

## SACRED SCRIPTURE AND THE ERRORS OF THE “NEW” EXEGESIS

~: Paul Cardinal Taguchi ~:

In the epilogue of his gospel, St. John points out:

Many other signs also Jesus worked in the sight of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.<sup>1</sup>

He is reminding us that the aim of his gospel—and, we might say—the aim of all the gospels and the whole of sacred Scripture, is that we should have faith in Christ, the Son of God, true God and true man, and, further, that we should put that faith into practice. This is how it has always been interpreted in the life of the Church. Reading the sacred books is solid nourishment for the Christian in his task of molding his conduct to the words of God himself found written in their pages. St. Augustine liked to call the books of sacred Scripture “letters which reach us from our distant homeland while we are away from it on our travels.”<sup>2</sup>

The Church has always encouraged those who read and study the holy Bible to approach it with the proper dispositions of faith and piety, reminding us time and again that it is the written word of God, given in safekeeping to the Church to be watched over, defended, and authentically explained. Yet over the years, there has been no shortage of opinions expressing an apparent ignorance of the divine character of Scripture and of the duty of reverence and faith incumbent on those who read, study, or interpret it.

There has been a growing tendency among some Catholics specializing in scriptural studies to question the divine origin, authority, and contents of the Bible. The divine element is sometimes denied or ignored, as if the Bible were just a human work subject to the conditioning, limitations, and evolution of any revered document of antiquity. Its veracity and its literal and historical meaning are at times either refuted or given a twisted meaning. The exegesis of the Fathers of the Church is discredited; and there are even some who argue against the Church having the right to interpret the sacred books at all.

Catholic doctrine is being undermined by various writers who we could call the “modern exegetes.” Whereas the correct Catholic interpretation draws on the

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1 John 20:30–31.

2 St. Augustine, *On the Psalms*, 90, in *St. Augustine on the Psalms* (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1960).

immense wealth of Tradition, the declarations of the Magisterium and the analogy of the faith, compiled over two thousand years of prayerful scholarship, the new exegesis is based on research that turns its back on all that has gone before and plunges instead into a whole series of dangerous speculations based on a total commitment to philosophies diametrically opposed to faith and the supernatural. It is thus deeply influenced by naturalism and the rationalist criticism of liberal Protestantism, in which subsidiary data are stressed to the detriment of the content.

In the face of all this, it seems more opportune than ever to restate some of the main points of the doctrine of the Church on sacred Scripture.

### *The Basic Doctrines: Scripture, Tradition, and Magisterium*

According to the Second Vatican Council (1963–1965):

In his goodness and wisdom, God chose to reveal himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of his will, by which through Christ, the Word made flesh, man has access to the Father in the Holy Spirit and comes to share in the divine nature. Through this revelation, therefore, the invisible God out of the abundance of his love speaks to men as friends, and lives among them, so that he may invite and take them into fellowship with himself.<sup>3</sup>

God has revealed himself to us, and this revelation makes up a body of truths, a divine *depositum* (“deposit”) entrusted to the safekeeping of the Church.<sup>4</sup> This *depositum* is contained in sacred Scripture and in Tradition.<sup>5</sup> When the hierarchical Church received this *depositum* it was also given the promise of divine help for its safekeeping and interpretation. According to Catholic faith, therefore, there is an intimate union between Scripture, Tradition, and the Magisterium of the Church;

3 Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum* [The Word of God], Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (November 18, 1965), 2, in *The Scripture Documents: An Anthology of Official Catholic Teachings*, ed. Dean P. Béchard (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 19–31. Hereafter abbreviated SD.

4 “The doctrine of the faith which God has revealed has not been proposed as philosophical findings which should be perfected by human intelligence, but it has been given to the Spouse of Christ as a divine deposit to be faithfully guarded and infallibly declared.” First Vatican Council, *Dei Filius* [Son of God], Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith (April 24, 1870), chap. 4, 13, in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 2 vols., ed. Norman P. Tanner (Washington: Georgetown University, 1990).

5 “This supernatural revelation, according to the faith of the universal Church declared by the holy Council of Trent, is contained in the written books and in the unwritten traditions which were received by the apostles from the lips of Christ himself and were passed from hand to hand down to us from those same apostles, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.” *Dei Filius*, chap. 2, 5.

it would be clearly against God's designs to seek his revelation in any one of these three without also consulting the other two.<sup>6</sup>

For any interpretation of sacred Scripture to conform with Catholic faith, it must, of necessity, be done in the light of and with the guidance of Tradition, keeping as its touchstone all that the Magisterium has said so far. This is nothing more than the old and reliable principle: *The Church is the only authentic interpreter of the sacred books.*<sup>7</sup> Revealed truth is kept, transmitted, illustrated, and set forth by the Church chiefly through the organ of its sacred Magisterium. This role of the Magisterium has been repeatedly asserted in pontifical documents.<sup>8</sup> The preservation of this unity between Scripture, Tradition, and the Magisterium is essential if exegesis is to give fruitful results leading to a better understanding of the Word of God. The excellence of Scripture and the sacred character granted it by the Church is based on one fact alone: *that God is its principal author.* When we speak of "inspiration" we refer to that divine and supernatural action whereby God raised the human writer above his natural capacity in order to make him an instrumental cooperator in the composition of the sacred books.

