

Reading the Bible in the Time of the Curé of Ars¹

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If there is one thing about 19th century Catholics that people know (or think they know), it is this: lay-people did not read the Bible; in fact, they were forbidden to do so – or, at least, severely discouraged from doing so – by the clergy, who themselves made only sparing use of the ‘Good Book’. This lack of Bible-reading and study is regarded as a major cause of the weaknesses that are perceived in Catholic life at the time.² So in 1872, the soon-to-be Cardinal Newman attributed widespread loss of faith among Catholics in France and Italy to the fact that ‘they have not impressed upon their hearts the life of our Lord and Saviour as given us in the Evangelists.’ As for the Old Testament, he judged, it was completely unknown to Catholics.³ But is it really true that Catholics did not read the Bible before the rise of the Biblical movement of the 20th century? Or might we need to modify our received ideas about Catholics and the Bible at least in the early 19th century?

The first thing that becomes clear from looking at the state of the Scriptures in the early 19th century, is that Catholics, including lay-people, *did read* the Bible then, as they had been doing earlier. Catholics were never forbidden to read the Bible. At the same time, however, Church authorities after the Reformation were vigilant to see that the faithful did not use vernacular translations that were considered faulty or doctrinally tendentious; they also emphasised that readers were not entitled to interpret what they read independently of Church teaching.⁴ So much for the principle; what about the reality? How

¹ This is the text of a lecture delivered at the Pontifical University of St Thomas (Angelicum), Rome, on 16 November 2011. It will be published in the periodical *Angelicum* and is reproduced in *Forum Novum* with permission.

² Thus Claude Savart, « Quelle Bible les catholiques français lisaient-ils ? », in *Bible de tous les temps*, t. 8, *Le monde contemporain et la Bible*, ed. by Claude Savart and Jean-Noël Aletti, Paris, Beauchesne, 19-34, at p. 19. The author goes on to rectify this judgment.

³ See Ian Ker, *John Henry Newman: A Biography*, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 1988/repr. 1990, 671; citing *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, ed. by Charles Stephen Dessain *et al.*, vols. xxiii-xxxi, Oxford, 1973-1977, xxvi. 87.

⁴ Thus already in this sense, the Council of Trent in its Decree Concerning the Edition and Use of the Sacred Books, adopted at its Fourth session, 8 April, 1546. See more generally Anne Sauvy, « Lecture et diffusion de la Bible en France », in

widespread in fact was Bible-reading among Catholics? Much depended, of course, on literacy and the availability of printed Bibles. Furthermore, our evidence is necessarily patchy and indirect. But there is enough to justify the statement that in the period that interests us, Catholics were Bible-readers.

The situation seems to have changed in the course of the 19th century. One decisive factor was undoubtedly the establishment of The British and Foreign Bible Society in 1804, with its policy of making the Scriptures available as widely as possible. The Society intended to be non-sectarian, even for a time including the Apocrypha/Deuterocanonical books in the Bibles it translated and distributed.⁵ Nevertheless, owing to its vigorous promotion, even in Catholic countries, of Bible *translations* that Catholics were forbidden to read because they came from Protestant sources, the Bible Society and its offshoots were regarded as agents of Protestant evangelisation; Popes of the 19th century from Pius VII to Pius IX repeatedly condemned the Bible societies. Meanwhile, translations authorised by the Church were regularly printed; but no Catholic organisation tried to distribute them on a wide scale. So it is easy to see how Bible-reading came to be associated in Catholic minds with Protestantism, in a way that it had not been before.

