

SANCTA MATER ECCLESIA
"Instruction Concerning the Historical Truth of the Gospels"
Pontifical Biblical Commission
April 21, 1964
English Translation by Joseph Fitzmyer, SJ

I. Holy Mother the Church, "the pillar and bulwark of truth,"[1] has always used Sacred Scripture in her task of imparting heavenly salvation to men. She has always defended it, too, from every sort of false interpretation. Since there will never be an end to (biblical) problems, the Catholic exegete should never lose heart in explaining the divine word and in solving the difficulties proposed to him. Rather, let him strive earnestly to open up still more the real meaning of the Scriptures. Let him rely firmly not only on his own resources, but above all on the help of God and the light of the Church.

II. It is a source of great joy that there are found today, to meet the needs of our times, faithful sons of the Church in great numbers who are experts in biblical matters. They are following the exhortations of the Supreme Pontiffs and are dedicating themselves wholeheartedly and untiringly to this serious and arduous task. "Let all the other sons of the Church bear in mind that the efforts of these resolute labourers in the vineyard of the Lord are to be judged not only with equity and justice, but also with the greatest charity,"[2] since even illustrious interpreters, such as Jerome himself, tried at times to explain the more difficult questions with no great success.[3] Care should be had "that the keen strife of debate should never exceed the bounds of mutual charity. Nor should the impression be given in an argument that truths of revelation and divine traditions are being called in question. For unless agreement among minds be safeguarded and principles be carefully respected, great progress in this discipline will never be expected from the diverse pursuits of so many persons."[4]

III. Today more than ever the work of exegetes is needed, because many writings are being spread abroad in which the truth of the deeds and words which are contained in the Gospels is questioned. For this reason the Pontifical Biblical Commission, in pursuit of the task given to it by the Supreme Pontiffs, has considered it proper to set forth and insist upon the following points.

IV. 1. Let the Catholic exegete, following the guidance of the Church, derive profit from all that earlier interpreters, especially the holy Fathers and Doctors of the Church, have contributed to the understanding of the sacred text. And let him carry on their labours still further. In order to put the abiding truth and authority of the Gospels in their full light, he will accurately adhere to the norms of rational and Catholic hermeneutics. He will diligently employ the new exegetical aids, above all those which the historical method, taken in its widest sense, offers to him--a method which carefully investigates sources and defines their nature and value, and makes use of such helps as textual criticism, literary criticism, and the study of languages. The interpreter will heed the advice of Pius XII of happy memory, who enjoined him "prudently to examine what contribution the manner of expression or the literary form used by the sacred writer makes to a true and genuine interpretation. And let him be convinced that this part of his task cannot be neglected without serious detriment to Catholic exegesis."[5] By this piece of advice Pius XII of happy memory enunciated a general rule of hermeneutics, by which the books of the Old Testament as well as the New must be explained. For in composing them the sacred writers employed the way of thinking and writing which was in vogue among their contemporaries. Finally, the exegete will use all the means available to probe more deeply into the nature of Gospel testimony, into the religious life of the early churches, and into the sense and the value of apostolic tradition.

V. As occasion warrants, the interpreter may examine what reasonable elements are contained in the "Form-Critical method" that can be used for a fuller understanding of the Gospels. But let him be wary, because scarcely admissible philosophical and theological principles have often come to be mixed with this method, which not uncommonly have vitiated the method itself as well as the conclusions in the literary area. For some proponents of this method have been led astray by the prejudiced views of

rationalism. They refuse to admit the existence of a supernatural order and the intervention of a personal God in the world through strict revelation, and the possibility and existence of miracles and prophecies. Others begin with a false idea of faith, as if it had nothing to do with historical truth--or rather were incompatible with it. Others deny the historical value and nature of the documents of revelation almost a priori. Finally, others make light of the authority of the apostles as witnesses to Christ, and of their task and influence in the primitive community, extolling rather the creative power of that community. All such views are not only opposed to Catholic doctrine, but are also devoid of scientific basis and alien to the correct principles of historical method.