The truth is affirmed in Scripture itself. St. Paul wrote: "All Scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching, for reproof, for correcting, for instructing in justice: that the man of God may be perfect, equipped for every good work."<sup>9</sup> As if foreseeing that some would attempt to deny the divine origin of these books, St. Peter adds: "No prophecy of Scripture is made by private interpretation. For

6 "It is clear, therefore, that sacred Tradition, sacred Scripture, and the teaching authority of the Church, in accord with God's most wise design, are so linked and joined together that one cannot stand without the others, and that all together and each in its own way under the action of the Holy Spirit contribute effectively to the salvation of souls." *Dei Verbum*, 10.

7 "If the heavenly doctrine of Jesus Christ, contained for the most part in the books inspired by God, had been given over to the thoughts of men, it could not, on its own, unite their spirits; rather would it become the object of their own differing interpretations. And this would happen not only because of the depth of its mysteries but also because of the diversity of the minds of men, and because of the turmoil that would result from the clash and struggle of opposing passions. For, from differing interpretations, there would inevitably spring differing sentiments, and these would provoke controversies, disagreements, and quarrels. . . . In order, therefore, to unite spirits and to foster and preserve harmony of feeling, it was necessary for there to be another principle, in addition to the existence of sacred Scripture. The divine wisdom required it; for God could not have wished for the unity of faith without also providing the suitable means to preserve that unity." Pope Leo XIII, *Satis Cognitum* [It is Sufficiently Well-Known], Encyclical Letter on the Unity of the Church (June 29, 1896), 7 (Kansas City, MO: Angelus, 2005).

8 "The task of authentically interpreting the Word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the teaching office of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. . . . This teaching office is not above the Word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously, and explaining it faithfully by divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit; it draws from this one deposit of faith everything which it presents for belief as divinely revealed." *Dei Verbum*, 10.

9 2 Tim. 2:6.

not by will of man was prophecy brought at any time; but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit."<sup>10</sup>

The Church's belief in the divine origin of Scripture has figured again and again in documents of the Magisterium and was solemnly proclaimed by the First Vatican Council (1868–1870). Vatican II reaffirmed it once more: "Those divinely revealed realities which are contained and presented in sacred Scripture have been committed to writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit."<sup>11</sup>

The role of the human writer is clarified when he is considered as one who, "in composing his sacred book, is a living and intelligent tool or instrument of the Holy Spirit."<sup>12</sup> However, it is equally true that this divine inspiration does not deprive the human instrument of his liberty, while he remains perfectly attuned to the will of God, faithfully reproducing what God wishes to say. As Pope Benedict XV said:

The books of sacred Scripture were composed under the inspiration, suggestions, promptings, or even at the dictation of the Holy Spirit; and, furthermore, they were written and edited by the Holy Spirit himself; and yet, this does not call into question the fact that each of the human authors has cooperated with God's inspiration according to his own individual character and personal traits.<sup>13</sup>

The Magisterium of the Church has further stated that the divine inspiration applies to *all the books in all their parts*.<sup>14</sup> In Vatican II's constitution on Scripture, *Dei Verbum* ("The Word of God"), we read: "Everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit"<sup>15</sup>

10 2 Pet. 1:20–21.

11 *Dei Verbum*, 11.

12 Pope Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu* [Inspired by the Divine Spirit], Encyclical Letter Promoting Biblical Studies (September 30, 1943), 33 (SD, 115–139).

13 Pope Benedict XV, *Spiritus Paraclitus* [The Holy Spirit, the Comforter], Encyclical Letter Commemorating the Fifteenth Centenary of the Death of St. Jerome (September 15, 1920), 8 (SD, 81–111).

14 "Anyone who does not accept these books as sacred and canonical in all their parts, as they are wont to be interpreted in the Catholic Church and as they are contained in the Latin Vulgate edition . . . will be excommunicated." Council of Trent, *De Libris Sacris et de Traditionibus Recipiendis* [On the Sacred Books and the Reception Tradition], Decree on the Reception of the Sacred Books and Apostolic Traditions (April 6, 1546), in Heinrich Denzinger, ed., *Enchiridion symbolorum definitonum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum* [Handbook of Creeds, Definitions and Declarations concerning Matters of Faith and Morals] (Freiberg: Herder, 1911), 1504; English text in *The Sources of Catholic Dogma* (Fitzwilliam, NH: Loreto, 2002). Hereafter abbreviated DS.

15 *Dei Verbum*, 11.

