

## BIBLE-READING REVIVAL

OF the various religious revivals of present-day Catholic Germany the biblical movement has, next to the liturgical, attracted most attention, even among Evangelical Christians. For centuries "Bible-reading" has been so marked a characteristic of Evangelical Christianity that those groups of Evangelical students which correspond to the various Catholic student youth-associations were spoken of as "B.K.'s" (*Bibelkreise*), i.e., "Bible-circles." Since the Reformation, Bible-reading has been part of the daily life of every devout Evangelical family, at a time when, even in the best Catholic families, one could search in vain for an unshortened edition of the book in which the word of God was shown forth. There are to-day signs that this particular tradition among Catholics is weakening. Hundreds of thousands of copies of the "book of books" are sold every year; everywhere vigorous "bible-circles" are springing into life.

The 22nd of September, 1932, marked the foundation of something entirely new. On that day there came into being in Stuttgart a central organisation to deal with all matters connected with the propagation of Bible-knowledge. Stuttgart then became the centre of the Catholic Bible Movement. Was it the result of a novel imitation of Evangelical forms of piety, or did it mark the return on the part of Catholics to an ancient Christian custom, which was only discontinued for a short time when the Bible was in danger of being seriously misinterpreted?

Obviously a great deal depends upon how we answer this question. If it was a custom native to the early Church, if it was practised by Christ and the Apostles, and recommended by the Fathers, our course of action is clear. We must strive to do as they did and would have us do.

The Gospels put it beyond doubt that Christ used the Bible which lay in front of Him, that is to say the Old

Testament, in the service of His message of salvation. It is significant that He began His public life with something which we might very well call a "Bible-class." "And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee, and the fame of him went out through the whole country. And he taught in the synagogues and was magnified by all. And he came to Nazareth where he was brought up: and he went into the synagogue according to the custom on the Sabbath-day; and he rose up to read. And the book of Isaias the prophet was delivered unto him: . . . And when he had folded the book, he restored it to the minister and sat down . . . And he began to say to them: This day is fulfilled this scripture in your ears." (Luke iv, 14 sqq.) And in John v, 39, Jesus praises the efforts of the learned in searching the scriptures, because they hoped "to find therein life everlasting." This searching in the scriptures must be prompted by the desire to honour God; otherwise the Bible will remain a dead book. "How can you believe who seek glory one from another; and the glory which is from God alone, you do not seek." Jesus quoted from the Bible to prepare His disciples for His passion. Luke xviii, 31-33: "Then Jesus took unto Him the twelve, and said to them: Behold we go up to Jerusalem, and all things shall be accomplished which were written by the prophets concerning the Son of Man. For he shall be delivered to the Gentiles and shall be mocked and scourged, and spit upon: and after they have scourged him, they will put him to death; and the third day he shall rise again." And when Christ found that His disciples did not understand this, he again referred to scripture: "But that the word may be fulfilled which is written in their law: they hated me without cause." (John xv, 25.)

Before the Passion Christ consoled His disciples with quotations from the scriptures, and He Himself drew comfort from them during the Passion. The words in which the dying Christ turns to His Father: "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me," occur in the 21st Psalm. Note also that "Jesus said 'I thirst,' . . . that the scripture might be fulfilled." (John xix, 28.)

The fact that Christ lived according to the scriptures is bound to increase the significance of our reading of them. It is not surprising that the disciples and apostles valued the Bible very highly. We have an example in the account of the chancellor of the Queen of the Ethiopians (Acts viii, 26), "who was returning sitting in his chariot and reading Isaias the prophet." Philip came to him there, and by means of a Bible-lesson led him to Christ and baptised him. The example will also be recalled of the well-disposed Jews in Beroa (Acts xvii, 10) who, according to St. Paul, "received the word with all eagerness, daily searching the scriptures whether these things were so." And, as a result of their reading, "many indeed of them believed." And Paul admonishes the Thessalonians: "I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read to all the holy brethren." (I Thess. v, 27); and he asks for the letter he had written to the Colossians to be read to the Christian community at Laodicea: "When this epistle shall have been read with you, cause that it be read also in the Church of the Laodiceans: and that you read that which is of the Laodiceans." (Colossians iv, 16.) On another occasion Paul refers his pupil, Timothy, to the scriptures as a source of comfort and strength: "And because from thy infancy thou hast known the Holy Scriptures, which can instruct thee to salvation, by the faith which is in Christ Jesus. All scripture, inspired of God, is profitable to teach, to reprove, to correct, to instruct in justice. That the man of God may be perfect, furnished to every good work." (II Tim. iii, 15-17.)

The writers of the succeeding period were, like the apostle, very much of the opinion that every word given us by God is useful for our instruction. Important early Christian writers found the reading of the scriptures the way to belief in Christ. Justin is giving us his own personal experience when he writes in his first *Apology* (I, 44): "Not only do we ourselves fearlessly read the scriptures, but, as you see, we bring them for your inspection and consideration, knowing that their contents will be pleasing to all."

