

SOME BIBLICO-LITURGICAL PASSAGES RECONSIDERED

THE language of the Liturgy is the language of the Bible. Not only is the Liturgy impregnated with words, phrases, ideas and reminiscences of all sorts drawn from the Bible, but extensive parts of the Bible are daily read, either privately or publicly, in the liturgical service. In the Latin Church obviously it is the Latin Bible or the Vulgate which is the official text of the Liturgy and which after Vatican Council II has been substituted by the vernacular languages. No version of the Bible is absolutely perfect. Neither St. Jerome's Latin Bible nor any of the modern versions is absolutely free from error or, at least, imperfections, and these errors and imperfections naturally find their way into the liturgy to the great detriment of the faithful in their daily use of liturgical books. It is not my purpose to list here all those biblico-liturgical passages which need correction or at least some explanation, but I simply limit myself to a few of the most familiar passages which are more likely to cause some confusion or difficulty to the reader.

Pinguis est panis Christi et praebebit delicias regibus, alleluja. These words which form the 3rd antiphon in Lauds for the feast of *Corpus Christi*, recall Gen. 49,20: 'Asher's food shall be rich, and he shall yield royal dainties', which does not perfectly agree with the sense of the antiphon. The sense of the antiphon is: The eucharistic bread yields pleasure, delight to kings. But in reality it offers delight to all who partake of it. The dative *regibus* is out of place and it should be changed into the adjective *regales*. The noun *rex* is not used here in its proper meaning but as a means to express the superlative. Hence the real sense is: The eucharistic bread yields an exquisite delight.

Hodie scietis quia veniet Dominus et mane videbitis gloriam eius. This is the invitatory of the Vigil of the Nativity of Christ, and is taken from Ex. 16,6.7 where God is promising to give to his people in the wilderness bread and flesh: 'Vespere scietis...et mane videbitis gloriam Domini'.

Non est alia natio tam grandis quae habeat deos appropinquantes sibi. From Deut 4,7. Although the Hebrew word *elohim* has a plural ending,

it has also a singular meaning which is more appropriate here.

Rex pacificus magnificatus est. The second antiphon of the First Vespers of the Nativity. Taken from 2 Chr. 9, 22 where it reads thus: King Solomon excelled all the kings of the earth i.e. the proper name Solomon has been translated 'pacificus' and applied to Christ.

In sole posuit tabernaculum suum. (Ps. 19, 4). 'In the sun He (God) set up his tent'. But the Hebrew text is different: 'In them, i.e. in the heavens He set up a tent for the sun.'

Tota pulchra es Maria et macula originalis non est in te. With the exception of the word *Maria* and *originalis*, which have been added to make the text fit the Immaculate Conception of Mary, the rest is taken from Canticle 4, 7 where the sense is: You are all beautiful, there is no blemish in you. The word *macula* in the biblical language is not 'stain' but any defect or imperfection.

O quam pulchra est casta generatio cum claritate. Read in the Office of Virgins. Taken from Wisdom 4, 1. But how different the Greek text is, which reads so: 'Better than this (i.e. unrighteousness) is childlessness with virtue'.

Dum medium silentium tenerent omnia et nox in suo cursu medium iter haberet, omnipotens sermo tuus de caelo a regalibus sedibus venit. Wisdom 18, 14. Read in the Office of the Octave of Nativity. The translation is correct, but the contexts in the Bible and in the Liturgy are totally different. The Liturgy applies these words to the Nativity of Christ, when the omnipotent Word of God, made flesh, descended from heaven, i.e. was born at midnight, as it is believed. But the context of the Bible is completely different. It refers to the death of the first-born of Egypt narrated in Exodus 12, 29-30. God's command is personified as an agent of God's justice, endowed with extraordinary power and charged with the destruction of all the first-born of Egypt. And at midnight this agent of God smote all the first-born in the land of Egypt. (Ex. 12, 29). There is therefore an immense difference between the text of Exodus-Wisdom and its application by the Church. In Ex-Wisd. God's word comes down on earth for destruction, in the Liturgy it comes down for salvation.

Emitte Agnum Domine Dominatorem terrae, de Petra deserti ad montem filiae Sion. Is. 16, 1. Read in the Office of the III Sunday of Advent. A prayer to God to send the Lamb, the ruler of the land, that is Christ. In

reality it is an invitation to the Moabites to send a tribute (lambs) to the ruler or king of Sion. Hence the correct reading should be: 'Send a tribute (of lambs) to the ruler of the land'.

