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LITURGIAM AUTHENTICAM
The Authority of the Vulgate and the Neo-Vulgate*

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The Executive Board of the Catholic Biblical Association of America contends that *Liturgiam authenticam* (LA), issued in March 2001 by the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, "appears to misinterpret the authority of the Neo-Vulgate." The Board states: "*Liturgiam authenticam* attributes massive authority to the Neo-Vulgate in nos. 24, 33, 37, 41a and 43."[1]

Let us take LA 37 as an example. It reads:

> If the biblical translation from which the Lectionary is composed exhibits readings that differ from those set forth in the Latin liturgical text, it should be borne in mind that the Neo-Vulgate edition is the point of reference as regards the delineation of the canonical text.

In support of the above statement that "the Neo-Vulgate edition is the point of reference as regards the delineation of the canonical

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[1]Catholic Biblical Association of America (CBAA), "To the Prelates of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops," http://cba.cua.edu/usccbdoc.cfm.

text," *Liturgiam authenticam*, in note 32, appeals to: 1) two decrees of the Council of Trent, and 2) the Apostolic Constitution *Scripturarum thesaurus* of John Paul II promulgating the Neo-Vulgate. Our discussion, therefore, will center on these documents.

I. THE COUNCIL OF TRENT AND THE VULGATE

Let us first consider LA's appeal to Trent. By this appeal, LA appears to be attempting to impart to the Neo-Vulgate the authority which Saint Jerome's Vulgate is alleged to possess according to the Council of Trent. LA refers to two decrees solemnly promulgated in the fourth session of the Council on April 8, 1546: Decree on Sacred Books and on Traditions to be Received,[2] and Decree concerning the Vulgate edition of the Bible and concerning the Manner of Interpreting Sacred Scripture.[3] The Vulgate is mentioned in each decree. Is it given the role of "the point of reference as regards the delineation of the canonical text"?

A. Decree on Sacred Books and on Traditions

In the conclusion to this decree, which lists the books of the Old and New Testaments recognized by the Council, Trent affirms:

> If anyone does not accept all these books in their entirety, with all their parts, as they are being read in the Catholic church and are contained in the ancient Vulgate Latin edition, as sacred and canonical ... *anathema sit.*[4]

Here the Vulgate, at first sight, might appear to be given a role as "the point of reference as regards the delineation of the canonical

[2]DS 1501-1505, ND 210-213.

[3]DS 1506-1508, ND 214-215.

[4]DS 1504, ND 213.

text." The books are to be received "with all their parts ... as sacred and canonical." A "part" is a notable portion of some importance, either in size (length) or in doctrine (content). But how is an authentic part to be identified? In answer to this question, the Council specified: "as they are being read in the Catholic church and are contained in the ancient Vulgate Latin edition."

How is this specification of the Council to be interpreted? Is the Vulgate given the role of "the point of reference as regards the delineation of the canonical text"? Does it mean that every part of the Vulgate is canonical by the very fact of being part of the Vulgate? The answer: probably not. Many of the better theologians maintain that Trent here lays down a double criterion: 1) presence in the Vulgate, and 2) acceptance by the tradition of the entire Church.

L. Venard holds that these criteria should be regarded as complementary rather than as totally distinct and separable; both must be fulfilled.[5] Insertion in the Vulgate is the clearest sign of the constant usage of the text in question in the Latin church, but it is not of itself sufficient to certify the canonicity of a text beyond all question. Before a final conclusion could be drawn, one would have to consult the liturgical and theological traditions of Eastern as well as Western Christendom.

Conclusion to A. In this first decree, the Vulgate is given a role as *a* "point of reference as regards the delineation of the canonical text." But it is not *the* point of reference. Presence in the Vulgate is one criterion of canonicity but it is not sufficient by itself to certify the canonicity of a text beyond all question.

B. Decree Concerning the Vulgate

In its fourth session (April 8, 1546), the Council of Trent also

[5]L. Venard, "Vulgate," in *Dictionnaire de Theologie Catholique* (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1909), cols. 3474-3492.

issued a Decree concerning the Vulgate Edition of the Bible. The council affirmed:

> Moreover, because the same Holy Council thought it very useful to the Church if it were known which, of all the Latin editions of the sacred books now in circulation is to be recognized as the authentic version, it declares and decrees: This same ancient Vulgate version which has been approved by its long-continued use for so many centuries in the Church is to be regarded as the authentic translation in public readings, disputations, sermons and expositions, and let no one dare or presume to reject it on any grounds.[6]

An authoritative interpretation of this tridentine decree has been given by Pope Pius XII in the encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (DAS). In DAS 21, the pope explains that Trent's decree, "that all should use as authentic" the Vulgate Latin version, applies only to the Latin church and to the public use of the same Scriptures. It does not detract in any way from the authority and value of the original texts, for at Trent "there was no question . . . of these texts, but of the Latin versions, which were in circulation at that time." Of these Latin versions, the Council "rightly declared to be preferable that [version] which 'had been approved by its long-continued use for so many centuries in the Church'."

