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# ON BIBLE RESEARCH

Instruction of the Pontifical  
Commission for Biblical Studies

*April 21, 1964*



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HOLY MOTHER THE CHURCH, “the pillar and foundation of Truth,”<sup>1</sup> in her mission of bringing salvation to souls has always been served by sacred Scripture and has always defended it from any form of false interpretation. Since there are never lacking complex questions, the Catholic exegete, in setting forth the divine Word and in solving the difficulties which oppose it, should never be discouraged. He should rather seek thoroughly to render ever more clear the true meaning of the Scriptures trusting not so much in his own forces but rather in the help of God and in the light of the Church.

2. It is a great satisfaction today that there are not a few faithful sons of the Church who are expert in the Biblical sciences according to the demands of our times, and following the exhortations of the supreme pontiffs they attend with energetic and untiring work to this grave and arduous task.

3. “May all the sons of the Church who are called upon, judge not only with justice but also with the maximum charity the efforts and the labors of these valiant workers of the vineyard of the Lord.”<sup>2</sup> Since even illustrious persons, such as St. Jerome himself, have at times obtained only relative success in their attempts to solve the more difficult questions.<sup>3</sup> Care should be taken lest “that in the ardor of the disputes the limits of mutual charity be surpassed, nor should the impression be given, in the debate, that the very

revealed truth and the divine tradition may be placed in doubt, since without the concord of souls and without the indisputable respect of principles, no great progress may be expected in this discipline from the diverse study of many persons.”<sup>4</sup>

4. The effort of exegetes today is all the more necessary as many writings are being spread about in which the truth of the sayings and of the facts contained in the Gospels are questioned. For this reason the Pontifical Commission for Biblical Studies, in order to carry out the task entrusted to it by the supreme pontiffs, considered it worthwhile to expound and inculcate the following.

## SECTION 1

5. The Catholic exegete, under the guidance of the ecclesiastical magisterium should exploit all the results achieved by the exegetes who preceded him, and especially by the Holy Fathers and the Doctors of the Church regarding the understanding of the sacred texts and should pledge himself to continue to pursue their work. In order to throw a full light on the perennial truth and the authority of the Gospels, and following faithfully the norms of rational and Catholic hermenutics, he will be diligent in making use of the new means of exegesis, and particularly of those offered by the universally esteemed historical method.

6. This method carefully studies the sources and defines their nature and value, making use of textual criticism, of literary criticism, and of the knowledge of languages. The exegesis will put into practice the admonishment of Pius XII of happy memory which required him “to seek prudently . . . to what extent the manner of expression or the literary style adopted by the sacred writer may lead to a correct and genuine interpretation; and let him be convinced that this part of his office cannot be neglected without serious detriment to Catholic exegesis.”<sup>5</sup>

7. By this admonishment Pius XII of happy memory gives a general rule of hermenutics, which is valid for the interpretation of the books of the Old as well as of the New Testament, since in drawing them up the sacred writers followed the way of thinking and of writing of their contemporaries. In substance the exegete will exploit all the means by which he may penetrate more deeply the nature of the testimony of the Gospels, the religious life of the primitive Christian communities, in the sense and in the value of the apostolic tradition.

8. When convenient it will be permissible for the exegete to examine possible positive elements offered by the "method of the history of forms," and make due use of them for a more extensive understanding of the Gospels. Nevertheless, he will do it with caution because the said method is often connected with inadmissible philosophical and theological principles which often vitiate the method itself as well as conclusions on the literary matter.

9. In fact, some supporters of this method, moved by rationalistic prejudices, refuse to recognize the existence of the supernatural order and the intervention of a personal God in the world by means of Revelation proper or the possibility of miracles and prophecies. Others start from a false notion of faith, as if faith did not care for historical truth or were even incompatible with it. Others deny *a priori* the historical value and the nature of the documents of Revelation.

10. And finally, others, taking into little account the authority of the Apostles as witnesses of Jesus Christ as well as of their office and influence in the primitive community, exaggerate the creative powers of this community. All these things are not only contrary to Catholic doctrine but also lack any scientific foundation and are outside the correct principles of the historical method.

