

DON BOSCO AND THE BIBLE

Part III

Source:

La Bibbia con don Bosco, Una lectio divina salesiana, 1. L'Antico Testamento, Morand Wirth.

TOPICS:

- The Bible in the Formation of Salesians
- Preaching Should be Based on Sacred Scriptures
- Don Bosco Was Very Much in Love the Bible

THE BIBLE IN THE FORMATION OF SALESIANS

Memorization of verses

In 1859 when he founded the Society of St. Francis de Sales, Don Bosco made an effort to convey to his followers the knowledge and love of the Word of God. He wanted his future priests, students of philosophy and theology to memorize every week 10 verses of the NT in the Latin Vulgate. He was not satisfied in mere memorization. His biographer assures us that he offered "a brief literal explanation with a few but magnificent commentaries. He would conclude with a maxim which aroused love for God and which acted as a norm of conduct" (MB VI, 206).

Remedy for idleness and cultivation of chastity

Don Bosco used to say to the Salesians during the spiritual retreats that there is nothing better than the reading of the Word of God in order to avoid idleness and to cultivate the virtue of chastity. He cited St. Jerome's recommendation: "Read the Scriptures more often; nay the sacred reading should never be taken away from your hands" (MB IX, 992).

Preaching

Addressing himself to future preachers, he insisted on the "importance and the manner of proclaiming the Word of God, recommending simplicity and clarity and the effort to touch the heart" (MB VI, 206).

On another occasion he gave the following advice: "The proofs they seek are set forth in Sacred Scriptures and especially the facts and the words of our Lord Jesus Christ.... The sacred orator obtains his eloquence not from the wisdom of the world. Instead he speaks according to the spirit of God" (MB IX, 23-24).

Retreats

Beginning in 1866 he animated every year the spiritual retreat of the confreres. The notes of his talks show that Sacred Scriptures occupied first place in those talks.

Breviary

The breviary is a true school of the Word of God. Don Bosco tells the story of a close collaborator. This man crossed out from the list of "ordinadi" to the subdiaconate certain young clerics of great value because they would have to recite the breviary and doing so made them waste their time. This merited a very spirited response. "These clerics reciting the breviary fulfills the divine office of praying with the whole Church; in it they are instructed with the inspired words of Sacred Scriptures, with the lessons of the holy fathers

and with the lives and examples of the saints; they pray with the psalms and canticles of the people of God and with liturgical hymns. The breviary will obtain for these clerics more knowledge than from so many books and teachers and will inspire them in teaching their students the science of God and of the soul" (MB XI, 293).

Program of studies

It is significant that the Constitutions of the Salesian Society gives first place to the Bible in the program of studies for the priesthood. Afterwards does it list Church history, dogmatic, speculative and moral theology and other books dealing with the Christian instruction of the young.

The Missions

Don Bosco reminded the Salesian missionaries who were leaving for South America that the Word of God should be proclaimed to the whole world; it is a command from the Lord and not merely a counsel. "This command or mission," he adds, "gave the name of missionary to all those who in our country or in foreign countries proclaim and preach the truths of our faith." It is the continuation of the mission entrusted by Christ to the apostles who from the beginning of the work of evangelization "associated others and later also other evangelical workers who they sent here and there to spread the Word of God."

PREACHING SHOULD BE BASED ON SACRED SCRIPTURES

Preaching

The traditional form used by Don Bosco to spread the Word of God was preaching, which he used to do in the exercise of his ordinary ministry, in the occasion of retreats or even in the course of extraordinary missions in the parishes. "Very many parish priests of Piedmont wanted to have him (Don Bosco) in the churches," wrote Don Lemoyne, adding that "if it were possible, he never refused them" (MB V, 765).

During the course of his life, Don Bosco preached a lot and he did so for all kinds of people, starting with the young.

Content: The Bible and Fathers of the Church

We know that his preaching was centered on the Bible, and in a particular way, on the Gospel. His biographer assures us that he used to begin "with a text from Scriptures" (MB III, 62) and that "his preaching were very effective because they were based on Sacred Scriptures and the holy Fathers" (MB IX, 342).

One day, after having preached in a parish when he was only a seminarian, the parish priest pointed to him some flaws regarding form but recognized that his preaching was full of "scriptural thoughts" (MO, 86).

Topics of preaching

We have preserved some of his sermons which go back to the time when he was a seminarian and when he was a young priest. One of them was precisely "On the Word of God". It begins with this citation taken from the Gospel of Luke: "Blessed are they who listen to God's Word and keep it" (Lk 11:28).

Other themes were the classical themes of the Last Things (death, judgment, purgatory, hell and heaven), sin, the passion of Jesus, mercy, forgiveness,

Retreats

charity, chastity, the institution of the Eucharist and frequent communion.

The spiritual retreats were considered special moments for listening and for preaching the Word of God. Don Bosco prepared the majority of his sermons for these retreats. In addition to the obligatory them of the Last Things, we find the following themes: charity, forgiveness, chastity, the Word of God and the Eucharist.

He himself joined every year the retreat organized at the Sanctuary of St. Ignatius at Lanzo. We have in our hands the notes taken during the retreat of 1842. There we find references to the Good Shepherd and to the Hymn to Charity by St. Paul.

In 1849 Don Bosco organized for the first time a series of spiritual retreats for the youth of the oratories of Turin. On "The Sacred Counsel" with a circulation of 1,500 copies, he announced the retreat. One can also read there this exhortation: "The Lord calling you to listen to his sacred words puts before us a favorable opportunity to receive his graces and his blessings. Take advantage of it. Blessed are you if from your youth you learn to observe the divine Law" (MB III, 605-606).