Therefore, concludes the pope,

> this special authority or, as they say, authenticity of the Vulgate was not affirmed by the Council particularly for critical reasons, but rather because of its legitimate use in the churches throughout so many centuries (DAS 21).

By this use, the Vulgate "is shown, in the sense in which the Church has understood and understands it, to be free from any error whatever in matters of faith and morals." As a consequence, the Vulgate "may be quoted safely and without fear of error in disputations, in lectures and in preaching." Its authenticity, therefore, "is not specified primarily as critical but rather as juridical."

[6]DS 1506, ND 214.

In DAS 22, Pope Pius XII explains:

> Wherefore this authority of the Vulgate in matters of doctrine by no means prevents—nay rather today it almost demands—either the corroboration and confirmation of this same doctrine by the original texts or the having recourse on any and every occasion to the aid of these same texts, by which the correct meaning of the Sacred Letters is everywhere daily made more clear and evident. Nor is it forbidden by the decree of the Council of Trent to make translation into the vulgar tongue, even directly from the original texts themselves, for the use and benefit of the faithful and for the better understanding of the divine word....

Conclusion to B. Trent's decree concerning the Vulgate edition does not claim for the Vulgate a critical authority or authenticity, nor does it forbid the making of translations directly from the original texts themselves.

Conclusion to Part I

The two decrees of Trent cannot be used to support the claim that the Neo-Vulgate is "the point of reference as regards the delineation of the sacred text"—as LA 37 attempts to do.

II. SCRIPTURARUM THESAURUS

The final document LA appeals to in support of its statement that the Neo-Vulgate is "the point of reference as regards the delineation of the sacred text" is the Apostolic Constitution *Scripturarum thesaurus* (ST) of Pope John Paul II authorizing the publication of the Neo-Vulgate.[7]

The Executive Board of the Catholic Biblical Association of America affirms that the true nature and purpose of the Neo-Vulgate can be learned from this constitution and from the interpretative article by Bishop A.L. Descamps, Secretary of the Pontifical Biblical

[7]AAS 71 (April 25, 1979), 558-559.

Commission.[8] But the Board contends that there is no basis either in the Apostolic Constitution or in Bishop Descamps's interpreting article "for making the Neo-Vulgate an authority for all translators of the Bible for liturgical purposes."[9] What do these documents say?

ST promulgated a new Vulgate of the sacred books. In no. 7 of his article, Bishop Descamps summarizes the historical background of the Neo-Vulgate to clarify its original purpose. Vatican II (*Dei Verbum* 22) set in motion a new revision of the Latin Psalter for the purpose of liturgical use. According to Vatican II, the Hebrew text would be taken as the basis, while at the same time account would be taken of Christian Latin (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 91).

But before the closing of the Council, Paul VI instituted the Pontifical Commission for the Neo-Vulgate and gave it the mission of extending *to all of Scripture* the project initiated by the Council *for the Psalter.* The new translation was to be made in the spirit indicated by Vatican II, and it would be destined in particular for liturgical use.

In 1970-1971, the entire New Testament was published. In 1976-1977, the entire Old Testament was published in a number of volumes with critical notes justifying the manuscript readings adopted. Finally, in 1977, the two Testaments received a definitive edition and were ready for promulgation by ST.

Essential Characteristics of the Neo-Vulgate

Bishop Descamps explains that the essential characteristics of the Neo-Vulgate flow from three great principles:[10]

1) The translators start from the *critical text* of the Vulgate, such as it results especially from the labors of the abbey of Saint Jerome

[8]Albert L. Descamps, "La Nouvelle Vulgate," *Esprit et Vie* 89 (1979), 598-603 (all translations from this source are the author's own).

[9]CBAA, "To the Prelates of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops."

[10]Descamps, "La Nouvelle Vulgate," 602.

in Urbe. In 1907, Pius X had created a pontifical commission for the publication of a critically-assured text of the Vulgate. In 1933, at the initiative of Pius XI, the Benedictine Abbey of Saint Jerome *in Urbe* was founded expressly to take over the work of the commission and to bring it to a successful conclusion. From 1926-1978, inclusive, the Old Testament was published to Ezekiel.

2) The translators took this text as the basis of their translation; that is to say they only departed from it in order to align this text with the original Hebrew or Greek when the Vulgate was not in conformity with them. This second principle flowed from the deliberate will to value highly a Latin deeply-anchored in the Christian tradition, a Latin to which our modern translations themselves are greatly indebted, often without our knowing it.

3) To detect the deviations of the critical Vulgate from the originals, the translators have compared the critical Vulgate with the critical text of the Hebrew Old Testament and of the Greek New Testament. In regard to the critical text of the Hebrew Old Testament, the principle which obtains is that of the primacy of the Hebrew over the Septuagint, following the line of choice made by Saint Jerome himself. Moreover, since Jerome did not translate certain deuterocanonical books of the Old Testament, the Neo-Vulgate, according to Bishop Descamps, has made here a particularly important contribution. It did this by making use of the best critical editions of these books. In sum: the Neo-Vulgate is a synthesis of both critical requirements and respect for the Latin of the Church.