## SECTION 2

11. The exegete in order to affirm the foundation of what the Gospels tell us, should give diligent attention to the three stages which mark the teaching and the life of Jesus before they came down to us. Christ the Lord chose disciples,<sup>6</sup> who followed Him right from the beginning<sup>7</sup> saw His work, heard His words and so were in a position to become the witnesses of His life and of His teaching<sup>8</sup>.

12. The Lord, in setting forth verbally His teaching, followed the forms of thought and of expression which were then in use, thus adapting himself to the mentality of the listeners, in order that what He was teaching should remain firmly impressed in their minds and could be easily remembered by the disciples. The disciples well understood that the miracles and the other events of the life of Christ were facts worked and ordained for the purpose of stirring faith in Christ and to have His message of salvation embraced with faith.

13. The Apostles announced first of all the death and the Resurrection of the Lord, giving testimony to Jesus<sup>9</sup>, they faithfully set forth His life, repeated His words<sup>10</sup>, bearing in mind during their preaching the needs of the various persons who listened to them.<sup>11</sup> After Christ had resurrected from the dead and His divinity appeared in a clear manner,<sup>12</sup> faith not only did not cause us to forget the memory of the events, but on the contrary, it consolidated it, because that faith was founded on what Jesus had done and taught.<sup>13</sup> Owing to the worship with which the disciples then honored Jesus as the Lord and Son of God, there was no transformation of Him into a "mythical" person nor was there a distortion of His teaching. It is not to be denied, however, that the Apostles have presented to their listeners the true sayings of God and the events of His life with that fuller understanding they enjoyed<sup>14</sup> following the glorious events of Christ's teachings and the enlightenment of the Spirit of Truth.<sup>15</sup>

14. It follows that, as Jesus Himself after the Resurrection “interpreted to them”<sup>16</sup> the words of the Old Testament as well as His own,<sup>17</sup> so they explained the facts and the words according to the needs of their listeners. “Constant in the mystery of the Word,”<sup>18</sup> they preached, stating things in a way suitable for their specific aim and for the mentality of the listeners; for they were debtors<sup>19</sup> “to the Greeks and to the barbarians, to the wise and to the ignorant.”<sup>20</sup> In fact, in preaching which has as its theme Christ, there can be discerned the following: catechesis, narration, testimonies, hymns, doxologies, prayers and other similar literary forms which appear in sacred Scripture and were in use among men at that time.

15. This primitive instruction which was done at first orally and then set down in writing—in fact it did happen that many endeavored to “order the narration of the facts”<sup>21</sup> which concerned Jesus Christ—and was gathered by the sacred authors in the four Gospels for the good of the Church, and with a method in keeping with the purpose of each. Some elements they chose, others they expressed in synthesis, they developed some elements, bearing in mind the situation of the various churches, seeking by every means that the readers should know the truthfulness of what they were being taught.<sup>22</sup>

16. Indeed, among all the material at their disposal, the sacred writers chose that in particular which was suitable to the various conditions of the faithful and the aims they had set themselves, narrating it in such a way as to meet those conditions and that aim. Now since the meaning of a statement depends on the context, when the evangelists present different contexts in reporting the sayings and the deeds of the Saviour, it is to be thought that they did this for the convenience of the readers. The exegete should therefore seek to find out what the intention was of the evangelist in setting forth a saying or a fact in a certain way or in a certain context.

17. Indeed, it does not go counter to the truth of the account that the evangelists report the sayings and the deeds of the Lord in a different order<sup>23</sup> and express

His sayings not literally but with some diversity, yet preserving their sense.<sup>24</sup> St. Augustine says in fact "it is very probable that every evangelist felt duty-bound to narrate those things he was narrating in that order which God suggested to his memory, at least those things in which order, of whatever kind, in no way detracts from the evangelical authority in truth. And since the Holy Ghost distributing His gifts to each as he pleases,<sup>25</sup> and therefore also governing and directing the mind of the saints for the purpose of placing the books on such a high pinnacle of authority, in recalling the things to be written He may have committed each to set forth the story in his own way; who ever seeks it with pious diligence will be able to discover it with divine help."<sup>26</sup>

18. If the exegete does not bear in mind all these things which concern the origin and the composition of the Gospels and will not make proper use of all that is good in recent studies, he will not fulfill his task of investigating what the intention was of the sacred authors and what they really said.

