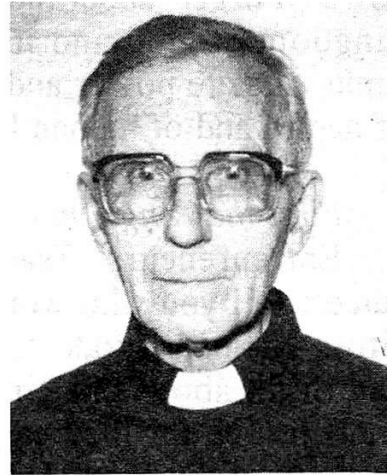


## *The Word of God Entrusted to the Church*

*Theobald Diederich, O.F.M.*

It is not possible for sinful human beings, relying upon themselves alone, to find their way back to God. Only God can call them to himself and lead them to salvation.



### **God's Revealing Word**

God made himself known in various ways to the Children of Israel: through the continuous progression of their history, through spokespersons, the prophets and saints; and through the writings of those who, moved by the Holy Spirit, conveyed God's message in human words. This message was faithfully preserved by the Jewish people in the books of the Old Testament, but in so far as God used imperfect human beings as instruments, revelation also remained imperfect.

In "the final days", however, the "Word was made flesh" (Jn 1:14), and the Son of God spoke as a man to men and women. Jesus Christ came into the world to fulfill his Father's mission--"to make God known" (Jn 1:18), and he did this by word and deed, through his life, his death and his resurrection...all of which bear witness to the fact that he was indeed the Son of God.

What Jesus' revelation and his message were was first proclaimed orally by his disciples, but later written down to form the books of the New Testament.

Christians call the collected books of the Old and New Testament "the Bible", or in Chinese "Sheng Jing" (the Holy Scripture). We accept the content of these books in faith as the Word of the living God, whose intention it is to speak to us through them as a Father addressing His beloved children. In them God continues to reveal himself to us all, and to guide us

along the way that leads to the One, who alone is the source of salvation. As is written in the Epistle of Paul to Timothy: "(Jesus Christ) is the Saviour of the whole human race" (1 Tim 4:10).

## **The Word of God Preserved in the Bible**

The Bible is, then, "the Book" (*Biblos*) written for all men and women. It is like a personal letter from God addressed to everyone. And God's Word remains forever alive. The prophet Isaiah says of the enduring nature of God's message to the Children of Israel:

All flesh is grass, the grass withers, the flower fades, and like the grass human beings will pass away, but the Word of God remains forever." (Is 40:7-10)

Jesus says this of his own preaching: "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away" (Mk 13:31). The mission of Jesus did not end with his death. On the eve of his passion which would culminate in that death, he stated in his prayer to the Father: "I have made your name known and I will continue to make it known" (Jn 17:26). As the Risen Lord, he is united in a new way with his followers; and as the Risen Lord, he sent out his disciples to continue his mission to proclaim the Gospel to all nations. To fulfill this mission, he bestowed upon them the gift of the Holy Spirit, who would "introduce them into the complete truth" (Jn 16:13), guide them in their work of preaching the Gospel, and make of them his witnesses "even to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:1). It is in the Gospels and all the other books of the New Testament that we find the Good News preached by Christ and written testimony of the original disciples of Christ. We are assured by those who were "eye-witnesses and ministers of the Word" (Lk 1:2) that "What we have seen and heard we are telling you, so that you, too, may be in union with us" that you may share our faith (I Jn 1:3).

The Church, which is the community of the followers of Christ, accepted the writings of the New Testament from the very beginning as the foundation of her faith and the rule of her life. The Church accepted the books of the Old Testament at the

same time, for was it not Christ himself who declared that the Scriptures of the Old Covenant gave testimony of him (Jn 5:39) and that he had come not to do away with but "fulfill the Scriptures" (Mt 5:17-19)? In a similar vein, the apostles also declared that everything written in the books of the Old Testament was written for the followers of Christ (Rom 15:4, 2 Tim 3:15-17; 1 Pt 1:10-12).