Since all the books of both the Old and the New Testament have but one author—the Holy Spirit—there is in them a unity of content. All the pages of both Testaments move toward Christ as to their center.<sup>16</sup> The constant teaching of the Fathers of the Church, as well as the doctrine so often given by the Magisterium, have fully clarified that the *realities* of the New Testament are contained in prophecy and prefigurement in the Old. The New Testament reveals explicitly and contains *really* what in the Old was only foretold.<sup>17</sup> In short, the New Testament completes and perfects the Old. This unity of sacred Scripture also implies a total harmony of content, so that the various texts illustrate one another. This is what is usually known as the *analogy of scriptural faith*.<sup>18</sup>

### **Scripture's Freedom From Error**

Inerrancy means that the sacred books are totally free from error in all their statements. This is very closely linked to the belief in inspiration; for, if Scripture has God for its author, and God is the supreme truth, then, obviously, there can be no error in the sacred books, for otherwise it would be tantamount to imputing the authorship of error to God himself. The Magisterium has often referred to this truth of faith.<sup>19</sup>

So the Magisterium has never ceased to come out strongly against any theory which tries to resolve the *apparent* inexactitudes of the sacred books by chafing against the limitation placed, *not* by inspiration, but by inerrancy, as if errors were possible in an inspired passage. Everything written in Scripture comes from God and, as such, is true. In other words, the formal reason for biblical inerrancy lies

16 Benedict XV, *Spiritus Paraclitus*, 63.

17 "God, the inspirer and author of both Testaments, wisely arranged that the New Testament be hidden in the Old and the Old be made manifest in the New." St Augustine, *Questions on the Heptateuch*, bk. 2, q. 73, in *Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Series Latina*, ed. J. P. Migne, 221 vols. (Paris: Garnier and J. P. Migne, 1844–1864), 34:623. Hereafter abbreviated *PL*; compare *Dei Verbum*, 16.

18 Vatican II teaches that "since holy Scripture must be read and interpreted according to the same Spirit by whom it was written, no less serious attention must be given to the content and unity of the whole of Scripture, if the meaning of the sacred texts is to be correctly brought to light. The living tradition of the whole Church must be taken into account along with the harmony which exists between elements of the faith." *Dei Verbum*, 12.

19 "For all the books which the Church receives as sacred and canonical are written wholly and entirely, with all their parts, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit; and so far is it from being possible that any error can coexist with inspiration, that inspiration not only is essentially incompatible with error, but excludes and rejects it as absolutely and necessarily as it is impossible that God himself, the supreme truth, can utter that which is not true." Pope Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus* [The God of All Providence], Encyclical Letter on the Study of Scripture (November 18, 1893), 20 (*SD*, 37–61). Pius XII, after indicating these words to be the constant belief of the Church, adds: "This teaching which our predecessor Leo XIII set forth with such solemnity. We also proclaim with Our authority, and We urge all to adhere to it religiously. No less urgently do we inculcate obedience in the present day to the counsels and exhortations which he in his day so wisely enjoined." *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 4.

in the very nature of inspiration. As Pope Leo XIII taught: "It follows that those who maintain that an error is possible in any genuine passage of the sacred writings, either pervert the Catholic notion of inspiration, or make God the author of such error."<sup>20</sup>

There is no margin for distinctions within the sacred Scriptures which would allow inerrancy to some texts and deny it to others, be it on account of their content, their ultimate aim, or for any other reason. Scripture is the Word of God and is true *because it is inspired*; that is, not only because (and insofar as) it is revealed; nor only insofar as it is matter of faith and morals.<sup>21</sup> To again quote *Dei Verbum*:

Therefore, since everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching firmly, faithfully, and without error that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation.<sup>22</sup>

One particular area of inerrancy that has a special relevance these days is that of freedom from error in historical matters. This is not to say that everything written in the sacred books is an actual historical event. There are scores of allegories, parables, and the like; these have no need of a historical basis since they belong to a different type of instruction. But with these exceptions (which must be established on the grounds of substantial evidence and a careful avoidance of sweeping generalizations), *the historical truth of sacred Scripture is a principle to be taken as a starting point for all work of interpretation of the sacred books; it is not, therefore, a conclusion or end-product of critical research.* Judging by the results of modern hypotheses, it is quite clear that this point has often been ignored. Nowadays in fact, it seems as if the *onus probandi* ("burden of proof") is being placed on the defenders of the historical truth or literal meaning.

The Church's thinking is made clear in the answer given by the Pontifical Biblical Commission to this question: "Is it possible to admit as a principle of sound

<sup>20</sup> Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus*, 21.

<sup>21</sup> In this context, Pius XII wrote: "A number of things are proposed or suggested by some even against the divine authorship of Sacred Scripture. For some go so far as to pervert the sense of the [First] Vatican Council's definition that God is the author of holy Scripture, and they put forward again the opinion, already often condemned, which asserts that inerrancy extends only to those parts of the bible that deal with God himself, religion, or morals. They even wrongly speak of a human sense of Scripture, beneath which a divine sense, which they say is the only infallible meaning, lies hidden." Pius XII, *Humani Generis* [The Human Race], Encyclical Letter on Certain False Opinions Threatening to Undermine the Foundations of Catholic Doctrine (August 12, 1950), 22 (*SD*, 141).