In what follows I am going to be looking at reading and study of the Bible among French Catholics in the early 19th century, using the examples of Jean-Marie Vianney and also and especially of Jean-Claude Colin. Colin was born in 1790 and ordained priest at Lyon in 1816 – a slightly younger contemporary of the Curé of Ars, and the one who emerged as leader of what was intended to be a multi-branched Society of Mary consisting of priests, brothers, sisters and lay-people. I am not proposing him as a typical or average representative of the clergy of his time; but neither do I think he was entirely exceptional. I believe he can show us what was well within the reach of someone who was seriously interested in the Bible. I am sure there were many others like him. What was true of France at this time was probably also true by and large elsewhere, but perhaps not everywhere, in Catholic Europe. Special mention should be made of Germany, where a strong Catholic theological movement got under way at Tübingen and other centres

Bible de tous les temps, t. 6, *Le siècle des Lumières et la Bible*, ed. by Yvon Belavel and Dominique Bourel, Paris, Beauchesne, 1986, 27-46.

⁵ See W. Canton, *History of the British and Foreign Bible Society*, 5 vols, London, John Murray, 1904-1910.

soon after the end of the Napoleonic wars; it would eventually produce distinguished exegetes as well as theologians.

Fr Colin was not a scholar; but he was a very well-read man, who kept up with what was going on in Scripture, as in other branches of scholarship, largely in the pages of a newspaper called *L'ami de la religion et du Roi*, to which he subscribed.⁶ There he learned of the latest books of Biblical interest, including those that concerned such things as archaeological discoveries and ancient documents that had a bearing on the Bible.⁷ Fr Colin's use of the Bible has been studied by Canadian Marist Pierre Allard, who has examined all his writings, including letters, also oral remarks and talks reported or summarised; Colin's sermons were deliberately not included.⁸ In this body of material, Allard has identified quotations from or recognisable allusions to all the books of the New Testament, except the Letters of Jude and Second and Third John. Old Testament quotations or allusions take in Genesis, Exodus, Numbers and Deuteronomy – apparently not Leviticus; then Joshua, Judges (not Ruth), Samuel-Kings, Second Chronicles, Nehemiah, Judith, Esther. Colin quotes or refers to all the Wisdom books – massively, of course, the Psalms – and, of the Prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Joel and Jonah. All this testifies to a rich Biblical culture. In other words, Colin knew his Bible very well, loved the Scriptures and was fond of quoting them or referring to them – no doubt from memory – in the course of speaking and writing, even when not professedly dealing with a Scriptural passage, as in a sermon.

In the case of Jean-Marie Vianney, the use he makes of the Bible in his sermons and catechetical addresses shows, according to his biographer Francis Trochu, that he had a 'quite vast knowledge of the Scriptures, especially of the Gospel'.⁹ So on occasion he passes before the imagination of his hearers, scenes and persons drawn from both Old

⁶ *L'ami de la religion et du Roi*, journal ecclésiastique, politique et littéraire, published twice weekly from 1814 in Paris by Adrien Le Clerc.

⁷ Thus, to take examples selected at random, in no. 1253 (Saturday, 12 August, 1826; vol. 49, p. 1-4), he might have read a lengthy review of Couturier's *Histoire de l'Ancien Testament*, and in no. 1589 (Saturday, 31 October, 1829; vol. 61, p. 369-372), a review of *Des dynasties égyptiennes*, a book on Egyptian chronology by retired Archbishop de Bovet of Toulouse.

⁸ Pierre Allard, *L'utilisation de la Bible par le Père Colin: Tables*, Rome, Via Alessandro Poerio 63, 1979.

⁹ Francis Trochu, *Le curé d'Ars, prédicateur populaire*, Lyon et Paris, Vitte, 1926, 45.

and New Testaments. His quotations are usually made from memory, entailing occasional minor confusions. In general, he does not set out to quote Scripture exactly: rather, he ‘develops, arranges, embroiders the inspired narrative, or, if he seems to give it in its original simplicity, he makes what is in fact his own translation’.¹⁰