VI. 2. To judge properly concerning the reliability of what is transmitted in the Gospels, the interpreter should pay diligent attention to the three stages of tradition by which the doctrine and the life of Jesus have come down to us.

VII. Christ our Lord joined to Himself chosen disciples,[6] who followed Him from the beginning,[7] saw His deeds, heard His words, and in this way were equipped to be witnesses of His life and doctrine.[8] When the Lord was orally explaining His doctrine, He followed the modes of reasoning and of exposition which were in vogue at the time. He accommodated Himself to the mentality of His listeners and saw to it that what He taught was firmly impressed on the mind and easily remembered by the disciples. These men understood the miracles and other events of the life of Jesus correctly, as deeds performed or designed that men might believe in Christ through them, and embrace with faith the doctrine of salvation.

VIII. The apostles proclaimed above all the death and resurrection of the Lord, as they bore witness to Jesus.[9] They faithfully explained His life and words,[10] while taking into account in their method of preaching the circumstances in which their listeners found themselves.[11] After Jesus rose from the dead and His divinity was clearly perceived,[12] faith, far from destroying the memory of what had transpired, rather confirmed it, because their faith rested on the things which Jesus did and taught.[13] Nor was He changed into a "mythical" person and His teaching deformed in consequence of the worship which the disciples from that time on paid Jesus as the Lord and the Son of God. On the other hand, there is no reason to deny that the apostles passed on to their listeners what was really said and done by the Lord with that fuller understanding which they enjoyed,[14] having been instructed by the glorious events of the Christ and taught by the light of the Spirit of Truth.[15] So, just as Jesus Himself after His resurrection "interpreted to them"[16] the words of the Old Testament as well as His own,[17] they too interpreted His words and deeds according to the needs of their listeners. "Devoting themselves to the ministry of the word,"[18] they preached and made use of various modes of speaking which were suited to their own purpose and the mentality of their listeners. For they were debtors[19] "to Greeks and barbarians, to the wise and the foolish." [20] But these modes of speaking with which the preachers proclaimed Christ must be distinguished and (properly) assessed: catecheses, stories, testimonia, hymns, doxologies, prayers--and other literary forms of this sort which were in Sacred Scripture and were accustomed to be used by men of that time.

IX. This primitive instruction, which was at first passed on by word of mouth and then in writing--for it soon happened that many tried "to compile a narrative of the things"[21] which concerned the Lord Jesus--was committed to writing by the sacred authors in four Gospels for the benefit of the churches, with a method suited to the peculiar purpose which each (author) set for himself. From the many things handed down they selected some things, reduced others to a synthesis, (still) others they explicated as they kept in mind the situation of the churches. With every (possible) means they sought that their readers might become aware of the reliability[22] of those words by which they had been instructed. Indeed, from what they had received the sacred writers above all selected the things which were suited to the various situations of the faithful and to the purpose which they had in mind, and adapted their narration of them to the same situations and purpose. Since the meaning of a statement also depends on the sequence, the Evangelists, in passing on the words and deeds of our Saviour, explained these now in one context, now in another, depending on (their) usefulness to the readers. Consequently, let

the exegete seek out the meaning intended by the Evangelist in narrating a saying or a deed in a certain way or in placing it in a certain context. For the truth of the story is not at all affected by the fact that the Evangelists relate the words and deeds of the Lord in a different order,[23] and express his sayings not literally but differently, while preserving (their) sense.[24] For, as St. Augustine says, "It is quite probable that each Evangelist believed it to have been his duty to recount what he had to in that order in which it pleased God to suggest it to his memory in those things at least in which the order, whether it be this or that, detracts in nothing from the truth and authority of the Gospel. But why the Holy Spirit, who apportions individually to each one as He wills,[25] and who therefore undoubtedly also governed and ruled the minds of the holy (writers) in recalling what they were to write because of the pre-eminent authority which the books were to enjoy, permitted one to compile his narrative in this way, and another in that, anyone with pious diligence may seek the reason and with divine aid will be able to find it." [26]

