

# ROMAN CATHOLICISM

In the Light of Scripture

by

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## CHAPTER ONE

### ROMAN CATHOLICISM AND THE BIBLE

“THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH does not desire the common people to read the Bible.”

That is a statement which will be immediately challenged and denied. Quotations from statements made by various popes and other high authorities of the church will be brought forward to disprove it. For instance, on the title page of the *Roman Catholic English Bible*, dated April, 1778, appeared a letter from Pius VI to the Archbishop of Florence wherein he urged Catholics to read the Bible:

*At a time when a great many books which grossly attack the Catholic religion are being circulated even among the unlearned to the great destruction of souls, you judge exceedingly well that the faithful should be urged to read the Holy Scriptures, for they are the most abundant source which ought to be left open to everyone, to draw from them purity of morals and of doctrine, and to eradicate the errors which are so widely spread in these corrupt times.*

Against this pleasing statement we must set the facts of ancient and modern history.

The Council of Toulon in 1239 actually forbade the laity to possess any of the books of the Bible except the Psalter and Breviary—the latter a Service containing portions of Scripture—and strictly prohibited their translation into any vernacular.

Some three hundred years later, in the Index of prohibited books prepared by order of the Council of Trent, that prohibition was renewed. The fourth rule of the Index read as follows:

*Since it is manifest from experience that, if sacred books be allowed to be circulated everywhere indiscriminately in the vulgar tongue, more harm than good may arise through the rashness of men in this respect, they must abide by the judgment of the bishop or inquisitor that they may be able to allow the reading of these books translated by Catholic authors into the vulgar tongue to those whom they shall have found capable of deriving from this reading no loss, but increase of faith and piety. This faculty they must have in writing, but any man who, without such faculty, shall presume to read or have them in his possession, cannot receive absolution of his sin till he has first returned the book to the ordinary. But booksellers who shall have sold or in any other way granted these books . . . shall forfeit the value of these books to the bishop.*

Thus by the decree of the Council of Trent, which pronounced a curse on all who refused to acknowledge its decisions as infallible and therefore of course unalterable, only those whom the bishops deem suitable may read the Scriptures in the vernacular, and then only when given authority to do so in writing.

Coming down to later times, an Encyclical Letter of Pope Leo XII dated May 3, 1824, reads:

*You are aware, venerable brethren, that a certain society called the Bible Society strolls with effrontery throughout the world, which society, contrary to the well known decree of the Council of Trent, labors with all its might and by every means to translate—or rather pervert—the Holy Scriptures into the vulgar language of every nation . . . We, in conformity with our apostolic duty, exhort you to turn away your flock by all means from these poisonous pastures.*

The Irish Roman Catholic bishops passed the Encyclical on to their priests in a covering letter from which the following extract is taken:

*Our Holy Father recommends to the observance of the faithful a rule of the congregation of the Index which prohibits the perusal of the Sacred Scriptures in the vulgar tongue without the sanction of the competent authorities. His Holiness wisely remarks that more evil than good is found to result from the indiscriminate perusal of them on account of the malice or infirmity of men . . . Hence, dearest brethren, such books have been and ever will be execrated by the Catholic Church; nay, why she has frequently ordered them to be committed to the flames.*

With such authoritative backing, the confiscation and public burning of Bibles in the past can hardly be wondered at. Indeed, in countries where the Romish Church has sufficient influence, it is still being done today. Such action would not be tolerated in Protestant countries, and Rome has to bow to enlightened public opinion, but that she is still at heart unwilling to place the Bible in the hands of the common people is evidenced by a statement of Cardinal Wiseman:

*But though the Scriptures may be here permitted, we do not urge them upon the people; we do not encourage them; we do not spread them to the utmost. Certainly not.*

In spite of Pius VI's letter, the Scriptures are not "left open to everyone to draw from them purity of morals and doctrine."

Quite the reverse is true. The established custom of the Roman church is to publish Bibles with notations, so that they shall be read in the sense which accords with its doctrines. The Encyclical Letter of Pius IX, dated December 8, 1849, says:

*The faithful under your charge . . . may be earnestly reminded with especial reference to the Holy Scriptures, that no person whatever is warranted to confide in his own judgment as to their true meaning, if opposed to the Holy Mother Church, who alone, and no other, has received the commission from Christ to watch over the faith committed to her trust and to decide upon the true sense and interpretation of the sacred writings.*

From this it will be seen that although the Roman Catholic Church acknowledges the divine inspiration of the Holy Scriptures, those Scriptures after all are not the final authority, but the Roman Church, which alone has the right to decide and interpret their meaning.