Colin and Vianney were priests; but what about lay-people at this time? Did they read the Bible? At least Frédéric Ozanam did and produced fruits of his reading in his *Le livre des malades. Lectures tirées de l'Écriture sainte*, which was published posthumously in 1858 with the warm approbation of the Cardinal Archbishop of Paris.¹¹ This little book presents extracts from both Testaments – without commentary – originally chosen by Ozanam in time of illness and arranged by subject or theme for the use of the sick. Its anonymous preface tells us that ‘the Holy Scripture was for this Christian a daily nourishment’. In fact, when still scarcely more than a child, Ozanam began the study of Hebrew ‘in order to read in the primitive text the founding truths of the faith’. No matter how busy he was, he ‘read each morning a passage of Scripture, most often in a Greek Bible’.¹²

Where did Jean-Claude Colin and Jean-Marie Vianney find the incentive and the help to read the Bible so assiduously? Colin began to know and love the Bible in childhood, during the last decade of the 18th century, when, we are told, his paternal grandfather, described as a ‘holy patriarch, well instructed in his religion’, made it a practice to ‘tell his family the story of the Bible’.¹³ Something similar is told of Vianney as a child, that in the evenings he would stay up with his mother and his sister Catherine to hear them tell ‘Sacred History’.¹⁴ Across the Channel and a few years later, in a very different national, religious and social setting, the little John Henry Newman ‘was brought

¹⁰ Trochu, *Le curé d'Ars, prédicateur populaire*, 46, with examples 46-49.

¹¹ A.-F. Ozanam, *Le livre des malades. Lectures tirées de l'Écriture sainte*, Paris, Lecoffre, 1858.

¹² *Le livre des malades*, vii-viii.

¹³ J. Coste, s.m. and G. Lessard, s.m., avec la collaboration de S. Fagan, s.m., *Origines maristes (1786-1836)* t. 2 (Données narratives recueillies avant la démission du P. Colin; Rome, Via Alessandro Poerio 63, 1961, 537 (Doc. 692, April 1849).

¹⁴ Francis Trochu, *Le curé d'Ars, saint Jean-Marie Vianney (1786-1859)*, first published 1925; edition cited here, Montsurs, Résiac, 3rd ed., 1987, 25.

up from a child', particularly by his grandmother and his aunt, when he stayed with them, 'to take great delight in reading the Bible'.¹⁵

We can put this information in a well-known context of family Bible-reading that was wide spread in the 18th and early 19th centuries. Of course, we are familiar with such scenes from England, where, as Newman was to put it, the 'national religion of England' was what he called 'Bible Religion', which 'consists, not in rites or creeds, but mainly in having the Bible read in Church, in the family, and in private.'¹⁶ We are much more surprised to find such scenes in Catholic France. Bible-reading there is best attested in the upper and middle classes; in those circles – as in England – it was quite usual for the family, including domestic servants, to gather daily for evening prayers and the reading of the Bible. Country folk – peasants and rural artisans – from whom Colin and Vianney came, have left fewer records of daily life. Family prayer was customary, but what about Bible-reading? Literacy was uneven and the possession of books not all that common, though not unheard of – books are sometimes mentioned in wills. However it only needed one member of the family to possess a Bible or at least a New Testament and be able to read it, for the whole household to take part. In all classes of society, where there was no full Bible, there was often a book of 'Bible history'. Such collections were inevitably drawn from the narrative parts of the Bible, with little attention to wisdom, prophecy and prayer; but they did at least convey a sense of what we now call 'salvation history'. One very popular version was that called *La Bible de Royaumont*; on every open spread of two pages, there was a half-page engraving illustrating a particular episode, such as the crossing of the Red Sea, and the remaining page and a half were devoted to an explanation and commentaries derived in the main from the Fathers of the Church.¹⁷ In the case of Jean-Claude's grandfather, we are not told that he 'read' the Bible to his family, but rather that he 'told the story of the Bible'. We know he could read, as he recited the Little Office of Our Lady daily from a book.¹⁸ But he does

¹⁵ Ker, *Newman*, 3; citing a letter to Miss E. Newman, 25 July, 1844.

¹⁶ Ker, *Newman*, 3; citing Newman's *Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, ed. by I.T. Ker, Oxford, 1985, 43.