<sup>22</sup> *Dei Verbum*, 11.

exegesis that books of sacred Scripture which are regarded as historical, at times do not relate, either wholly or in part history properly so-called and objectively true, but present only the appearance of history with the purpose of expressing some meaning differing from the strictly literal or historical sense of the words?" The commission's responded:

Answer: In the negative. Except in the case neither easily nor rashly to be admitted, in which, the mind of the Church not being contrary and without prejudice to its judgment, it is proved by solid arguments that . . . under the guise and form of history, a parable, an allegory, etc. is set forth.<sup>23</sup>

With reference to the historical truth of the gospels, we have a particularly strong and unanimous tradition, expressed and approved in numerous documents of the Magisterium. In these it is unequivocally affirmed that the inspired books quite rightly demand our unwavering belief in their historicity.<sup>24</sup> The latest statement in this regard comes in *Dei Verbum*:

Holy Mother Church has firmly and with absolute constancy held, and continues to hold, that the four gospels . . . whose historical character the Church unhesitatingly asserts, faithfully hand on what Jesus Christ, while living among men, really did and taught for their eternal salvation until the day he was taken up into heaven.<sup>25</sup>

### *Doctrinal Deviations of the "New" Exegesis*

Of the doctrinal deviations now being adopted by some Catholic exegetes, perhaps the most harmful is the application of the Protestant principle of *sola Scriptura* ("Scripture alone"). Those who uphold this principle assert that the only source of revelation is the Bible itself; they completely ignore Tradition and the Magisterium of the Church. This assertion is incompatible with the unity of Scripture. It is as if they were trying to wrench the Holy Spirit who wrote the books from the same Holy Spirit who interprets them through the organs of Tradition.

The falsity of this position shows itself in two main tendencies. First, one comes across frequent references to a so-called "scientific investigation" of Scripture that is said to be opposed to a "Catholic interpretation"; it is almost as if

23 Pontifical Commission for Biblical Studies, *Responsum de Narrationibus Specietenus Tantum Historicis in Sacrae Scripturae Libris qui pro Historicis Habentur* [Response Concerning Historical Narratives] (June 23, 1905) (SD, 188).

24 Compare the responses from the Pontifical Commission for Biblical Studies dated June 19, 1911, June 26, 1912, and May 29, 1907 (SD, 190, 197–202).

25 *Dei Verbum*, 19.

the Magisterium and Tradition were superfluous to a correct understanding of the Bible. Consequently, total reliance is placed on the critical and historical methods of study, while Catholic interpretations are regarded as mere impositions.

This approach, in practice if not in theory, denies the Magisterium's right to guard, interpret, and explain Scripture.<sup>26</sup> The important word here is *interpret*; for it is the Magisterium's supreme task to interpret the truths of faith in its care. The exegete should do his work with the Magisterium as his support—directed by the Magisterium, defended by it, joyfully submitting to it, sure in the knowledge that the Magisterium has always maintained the continuity of the Church's teaching.

The second tendency one sees is that the opinion of contemporary exegetes, and particularly Protestant exegetes, is rated higher than those of the Fathers of the Church and of Tradition. Some Catholic workers in the field of biblical studies seem to take as their yardstick the commonly held opinions of their contemporary Protestant counterparts, in preference to what has at all times and in all places been the unanimous belief of the Church. It follows that the exegesis of the Fathers, when not openly ridiculed, is considered worthless and outdated. In doing so, Catholic exegetes appear to be influenced by a certain inferiority complex which makes them oblivious to Pope Leo XIII's words:

The holy Fathers . . . are of *supreme authority whenever they all interpret in one and the same manner any text of the bible as pertaining to the doctrine of faith and morals. . . .* The opinion of the Fathers is also of very great weight when they deal with these matters in their own personal capacity as private doctors; not only because they excel in their knowledge of revealed doctrine and in their acquaintance with many things which are useful in understanding the apostolic books, *but because they are men of eminent sanctity and of ardent zeal for the truth, on whom God has bestowed a more ample measure of his light.*<sup>27</sup>

These words are systematically ignored by those who prefer to accept the authority of the modern exegetes as supreme.<sup>28</sup> To overvalue the work of the modern exegetes, betrays a lack of faith as well as a faulty methodology. It amounts to

26 Compare *Dei Filius*, chap. 4.

27 Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus*, 14.

28 This situation also seems to have been foreseen by Leo XIII, when he wrote: "It is most unbecoming to pass by, in ignorance or contempt, the excellent work which Catholics have left in abundance, and to have recourse to the works of non-Catholics, and to seek in them, to the detriment of sound doctrine and often to the peril of faith, the explanation of passages on which Catholics long ago have successfully employed their talent and their labor. For . . . the sense of holy Scripture can nowhere be found incorrupt outside the Church, and cannot be expected to be found in writers who being without the true faith, only gnaw the bark of the Sacred Scripture and never attain its pith." *Providentissimus Deus*, 15.

rejecting material of superior quality in favor of an inferior product. It would be naïve indeed to accept some of these "new" views simply because they are often talked about and frequently appear in print. The propaganda campaign behind them may be stronger than the *scientific proofs* that would seem to support them.