DON BOSCO WAS VERY MUCH IN LOVE WITH THE BIBLE

The influence of Mama Margaret

To understand Don Bosco's love for the Bible it is necessary to begin from the lessons he received from his mother.

Mama Margaret was illiterate, but he knew perfectly her catechism, a concise and systematic exposition of the truths of divine revelation, which were illustrated with examples from Sacred History and the lives of Saints.

Don Lemoyne writes in the Biographical Memoirs: "In those days it was not uncommon to find in the houses of the farmers people who were well-versed in Sacred History or the lives of Saints. Some elderly person used to read some pages about them to the family gathered on Sunday evenings, in the stall if it was winter, or under a pergola if it was summer or autumn. Therefore, Mama Margaret memorized many examples from Sacred Scriptures or the Life of Saints" (MB I, 52).

Catechism and preaching

After the teaching of his mother, Don Bosco came in contact with the Word of God by attending catechism and listening to sermons.

The dream at nine which he would later recount in the Memoirs of the Oratory demonstrates that he was familiar with the figure of Jesus, the Good Shepherd and his mother (MO 36-38).

At the age of ten he was able to repeat to his companions "the examples he heard in the sermons or in catechism" and excerpts of "the explanation of the gospel heard in the morning" (MO 40-41).

At eleven on the occasion of his first holy communion he wrote: "I knew the entire little catechism" (MO 43).

At Chieri

The encounter with Don Calosso at 14 years allowed him to “taste the spiritual life”. This priest taught him to make “a brief meditation or better a bit of spiritual reading” (MO 47) every day.

During his studies at Chieri (1831-1835) Don Bosco participated in the numerous religious practices which in those days were part of the scholastic program: catechism, spiritual reading, explanation of the gospel, instruction, recitation of the Office of the Blessed Virgin with the psalms, Christmas triduum, and retreat during the Holy Week.

Together with his close friends, they frequented also the church of St. Anthony, where the Jesuits taught a “wonderful catechism” (MO 58).

His friendship with Jonah brought him in contact with the Jewish environment of Chieri and offered him the opportunity to deepen his understanding of the relationship between the Old and the New Testaments.

The mother of Jonah gave this objection: “Christians do not believe in Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses, neither the prophets.” Don Bosco responded: “On the contrary we believe in all the holy Patriarchs and in all the prophets of the Bible. Their writings, their utterances, their prophecies form the foundation of the Christian faith” (MO 68).

Much later in the second half of the century he wrote to a Milanese Jew: “We Catholics follow strictly the teaching of Moses and all the books which this great prophet left us. The only difference is in the interpretation” (Epistolario, IV, 97).

Self-study

But his interest in the Bible grew above all during his years in the Seminary of Chieri (1835-1841). In those days when there was not a course that was specifically about the Bible, he spent his free time and vacation to study his favorite subjects.

He dedicated himself with passion to the reading of the works which were not part of program of studies. Among these were “The History of the Old and New Testament” by the French Benedictine, Augustin Calmet, “The Jewish Antiquity” and “The Jewish Wars” of Flavius Josephus, as well as “The Sacred Lessons on the Divine Scripture” of the Jesuit, Ferdinand Zucconi (MO 93-94).

“The study of Greek was something I wanted so much,” Don Bosco wrote in the Memoirs of the Oratory. With the help of a Jesuit who had “a deep knowledge of Greek”, he was able to translate in four months “almost the entire New Testament”. He also studied “the principles of Hebrew”, saying that “these three languages, Hebrew, Greek and French were my favorites after Latin and Italian” (MO 94-95).

According to his biographer, during the last four years in the seminary, Don Bosco “read and studied the whole bible” (MB I, 412).

The breviary

Beginning with his ordination to the subdiaconate, he was obliged to recite the breviary every day. It consisted of the entire psalmody and numerous

Biblical geography

biblical readings. We would not be mistaken to hold that the numerous biblical citations of Don Bosco came from his recitation of the divine office.

After Don Bosco's death, Don Lemoyne found written on the bookmarks of his breviary eleven citations taken from the Bible. One was from the New Testament (Second Letter to the Corinthians) and the rest, from the Old Testament. Of the Old Testament citations, nine were from the wisdom books (three from Proverbs, two from Ecclesiastes and four from Sirach) and one from the prophet Nahum. According to his biographer, these were some sort of program of conduct that Don Bosco had before his eyes everyday. These texts, in fact, reveal in a meaningful way a biblical spirituality along the following lines: trust in divine Providence and in God's goodness, worship owed to him, prudence in one's relationship with women, detachment from worldly goods, respect for one's parents and superiors, vigilance over one's speech, almsgiving, pardon of offenses, joy, not forgetting the judgment that one day God will pronounce over all our actions (MB II, 523-526).

Don Bosco was interested in everything that enabled him to understand Sacred Scriptures, in particular, biblical geography.

Don Lemoyne wrote: "To acquire a clearer understanding of Sacred Scriptures, Don Bosco carefully studied the ancient geography of the holy land and all the regions surrounding Palestine, not excluding Asia Minor, Mesopotamia, Egypt and Greece." One of his closest friends recall that in 1849 Don Bosco had posted on the walls of his room a geographical map of Palestine (MB III, 590).

In 1850 and in 1851, again according to his biographer, Don Bosco attended lessons in "Sacred Geography" in one of the classrooms of the Turin Seminary (MB III, 618).