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The Authorized Interpreter
of Holy Scripture

William H. Sloan



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By

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THE AUTHORIZED INTERPRETER OF HOLY SCRIPTURE



IN a somewhat diligent study of Holy Scripture, carried on through a series of years, we found many things that early family teaching and subsequent theological training had impressed upon our minds; thus these early-acquired ideas were confirmed—clinched, so to speak. They became a fixed part of our mental furniture. But there were other things that we learned, as Josh Billings used to say, that were not so; contradictions that at first confounded our thinking and then amazed us by their simple, unanswerable force and our previous prejudices and incredulity. We learned some things that compelled us, perhaps against our will, to throw out of our minds much that we had previously “rolled under our tongues as sweet morsels.” We ascertained, for example, that the Pope of Rome was not really regarded by Catholics as a god; that the Blessed Virgin Mary was not worshipped; that Masses were not sold; that indulgences to commit sin were not given; that the confessional was not “a sink of iniquity;” that men could not purchase the absolution of their sins; that Catholics could be good American citizens; that Protestants had burned and decapitated as many heretics as Catholics; and so on to the end of the chapter. Perhaps the greatest truth we learned is that recorded in the following pages, to which the author lays no original claim, but whose argument has been found in the Scriptures, in sermons, books, newspapers and other sources of information.

We are informed by our non-Catholic Christian friends that they can obtain all religious truth, all the teaching of Christ, from the Bible. The Bible, as Chillingworth

said, is the religion of Protestants. It is the Bible, the whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible, interpreted by every reader for himself, that is the sole Protestant rule of faith, the only guide to religious truth. The sixth of the thirty-nine Articles—the basic creed of the Episcopal Church—says that nothing is to be believed except what is found in the Bible.

There is no Scripture authority for such a statement. The Apostle Paul says that "Faith cometh by hearing" (Rom. x. 17). The Bible does not contain all religious truth, and for that reason non-Catholics have not the whole revelation of Christ to men. The Bible consists of the books of the Old and of the New Testament. These sacred writings were inspired by the Holy Ghost, and contain revealed truth, but not all of it. The New Testament gives us Christ's teaching to men; yet St. John, the last who wrote any of the inspired Scriptures, towards the end of his Gospel uses these words: "Many other signs also did Jesus in the sight of His disciples, which are not written in this book" (John xx. 30). And he concludes his Gospel with these remarkable words: "There are many other things which Jesus did, which, if they were written, every one, the world itself, I think, would not be able to contain the books that should be written" (John xxi. 25). Where are these many other things that our Lord taught? Are they all lost? No; they are in the custody of the Church; they are in that "deposit of faith" committed to her keeping. Did not our Lord remind His Apostles of this when He said to them: "But the Paraclete, the Holy Ghost, Whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring all things to your mind, whatsoever I shall have said to you" (John xiv. 26). These things are not lost. It is true they are not contained in the Scriptures; but they are preserved by the Church, and the Holy Ghost

will remind her of all of them. Now, to have integral divine faith it is necessary to believe all the truths revealed to us by Christ, and we find all of them only in the Church enlightened by the Holy Spirit. No; our non-Catholic friends have not in their Bibles all the truths revealed by Christ.

Our non-Catholic friends should consider the helpless position of those who take the Scriptures alone as their sole rule of faith; in other words as their only guide to religious truth. They ought to be able to show, and that, too, from the Sacred Scriptures, that our Lord Himself wrote them, or, at least, that He commanded the Apostles to write down the teachings that fell from His lips. They ought to be able to show us that our Lord Himself gave the Bible to men, and told men to read it for themselves, and get their own meaning out of it, and then take their own private judgment and private interpretation of the Bible as their sole rule of faith, their only guide to religious truth. But far from this being the case, all acknowledge that our Lord Himself never wrote any of the Scriptures. Nor did He tell the Apostles to do so. Most of the Apostles wrote nothing of them. A few of them only committed His teachings to writing in their Gospels. These Gospels and the Epistles were written in the early days of the Church for the edification and the instruction of the faithful. These writings, indeed, were inspired by the Holy Ghost. Let us remember that it was not till about sixty-seven years after the death of Christ, at the end of the first century, that the last of the books of the New Testament was written, and by St. John. Christ had established His Church through His Apostles before He left the earth, and the Church was widely spread over most of the known earth before the New Testament was completed. There were several millions of Christians and tens of

thousands of martyrs to the faith before the New Testament was finished, and before the Bible was put together, even in writing.