Another false approach is that of considering the exegesis of the Fathers merely as a *pious exegesis*. It is good to remember that, as Pope Pius XII has written, the Fathers are valued for their intellect as well as their faith: "By reason of the office assigned to them by God in the Church, *they are distinguished by a certain subtle insight into heavenly things and by a marvelous keenness of intellect*, which enables them to penetrate to the very innermost meaning of the divine Word and bring to light all that can help to elucidate the teaching of Christ and promote holiness of life."<sup>29</sup>

In general, one might say that the notion of inspiration, in the hands of the modern exegetes, has lost its supernatural and dogmatic-value and has acquired in its place a somewhat vague content derived from rationalistic reflection. Modern exegetes will not, of course, deny outright the divine origin of the inspired books, but it is obvious from their writings that they rely on exclusively human methodology—philology, historical research, and sociology as if this were the correct way to show their true content.

In other words, the production of these sacred books is looked upon as the result of a purely human effort. This effectively precludes mention of God's inspiration as something positive, as a *supernatural charisma* elevating the powers of the writer and making him an instrument of God to write all that God wanted him to write, and only that. Any biblical passage, any institution or action due to the supernatural intervention of God in history is explained away in a human fashion (even when such explanation happens to go against the obvious meaning of the words or against the whole context of a passage); appeal is made to "ancestral taboos," or a "centralizing mentality," or the sacred writer is said to be "personifying" God or ascribing to God words that really come from other sources.

Modern exegetes would have us believe that the writer's inspiration comes not from God but from his community; they contend that the sacred books are the result of evolutionary elements at work among the people of Israel. Again, instead of affirming the profound unity of the Old and New Testaments, modern exegetes believe Christ's preaching should be interpreted in harmony with the historical setting he lived in—namely, the world of the Old Testament, with its emphases on collective responsibility, social determinisms, punishment or reward dealt out to the nation as a whole, and so on. They try to present Christian doctrine as an antidote to an exaggerated acceptance of collectivity and things temporal—not as the fullness of revelation or as the redemptive intervention of God.

29 Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 28.

Another problem is the excessive value given to the social background of neighboring ancient nations as the key to understanding the literal meaning of the sacred books. The “analogy of faith” existing in Scripture is replaced by a “cultural and ethnical analogy.” In this view, the Bible is the purely human work of many authors of an unimportant nation, who were influenced by the cultural, political, and economical policies of more affluent neighboring states; what they wrote and the way they wrote it did not basically differ from the literature of those neighboring peoples, so the literal meaning of the Bible can be found through comparative philology and the interpretation of Israel’s history discovered through comparative sociology.

### *A Mistaken View of Inerrancy*

One natural consequence of this mistaken view of inspiration is that modern exegetes accept the possibility of falsehood in the Bible while insisting that this does not detract from inerrancy. This leads them to seek a critical examination of the Bible so as to draw a line between what *can be deemed truthful* and what can be considered owing to the imagination of the sacred writer or the influence of his social background.

The moderns also draw a line between so-called fundamental and secondary elements in the Bible and consider inerrancy as applying only to the former in such a way that it is not affected by “inaccuracies” in the secondary elements. However, the Magisterium has quite clearly disapproved of “those who distinguish between the primary or religious element of Scripture and the secondary or profane element and quite openly admit that inspiration affects all the sentences, even every word of the Bible, yet who restrict its effects, and above all its immunity from error and its absolute truth, to the primary or religious elements only.”<sup>30</sup>

Faith tells us that everything in sacred Scripture which appears as historical narrative should be understood in its literal meaning, unless there are sufficient and proven reasons for thinking otherwise, in which case it should be submitted to the judgment of the Church. In contrast, current exegetes think that the reader should put no trust in this literal and historical reading but should rather go in search of whatever historical nucleus the probings of philological and historical investigations might happen to bring to light.

It is a doctrine of the Church that, since the faith is one, there must be a perfect adequacy or similarity of content between the way an ordinary Catholic with no theological training understands the Bible, and that in which a scholar of exegesis understands it.<sup>31</sup> The plea of the modern exegetes is that the advances

30 Benedict XV, *Spiritus Paraclitus*, 19.

31 Compare Pope Pius X, *Lamentabili Sane* [With Truly Lamentable Results], Syllabus Condemning the Errors of the Modernist (July 3, 1907), 32, in *Encyclical Letter of His Holiness Pope Pius X on the Doctrines of the Modernists* (London: Catholic Truth Society).

made in exegesis have left the ordinary Christian behind, and now only the experts are qualified to understand Scripture. And so, as in the case of liberal Protestantism and modernism, the Bible ends up appearing as a *double history*. First, there is the historical version that a straightforward reading of the books would give. However, this, they say, is riddled with dramatic personifications, epic historicifications, and borrowed myths; the true history is said to be reached only by delving beneath the surface with their own particular critical tools.