¹⁷ Sauvy, « Lecture et diffusion de la Bible en France ». Le « Sieur de Royaumont » was, it seems, a pseudonym adopted by Le Maître de Sacy (on whom, see below, p. 6).

¹⁸ Jean Jeantin, *La vie du T.R.P. Colin, fondateur et premier supérieur général de la Société de Marie*, vol. I, Lyon, Vitte, 1895, 2.

not seem to have had a copy of the Bible in any form, so must have been telling the story from memory.¹⁹

The young Colin's Biblical formation continued in the various minor seminaries that he attended, where he did not only his secondary schooling but also, finally, his study of philosophy.²⁰ There he began to read the Bible systematically, as the seminary rule required, following a programme of daily reading. This was over and above the Scriptures read and heard in the liturgy. He and his fellow seminarians began to memorise the New Testament, a chapter per week, in Latin. Here it is worth pointing out that France did not produce a translation of the Bible that played a role in general culture comparable to that of Luther's Bible or the King James Bible in German- and English-speaking countries. French Catholics did, however, have a dominant version, that of Le Maistre de Sacy, whose translation of the New Testament appeared in 1667, with the Old Testament coming out between 1672 and 1695. Le Maistre de Sacy was associated, through Port Royal, with Jansenism. That did not, however, prevent Catholics from embracing his translation. It was often reprinted, especially in editions containing the New Testament with the Psalms. For clerics, however, the Bible meant the Latin Vulgate. There were also classes in Scripture at the minor seminary. This must have been Colin's favourite subject: one year (while at Alix) his health broke down temporarily from overwork; he was exempted from all lectures, but begged successfully to be allowed to continue with the New Testament class.²¹ Classes involving the Bible were not restricted to young clerics. Not long after Colin and Vianney were seminarians, Ozanam as a schoolboy in Lyon was making 'résumés d'histoire sainte' and later composed a long French poem based on the 'Lamentations of Jeremiah';²² presumably these were school exercises, such as other boys would also have done.

The habits of Bible-reading acquired by Colin in the seminary stayed with him all his life. He took it for granted that the '*Novum*', as he called it for short, the New Testament in Latin, would be the constant

¹⁹ Of course, in illiterate or semi-literate cultures, memories are regularly retentive and exact.

²⁰ Colin was at the minor seminaries of Saint-Jodard (1804-1809), Alix (1809-1812), and Verrières (1812-1813).

²¹ Donal Kerr, *Jean-Claude Colin, Marist: A Founder in an Era of Revolution and Restoration: The Early Years 1790-1836*, Dublin, Columba, 2000, 86.

²² C.A. Ozanam, *Vie de Frédéric Ozanam, professeur de littérature étrangère à la Sorbonne*, Paris, Poussielgue, 1897, 85, 107-114.

companion of every priest.²³ Bible-reading remained part of his daily routine. From his seminary days on, he used to keep a notebook, in which he would jot down texts that struck him or appealed to him.²⁴ When his eyesight failed him in old age, he would have one of his confreres read to him.²⁵ In 1875, arriving in the course of the Old Testament at the Book of Job, he foretold to his reader that he would not live to see the book through to the end.²⁶

In the autumn of 1813, Colin entered the major seminary of St Irénée in Lyon to begin the two or three years of theology that would lead to priestly ordination. Jean-Marie Vianney, who had been with him at the minor seminary at Verrières, began at the same time. We are very well informed about St Irénée at this period.²⁷ We have to remember that, when Vianney and Colin were seminarians, the Church in France and generally in Europe was coping with the dislocation caused by twenty-five years of revolution and warfare. Most religious institutions, including educational, had been destroyed, and centuries old traditions disrupted. In this situation, the seminaries did not do more than try to restore what had been before. They were, of course, closely supervised by the authorities of both Church and State, who certainly did not want innovation. So we must not be surprised that there were no outstanding theologians or exegetes produced in this generation. For the time being the methods and books of the past had to suffice: that was all there was.