19. From the new studies there emerges the fact that the life and the teaching of Jesus were not simply reported for the sole purpose of preserving their memory but were "preached" so as to offer the Church the basis of faith and of morals. Therefore by diligently scrutinizing the testimonies of the evangelists the exegete will be in a position to illustrate with greater penetration the perennial theological value of the Gospels and throw a full light on how necessary and how important is the interpretation of the Church.<sup>27</sup>

20. There remain many things, things of great importance, in the discussion and explanation of which the intelligence and discernment of the Catholic interpreter can and must be freely exercised, so that each for his part brings his contribution for the benefit of all, to a growing progress of sacred doctrine, to prepare the judgment of the Church and to document it for the honor and defense of the Church.<sup>27</sup>



21. Let him therefore be disposed to obey the magisterium of the Church and let him not forget that the Apostles preached the good tidings filled with the Holy Spirit and that the Gospels were written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit which preserved the authors from any errors. "In truth, not by means of others have we known the economy of Salvation, if not by means of those from whom the Gospel came to us: (the Gospel) which at first they preached and then, by the will of God transmitted to us in the Scriptures, destined to be the pillar and foundation of our Faith. It cannot in fact be said that they preached before having a perfect knowledge, as some dare to say, boasting that they are the correctors of the Apostles. In fact, after the Lord resurrected from the dead and they were clothed from on high with the virtue of the spirit which descended upon them, they were informed on all things and had a perfect knowledge; then they left for the ends of the earth evangelizing the good news that came to us from God and announcing heavenly peace to men, that all and each may possess the gospel of God."<sup>28</sup>

### SECTION 3

22. Those then to whom the task is entrusted in seminaries and like institutes "may they be careful that . . . the divine letter be taught in that manner which the very gravity of the discipline and the necessity of the times suggest."<sup>29</sup> Teachers should give first place to theological doctrine so that the sacred Scriptures may become for future priests of the Church the pure and perennial font of spiritual life for each of them personally and the substance for the office of preaching which is awaiting them.<sup>30</sup>

23. Moreover, when they have recourse to criticism and particularly to literary criticism let them not do it as if they were interested only in it for itself, but rather with the aim of better understanding, by means of the sense intended by God by means of the sacred writers.

24. Let them therefore not stop halfway, content with their literary devices, but let them show how these devices contribute in reality toward understanding even more clearly revealed doctrine, or when possible toward rejecting errors. Teachers who follow these norms will insure that students may find in the sacred Scripture that "which raises the mind to God, which nourishes the soul and stimulates the interior life."<sup>31</sup>

#### SECTION 4

25. Lastly, those who instruct the Christian people with sacred preaching have need of the greatest prudence. First of all, let them teach the doctrine, mindful of the admonition of St. Paul: "Attend to yourself and to the task of teaching, and in this persevere; by doing this you will save yourself and your listeners."<sup>32</sup>

26. They should abstain completely from advancing vain or insufficiently proven innovations. New opinion, already solidly demonstrated, they may explain if necessary, with caution and keeping in mind the condition of the listeners. In narrating Biblical facts they should not mix in with them fictitious details which little conform to truth. This virtue of prudence must be above all the characteristic of those who publish writings to be circulated among the faithful.

27. Let their study put in evidence the riches of the divine Word "so that the faithful feel themselves stirred and impelled to improve their lives."<sup>33</sup> Let them be scrupulous not to digress ever from the common doctrine or from the Tradition of the Church, not even in the smallest things, while treasuring the advances of Biblical science and using profitably the results of modern scholars, but avoiding altogether the temerious opinions of innovators.<sup>34</sup> They are severely forbidden to spread, in order to satisfy a pernicious bent for novelty, any attempt for the solution of difficulties, thus perturbing the faith of many, without a prudent choice and an earnest examination.

28. This Pontifical Commission for Biblical Studies already has deemed it opportune to recall to mind that even books and articles in magazines and newspapers which concern the Bible, inasmuch as they concern articles of religion and the Christian instruction of the faithful, must be submitted to the authority and jurisdiction of the Ordinaries.<sup>35</sup> The Ordinaries are accordingly requested to keep watch with the greatest diligence on such writings.