After long years of spiritual seeking Justin himself had found belief in Christ through reading the scriptures. His testimony is pre-eminent in importance, because it shows how intensively the Bible was read in early Christian times. He even invites pagans to join Christians in their Bible-reading. The same invitation is to be found in the early Christian apologetic writings of Aristides and Athanagoras. There are many Catholic bishops of to-day who could not write with St. Polycarp: "I know that you are well-versed in scripture and that nothing is hidden from you" (cap. 12), or with Clement of Rome could be convinced that their flocks have "thoroughly investigated the truths of the holy scriptures as written by the Holy Ghost" (I Cor. c. xlv, 2), and "attained to a deep insight into the words of God." (*ibid.*, c. 53.) A remark of Eusebius (vi, 2) about Origen's system of education shows to what an extent the reading of the Bible had then become part of Christian family life: "Every day let [the young Christian] learn some passages [of scripture] by heart and recite them. He does this with great joy. He is not content with an ordinary superficial reading of the scriptures; on the contrary, he applies himself earnestly to them and even aims at discovering their deeper meanings. His questions about their deeper significance keep his father fully occupied." And a proclamation of Irenæus, Bishop of Lyons—an application of the still red-hot words of St. Paul—draws our attention to the value of Bible-reading: "We must avoid those teachers who are false and take the very greatest care not to be harmed by them. But we must have recourse to the Church. We must cling to the folds of her skirt for guidance in education and be nourished on the words of the Lord. The Church is the planted Paradise-Garden of the world. You may eat of every tree, that is to say, of every word of the Lord, but with a proud heart you may not eat." (*Advers. Hær.*, 5, 20.)

The African Church and her faithful were brought up in the same spirit. Cyprian wrote to his community: "God's writings are in our hands; God's thoughts are in our minds," (*De zelo et livore*, 16); and elsewhere: "you

should be constantly occupied with prayer or the reading of holy scripture; both talk to God and let God talk to you" (*ad Don.* 15). It will be remembered that the conversion of the greatest leader of the African Church was wrought by the reading of Romans xiii, 13. We can well understand how St. Augustine felt when he warned his flock to "work hard in instructing each other out of holy scripture." (*Sermo 227.*)

Love of the Bible spread throughout Western Christendom and entered the Anglo-Saxon monasteries. Thence Wynfried brought it to the Germans. He was commissioned by Gregory II "to hasten to those peoples who were imprisoned in unbelief and to communicate to them in a way appropriate to their understanding the teaching of *both* Testaments." The Bible never left Wynfried. It is even recorded that, at the time of his death, he held his faithful companion high over his head to protect himself from the blows of his murderers. The codex he used is still preserved in the Fulda Public Library and the marks made by those blows are still discernible.

We should gladly recognise that the important place which our separated brethren have given to the Bible in their Christian educational system is in line with ancient Catholic practice. And we should recognise that the well-known "Bible Pastoral Letter" issued by Cardinal Faulhaber in 1928 marks a return to an early Christian tradition: "The gospel is our best prayer-book and finest book of devotion. Forgetfulness of self in the words of Christ recorded in the Gospel is, in itself, a spiritual communion. Eucharist and Gospel are the two trees which God has planted in the new paradise—the tree of life and the tree of knowledge." And the message of the German bishops from Fulda by the tomb of St. Boniface sounds like an echo of the words of the first bishop of the Germans: "The holy scriptures of the old and new Testaments, being inspired by the Holy Ghost, are for every true seeker after truth an inexhaustible storehouse of godly thoughts . . . to-day it is more necessary than ever that the gospel should be more frequently read at home, that

the whole house be kept nearer to the Saviour.'"

Pius X, great inspirer of the liturgical and eucharistic movement in the Church of to-day, was also an eager supporter of the Bible-reading movement. Even before the famous decree about frequent Communion, he mentioned the following as a wish of his that was, in many lands, not yet realised: "Since we wish to 'renew everything in Christ,' we desire nothing more than that our children should possess copies of the Gospels and read them not only frequently but daily, so that they may learn at first hand how everything may be renewed in Christ." (Letter to Cardinal Sassetta, 1907.) How far do Christian families fall short of fulfilment of the order which Benedict XV expressed in his encyclical on St. Jerome: "There shall not be any Christian family without a copy of the holy scriptures of the New Testament, and all members should be accustomed to use it for daily reading and for meditation . . . Of particular merit is the work of those men, who, in different countries, try to propagate the New Testament and selected books of the Old through the distribution of popular editions." And the present Pope has said: "We want the Gospels to be known, because no book can speak to the soul with so much light of truth, or with so much wealth of example, or so much warmth of feeling as the Gospel." (Letter on the occasion of the Turin Conference of 1928.) This makes it clear that it is the urgent wish of the Church that the New Testament should become the common possession and life-companion of Catholic Christians. Let us regard it as the will of God that we should, in this respect at least, be able to tread the same path as our Protestant brethren.