Rorate caeli desuper et nubes pluant iustum: aperiatur terra et germinet salvatorem. Another well known text of the liturgy of Advent. Here again St. Jerome, as usual, is twisting the natural sense of the words in order to make them fit the Messiah. In the context the prophet is predicting the victories of Cyrus as a prelude to the liberation of the Israelites from the exile and concludes with this wish: Shower, O heavens, from above, and let the skies rain down righteousness (i.e. victory) let the earth open, that salvation may sprout forth (Is. 45, 8). The object of the prophet's wish and prayer is the victory of Cyrus and the deliverance of the exiles.

Mittamus lignum in panem eius et eradamus eum de terra viventium. Jer. 11, 19. Read in the Office for Maundy Thursday in Matins. I confess that I have been always puzzled by the words 'Let us put wood in his bread'. Naturally they denote some sort of torture. But what was it? How and when was it applied to Christ? The Hebrew text solved, at least to some extent, the difficulty. The word for 'let us put' is generally translated 'let us destroy'; the word for 'wood' means also 'tree'; and the word for 'his bread', by means of a slight emendation, is made to mean 'his vigour'. Jer. 11, 19 is therefore generally translated thus: Let us destroy the tree in its vigour; and these may be easily applied both to Jeremiah and to Christ.

Recordare, Virgo Mater Dei, dum steteris in conspectu Domini, ut loquaris pro nobis bona, et ut avertas indignationem suam a nobis. Jer. 18, 20. This is the offertory in the Mass for Our Lady of Sorrows. It is taken from Jer. 18, 20. The prophet is pleading with God against the ingratitude of his countrymen for whom he had interceded so many times before God. The Church, however, applies these words to Our Lady who is requested to stand before God and intercede for us.

In medio duorum animalium innotesceris (Habacuc 3, 2.) This passage together with Is. 1, 3: *Cognovit bos possessorem suum, et asinus praesepe domini sui* gave rise to the legend of the ox and the ass near the manger of the Babe Jesus; how rightly we shall soon see. Isaiah is contrasting the people's ingratitude with the brutes' gratefulness to their benefactors, without any reference to any particular master of oxen and

asses. Habacuc says nothing about animals, and his text, as read in the Latin Vulgate is a wrong translation of Hebrew. In fact the word 'annorum' reproduces the Hebrew word *snim*, and the Hebrew word *bjjhu* is very much similar to *bjut* 'animals'. Therefore the original 'In the midst of the years thou shalt make it known' became 'in the midst of two animals thou madest (thyself) known'. And so we leave the ox and the ass to the imagination of children and to the rhetorics of orators.

Exultabo in Deo Iesu meo (Hab. 3, 18). In the Office of the Holy Name of Jesus. The text sounds like an attestation of the divinity of Jesus; but it is not. *Jesus* is a common noun meaning 'Saviour' (Mt. 1, 21). Hence the sense is: God, my saviour, *not* Jesus, my God.

Cum esset desponsata Mater Jesu Maria Joseph, antequam convenirent. The *v. convenirent* is generally taken to denote euphemistically the conjugal intercourse. The whole verse therefore excludes only any intercourse before, but not after, the conception of Jesus. Therefore the verse does not necessarily imply the perpetual virginity of Mary. The objection rests on the euphemistic meaning of the *v. convenire*, which is absolutely gratuitous and unproved. *Convenire*, said of married persons, denoted simply the cohabitation without any necessary relation to sexual intercourse. Cohabitation followed the betrothal, and its beginning was the wedding ceremony. Hence the sense of Matt. 1, 18 is that Jesus was conceived before Mary and Joseph were wedded, before they went to live in their own home as two married persons. This sense is confirmed by the following verses where Joseph is assured by the angel that the conception was due to no human agency but exclusively to the Holy Ghost.

Quis autem vestrum cogitans potest adiicere ad staturam suam cubitum unum? (Matt. 6, 27). This is simply absurd and absolutely against the context. In vv. 25-34 Christ is emphasizing the uselessness of excessive worrying and anxiety about worldly riches. Man need not worry about the necessities of life, because despite all his anxieties man cannot alter in the least the ordinary course of things, not even prolong a little his span of life. This is why the meaning 'age, extent of life' for the Greek *belikia* is preferable to the more common 'stature'. The heightening of one's stature by one cubit, which is about 20 inches, besides being mostly undesirable, is not a small achievement. Life is here compared to an expanse of indefinite length to which no one can add the smallest quantity.