Were these Christians true followers of Christ? Did they believe all they were bound to believe in order to be saved? Did they not seal their faith, many of them, by their blood? Do we not all, Protestants and Catholics alike, venerate them as martyrs to the faith? But how did they know what to believe? Was it from the Bible, and by each one reading it for himself? Not at all. They had no Bible, for it was yet in its formative state. There were only fragments of it, and these very rare, and in the hands of very few, and they were written in a language unintelligible to the vast majority of these first Christians. But how did the people get the truth? But how did they know it was the truth? They learned it, as we do to-day, from the teaching of the Church. St. Paul tells us: "How shall they believe Him of Whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent?" (Rom. x. 14, 15.) It was by preaching, and preaching with authority, that the nations were first converted, and the people came into possession of the revealed truth of God. Our Lord gave the example in His own person. He preached, but wrote nothing. "Christ," says Chrysostom, who lived in the fourth century, "left no written instructions to His Apostles; but, instead of books, He promised them the Holy Spirit, Who would inspire them with what they should say." His Church existed, and was flourishing all around the Mediterranean Sea, before the Bible was in being. The sacred writings of His Apostles in the New Testament did not form or establish the Church or Christian communities, but were addressed to Christian communities already formed and already possessed of the faith.

Christ did not say to the people: "Get your religion from the Bible." But He said to His Apostles, after founding His Church: "All power is given to Me in heaven and in earth. Going, therefore, teach ye all nations.....teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you; and behold I am with you all days" (Matt. xxviii. 18-20).

Let us remember, too, that it was only at the end of the fourth century, at the Council of Carthage, held mainly through the influence of St. Augustine, that the canon or collection of the New Testament Scriptures, as we have them now, was finally settled. It was only then that the various Scriptures were thoroughly examined, the true and inspired writings separated from the false and spurious ones, of which many then existed, and the true Scriptures were collected together in the form in which we have them now. It was only then that the Bible, as we understand it, was finally put together. Yet, throughout these three hundred years after the death of Christ, the faith was spread, heresy was fought, the persecutions of Imperial Rome were suffered, and martyrs died for the faith.

Not only for three hundred years was the world left without the Bible, but for almost one thousand four hundred years. The art of printing was discovered only towards the end of the fifteenth century. It was then the Bible was first printed. Up to this time Bibles were written in manuscript, and were very costly, and very few could own a Bible. They were still rare and costly long after the art of printing was discovered. The majority of people had not obtained the Bible, and did not know what it contained. Yet we are told that from the Bible alone men must get their knowledge of religious truth.

If God had given the Bible alone as a rule of faith, if He had made it a law for all Christians to read the Bible

for themselves, and verify the true meaning of it, and get their religion from it alone, surely He would not have made it impossible for most men to carry out His command. And yet it was impossible for the vast majority of men for eleven centuries after His ascension to have what existed in rare and costly copies. It is only in very modern times that it is possible to have the Bible printed cheaply and widely circulated. Are we to believe that God left the vast majority of men for one thousand four hundred years without that help so necessary to salvation, the Bible and the Bible alone?

And what of the millions who could not read? For many centuries a great majority of even civilized men could not read at all. What good to man is a book if he cannot read it? Are we to believe that God deprived the millions of the poor at every age of the truths of salvation, because, in their ignorance, they could not read the Bible? On the contrary, God did not forget His poor; and His Church has always flourished best among the poor; our Lord Himself tells us that it was one of the marks of His divine mission that the poor would have the Gospel preached to them. Observe, He does not say they were to find the Gospel in the Bible, but it was to be *preached* to them.