But it is true that, to prevent misunderstandings, it must be strongly emphasised that the reading of the Bible is, of course, not absolutely necessary to eternal salvation. The Church has often had to oppose such exaggerated views (cf. Denz. 1439-31 against the Jansenists and Denz. 1507 against the Synod of Pistoia). The fact that the reading of the Bible is not necessary to salvation is also the reason why the Church through prohibitions limited the reading of

the Bible in the vernacular and, consequently, its effect on faith and life, at times when the inspired word of God was misused by heretics, as was the case in the middle ages with the Albigenses and the followers of Wyclif and Huss. But the Church has never at any time taken up a position fundamentally opposed to the reading of the Bible. Any tendencies in this direction have immediately been strongly opposed by the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Even in the Council of Trent the Bible-reading movement found a warm supporter in Cardinal Christofero Madruzzo: "Let us read the holy scriptures ourselves for the honour of Christ. Our vernacular speech is also a gift of the Holy Ghost and of Jesus Christ, who will be with us until the end of time. People of either sex, and of every age and occupation should be allowed to read the holy scriptures. Let men of every age and tongue read Christ and love Him."

The unprejudiced Evangelical Christian will not deny that unenlightened Bible-reading is liable to expose men to serious dangers. It is certain that the Bible was in former times made use of for superstitious purposes, and that verses from the Bible, particularly from the comminatory psalms, for instance, were used to summon up the devil. And, for example, as the result of a misunderstanding reaching far back into the middle ages, the passage in the eleventh chapter of Leviticus about clean and unclean animals was responsible for the banning of many favourite dishes. "Jugged hare" was one of these. And it is a well-known fact that most false prophets have called upon the Bible to substantiate their particular views and have usually tried to found their doctrines upon the inspired word of God.

The caution of the Church has been abundantly justified and has served to keep our faith in the Bible unpolluted. To-day, as much as centuries ago, the Church realizes that the reading of the Bible can be fruitful only under certain conditions, and that the efforts of those Catholics who have care of souls must be directed, as far as it is possible, towards the realization of these conditions. Upon this will it depend if the dangers, which history tells us has accom-

panied the reading of the Bible, can be banished for ever from the Church. The following is an important condition for the fruitful reading of the Bible: Catholic Bible reading should be under the direction of a priest learned in theology. The many difficulties of holy scripture, obscure passages and seemingly contradictory texts, can only be properly explained by someone who has a clear grasp of the main question connected with the study of the Bible, and a thorough understanding of its basic thoughts. There are very many obscure and frequently misunderstood passages which can only be elucidated by reference to the basic thoughts of the whole. It would clearly hardly be possible for a layman to have the time and the energy to attain to so deep an understanding of scripture. Even the theologian will not be satisfied with only a moderate knowledge of the Bible. Knowledge of the Bible is yet another of the responsibilities of the priest and theological student. He, whose profession it is to expound the word of God, is called upon to do everything at his command to increase his own knowledge of the Bible, so that he can become a true "dispenser of God's mysteries." The priest knows how to relate the Bible to the Church's body of doctrine. When we ask him to direct our Bible reading, we are merely obeying the Catholic principle that the word of God is deposited in the hands of the Church, who administers it through her authorised representatives.

But the priest who directs the reading should not be satisfied with a purely didactic exposition of the Bible. He must be such a personality that his hearers can feel that God's word in the Bible is something which has power over souls, which supplies an answer to man's deepest spiritual questionings, and which consoles man during the darkest hours of his life. The priest must study the way Jesus taught (every page of the Bible can teach him a little about this), so that he may know how to bring the word of God so near to modern man and to explain it in so lively a way, that he feels it as something concrete and personal. Let us follow St. Paul (Acts xiii, 23) and leave the altars dedicated



## BLACKFRIARS

“to the unknown God” and preach the Christian God—the Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

In conclusion we may suggest how it is possible for the priest, whom the necessary training has qualified for the work, to communicate his knowledge of the Bible to his people and to turn out the best kind of Catholic “Bible-Christian.” The most ancient way is that of preaching on the Bible. All the early Christian fathers practised it. Our masters and models would be the greatest preachers in Christendom: John Chrysostom in the Eastern and Augustine in the Western Church.

A second way is the study-circle or “Bible-class.” Though cultivated nowadays chiefly by Protestants, it is native to early Christendom. Early Christians who had been thrown into prison used to read from the scriptures to wile away the boredom of their imprisonment and to fill their hearts with strength and courage. The pseudo-Clementine letters (I, 10) tell of certain ascetics, who, on various pretexts, went around from house to house, visiting “virgins, brothers and sisters” and reading the scriptures. This kind of “Bible class” could become one of the most valuable implements of modern pastoral work. It would help in the fight against an easy-going materialism and teach people of the twentieth century that “this is eternal life, that you may know the One True God, and Him Whom Thou hast sent, Jesus Christ.”

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