

THE CHURCH AND THE BIBLE

THE EDITOR

IT would seem that today we stand on the threshold of a great movement for unity. Or perhaps it would be better to use the term 'unification', for people have always desired union with some reality which is regarded as ultimate. Now, however, people are anxious also to gather up the bits and pieces of human life that has become so dissected, and make them into a single whole, where peace at last may be found. Particularly since the sixteenth century men have been broken into many parts. An international order that seemed at one time almost practicable has been shattered by increasing individualism among nations. Society itself has been turned into a collection of units so that the benefits of invention and industry have largely been turned into instruments of separating man from man. In religion each man wanted to be his own Pope and to keep the Bible for his own personal interpretation, while religious thinkers multiplied systems and distinctions in their desire for rational accuracy. Perhaps the most harmful separation was caused by the desire to understand scriptural truth which led to a concentration upon the explanation of biblical texts, till at last the Bible itself disappeared behind a huge wall of religious and 'spiritual' tomes. The life of the spirit was fed, not by the revealed instrument fit for the whole man, but by 'steps' and 'ladders' and 'ways' and spiritual textbooks, which were more concerned with the 'nights' and the 'ways' than they were with the life of Christian grace.

Now all this is being changed, at least by the intense desire for a whole reality. Even in the international order the modern means of transport and communication are teaching men to think of the world as a whole. There are signs too that man at least understands the danger of mechanism and plans to master the machine for the good of society. And for those who had for so long been content with secondhand 'spirituality' there has arisen a movement to recapture the Scriptures and the Liturgy for the normal

life of man hoping for heaven. A most encouraging sign of this may be found in the recent publication of the massive, single volume, *Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*.¹ It is not only that the editors have attempted in the compass of one volume to introduce the Bible as a whole and in all its parts, and to comment on all the parts; nor is it simply that over forty English-speaking biblical specialists have by the masterly and masterful work of four editors been gathered into a joint effort and encouraged to give of their best; the most hopeful sign lies in the fact that these 2,600 closely packed columns are the result of an endeavour to reintegrate the immense progress in biblical scholarship into the Christian's understanding of the Scriptures. In this sense it may be said that the work, although eminently scholarly, is not a work of scholarship. Hitherto scholars have run down their own alleyways supremely interested in discovery, but caring little about the relevance to the life of men of the bits of information unearthed by them.

The Preface to the Commentary says that it is 'the result of nine years' work by a group of scholars who believe that biblical learning must be integrated with traditional Christianity if it is to bear any spiritual message or fruit for modern society'. The intention of writing the volume was to feed the spirit of man by the Spirit of God, which is what the Scriptures do to those who are concerned to learn of God. Those who are anxious only to learn human knowledge, who study Hebrew, history and comparative religions merely to dissect the materials of the Bible are not necessarily so fed; they are often too intent upon the multiplicity of the words. The unity of the Word of God, however, can gather all their learning and scholarship into a single life, the life of the Spirit.

In the past this was the accepted attitude towards the Scriptures. St Thomas, despite his skilful use of the pagan Aristotle in sacred science, remained always and essentially a 'Master of the Sacred Page'. For him Sacred Doctrine was fundamentally the mind of man working systematically upon

¹ *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*, Edited by Bernard Orchard, O.S.B., Edmund Sutcliffe, S.J., Reginald Fuller, and Ralph Russell, O.S.B. (Nelson; £4 4s.)

Holy Writ to discover God and the way to God in final blessedness. Again, any page of St John of the Cross will show that he never left the Sacred Page to wander after his own ideas however beautiful or mystical. We cannot, of course, return to older methods and simply ignore the workings of men's minds since the time of Aquinas or yet of St John of the Cross. There is no going back. But going forward now is going back to the Bible, the Word of God, which is still present with us today—as the Holy Father has shown us in his Encyclical on the Bible. We have to take all these investigations, these literary, archeological and theological findings and replace them in their true setting. This can only be done fully in the Church which remains the Word of God on earth, the Mystical Body of Christ.

Thus the first article in the Commentary deals with 'The Place of the Bible in the Church'. 'It is impossible to understand the Bible aright and its message unless the Bible itself be first viewed in its right setting, i.e. not merely as the eclectic product of certain outstanding members of that divine society that has existed in the world ever since God called Abram out of Ur of the Chaldees, but rather as the divinely inspired crystallisation of the spirit and teaching of that society at times and places specially chosen by the Spirit of God dwelling within it'. It may be regretted that the authors of this first article could not have shaken themselves free of the outworn apologetic approach which has always tended towards division rather than union. They could have gone on to show how the Spirit of Christ yet lives, how the Word is still uttered because the Church is the Word of God on earth. Christ's voice still speaks to us today in the Scriptures, but not so much in the dead letter of historical books as in the living Church who gathers even now all truth within her fruitful womb to bring it forth continuously with the character of its true lineage impressed upon it. In the Word are all things made and from him are brought forth all things both new and old.

But the authors of this Commentary manage on the whole to rid themselves of that destructive spirit of fear in the face of progressive knowledge that has so often marked our apologetics. Rightly they draw into their net—St Peter's net

—the living, jumping, writhing catch of so many great non-Catholic biblical scholars. And as their sense of security within the living Word of God grows so will they be able to push forward fearlessly in their work of unification. In the present issue of *THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT* there is barely suggested the foundation of that unification—the Spirit in the Church, the Eucharistic, living Symbol of the Word, where this Word is both spoken to the mind and fed to the will—such is our secure foundation.

Finally a word should be said about the magnificent production of this Commentary which in a few weeks has outrun its first printing of 5,000 copies. That success is due, after the brilliant work of editors and authors, to the non-Catholic firm of Nelson who have made it typographically so attractive. The smallish type is yet clear to read; the binding and general presentation are not drab or undistinguished as so much similar work has been in the past. There is here in fact a unification in production between editors, authors, printers, binders and publishers.



GRACE IS COMMON

ALAN C. CLARK

IT is a strange fact of history that the Church does not escape some loss when she has to engage in doctrinal controversy. So much has been gained, such steps forward in the clarification of doctrine made, that it is only after a period of years that the suspicion grows that the whole truth has not yet been said. Yet closer analysis of the nature of 'controversial theology' shows how inevitable this must be. From the first the Catholic protagonist suffers the disadvantage of being forced to fight on ground chosen by his adversary. If he is able, he will seize his opponent's weapons and turn them against their owner. But what has happened? He is left victorious in a field not of his own choosing and with weapons not of his own making, effective though they were in the historical context of the controversy. Further, the controversies, however much they bear on eternal truths,