself to be the special custodian of the oracles of God, for Roman Catholic scholars are making as enthusiastic claims concerning the Bible as their only source of truth. There was a day when Holy Scripture was reserved for the Roman Catholic clergy and for those who had left the Church of Rome. Today, however, Rome's own sons are speaking of the Bible as "the Book of the people of God,"12 and indications are that many of the leaders within that church are seeking to make it no less than that in the lives of their people.