When faced with errors like the ones we have been outlining here, we must remember that sacred theology cannot come to conclusions at variance with the doctrine of the Church. *Faith is not a conclusion to be reached; it is the premise to use as a starting point.* Theological research does not discover faith, but rather it studies it more deeply, and not in any new sense, but in the way it has always been understood by all the faithful. Theologians in general, and exegetes in particular, should make it very clear to the faithful that their conclusions in no way change or increase the content of our faith, but simply attempt to clarify further what has always been believed.

### *Exegesis as "Pseudo-Science"*

The whole question of literary genres as dealt with in the new exegesis is closely bound up with the question of the historical truth of the sacred books.

The doctrine outlined by Pius XII—that any literary genre may be postulated as long as it is not opposed to the truth and sanctity of God<sup>32</sup>—is no longer accepted by the new exegetes. They have replaced it with the arbitrary assertion that any literary genre is possible, whether it goes against the sanctity and truth of God or not, so long as it conforms to the mentality of the ancient Middle East. The Fathers and Doctors of the Church were, of course, very much aware of the different genres of the Bible, and had much to say on the subject in terms of historical books, psalms, canticles, parables, and the like.

What some writers are now affirming is not only without precedent, it is also in direct opposition to what the Church has always understood and believed. In the name of the so-called mentality of the ancient Middle East, the new exegetes multiply the number of literary genres (*midrash*, *etiological narrative*, *historical epic*, *lament*, etc.), and proceed to question the historical truth of the books of Joshua, Judges, Judith, Esther, and Daniel, as well as the childhood of Christ as narrated in the gospels; they even go so far as to cast doubt on the whole framework of prophecies and miracles throughout sacred Scripture. They would say, for example, that in the gospel account of the annunciation, Mary's question and the archangel's answer would not imply that such an exchange actually took place; instead they are to be understood as a literary device of the author in order to describe the virginal

32 Compare Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 38.

conception of the Messiah. There are countless examples of such pseudo-scientific nonsense.<sup>33</sup>

Other abuses in this pseudo-scientific vein concern the history of forms (German: *Formgeschichte*) and the history of composition (*Redaktionsgeschichte*). The first dwells mainly on the creative role of the community, and the second on the creative genius of the writer. In practice, these methods take their origin and growth from rationalistic conceptions of philosophy and theology, which are opposed to the supernatural character of sacred Scripture. So it is only natural that they should be out of focus with respect to the object upon which they are supposed to be used, namely, a book written by God via human instruments, which is not simply a record of the history of a people but rather a narrative of the intervention of God in that history.

Let loose upon the gospels, these theories have remarkable effects. The first theory leads to the suggestion that the authors of the gospels were no more than editors who more or less arbitrarily pieced together the *creations* of the primitive and impersonal community. Consequently, the only things we can know about Jesus Christ are what the primitive community thought about him. The second theory presents the idea that the evangelists were actually theologians who added their own opinions, interpretations, and philosophies of life to the gospels to give them a theological unity.

The net result of both of these approaches is that inspiration, authenticity, and historical accuracy all go by the board. In the name of "internal criticism," the sacred books have been torn apart. Their integrity is sometimes accepted, sometimes rejected; and the order of the passages is radically changed because of mere hypotheses affecting the dating. Thus, for example, chapters 40–66 of Isaiah are no longer considered to be written by the prophet; the author of 2 Peter is no longer supposed to be St. Peter; similarly, St. Paul is robbed of the authorship of his letter to the Hebrews; and in St. John's gospel the passage about the woman taken in adultery is thought to be out of harmony with the rest of his message.

Leo XIII spoke out strongly against this high-handed procedure as unacceptable not only for the study of the sacred books but even for that of any purely human work: "It is clear that in historical questions such as the origin and the handing down of writings, the *witness of history is of primary importance* and that historical investigation should be made with the utmost care and that, in this matter, *internal evidence is seldom of great value except as confirmation.*"<sup>34</sup>

In other words, when it is a question of authenticity and integrity, the weight of argumentation ought to lie on external evidence: Christian tradition, the liturgy,

33 It was with a note of sorrow that Benedict XV wrote: "Holy Scripture is assailed by detractors of every class. We speak particularly of those who abuse certain principles—which, if rightly used, would be legitimate—to the point where the foundations of the truth of the Bible are whittled away, and the Catholic doctrine taught by all the Fathers is destroyed." *Spiritus Paraclitus*, 26.

34 Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus*, 17.

Jewish tradition, manuscripts; and not, for instance, on the computer analysis of the occurrence rate of the Greek participle *kai* ("and") in one of the sacred books. This is a basic ruling of scholarship even for a non-believer who sees the Bible as nothing more than a human document.

### **"Demythologization" and the Myths of Modernism**

One cannot forget how the encyclical *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* ("Feeding the Lord's Flock"), condemned the attempt to adapt faith to the demands of "modern thought." It showed that its consequent vision, based on the "principle of immanence," was necessarily agnostic and opposed to the supernatural. In fact, the campaigners for this false position would consider the supernatural as only a particular way in which the evolution of religious feeling manifests itself.