Teaching and study at St Irénée were dominated by dogmatic and moral theology taught according to the eight-, then nine-volume textbook by Louis Bailly, *Theologia dogmatica et moralis*, first published in 1789 – recently, therefore, at the time we are speaking of – and continually republished at Lyon and used in the seminary until 1852 – when it was put on the Index, for rigorism in moral theology and gallicanism in ecclesiology. Scripture, of course, played a part in Bailly

²³ *A Founder Speaks: Spiritual Talks of Jean-Claude Colin*. Selected and introduced by Jean Coste, s.m., translated by Anthony Ward, s.m.; Rome: Via Alessandro Poerio 63, 233 (Doc. 79,7; November, 1844); 521 (Doc. 182,13; September, 1850).

²⁴ *Origines maristes*, t. 2, 425 (Doc. 613,1; 1845).

²⁵ *Actes manuscrits du procès ordinaire de Lyon* (1919), 576, 847.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 860.

²⁷ J. Soulcie, p.s.s.: *La formation des clercs au séminaire Saint-Irénée de Lyon de 1659 à 1905*. Thèse de doctorat présentée devant la faculté de droit canonique de Lyon. Fascicule 2. *Le séminaire au XIX^e siècle*; Lyon, 1955; also Kerr, *Jean-Claude Colin, Marist*, 105-106.

as in all such textbooks, being one of the three sources of proofs – along with tradition and reason – for each thesis defended there.

Scripture as such was a minor subject and had only two periods a week allotted to it, on Sunday and on the weekly half-day off – hardly prime time. In Vianney and Colin's day, there were no examinations in Scripture; so students lacked an important incentive to take it seriously as a subject. It was only in 1836 that for the first time the professor was allowed to examine the students. The Scripture course was clearly meant to supplement the future priest's own reading of the Bible, which was taken seriously. Throughout most of the 19th century, the Faculty seems to have been divided, or at least to have hesitated, over its main purpose: the personal piety of the student or his instruction? The line was still wavering back and forth as late as the 1870s. In 1874 the Superior was insisting on the importance of the literal meaning of the Scriptures and advocating the study of Hebrew for the better students. Two years later, his successor was laying stress on 'the Method of the Fathers' and declared that the seminarians should learn to study from the point of view of the 'needs of the heart' rather than to satisfy the 'needs of the mind'.²⁸

For a long time, there was no published commentary or other textbook set for the students. The Scripture course followed the traditional method used also in other subjects and already criticised in the 18th century, of dictation by the professor, written down by the students, learned by heart and repeated in the exams (in subjects that had them). The content, as far as we can judge from books used at the time, would have been a series of explanatory notes on the Biblical text with occasional discussions of topics that needed more attention. There was no detailed exegesis of particular passages. In 1844, the Superior of St Irénée announced that more importance was to be given to Scripture as a subject: one of the professors was preparing an introductory textbook in five volumes; in the mean time, the students were to use the well-known commentary of Menochius or Giovanni Stefano Menochio, an Italian Jesuit (1575-1655), whose *Brevis explicatio totius S. Scripturae* in two thick volumes, was first published at Cologne in 1630 and often republished over many years.²⁹ This provided a concise running commentary on the whole Bible. A multi-volume Bible in Latin

²⁸ Soulcisé, *Saint-Irénée*, 272.

²⁹ See *Bibliothèque de la Compagnie de Jésus*, new edition by Carlos Sommervogel, s.j., Bibliographie, t. 5; Bruxelles-Paris, Schepens-Picard, 1894, 948-955.