X. Unless the exegete pays attention to all these things which pertain to the origin and composition of the Gospels and makes proper use of all the laudable achievements of recent research, he will not fulfil his task of probing into what the sacred writers intended and what they really said. From the results of the new investigations it is apparent that the doctrine and the life of Jesus were not simply reported for the sole purpose of being remembered, but were "preached" so as to offer the Church a basis of faith and of morals. The interpreter (then), by tirelessly scrutinizing the testimony of the Evangelists, will be able to illustrate more profoundly the perennial theological value of the Gospels and bring out clearly how necessary and important the Church's interpretation is.

XI. There are still many things, and of the greatest importance, in the discussion and explanation of which the Catholic exegete can and must freely exercise his skill and genius so that each may contribute his part to the advantage of all, to the continued progress of sacred doctrine, to the preparation and further support of the judgment to be exercised by the ecclesiastical magisterium, and to the defense and honour of the Church.[27] But let him always be disposed to obey the magisterium of the Church, and not forget that the apostles, filled with the Holy Spirit, preached the good news, and that the Gospels were written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, who preserved their authors from all error. "Now we have not learned of the plan of our salvation from any others than those through whom the gospel has come to us. Indeed, what they once preached they later passed on to us in the Scriptures by the will of God, as the ground and pillar of our faith. It is not right to say that they preached before they had acquired perfect knowledge, as some would venture to say who boast of being correctors of the apostles. In fact, after our Lord rose from the dead and they were invested with power from on high, as the Holy Spirit came upon them, they were filled with all (His gifts) and had perfect knowledge. They went forth to the ends of the earth, one and all with God's gospel, announcing the news of God's bounty to us and proclaiming heavenly peace to men." [28]

XII. 3. Those whose task it is to teach in seminaries and similar institutions should have it as their "prime concern that Holy Scripture be so taught as both the dignity of the discipline and the needs of the times require." [29] Let the teachers above all explain its theological teaching, so that the Sacred Scriptures "may become for the future priests of the Church both a pure and never-failing source for their own spiritual life, as well as food and strength for the sacred task of preaching which they are about to undertake." [30] When they practice the art of criticism, especially so-called literary criticism, let them not pursue it as an end in itself, but that through it they might more plainly perceive the sense intended by God through the sacred writer. Let them not stop, therefore, halfway, content only with their literary discoveries, but show in addition how these things really contribute to a clearer understanding of revealed doctrine, or, if it be the case, to the refutation of errors. Instructors who follow these norms will enable their students to find in Sacred Scripture that which can "raise the mind to God, nourish the soul, and further the interior life." [31]

XIII. 4. Those who instruct the Christian people in sacred sermons have need of great prudence. Let them above all pass on doctrine, mindful of St. Paul's warning: "Look to yourself and your teaching;

hold on to that. For by so doing you will save both yourself and those who listen to you." [32] They are to refrain entirely from proposing vain or insufficiently established novelties. As for new opinions already solidly established, they may explain them, if need be, but with caution and due care for their listeners. When they narrate biblical events, let them not add imaginative details which are not consonant with the truth.

XIV. This virtue of prudence should be cherished especially by those who publish for the faithful. Let them carefully bring forth the heavenly riches of the divine word "that the faithful may be moved and inflamed rightly to conform their lives (to them)." [33] They should consider it a sacred duty never to depart in the slightest degree from the common doctrine and tradition of the Church. They should indeed exploit all the real advances of biblical science which the diligence of recent (students) has produced. But they are to avoid entirely the rash remarks of innovators. [34] They are strictly forbidden to disseminate, led on by some pernicious itch for newness, any trial solutions for difficulties without a prudent selection and serious discrimination, for thus they perturb the faith of many.

XV. This Pontifical Biblical Commission has already considered it proper to recall that books and articles in magazines and newspapers on biblical subjects are subject to the authority and jurisdiction of ordinaries, since they treat of religious matters and pertain to the religious instruction of the faithful. [35] Ordinaries are therefore requested to keep watch with great care over popular writings of this sort.