That the Holy Scriptures should of right be in the hands of the common people is evident from the Scriptures themselves, and that provides a very sufficient reason for the ban placed upon them by the papal authorities, since the teachings of the Bible and the doctrines of Rome are often poles apart.

Let us turn to the Bible.

1. *In Old Testament days the whole multitude of Israel gathered at Sinai to hear God speak.*

Moses was ordered to commit to writing all the commandments that God had given him (Exodus 34:27, 28). The writing was to be read in the ears of all the people every seventh year at the Feast of Tabernacles (Deuteronomy 31:9-13).

**Gather the people together, men, and women, and children, and thy stranger that is within thy gates, that they may hear, and that they may learn, and fear the Lord your God, and observe to do all the words of this law: And that their children, which have not known any thing, may hear, and learn to fear the Lord your God, as long as ye live in the land whither ye go over Jordan to possess it** (vv. 12, 13).

A record of this being done is found in Nehemiah 8: 1-18 where “**also day by day, from the first day unto the last day**” Ezra “read in the book of the law of God.” The reading of the Scriptures (Nehemiah 8) led to repentance (Nehemiah 9).

2. *Joshua was commanded to meditate upon the written law of the Lord day and night that he might observe to do according to all that was written therein.*

It was not “**to depart out of his mouth,**” which meant that all the commands he gave to the people were to be ordered by it (Joshua 1:7, 8).

3. *The command to the children of Israel was:*

**And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes. And thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates** (Deuteronomy 6:6-9; see also 11:18-21).

These passages show how the Word of God—first oral and then committed to writing, to form the beginning of the Old Testament Scriptures—was to be known and made familiar by the Israelite people, and woven into the warp and woof of their daily life.

4. *When the theocracy changed to a monarchy, each new king as he ascended to the throne was to write out a copy of the Book of the Law for himself.*

**And it shall be, when he sitteth upon the throne of his kingdom, that he shall write him a copy of this law in a book out of that which is before the priests the Levites: And it shall be with him, and he shall read therein all the days of his life; that he may learn to fear the Lord his God, to keep all the words of this law and these statutes, to do them** (Deuteronomy 17:18, 19).

5. *The Psalms abundantly demonstrate that the Old Testament canon, so far as it then existed, was familiar ground to God's chosen people.*

As a standard of faith and conduct it stood at the very center of their national life.

Psalms 1:1-3 describes the blessedness of the man whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates therein day and night. **He is like a tree planted by the rivers of water that bringeth forth its fruit in its season and whose leaf does not wither.**

Psalms 19 speaks of the perfection of God's law and of its practical effect in the lives of those who keep it. It is better than gold, sweeter than honey, enlightening, warning, rewarding.

Nearly every one of the 176 verses of Psalm 119 mentions the Word of God under one title or another:

- v. 9: **Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? by taking heed thereto according to thy word.**
- v. 11: **Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee.**
- v. 16: **I will delight myself in thy statutes: I will not forget thy word.**
- v. 104: **Through thy precepts I get understanding: therefore I hate every false way.**
- v. 105: **Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.**

6. *Coming down to New Testament times, we find our Lord Himself as a boy increasing in wisdom until His knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures amazed the doctors in the temple (Luke 2:46, 47).*

His mind was saturated with the Scriptures even at that early age. Later, as He met the tempter in the wilderness He could instantly lay hold of the Scripture exactly apposite to His need, and His thrice repeated **"It is written"** drove the Devil from the field (Matthew 4:1-11).

Our Lord never rebuked the Jews of His day for reading the Scriptures. He rebuked them for refusing to obey what they read: **"Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me. And ye will not come to me, that ye might have life"** (John 5:39, 40). When the Sadducees scoffed at the resurrection, He said, **"Ye do err, not knowing the Scriptures, nor the power of God"** (Matthew 22:29).

The pope and Roman Church councils say that the ordinary man runs into danger of error when he reads the Bible for himself. Our Lord says that the danger of going astray lies in not reading our Bibles. Whom ought we to believe—God or man? Let the Apostle Peter answer: **“We ought to obey God rather than men”** (Acts 5:29).