and French annotated with the commentary of Menochius was among the books personally acquired by the Curé of Ars and presumably consulted by him.³⁰ Let us pause to note here that, at the death of the holy Curé in 1859, the presbytery of Ars contained a library of 252 titles, of theology, pastoral practice, sermons and instructions, spirituality. Jean-Marie Vianney certainly read 153 of them in whole or in part, and may have read a further 39, generally while eating his meals or in bed at night. Many of these books were already in the presbytery when he came to Ars in 1818, but a good number were acquired after that date. Of the total number of books in the presbytery library, twenty-one concerned the Bible directly, and of these, ten were read certainly or quite likely by Vianney. They included, besides Menochius, commentaries on the Psalms and on Job, and on the Epistles and Gospels read at Mass, a Life of Christ by François de Ligny, also *La Bible de Royaumont* and similar works of Bible history.³¹

As a priest, Jean-Claude Colin regularly consulted and recommended Scripture commentaries. One of the witnesses at the Lyon Beatification process testified: 'He made me read many passages of the Gospel or Sacred Scripture. He would send me off to the library to look for commentaries.'³² In 1849, Colin recommended the Marist Scripture professor, Fr Vitte, to use the commentaries of Moduit, Wouters, de Ligny (just mentioned), Maldonatus and Cornelius a

³⁰ *Sainte Bible contenant l'ancien et le nouveau testament avec une traduction française en forme de paraphrase par le R.P. Carrières, et les commentaires de Menochius de la Compagnie de Jésus*, 15 vol. in-8^o, Lyon, Rusand [a well-known bookseller and publisher frequented by the Curé], 1833-34; see Trochu, *Le Curé d'Ars, prédicateur populaire*, 43f, n. 1; cited by Soulcé, *Saint-Irénée*, 227. For the library at the presbytery of Ars and in particular this item, see now Philippe de Peyronnet, *Inventaire de la bibliothèque de saint Jean-Marie Vianney, curé d'Ars* (Editions aux amateurs de livres), Paris, Klincksieck, 1991, 102-103. For Menochius, see Sommervogel, *Bibliothèque*, t. 5, 951.

³¹ Peyronnet, *Inventaire*, who asks (p. 60) whether Jean-Marie Vianney read the Bible in a continuous fashion. He notes that the copies of the Bible in the Ars library, including, it seems, Menochius, do not bear the usual signs of use by the Curé, notably traces of food, and suggests that perhaps Jean-Marie refrained from reading them while at table. Reverence for the sacred text could also have restrained him from marking pages, as he did with other books.

³² *Actes manuscrits du procès ordinaire de Lyon* (1919), 909.

Lapide.³³ Half a century later, the commentaries of Maldonatus and Cornelius a Lapide were still being cited by the Dominican Marie-Joseph Lagrange, who founded the Ecole Biblique of Jerusalem in 1890. In 1910, in the preface to his commentary on St Mark, Lagrange includes them in his own short list of four names – the Dominican Cajetan, Maldonatus, Cornelius a Lapide and Calmet – whose works, he writes, ‘are in everybody’s hands’.³⁴ However, this is obviously no longer the case. Somewhere after Fr Lagrange there has been a rupture in a centuries-long tradition of Bible commentary. Who were these exegetes, and how did they read the Bible?

Maldonatus, or Juan Maldonado, was born in Spain in 1533.³⁵ He studied philosophy and theology at the University of Salamanca, and then became a Jesuit. He was sent to Paris, where he added Hebrew, Aramaic, Syriac and Arabic to the Greek and Latin he already had. For a number of years, he was active in France as a theologian and controversialist. In 1580 he was elected as a delegate to the Fourth General Congregation of the Society of Jesus and then, like others before and since, told to stay on in Rome, where the Pope appointed him to the commission charged with editing the Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament. Before his death in 1583, he completed commentaries on the four Gospels that were highly regarded and, as we have seen, kept their place in the bibliographies into the 20th century. An English translation was published in 1868 and can still turn up second-hand.