XVI. 5. Those who are in charge of biblical associations are to comply faithfully with the norms laid down by the Pontifical Biblical Commission. [36]

XVII. If all these things are observed, the study of the Sacred Scriptures will contribute to the benefit of the faithful. Even in our time everyone realizes the wisdom of what St. Paul wrote: The Sacred Writings "can instruct (us) for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is divinely inspired and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in uprightness, so that the man of God may be perfect, equipped for every good work." [37]

XVIII. The Holy Father, Pope Paul VI, at the audience graciously granted to the undersigned secretary on April 21, 1964, approved this Instruction and ordered the publication of it.

Rome, April 21, 1964
Benjamin N. Wambacq, O. Praem.
Secretary of the Commission

Footnotes to the PBC's "Instruction"

* [Fitzmyer's Note]: The numbering of the footnotes of the Latin is generally preserved; occasionally it has been necessary to reverse two of them because of the English wording. Words added in parentheses do not appear in the Latin text; they are supplied for the sake of the English. Cf. notes 2 and 8 supra.--For some strange reason the references to the Encyclical *Divino afflante Spiritu* are given in the Latin text of the Instruction to the Italian translation of the Encyclical in *Acta apostolicae sedis*; we have changed them to the corresponding pages of the official Latin text.

1) 1 Tim 3:15.

2) *Divino afflante Spiritu* (hereafter DaS) 46 (EB 564; AAS 35 [1943] 319; RSS 101).

3) Cf. *Spiritus Paraclitus* 2, 3 (EB 451; RSS 50).

4) Apostolic Letter *Vigilantiae* (EB 143; RSS 33).

- 5) DaS 38 (EB 560; AAS 35 [1943] 316; RSS 98).
- 6) Mk 3:14; Lk 6:13.
- 7) Lk 1:2; Acts 1:21-22.
- 8) Lk 24:48; Jn 15:27; Acts 1:8; 10:39; 13:31.
- 9) Lk 24:44-48; Acts 2:32; 3:15; 5:30-32.
- 10) Acts 10:36-41.
- 11) Compare Acts 13:16-41 with Acts 17:22-31.
- 12) Acts 2:36; Jn 20:28.
- 13) Acts 2:22; 10:37-39.
- 14) Jn 2:22; 12:16; 11:51-52; cf. 14:26; 16:12-13; 7:39.
- 15) Jn 14:26; 16:13.
- 16) Lk 24:27.
- 17) Lk 24:44-45; Acts 1:3.
- 18) Acts 6:4.
- 19) 1 Cor 9:19-23.
- 20) Rom 1:14.
- 21) Lk 1:1.
- 22) Lk 1:4.
- 23) Cf. John Chrysostom, Hom. in Matth. 1, 3 (PG 57, 16-17).
- 24) Augustine, De consensu Evangelistarum 2, 12, 28 (PL 34, 1090-91; CSEL 43, 127-29).
- 25) 1 Cor 12:11.
- 26) De consensu Evangelistarum 2, 21, 51-52 (PL 34, 1102; CSEL 43, 153).
- 27) DaS 47 (EB 565; AAS 35 [1943] 319; RSS 102).
- 28) Irenaeus, Adversus haereses 3, 1, 1 (Harvey 2, 2; PG 7, 844).
- 29) Apostolic Letter Quoniam in re biblica (EB 162; RSS 36).
- 30) DaS 55 (EB 567; AAS 35 [1943] 322; RSS 104).

31) DaS 25 (EB 552; AAS 35 [1943] 311; RSS 93).

32) 1 Tim 4:16.

33) DaS 50 (EB 566; AAS 35 [1943] 320; RSS 103).

34) Apostolic Letter Quoniam in re biblica 13 (EB 175; RSS 38).

35) Instruction De consocialionibus biblicis. (EB 626).

36) Ibid. (EB 622-33).

37) 2 Tim 3:15-17.