*7. At Lystra, Paul found a certain young disciple named Timothy, the son of a Jewess, but his father was a Greek.*

Paul took Timothy with him to be his companion in service.

Two of Paul’s epistles, written toward the end of his life, were addressed to this young man. In II Timothy 3:15 he says, **“From a child thou hast known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.”** The Holy Scriptures, which Timothy had known from childhood, had not led him into error but into the knowledge, of salvation through Christ. How did he get that early knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures? We find the answer in II Timothy 1:5. Obviously this knowledge came from his grandmother Eunice and his mother Lois.

8. Just one more passage. When the Jews at Berea heard the preaching of Paul and Silas concerning the Lord Jesus Christ, **“they received the word with all readiness of mind.”** But they did not stop there; they turned to the Old Testament Scriptures, **“examining the Scriptures daily whether these things were so.”**

They had the Scriptures in their hands, they searched them, and they took them as the standard by which the preaching was to be tested. They were not rebuked for so doing. On the contrary, they received high commendation:

**These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the Scriptures daily, whether those things were so. Therefore many of them believed** (Acts 17:11, 12).

All these passages refer to the Old Testament Scriptures, and this could not be otherwise, since at that time the New Testament was not written. But nowhere in the Bible is there the least suggestion that the New Testament Scriptures as they came to be written should be treated differently from the Old. Peter in his epistle (II Peter 3:15, 16) mentions some of Paul’s epistles which at that later date had come into circulation, and classifies them with the **“other Scriptures,”** thus putting them on a par with the Old Testament books.

The Roman Catholic Church quotes this passage as proving the necessity for the Church to ban the Bible to common people, because Peter mentions certain unlearned and ignorant souls having wrested Paul’s writings, or parts of them which were difficult, to their own destruction. Peter truly warns against the danger of wresting the Scriptures; that is, twisting their meaning, but he certainly does not warn his readers against reading them, or suggest that only the pope and the Councils must read and interpret them! What he says is:

**Ye therefore, beloved, seeing ye know these things before, beware lest ye also, being led away with the error of the wicked, fall from your own steadfastness (II Peter 3:17).**

Immediately he goes on to say, **“But grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.”** How were they to grow in grace and knowledge, and how may we grow in these things? The answer is in I Peter 2:1, 2:

**Wherefore laying aside all malice, and all guile, and hypocrisies, and envies, and all evil speakings, as newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby.**

Our spiritual growth and development depends upon our regular prayerful reading of the Word of God, with hearts ready to obey its every precept.

According to the Word of God, one of the gifts of the ascended Lord Jesus to His church is **“teachers”** (Ephesians 4:11). All true children of God recognize the help that comes in receiving the teaching of men of greater knowledge of the Bible and deeper Christian experience than themselves. We are told to **“let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially they who labor in the word and doctrine”** (I Timothy 5:17). But that is very different from the teaching that would deny us direct access to the Scriptures, and bid us to accept an interpreter instead.

There is a Teacher promised and given to every believer, whom the Roman Catholic Church forgets or ignores in practice. Before our Lord left His disciples He said to them in His discourse in the upper room:

**And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever; Even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you (John 14:16, 17).**

**But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, which the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you (John 14:26).**

**When he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth (John 16:13).**

The promise of the Holy Spirit was not for the apostles alone, but for all believers. He came upon the 120 gathered at Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 1:15 and 2:14). He was promised to the thousands who believed on that day (Acts 2:38) and that promise extended to generations of believers unborn, both Jews and Gentiles (Acts 2:38, 39). Rome’s insistence on priestly guidance in reading the Scriptures expressly contradicts the statement of I John 2:27, addressed to all believers:

**But the anointing which ye have received of him abideth in you, and ye need not that any man teach you: but as the same anointing teacheth you of all things, and is truth, and is no lie, and even as it hath taught you, ye shall abide in him.**

It also runs counter to what Paul wrote to the Corinthian and Thessalonian churches:

**I speak as to wise men; judge ye what I say** (I Corinthians 10:15).

**Prove all things; hold fast that which is good** (I Thessalonians 5:21).

In both of these passages the right and duty of private judgment is upheld not merely by Paul, but also by the Holy Spirit, whose inspiration of these very epistles Rome acknowledges. The exhortations are not addressed to popes or priests, for the papacy did not then exist, nor even to church elders, but **“to the saints and faithful brethren in Christ.”**

~ end of chapter 1 ~

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