The Latin name Cornelius a Lapide translates literally the Flemish Cornelissen Van den Steen.³⁶ Born in 1567 in what is now Belgium, he became a Jesuit and taught Holy Scripture at the Roman College from 1616 until his death in 1637. He wrote commentaries on all books of the Bible (except Job and Psalms). In interpreting the Biblical texts, Cornelius a Lapide gave primacy to the literal sense. In this he was following the tendency established by the Renaissance and followed

³³ Bernard Bourtot, s.m. (ed.), “*Colin sup*”: *Documents pour l’étude du généralat de Jean-Claude Colin (1836-1854)*, t. 4, 1848-1854, Rome, 2009, 224 (Doc. 121,1, October, 1849).

³⁴ M.-J. Lagrange, o.p., *Saint Marc* (Etudes bibliques), Paris, 2nd ed., 1910, xi.

³⁵ Sommervogel, *Bibliothèque de la Compagnie de Jésus*, t. 5, 403-412.

³⁶ Sommervogel, *Bibliothèque de la Compagnie de Jésus*, t. 4 (1893), 1511-1526; Jean-Robert Armogathe, « La soif des Ecritures », *Bible de tous les temps*, t. 6, *Le Grand Siècle et la Bible*, ed. par Jean-Robert Armogathe, Paris, Beauchesne, 1989, 13-38, pp. 29-30.

also by Calvin in his Scripture commentaries. This meant relegating to second place, if not entirely ignoring, the spiritual senses so beloved by much medieval exegesis. So, for example, Jericho and its capture by Joshua might well be read as an allegory of something else – perhaps the end of this world and the second coming of Jesus³⁷ – but the literal meaning of the Book of Joshua concerns a real city and its conquest. On the other hand, Cornelius a Lapide did not simply set aside the tradition of the four senses – literal, allegorical, tropological and anagogical – and the preface (*prooemium*) to his *Commentary on the Pentateuch* contains an interesting historical survey of medieval exegesis. In practice, he always gives the literal sense of the text he is commenting, complementing it occasionally with one or more of the spiritual senses where they are coherent with the literal sense and enrich one's understanding of the text. He interprets the Vulgate, but regularly consults other texts, both the original Hebrew and Greek and other ancient versions, such as the Greek Septuagint and the Syriac. For his commentaries, he draws abundantly on the Fathers of the Church. Out of this twofold attention to the literal sense of the text and to patristic and medieval readings of it, Cornelius a Lapide composed a Biblical commentary of great richness, not lacking in the critical spirit, of interest also to the modern reader. It continued to be republished into the 19th century. Cornelius a Lapide had a long posterity of Catholic commentators on the literal sense of Scripture, including Menochius already mentioned.

I would like now to talk about the fourth name on Lagrange's short-list, the Benedictine Antoine Augustin Calmet,³⁸ who was very influential on Catholic exegesis in the 18th and 19th centuries. Calmet was born in 1672 and spent most of his life in his native Lorraine, which was then an independent duchy not yet absorbed into France. Lorraine was situated at an important European crossroads between France, Germany and Holland. Calmet was himself of French language and culture, but open to cultural influences coming from neighbouring countries. Though a convinced Catholic and a monk, he was in touch with Jansenists and Cartesians and studied Hebrew with a Protestant pastor. He was respected by Voltaire, who praised both his learning and

³⁷ Thus Origen in one of his homilies on Joshua (*Hom.* 6. 4: *PG* 12, 855-856).

³⁸ Patrick Marsauche, on Dom Calmet (1672-1757), en *Bible de tous les temps*, t. 6, *Le Grand Siècle et la Bible*, éd. par Jean-Robert Armogathe, Paris, Beauchesne, 1989, 233-253.

his genuine piety. He decided to devote himself to the Bible and established an academy of about twenty young monks to study the Scriptures with him, in which he anticipated, in some ways, Fr Lagrange and the Ecole Biblique.

Dom Calmet published his *Commentaire littéral* – note the significant adjective – *sur tous les livres de l'Ancien et du Nouveau Testament* ('Literal Commentary on All the Books of the Old and New Testaments') in the early years of the 18th century. He takes the text of the Vulgate while referring systematically in his commentary to the original languages and other ancient versions. As we have seen, Cornelius a Lapide did the same. Calmet, however, makes an important innovation, which is to add, facing the Latin, the French translation of Le Maistre de Sacy. Even more important, he wrote his commentary in French, so clearly intending it to be read by lay-people. Needless to say, it had an enormous influence.