### **Book of the Church**

Thus did the Bible, the total collection of Old and New Testament books, become the "Book of the Church", the treasure-house of God's revealed word. But this treasure is not to be kept by the Church for herself alone; she is called to share it with others...with the whole world. What the Risen Lord said to his band of disciples was meant for the whole Church: "As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you" (Jn 20:21). Christ had come "to make God known", and as the resurrected Lord living on in his Church, he continues to fulfill that promise he made to the Father: "I shall continue to make your name known" (Jn 17:26). It is his intention to lead all men and women to faith through the Church and in faith to salvation. But as St. Paul reminds us: "Faith comes from preaching and preaching has its roots in the Word of God (Rom 10:17). It is, then, Christ himself, who proclaims the Good News through the mouths of his messengers, and "the Gospel is the power of salvation to everyone who believes" (Rom 1:16).

How are people to come to know Christ, and through Christ to know God, unless the Church opens up to them the treasury of Divine revelation? St. Jerome has clearly stated: "Ignorance of the Scriptures means ignorance of Christ," and adding to these words he also wrote: "Whoever does not know the Scriptures does not know the power and might of God."

### **Translation of the Bible**

The Church received the Scriptures in their original languages...Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. When she sent forth missionaries to the various tribes and nations, new copies of the old texts were sent with them. By the second century, translations of the Bible began to appear. The earliest were done in

Syriac and Latin, but these were soon followed by translations into the Near East languages. Then came translations into the many languages of the nations of Europe. When in the 15th century the printing press was introduced to Europe, and in the 16th century following upon the Reformation, Bible translations became available in many languages. The most active group in providing these translations of the Bible were the Protestants, who increased their efforts from the beginning of the 19th century by founding a great number of Bible societies. These societies had as their main purpose the printing and dissemination of the Bible throughout the world. Through their efforts knowledge of the Bible, in whole or in part, has reached about 90% of the world's population.

### **Bible Translation in China**

Was the Church in China remiss in fulfilling her mission to proclaim the Word of God? There can be no doubt that the missionaries from the very beginning did preach the teachings found in the Bible; however, they failed in their repeated attempts to translate the Bible itself into Chinese. Only at the beginning of the 19th century was the treasury of the Bible opened in its entirety to the Chinese people.

The famous Nestorian stele in Xian, erected in the year 781, testifies to the fact that Nestorian monks arrived in Changan, the ancient capital of the Tang dynasty in 635 and there began translating the New Testament. Nothing of their work has been preserved. However, in the writings of John of Plano Carpini and William Rubruck, who were among the first group of Franciscan missionaries to China in the 13th century, we do find confirmation of the fact that there were still many Nestorian Christians among the Chinese, many of whom had some knowledge of the Bible and its contents.

At the end of the 13th century John of Montecorvino, another Franciscan, arrived in Khanbaliq (Beijing) where he was later to be made Bishop. In one of his letters to Rome, he mentioned that he had prepared a set of paintings depicting events of the Old and New Testament and accompanied them with explanatory inscriptions to serve as educational aids in teaching biblical history. Montecorvino did his best to make the Bible known among the people there, but he had to do so in the Mongolian

language. Unfortunately, his original manuscripts have also been lost. The first Franciscan mission to China ended with the overthrow of the Yuan dynasty by the Ming during the middle of the 14th century, when propagation of the Christian faith was prohibited by government decree.

At the close of the Ming dynasty in the latter part of the 16th century, the Society of Jesus began its missionary work in China under the leadership of such notable Jesuits as Matteo Ricci, Aleni, Diaz, Buglio, Ruggieri, de Pantoja and others. While their preaching was extensive, and in their writings they introduced Christian terminology into the Chinese language, unfortunately, they did not devote much attention to the translation of the Bible, except for the biblical texts used in the celebration of the Christian liturgy.

It was a French missionary from the Paris Foreign Mission Society, J. Basset, who around the year 1700 was the first to have the Four Gospels, the Acts and the Epistles of Paul (up to the Epistle to the Hebrews) translated into Chinese. A Jesuit, Louis de Poirot, completed a translation of the greater part of the Old Testament by the year 1800. But neither Basset's manuscript nor the 34 volumes of Poirot's work reached publication. In the meantime, Protestants had begun their active missionary efforts in China, and by the beginning of the 19th century, they were already at work translating and publishing the Bible in Chinese. Praise of the highest order belongs to Robert Morrison, whose edition of the entire Bible translated into Chinese was printed in 1823 in Malacca, but great merit also belongs to such translators as W. Milne, J. Marshman, W. Carey, J. Lassar, K. Gutzlaff and W. Medhurst, to mention only the better known among their number. At the beginning of our own century, various Protestant denominations came together to revise the texts of the existing Chinese translations in order to prepare a common version. The final fruit of their endeavours was the "Union Version", published in 1919, which quickly became the standard version commonly used by Protestant Churches in their religious services. It was reprinted recently in Nanjing and is again being circulated throughout the China mainland. Of the recent Protestant translations, we must mention here "Today's Chinese Version", edited by the United Bible Societies, which is an adaptation of the popular "Good News Bible" in English, and also the "The New Chinese Bible" which