Here is a curious contradiction: non-Catholics admit that for several centuries, from the beginning of Christianity, the Church preserved the faith and taught it pure and uncorrupted. Yet, it was during this long period that the vast majority of the faithful never saw the Word of God in writing, much less in print. If the Bible, and the Bible alone, is the only guide of truth, how can they explain that the people got the faith, and preserved it, and handed it down pure and incorrupt, without the Bible?

But are non-Catholics sure of having the Word of

God at all in the Bible they read? Consider all the versions, translations, and editions of the Bible. Consider, again, all the interpolations and excisions even in essential points of doctrine. There are seven complete books wanting in the Protestant Bible. That is to say, there are seven fewer books than there were in almost every collection or catalogue of Holy Scripture, from the fourth to the sixteenth century. These books were deliberately cut out by the so-called reformers of the sixteenth century. Why? Because they did not suit the new doctrines and opinions then put forth. The second book of Machabees was cut out because it taught that "It is a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead, that they may be loosed from sins" (2 Mach. xii. 46). As it was with whole books, so was it with texts in those books they allowed to remain. St. Paul's doctrine, "We are justified by faith," was made by Luther to read, "We are justified by faith only," lest the doctrine of good works in addition to faith, so strongly insisted on by St. James, should be taught, "Faith alone without works is dead" (James ii. 17). St. Paul, inspired by the Holy Ghost, must yield to correction by men, each one a law unto himself in matters of religious truth. How, indeed, we may well ask, can non-Catholics, with their versions and translations of the Bible, maimed and mutilated by men without authority, be sure they have the sacred text at all? They have no certainty of it. They could not have it, for they deny that there is any authority that would infallibly assure them of it. We Catholics know we have the pure Word of God in the Holy Scriptures; for the Church, that always kept it pure, gives it to us, and guarantees it.

Even supposing non-Catholics have a correct version and translation, how are they to ascertain the true meaning of the Scriptures? For if they have not the true mean-

ing of them, they have not the Word of God. Perhaps they will tell us what many say: "The Bible is an open book; any one can read it, and understand it." St. Peter, however, referring to Paul's Epistles, says there are in them "certain things hard to be understood, which the unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other Scriptures, to their own destruction" (2 Peter iii. 16). Did not our Lord in His time condemn the Pharisees for doing the same with the Old Testament? Now the Word of God is the Word of God only in the sense in which God spoke it. But who will give us this sense, and give it with infallible accuracy? How many of the most important texts of Scripture, dealing intimately with man's eternal destiny, have been misunderstood? Did God leave these words, so momentous for man, to each one's private judgment and personal interpretation? What a false principle even for Bible experts in Bible criticism and exegesis—to take the Sacred Scriptures and twist them and turn them and interpret them according to their own sweet will, as if they were the Apostles themselves, or had the authority of Christ to do so; and then turn round and say that the Catholic Church is wrong, and has departed from the truth which Christ taught? The self-sufficiency and pride of men in our own day, as in the days of the Apostles, "wrest the Scriptures to their own destruction" (2 Peter iii. 16). Each man, even the most ignorant, claims to do with the Sacred Scriptures what no man would dare to do with the common law of the land, that is, give a final and definite meaning to them. It is, then, a false principle for even good people who read their Bible piously to take from it alone their religion without any guidance to its meaning. For if the Holy Ghost does not illuminate its pages, they will not convey the sense of God's Word, and the Church alone is the

channel through which the Spirit of God interprets the inspired Word of Holy Scriptures.