Calmet has been criticised, both in his own time (by Richard Simon) and later, for not coming down clearly on one side or the other on disputed points. He almost seems at times to avoid expressing his own view. However, his Letters give a clue as to what he was intending to do. Remember, the age in which he lived was one of deep divisions of opinion and even of doctrine, among Catholics themselves, let alone between Catholics and Protestants; besides, new and troubling questions about the reliability of the Bible were beginning to be raised. On such subjects as Grace and free will or certain historical questions, Calmet presents positions that are highly nuanced. It was not that he was refusing to commit himself. Rather, when a biblical text was difficult, for whatever reason, he did not find it helpful to state one opinion as though it were the only possible solution. Instead, he would put in parallel the various interpretations that he regarded as credible. So it is, that in the course of his commentaries, the reader finds the interpretations of the Church Fathers and Catholic writers, but also those of Jewish or Protestant commentators or even explanations provided by the scientists of the day. In his Preface, Calmet accepts the possibility of a plurality of meanings, also of cases where the meaning simply cannot be determined.

For a final glimpse of the resources available to Catholic Bible readers in the first half of the 19th century, let us look at Migne's *Scripturae sacrae cursus completus*, published in 28 volumes at Paris

between 1837 and 1841.³⁹ The Abbé Jacques-Paul Migne was an extraordinary man, whose astonishing career has been recently told by R. Howard Bloch, in *God's Plagiarist*.⁴⁰ The title of this book does not quite do justice to Migne, who acknowledged every item he borrowed. His aim was to provide a low-cost universal library for every priest, and he used innovative methods of mass-production, sales-promotion and credit purchase (most notoriously through trading in Mass stipends) to achieve his aim. What he did was to reprint texts already published. Migne is, of course, best known for his Greek and Latin Patrologies. He also produced what were meant to be complete collections of theological treatises and Bible commentaries. Let us take a look at this last. From the indexes in the final volume, we learn that contributors to the *Scripturae sacrae cursus completus* came largely from France, but also from Italy, Germany, Belgium, England, Spain and other countries. They include, of course, Cajetan, Maldonatus, Cornelius a Lapide, Calmet and also Wouters, recommended by Colin. We find Jesuits, Dominicans, Benedictines and other religious, as well as diocesan priests and lay-people. Catholics are in the majority, but Protestants (including Anglicans) and Jews also feature.

I would like to conclude this lecture with a personal reflection. As I researched this subject I was very struck by points in common between the old commentaries of Cornelius a Lapide and Calmet and Migne's *Cursus*, on the one hand, and on the other the Ecole Biblique's project – now officially that of the Order of Preachers – *The Bible in Its Traditions*. This project, like those older works, but no doubt more systematically than they, means to present the diversity of the traditions in which the Biblical writings have been received – the ancient texts and versions – and also the diversity of the traditions that have received them: the Church Fathers, Greek, Latin and Syriac, later theologians, Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant, and also the Jewish tradition. Its full version will be available on line,⁴¹ with the possibility of many different sorts of printed editions derived from this. Despite the differences in presentation, I now have the feeling that *The Bible in Its Traditions*, as

³⁹ The entire collection is now available in pdf. online at *Documenta catholica omnia*.

⁴⁰ R. Howard Bloch, *God's Plagiarist: Being an Account of the Fabulous Industry and Irregular Commerce of the Abbé Migne*, Chicago, University of Chicago Books, 1994.

⁴¹ At www.bibest.org.

well as representing the best in recent and contemporary Biblical scholarship, including historical criticism, is also reaching out and joining hands with an older tradition of Biblical commentary that has been neglected for most of the 20th century, owing no doubt to a preoccupation with critical issues. You could call it an exercise in the hermeneutic of continuity.