is edited by the New Chinese Bible Commission. These two versions appeared between 1973 and 1976.

It must be admitted that efforts by the Catholic Church in translating the Bible pale in comparison to the prodigious activity of Protestant translators during the past century. While there were various abridgments of the Old and New Testaments, it was only in 1922 that there appeared a complete Catholic version of the New Testament in one edition, which was translated from the Latin by Joseph Siao, S.J. This edition was much appreciated and has been reprinted many times. Other translations of the New Testament followed, most notably that of Dr. Wu Ching Hsiung, who not only translated the New Testament, but also rendered the Book of Psalms in the Chinese classical style.

Despite such efforts, there remained an urgent need for a complete Catholic version of the Bible in Chinese based on the original texts and versions. Fr. Gabriel M. Allegra, O.F.M., arrived in China in 1931 and dedicated the rest of his life to answering this need. By 1945, he had gathered together a group of young Chinese Franciscans in Beijing, all of whom were graduates of Fujen University, to collaborate with him in this work. This group, known as the Studium Biblicum, moved to Hong Kong in 1948. By 1961, it had produced an eleven volume translation of the entire Bible, complete with commentaries. After careful revision, it was published in 1968 in a one volume edition. The Studium Biblicum also continued to publish supplementary biblical materials to promote biblical knowledge and serve as an aid for Bible reading and study. Most notable among the biblical literature provided has been the *Bible Dictionary* and a Bible periodical.

It was providential that this new Catholic edition of the Chinese Bible became available immediately following The Second Vatican Council. When the Council called for liturgical reforms and the translation of the Roman Liturgy into indigenous languages, there was a Catholic Chinese Bible ready at hand to be used for this purpose.

Last year, the Chinese Bishops' Conference, meeting in Beijing, agreed to print the Studium Biblicum translation of the Old Testament for use on the mainland. For the New Testament, they intend to use the version now being prepared by Bishop Aloysius Jin of Shanghai.

While the first Catholic translation of the Bible by the *Studium Biblicum* is in no way perfect, and a new version will be needed in the near future, the treasury of the Word of God has at least been opened and offered to the Chinese people. We trust and pray that what was spoken by God concerning His Word through the prophet Isaiah will also be fulfilled in China:

As the rain and the snow come down from the heavens and do not return without watering the earth, making it yield and giving growth to provide for the sower and bread for the eating, so the Word that goes from My mouth does not return to Me empty, without carrying out My will and succeeding in what it was sent to do. (Is 55:10-11)

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## **China Church Update (continued from Page 5)**

### **Bishop Ordained in Xichang**

Fr. Xie Chaogang, 80, was ordained bishop of Xichang in Sichuan Province on May 5. The ceremony took place in Beijing and the acting president of the Bishops' Conference of the Catholic Church in China, Msgr. Joseph Zong Huaide, presided. Vatican-appointed Bishop Duan Yinming of Wanxian and China-appointed Bishop Chen Shizhong of Yibin, both of Sichuan, assisted. This episcopal see had been vacant since 1954 when French Bishop Stanislaus Baudry died. In the early '50s, when the French Foreign Missionaries were expelled, Bishop Xie was appointed vicar-general of the diocese. Shortly afterwards he was jailed for 28 years, according to UCAN sources. The diocese, which has about 20,000 Catholics, has only 5 priests. His ordination took place at the same time the bishops of southern China were assembled in the capital city for a 15-day study seminar.

### **Joseph Zheng Changcheng Ordained Bishop of Fuzhou**

On February 6, Joseph Zheng Changcheng was unanimously elected bishop of Fuzhou diocese, Fujian province, on China's southern coast. Born in Fujian, Bishop Zheng was educated in  
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