The parable of the ten virgins (Matt. 25, 1-12). The liturgical and homiletical applications of this parable are too well known to call for any special exposition here. What I wish to emphasize here is the total lack of any relation of the parable with virgins. Those that in the parable are called virgins have nothing to do with those whom today we call virgins; they are simply bridesmaids. In those days the nuptial ceremony consisted in a procession, which today is called *aux flambeaux* from the house of the bridegroom to the house of the bride and back again. Both the bridegroom and the bride used to be attended upon by friends or bridesmen and bridesmaids carrying glaring torches in one hand and cruets of oil in the other. The bridesmaids were young unmarried girls, presumably still virgins, but not necessarily so. And so any relation of the parable with virgins vanishes away.

Dormite iam et requiescite. Sufficit: venit hora. Mc. 14, 41. This sense is unsuitable to the context. Did Christ intend to tell them: You have slept enough: now it is time to get up. But this contradicts Christ's previous words: Sleep now and take your rest. Out of the many suggestions proposed this seems to be the most probable. The Aramaic verb underlying the Greek *apechei* is *rebeq*. Now the letters *r* and *d* are very similar and easily interchangeable in Aramaic and Hebrew. Supposing the letter *r* to represent an original *d*, the verb would be *debeq* which means 'to press, to urge'. Moreover the noun 'hour' may be connected with the verb *apechei* as its subject. Hence the sense and translation is: Sleep and take your rest. Time presses: it has arrived.

Haec descriptio prima facta est a praeside Syriae Cyrino. Lk. 2, 2. Christ's birth took place during a census of the Roman Empire ordered by Augustus. This census is said to be *first* (prote) during the tenure of office of Quirinius, governor of Syria. Both Grammar and History have been called upon to explain in what sense is this census to be first, and consequently to determine the exact year of the birth of Jesus Christ and the beginning of christian chronology. Needless to say, opinions differ, and in spite of long discussions, there is as yet no agreement. A satisfactory solution, however, does not seem to be very far off. Supposing Luke to be using Aramaic sources, it is easy to read the word *rishon* for the Greek *prote* 'first'. But Aram. *rishon* as Hebrew *rosh* means both 'first' and 'head'. Hence two possible meanings 'a first census' and 'a census of heads'. This twofold meaning is confirmed by history and ancient documents. There is indisputable evidence that in the Roman

Empire the people were numbered sometimes by houses or families, and sometimes by persons or heads. The census carried out under Quirinius seems to have been a census by heads.

Obtulerunt pro eo Domino par turturum aut duos pullos columbarum. Lk. 2, 24. This is the 5th antiphon in Lauds of the feast of the Purification of Our Lady. But now the question arises: What did Mary actually offer, a pair of turtle-doves or a pair of pigeons? A distinction must be made between the prescription of the law and the fact itself prescribed by the law. The law is clearly stated in Lev. 12. 2-8; 'If a woman bears a male child... she shall bring to the priest a lamb a year old... And if she cannot afford a lamb, then she shall take two turtle-doves or two young pigeons... Therefore in case of poverty the law not only grants a concession of a smaller offering, but also allows the alternative of another offering of equal value. What did Mary actually offer is not stated in the biblical text, which simply says that 'Mary brought the baby to present him to the Lord and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the law of the Lord, a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons' (Lk. 2, 23, 24). Mary certainly offered the prescribed offering, whether turtle-doves or pigeons. It is the liturgy which transferred the alternative or from the law to its execution.

Beati eritis cum... eiecerint nomen vestrum tanquam malum. Lk. 6, 22. Read in the 5th responsory of the Office of the Apostles. The Greek verb *ekballein*, rendered 'cast away', means simply 'to bring out' without any idea of violence. It is the literal equivalent of the Hebr. *bosi*, which is the causative form of the verb *yasa* 'to go out', hence 'to bring out' and idiomatically 'to make known'. In the Koine and the LXX the Greek verb has lost altogether the idea of violence and means simply 'to send out, to put away'. But the idiomatic sense 'to spread an evil name' for the verb *bosi* occurs in Numb. 13, 32. 'They spread abroad an evil report'. Lk. 6, 22 means 'They will spread an evil name against you'.