Nearly all the modernist errors condemned by Pope St. Pius X boiled down to an open profession—by a handful of Catholics—of the theories of schools which sprang from the seedbed of nineteenth century liberal Protestantism. For several decades it appeared that this tide had been stemmed. But in the last ten or twelve years, perhaps partly due to the feeling of revision which attended many of the debates of Vatican II, the hermeneutical principles of liberal Protestantism and Catholic modernism have again raised their heads. This time they appear mainly in the work of some Catholic exegetes who write essay-type articles for magazines and reviews of wide circulation.

The job of exegesis is now seen to be *demythologization*. This means that everything in the sacred books that implies the supernatural is dubbed as a *myth*, a relic of the *primitive reality*, which is said to be repulsive to the modern mind. In principle, they reject the existence of miracles, prophecies, and any divine intervention in the history of the chosen people. "Demythologization" may be a new name, but the idea behind it is as old as Christianity itself. Even Peter had occasion to condemn it when he wrote: "For we were not following fictitious tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his glory."<sup>35</sup>

Modern existentialist philosophy has been raised to the category of a fundamental hermeneutical principle for the interpretation of Scripture. By observing how some moderns now explain our Lord's resurrection, we can clearly see how the criteria of modern philosophy (existentialism and rationalism in particular) are being used to banish supernatural elements from the bible. This is alluded to in a letter from the German bishops:

The words in the gospel which affirm that *Jesus has risen from the dead* are, they [modern exegetes] tell us, the result of the pious reflection of the primitive community in their attempts to

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35 2 Pet. 1:16.

explain their paschal experience, a “happening” that cannot be expressed in precise historical terms. It expresses their conviction that the cause of Jesus had not ended with the cross, but that it continued. This somewhat vague experience had first been understood as the missionary task entrusted to the apostles. Later, it was termed as a *vision* of the Risen One; and finally it stabilized into the formula “*Jesus has risen from the dead.*”<sup>36</sup>

It is clear that this hermeneutical assumption amounts to a denial of the faith of the Church, which definitely affirms and professes that the resurrection of Jesus was a *real fact*. The resurrection cannot be understood as the result of an inner experience, conditioned by time and expressible in other terms.

Finally, we are witnessing a new-styled *gnosis*. In the type of interpretations we have just been discussing, all coming from ideas opposed to faith, one thing stands out clearly, and that is that the truths of faith revealed by God, which ought to be the starting point and objective for everything, have been entirely lost. When supernatural reality is demoted to a mere by-product of evolutionary factors and inner experiences of the community, then these truths are replaced by human “thoughts” or “decisions.” Thus, instead of objective truth, modern exegetes put forward explanations which they know are not fully satisfactory and which, consequently, can be justifiably replaced by new ones as human knowledge progresses.

### *How to Read, Study, and Explain the Scriptures*

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do men say that the Son of man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.”<sup>37</sup>

In his own time, afterwards, and up to our own days, we men have taken various attitudes toward Jesus. Sometimes it is one of human esteem, or admiration; or we regard him as a man with a prophetic religious mission. But there is only one attitude which Jesus Christ praised, and that is Simon Peter’s. Only the man who

36 Letter from the German Bishops, September 22, 1967.

37 Matt. 16:13–17.

confesses that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, true God, has grasped the truth; only he has fully understood.

But to do so requires two things. The first is beyond the reach of purely human effort; for it is the free gift of faith, a grace of God. The second is the human cooperation with that grace of God, man's noble and sincere acceptance of it. From this we can draw the following consequences for the dispositions of those who read and study the sacred books:

Any Christian, whether he is an ordinary member of the faithful or a theologian, must necessarily begin by having *obedience to the faith*<sup>38</sup> of the one Church of Jesus Christ in order to penetrate the written Word of God. This means *the faith of the Church in the canonicity, the inspiration, the inerrancy, the historicity, and the authenticity of the holy Bible*. Faith, in other words, in God's being the principal author of the sacred books, and in their containing truth unmixed with error.

This faith, however, cannot be attained outside the Church, nor is it compatible with error. Through it, we accept what God revealed to us and which is proposed by the Magisterium as such, "not by the intrinsic truth of things, viewed in the natural light of reason, but by the authority of God who reveals them and who can neither deceive nor be deceived."<sup>39</sup>

Since faith is a free and supernatural gift of God, man can neither make himself worthy of it, nor can he acquire it with his human strength alone. As he grows in the knowledge of the written Word of God, man should so dispose himself in prayer that he will be able to receive the light which comes to us freely from the Holy Spirit.<sup>40</sup> In this spirit, anyone who reads, studies, or meditates upon sacred Scripture should seek the meaning of the holy Word in earnest prayer and in his contact with God. Understanding of the secrets of the divine words is not to be found in philology, sociology, psychology, or any other branch of human knowledge, but, quite simply, in holiness of life.