“Beware of false prophets. . . . by their fruits you shall know them. Do men gather grapes of thorns or figs of thistles?” (Matt. vii. 15, 16.) What is the result to-day of nearly four centuries of religion from the Bible alone? What is the result of this “believe as you please,” this private judgment and interpretation of the Scriptures? For this is the bedrock of Protestantism. Outside the Catholic Church to-day it is calculated that there are over three hundred and fifty different Protestant denominations, and of these there are in England and Wales alone, to say nothing of the United States, at the lowest computation, one hundred and eighty, and all these profess to be the true religion of Christ. Now, all of them read the Bible. One says bishops are necessary, and are of Apostolic, nay, of divine origin, another says they are useless and unnecessary. One says there is a hell, but his neighbor denies it. One says baptism is necessary, but another says it is not. One insists on feet-washing, another does not. One says Christ is the Son of God, another says He is not. One believes in the divine vocation of the ministry, but another denies it. One says that Jesus Christ was born of a virgin, but another says that He was not. And so on, and so on. Yet all of them agree in taking their religion from the Bible alone by their private judgment, and scarcely agree in anything else, except, indeed, in repudiating the claim of the Catholic Church to be infallible in giving the true meaning of the Scriptures. They are the natural progeny of private judgment, and such judgment in interpreting the Holy Scriptures is a disintegrating principle, a principle of discord. The early reformers, Luther, Hubmaier, Calvin, Knox, Zwinglius, and the others, split up amongst themselves. Their immediate followers did

the same, for we have their word for it. And with time, the diversity of opinion has become more widespread. Indeed, in order to preserve a shadow of unity of belief some Protestants have had recourse to formulas of faith or creeds. But are not these a formal contradiction to the right of each one to get his religion from the Bible alone? And even if they agreed, and if all of them agreed, on any one point of doctrine, no man could believe in it, nor could they themselves believe in it. There can be no divine faith without divine certainty or infallibility. But they don't claim that for anything they believe; but, rather, they condemn the Catholic Church because she alone claims it for her teaching.

Protestantism is the religion of doubt, of "believe as you please." The flood of materialism and rationalism that deluges the modern world is due to men denying the principle of divine faith, the living, unerring voice of the Church of Christ, and substituting for it private judgment in religious truth. And because men have refused to believe in a Divine Teacher, they have lost the certainty of revealed truth; they have lost the fullness of revealed truth, and retained only fragments of it; they have lost the true meaning of the Scriptures, and they are now fast losing belief in the Sacred Scriptures as the inspired Word of God and losing all consciousness of divine truth itself. The reform movement of the sixteenth century held out many promises; abuses were to be corrected in clergy and laity alike; ignorance was to be supplanted by knowledge; human reason was to be freed; human thought was to be expanded and developed; a new era of civil and religious liberty—a millennium, indeed—was at hand. But, alas! it was all a mirage, like that which we used to see on the great plains of the West with its phantom foundations, plants and flowers, so soothing to the weary travelers to behold, but which quickly dis-

appeared and left nothing behind. Protestantism as a light interpreting the Holy Scriptures is a "broken light," a pillar of cloud. Its followers can agree only to disagree in almost every doctrine that concerns man's eternal destiny. "Let them alone; they are blind, and leaders of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, both fall into the pit" (Matt. xv. 14).

From all this we see that the Bible privately interpreted is not the language of God to man, or a teacher of man in religious truth. The Bible is the Book of God when it has God's meaning in it. It is the language of inspiration. We Catholics maintain, however, that the Bible, read as non-Catholics read it, is not the language of inspiration, and that their understanding of it is not the Word of God. The Bible is a good book; it is really inspired by God; but we say to these people that they have not been appointed to explain the Bible either for themselves or for others. The law of the land is good in itself. But does the State permit everyone to read his own meaning into it, and act accordingly? If it did, there would be as many lawmakers and law-breakers as there are individuals in society. The State establishes its courts, and even courts of appeal, and supreme judges, men skilled in the law, to give a final interpretation of the law as passed by the Legislature. So, in like manner, our Lord established a supreme court of appeals, and a supreme judge in the teaching authority of His Church, and promised His own help, and the assistance of the Holy Spirit to preserve it from giving an erroneous decision in matters of doctrine, "He that does not hear the Church, let him be to thee as a heathen" (Matt. xviii, 17)—aye, even if he had the Bible by heart, let him be to thee as a heathen, as a worshipper of false gods. What Church is it that the people are to hear? Surely, it is the Church which Christ Himself founded when He was