## SECTION 5

29. Let those who preside over the Biblical associations comply faithfully with the norms set by the Pontifical Commission for Biblical Studies.<sup>36</sup>

30. If the above stated norms are faithfully observed, the study of the sacred Scripture will redound certainly to the usefulness of the faithful. Even in our days there is no one who does not share the comment of St. Paul: "Sacred letters can instruct for salvation, by means of the faith which is in Jesus Christ. The whole Scripture, divinely inspired is useful for teaching, for reproaching, for correcting, for educating to justice, so that the man of God may be perfect and rendered suitable for any good work."<sup>37</sup>

31. On April 21, 1964, at an audience benignly granted to the undersigned secretary, the Holy Father Paul VI ratified and ordered the publication of the above instructions.

Rome, April 21, 1964,

Benjamin N. Wambacq, O. Praem.,  
Secretary

Pontifical Commission for Biblical Studies

## Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> *Tim.* 3, 15.
- <sup>2</sup> *Divino Afflante Spiritu; Enchiridion Biblicum (EB)* 564; *A.A.S.* 35 (1943) p. 346.
- <sup>3</sup> Cf. *Spiritus Paraclitus; (EB)* 451.
- <sup>4</sup> Apostolic Letter *Vigilantiae; (EB)* 143.
- <sup>5</sup> *Divino Afflante Spiritu (EB)* 560; *A.A.S.* 35 (1943) p. 343.
- <sup>6</sup> Cf. *Mark* 3, 14; *Luke* 6, 13.
- <sup>7</sup> Cf. *Luke* 1, 2; *Acts* 1, 21, 22.
- <sup>8</sup> Cf. *Luke* 24, 48; *John* 15, 27; *Acts* 1, 8; 10, 39; 13, 31.
- <sup>9</sup> Cf. *Luke* 24, 44-48; *Acts* 2, 32; 3, 15; 5, 30-32.
- <sup>10</sup> Cf. *Acts* 10, 36-41.
- <sup>11</sup> Cf. *Acts* 13, 16-41 with *Acts* 17, 22-31.
- <sup>12</sup> *Acts* 2, 36; *John* 20, 23.
- <sup>13</sup> *Acts* 2, 22; 10, 37-39.
- <sup>14</sup> *John* 2, 22; 12, 16; 11, 51-52; Cf. 14, 26; 16, 12-13; 7, 39.
- <sup>15</sup> Cf. *John* 14, 26; 16, 13.
- <sup>16</sup> *Luke* 24, 27.
- <sup>17</sup> Cf. *Luke* 24, 44-45; *Acts* 1, 3.
- <sup>18</sup> *Acts* 6, 4.
- <sup>19</sup> *I Cor.* 9, 19-23.
- <sup>20</sup> *Rom.* 1, 14.
- <sup>21</sup> Cf. *Luke* 1, 1.
- <sup>22</sup> Cf. *Luke* 1, 4.
- <sup>23</sup> Cf. St. John Chrysostom in *Mat. Hom.* 1, 3; *PG* 57, 16-17.
- <sup>24</sup> Cf. St. Augustine *De consensu Evang.* 2, 12, 28; *PL* 34, 1, 090-1,091.
- <sup>25</sup> *I Cor.* 12, 11.
- <sup>26</sup> *De consensu Evang.* 2, 21, 51, s.; *PL* 34, 1102.
- <sup>27</sup> *Divino Afflante Spiritu; (EB)* 565; *A.A.S.* 35 (1943) p. 346.
- <sup>28</sup> St. Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer* III 1, 1; *PG* 7, 844; Harvey II, 2.
- <sup>29</sup> Apostolic Letter *Quoniam in re Biblica; EB* 162.
- <sup>30</sup> *Divino Afflante Spiritu; EB* 567; *A.A.S.* 35 (1943) p. 348.
- <sup>31</sup> *Divino Afflante Spiritu; EB* 552; *A.A.S.* 35 (1943) p. 329.
- <sup>32</sup> *I Tim.* 4, 16.
- <sup>33</sup> *Divino Afflante Spiritu; EB* 536; *A.A.S.* 35 (1943) p. 347.
- <sup>34</sup> Cf. Apostolic Letter *Quoniam in re Biblica; EB* 175.
- <sup>35</sup> Instruction to the Most Reverend Ordinaries of Dioceses. Dec. 15. 1955 *EB* 626.
- <sup>36</sup> *EB* 622-633.
- <sup>37</sup> *II Tim.* 3, 15-17.