Quia propheta magnus surrexit in nobis: et quia Deus visitavit plebem suam. Lk. 7, 16. Read during the week after the 4th Sunday of Lent. The conjunction *quia* is not the usual casual conjunction; it is the Greek conjunction *boti*, which in its turn represents the Hebrew conjunction *ki*, which besides denoting the cause serves also to introduce a statement or to assert emphatically an event. Hence in Lk. 7, 16, the sense is: Truly a great prophet has arisen amongst us; truly God has visited his people.

Ignem veni mittere in terram et quid volo nisi ut accendatur? In the feast of St. Ignatius. The Greek text is difficult and translation is doubtful. A literal translation is :I came to cast fire upon the earth; and what will I? if it is already kindled. Many others however prefer to translate: How I wish that it were already kindled! But this rendering does violence to the Greek text and implies that Christ has cast a fire that is not yet kindled, which is absurd. Anyhow the punctuation given above is preferable to that of the Vulgate, Lk. 12, 49.

Descendit hic iustificatus ab illo. Lk. 18, 14. 10th Sunday after Pentecost. The expression 'ab illo' implies a comparison. But what does the comparison bear upon? Justification itself or the degree of justification? Hence is the sense: The one was justified, the other was not, or rather: the one was justified more than the other? The first sense is excluded by the context which in no way implies a condemnation of the Pharisee; the second is possible both by context and grammar. Hence we say that the publican went down to his house justified, the Pharisee went out of the temple with a lesser degree of justification.

Et vidimus gloriam eius, gloriam quasi unigeniti a Patre (Jn. 1, 14). In the last Gospel of the Mass and in the Office of Nativity. This seems to imply that Christ had a glory similar to, but not identical with, that of the Father. But at the time when the translation of John's Gospel was made the particle *quasi* had also the meaning of *sicut*. Hence the sense is: We saw his glory, as the glory of the only son.

Erat lux vera quae illuminat omnem hominem venientem in hunc mundum. Jn. 1, 9. In the last Gospel of the Mass, when it was still read. The subject, according to the context, is the man sent from God to give testimony to the light and who was not the light (vv. 6-8). But this contradicts v. 8. How could the man sent from God illuminate, if he was not the light? The ptcp. *venientem* must be made to agree with *lux*. The light was to come on earth and illuminate every man.

Principium qui et loquor vobis (Jn. 8. 25). Second Sunday of Lent. This is the answer to the Jews' question: Who are you? The sense however is not easy to grasp. The nominative or accusative neuter *principium* corresponds to the Greek accusative *ten archen*, which besides a nominal meaning, *principium*, has also an adverbial meaning, *primum* or *principaliter*. Hence the sense of Christ's words is: *Primum ego sum id quod vobis dico*. That is, Primarily, essentially, I am what I have told

you; I am what my words reveal me to be.

Dicit ei Jesus: Maria. Conversa illa, dicit ei: Rabboni. Jn. 20, 16. These words are not read in the liturgy, but yet they present some difficulty. In fact in v. 14 we read that when the angels spoke to Mary Magdalene, 'she turned round and saw Jesus standing there', then in v. 16 'Jesus said: Mary. She turned to him and said: Rabboni'. This second turning can be understood as turning the back on Jesus, which is absurd; unless we suppose that Mary turned slightly to her right or left side. The incongruity of the first meaning is avoided by supposing a confusion between the two Aramaic verbs *istabar* 'to turn oneself' and *istakal* 'to recognize'. By adopting the latter meaning we obtain this sense: Jesus said: Mary. She recognized him and said: Rabboni.

There are also many other inaccuracies in the Latin Vulgate of the Old and New Testament due either to an over-literal translation or to a misunderstanding of idiomatic words and expressions. Thus the word *anima* 'soul', which reproduces the Hebr. *nepshesh* (Malt. *nifs*) is a very frequent mistranslation. In fact the word *nepshesh*, besides its ordinary meaning 'soul', means also 'neck, throat', a meaning which occurs also in Accadian. Thus in Ps. 68(69)2 we read 'Save me, O God, for the waters are come in even unto my soul' i.e. unto my neck, the figure being that of a drowning man. Is. 5, 14 'Hell hath enlarged her soul and opened her mouth without any bounds'. What is the soul of hell? Hell has no soul; the soul of hell or the *nepshesh* is the throat, the gullet which is represented as wide-open ready to swallow up as many of the people as are ready and willing to go down. Hence in the prayer for the Pope 'Dominus conservet eum... et non tradat eum in animam inimicorum eius' we pray God to deliver the Pope from his enemies who are ready to swallow him up as a beast swallows a tiny insect.

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