upon earth, and which He told to "teach all nations" (Matt. xxviii. 18). Besides the Catholic Church, there are over three hundred and fifty non-Catholic so-called Christian churches. But there is only one Church established by Christ. When He speaks of it He always uses the singular number, and whether He speaks of it in figures or in parables, or in ordinary language, He has always the idea of oneness or unity in His mind. Which was the Church established by Christ? All of these Christian denominations claim to be the Church of Christ. But which is really the true one? The Church of Christ must have lasted from His time, for He promised to be always with it. It is not, then, the "Church of England as by law established." Its very name shows that Christ did not establish it, for it is a Church made by civil law. Nor did He establish a Church for England, or for the United States, or for any other country for that matter; but, rather, one for all nations. So it is with the others. They trace their foundation to some remarkable man, to Luther, Knox, Calvin, Wesley, Brown, Williams, Campbell, or to some woman like Mrs. Eddy, but not to Christ and His Apostles.

Universal history points to the Catholic Church as the Church established by Jesus Christ. We are informed by non-Catholics that such was the fact, but that the Catholic Church, the Church of the ancient faith, fell into error; that it is no longer now what it was in the early centuries of its existence. Well, if the Catholic Church was ever the true Church of God, then she is so to-day, and she shall be the true Church of God to the end of time. For Christ pledged His word that the Church which He established should never fall into error, because the Holy Spirit would dwell in it. He says He built her on a rock, to show her firmness and solidity, and that "the gates of hell should not prevail

against her," that the powers of darkness should not overcome her. If this Church has fallen into error, as non-Catholics say she has done, then Christ has failed in His word; He has abandoned her after promising to be ever with her. He has deceived us; and He is no longer God, or the God of Truth. He also promised the Holy Ghost, the Spirit of Truth, to teach her all truth, and that the Holy Spirit should abide with her forever, and this to prevent any error from entering into her teaching. And are we to say that our Lord failed in making good this promise also, and allowed the spirit of truth to depart from her? No wonder Christ tells us to hear the Church as we ought to hear Himself, "He that heareth you heareth Me" (Luke x. 16). If I hear and believe what the Church teaches, then I hear and believe what God teaches. If I refuse to hear and believe what the Church teaches, then I refuse to hear what God teaches. Listen to these words of St. Paul: "But though we or an angel from heaven preach a Gospel to you besides that which we have preached to you, let him be anathema" (Gal. i. 8). St. Paul was an Apostle, "a vessel of election," who was raised to the third heaven, and who received a special revelation from Christ Himself, and he tells us that the "Church is the pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Tim. iii. 15). Moreover, Christ did not say "Hear the churches;" but He said, "Hear the Church." Nor did He say we should hear the Church for three hundred or five hundred years or one thousand five hundred years, but to hear the Church without limitation of time or place, as He Himself would be with her always. It is then the Catholic Church, the true Church of Christ, which alone will teach us the truth, and which alone will give us the true meaning of the inspired writings of Holy Scripture with divine authority.

The moment you take away the authority of the Church, the way is opened for all kinds of errors and heretical doctrines. In the sixteenth century, Protestantism did away with the authority of the Church, and made everyone his own judge of religious truth by his own reading of the Bible. No authority; each one for himself with his Bible; that was the essence of the new religion. If in an army each soldier followed his own judgment and announced authority, could a war be carried on, or would a nation be safe? If in a ship each sailor were to do the same, and put aside the authority of the captain, would the vessel continue long on a safe course? If in a business concern each employee followed his own judgment and acknowledged no responsible authority, would such a concern last long? Apply all this to the Church and her teaching, and we see at once how vital is the principle of authority to direct us safely in the path of truth. Outside the Catholic Church today, outside this centre of unity and authority in religious truth, Christianity is a "kingdom divided against itself," with mutiny and anarchy reigning supreme, because there is no one who can claim authority to teach, and no one, therefore, reverently to obey. But when we turn from this "city of confusion," this "Babel of confused tongues," to the Catholic Church, we have "the City of Peace."

"I believe in the Holy Catholic Church." Why? Because here there is unity of teaching, unity of worship, unity of government. Because here we have as a first principle authority divinely constituted, and, secondly, submission to that divine authority which we acknowledge. Here, as St. Paul says, we are careful "to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace; one body and one Spirit. . . . one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism" (Eph. iv. 3-5).

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