Through his relationship with God in prayer, a man becomes humble and learns to walk in the dazzling light of faith without being blinded. Only the love of God can bring him this familiarity with things divine, for they cannot come through neat rationalist formulas. This, too, is of the very nature of sacred Scripture. As Pius XII stated:

For the sacred books were not given by God to men to satisfy their curiosity or to provide them with material for study and research, but, as the Apostles observe, in order that these divine oracles might *instruct us to salvation, by the faith which is Christ*

38 Compare Rom. 16:26.

39 *Dei Filius*, chap. 3.

40 See Dan. 9:1–23.

*Jesus, and that the man of God may be perfect, equipped for every good work.*<sup>41</sup>

The Christian must show humility and love in the work of exegesis; he must be prudent in not even considering injudicious opinions which are at variance with what the Magisterium of the Church and Tradition have always taught. He must be firmly convinced that he can never actually demonstrate truths of a supernatural order, and that it is not a question of getting to the bottom of what God has revealed but of joyfully accepting it exactly in the way it is interpreted by the teaching authority of the Church.

These virtues must also be shown in the way he firmly rejects any new opinions which are not in line with the doctrine of faith and morals. Also, the exegete should give an example of humility and Christian charity when, in his work, done in full realization of his duty to God and to souls, he refrains from publishing theories which may seem brilliant but are also imprudent and would only lead to confusion. In short, when a Christian exegete makes the bringing of souls to God the first aim of his work, then he can be sure that he is doing that work as God would wish it to be done.

The exegete makes of faith a science; that is, he seeks a better understanding of what we believe. It would be ridiculous for him to argue with faith, since faith is the first principle of his science. If he does not begin his work in obedience to faith, then he can never by rational dialectic come to the true pillars of his science, which are the dogmas of faith.

It is not the job of the theologian or exegete to change the faith, to pick away at the truths in the *depositum* by denying them and offering other "truths" in their place. It is their job to make more explicit the truths that have always been believed, but perhaps in a more general sense. With the light of their knowledge they should pinpoint what was before believed and admired for its beauty; they should try to clarify things that were believed but not fully understood; they should strive to make more precise the language used to express truths which have always been wholeheartedly believed. This last point, especially, merits careful consideration, for theologians in general and exegetes in particular should avoid false novelties which would render their work ineffective. To forfeit the terminology which the patient work of centuries has succeeded in making precise, and to replace it by a new one on the pretext that it is more "evangelical" would be sheer folly.

From all that has been said, it should be clear that it is essential for the exegete to have a wide, deep, and mature knowledge of theology. If his work were that of a philologist, he should be noted for his flair for oriental and Semitic languages. If he were a historian, he should be renowned for his knowledge of the dynasties of the Pharaohs of Egypt, of the kings of Assyria, and the like. But since his work

41 Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, quoting 2 Tim. 3:15–17.

is to research into the written Word of God, which is inseparable and indeed complementary to the Word of God transmitted orally and by the Magisterium of the Church, then "the professor of holy Scripture . . . must be well acquainted with the whole circle of theology and deeply read in the commentaries of the holy Fathers, the Doctors, and other interpreters of note," as Leo XIII has written.<sup>42</sup>

When there is no authentic interpretation of the Magisterium on a certain passage, it is up to the exegete to go into the writings of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church, and to set forth his conclusions in continuity with the doctrine commonly held by those holy men. He should not suggest something in opposition to what they would have unanimously affirmed in matters of faith and customs, and he should always work within the analogy of faith.

Logically, the exegete should make correct use of all the human means within his reach. But if, for example, he limited himself to only a philological analysis of some words used in sacred Scripture, or to the social background of a particular hagiographer, then he would end up knowing practically nothing of the sacred books. These texts are the living word of God, not even fully understood by the inspired writers themselves. Their theological content is both deep and precise, and only accessible to those to whom God chooses to reveal it. They are for this reason inseparable from the Tradition of the Church and from the living, constant, and universal Magisterium. Critical, historical, and philological procedures alone stand no chance of attaining their true meaning. They are the Word of God, which can only be understood in the light of the infallible help of his Spirit and his Church.

If the above are the criteria which guide the exegete in his research work, how much more firmly should he adhere to them in the publication of his findings and in teaching. Hence, the really essential part of an exegete's work is showing the theological content of each passage or book, and how the doctrine of the Church is contained in sacred Scripture.

The words of Pius XII addressed to Scripture teachers can be fittingly quoted here by way of conclusion:

With special zeal should they apply themselves not only by expounding exclusively these matters which belong to the historical, archeological, philological, and other auxiliary sciences. . . . Their exegetical explanation should aim especially at the theological doctrine, avoiding useless discussions and omitting all that is calculated rather to satisfy idle curiosity than promote true learning and solid piety. They should expound what is called the literal meaning and most especially the theological meaning so carefully, explain it so clearly, and implant it so deeply, that in their students there might take place in a certain way what

42 Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus*, 14.

happened to the disciples on the way to Emmaus when, having heard the words of the Master, they exclaimed: "Was not our heart burning within us while he was speaking on the road and explaining to us the Scriptures!"<sup>43</sup>

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43 Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 54.