It is to be noted, however, that the Executive Board of the Catholic Biblical Association of America is very critical of some of the deuterocanonical books of the Neo-Vulgate. It points out that the text of the Wisdom of Solomon is so bad in the Neo-Vulgate that one specialist has recommended that ecclesiastical authority recall it.[11] Concerning the Old Latin, which is essentially the textual basis

[11]Giuseppe Scarpat, "Osservazioni sul testo della Sapientia Nella Nova Vulgata," *Rivista Biblica* 35 (1987), 187-194.

for Sirach in the Neo-Vulgate, Alexander A. de Lella, O.F.M., of the Catholic University of America, an authority on this book, has affirmed that it

> has more doublets, variants, glosses, and interpolations than any book of the Latin Bible ... double and even triple renderings, additions, transpositions, Christian reworkings, and a few omissions as well.[12]

As a consequence, the Executive Board of the Catholic Biblical Association of America expresses its concern that LA 37 requires translators to use the Neo-Vulgate as the textual basis for the deuterocanonical books.

Import of the Neo-vulgate in the Present Situation

In no. 8 of his interpretative article, Bishop Descamps attempts to clarify the import of the Neo-Vulgate in the present situation and the import of its promulgation by ST (which, he admits, "is not so easy to explain").[13]

While the Commission for the Neo-Vulgate was carrying out its work of preparing a new Latin translation of all Scripture, destined in particular for liturgical use, an unforeseeable event occurred which went beyond the premises posed by Vatican II liturgical matters. Paul VI allowed the use of the vernacular to be generalized, both for the missal and for the breviary. What, then, is the import of the Neo-Vulgate in the light of the introduction of the vernacular in the reading of the Bible and in the liturgy? ST, according to Bishop Descamps, provided three important indications in this regard:[14]

1) The first is that the Neo-Vulgate is destined for liturgical

[12]Patrick Skehan and Alexander di Lella, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira* (New York: Doubleday, 1987), 57, 60.

[13]Descamps, "La Nouvelle Vulgate," 598.

[14]Descamps, "La Nouvelle Vulgate," 602-603.

use. It is true that, in fact, Latin now has scarcely any place in the liturgy, especially in the biblical readings and in the mass. But its use continues to be permitted and is more actual in the office (abbeys, chapters, etc.).

2) The second indication of the Constitution is important. The Neo-Vulgate "will be able to serve as reference for translations in vernacular languages destined for liturgical and pastoral use." Bishop Descamps comments:

> It seems we can comment on this brief passage as follows. The gigantic work which consists in making, throughout the whole world, biblical translations in living language for liturgical and pastoral use, is far from being completed; at least the actual results are still perfectible. But in the future improvement of such texts, one can think that the Neo-Vulgate will be a good instrument for this task from the fact that it is, at the same time, faithful to the originals and readable by a numerous category of persons who, without knowing Hebrew or Greek, understand Latin sufficiently. This is the case, despite everything, of priests as a body, and of a good number of lay persons who can be called, for example, to collaborate in the making of new translations in living language.[15]

3) A third use of the Neo-Vulgate is indicated by the Constitution.

> One can think that it will serve as a foundation on which biblical studies may be able to base themselves—especially where specialized libraries are accessible with great difficulty.[16]

Bishop Descamps comments:

> Let us take the risk of making this objective a little more precise. The ignorance of Hebrew or Greek is not an obstacle to a serious study of Scripture. Excellent translations made in the principal living languages furnish here more than one contribution. But in relation to these translations themselves, the Neo-Vulgate retains, from a strictly scientific

[15]Descamps, "La Nouvelle Vulgate," 602-603.

[16]ST as quoted in Descamps, "La Nouvelle Vulgate," 602-603.

> perspective, a precious privilege: it is a precise reflection of the original texts of the two Testaments.[17]

To the objection that persons who devote themselves to exegesis at the highest level cannot dispense with the study of Hebrew or Greek, Bishop Descamps answers: "That is evident." But he affirms that there is room for thinking also of that category of "Biblists" which is situated half-way between the specialists and the educated readers, and charged besides with popularizing the results of critical exegesis. For them, the Neo-Vulgate provides

> a faithful mirror of the original, while linking them, in addition, to an entire Christian tradition, therefore also to all the moral and dogmatic teaching which should remain at the basis of a Christian view of the world.[18]

Conclusion to Part II

The three indications given by ST, regarding the import of the Neo-Vulgate in the present situation, do not support the claim of LA that the Neo-Vulgate is "the point of reference as regards the delineation of the canonical text." Rather, the Neo-Vulgate is proposed as a 1) helpful "reference for translations in vernacular languages destined for liturgical and pastoral use," especially when translators know no Hebrew and Greek, and 2) foundation on which biblical studies may be based, "especially where specialized libraries are accessible only with great difficulty" and where "Biblists" do not know Hebrew or Greek. The Apostolic Constitution, as interpreted by Bishop Descamps, does not make the Neo-Vulgate an authority for all translators of the Bible for liturgical purposes.

[17]Descamps, "La Nouvelle Vulgate," 603.

[18]Descamps, "La Nouvelle Vulgate," 603.