



Inter Praecipuas
On Biblical Societies
Encyclical Of Pope Gregory XVI
May 8, 1844

To the Venerable Brothers, Patriarchs, Primates, Archbishops and Bishops.

Venerable Brothers, Greetings and Apostolic Benediction.

Among the special schemes with which non-Catholics plot against the adherents of Catholic truth to turn their minds away from the faith, the biblical societies are prominent. They were first established in England and have spread far and wide so that we now see them as an army on the march, conspiring to publish in great numbers copies of the books of divine Scripture. These are translated into all kinds of vernacular languages for dissemination without discrimination among both Christians and infidels. Then the biblical societies invite everyone to read them unguided. Therefore it is just as Jerome complained in his day: [1] they make the art of understanding the Scriptures without a teacher "common to babbling old women and crazy old men and verbose sophists," and to anyone who can read, no matter what his status. Indeed, what is even more absurd and almost unheard of, they do not exclude the common people of the infidels from sharing this kind of a knowledge.

2. But you know the aim of these societies. In his sacred writings, Peter, after praising the letters of Paul, warns that in these epistles "certain things are difficult to understand, which the unlearned and the unstable distort just as they do the rest of the Scriptures, which also leads to their destruction." He adds at once, "Since you know this beforehand, be on your guard lest, carried away by the error of the foolish, you fall away from your own steadfastness." [2] Hence it is clear to you that even from the first ages of Christianity this was a skill appropriate for heretics. Having repudiated the given word of God and rejected the authority of the Catholic Church, they either interpolate "by artifice" into the Scriptures or pervert "its meaning through interpretation." [3] Nor finally are you ignorant of the diligence and knowledge required to faithfully translate into another language the words of the Lord. In the many translations from the biblical societies, serious errors are easily inserted by the great number of translators, either through

ignorance or deception. These errors, because of the very number and variety of translations, are long hidden and hence lead the faithful astray. It is of little concern to these societies if men reading their vernacular Bibles fall into error. They are concerned primarily that the reader becomes accustomed to judging for himself the meaning of the books of Scripture, to scorning divine tradition preserved by the Catholic Church in the teaching of the Fathers, and to repudiating the very authority of the Church.

3. For this end the same biblical societies never cease to slander the Church and this Chair of Peter as if We have tried to keep the knowledge of sacred Scripture from the faithful. However, We have documents clearly detailing the singular zeal which the Supreme Pontiffs and bishops in recent times have used to instruct the Catholic people more thoroughly in the word of God, both as it exists in writing and in tradition. The decrees of the Council of Trent even commanded the bishops to see to it that "the sacred Scriptures and the divine law" are preached more frequently in the dioceses.[4] In expanding the provisions of the Lateran Council,[5] they order that in each church, either cathedral or collegiate in the cities and better known towns, individuals able to explain and interpret sacred Scripture must be obtained.[6] Later action was taken in many provincial synods[7] concerning the establishment of an ecclesiastical benefice according to the norms of articles sanctioned by the Council of Trent,[8] and about readings to be given publicly to the clergy and also to the people by a canonical theologian. Also, in the Roman Council of 1725, Benedict XIII assembled not only the sacred bishops of the Roman province but also many of the archbishops, bishops and other ordinaries of places in no way subject to this Holy See to deal with this same matter.[9] In addition, for the same purpose he proposed several measures in apostolic letters which he wrote expressly for Italy and the adjacent islands.[10] You customarily report on the condition of diocesan affairs at stated times to the Apostolic See.[11] It is clear from the answers of our Congregation of the Council, sent repeatedly to your predecessors or to you yourselves, how this same Holy See congratulates bishops if they have beneficed theologians who give public readings of the sacred Scriptures. The Holy See never fails to admonish and aid the pastoral care of those bishops, if anywhere this matter has not succeeded according to plan.

4. Moreover, regarding the translation of the Bible into the vernacular, even many centuries ago bishops in various places have at times had to exercise greater vigilance when they became aware that such translations were being read in secret gatherings or were being distributed by heretics. Innocent III issued warnings concerning the secret gatherings of laymen and women, under the pretext of piety, for the reading of Scripture in the diocese of Metz.[12] There was also a special prohibition of Scripture translations promulgated either in Gaul a little later[13] or in Spain before the sixteenth century.[14] But later even more care was required when the Lutherans and Calvinists dared to oppose the changeless doctrine of the faith with an almost incredible variety of errors. They left no means untried to deceive the faithful with perverse explanations of the

sacred books, which were published by their adherents with new interpretations in the vernacular. They were aided in multiplying copies and quickly spreading them by the newly invented art of printing. Therefore in the rules written by the fathers chosen by the Council of Trent, approved by Pius IV,'s and placed in the Index of forbidden books, we read the statute declaring that vernacular Bibles are forbidden except to those for whom it is judged that the reading will contribute "to the increase of faith and piety." [16] Because of the continued deceptions of heretics, this rule was further restricted and supplemented by a declaration of Benedict XIV: for the future the only vernacular translations which may be read are those which "are approved by the Apostolic See" or at least were published "with annotations taken from the holy Fathers of the Church, or from learned and Catholic authors." [17]

5. Meanwhile there was no dearth of new sect members in the school of Jansenius. Borrowing the tactics of the Lutherans and Calvinists, they rebuked the Apostolic See on the grounds that because the reading of the Scriptures for all the faithful, at all times and places, was useful and necessary, it therefore could not be forbidden anyone by any authority. But this audacity of the Jansenists we find reprehended by the grave censures of two recent supreme pontiffs, namely Clement XI in the Constitution Unigenitus in 1713 [18] and Pius VI in the Constitution Auctorem Fidei in 1794. [19]

6. So before the biblical societies were founded, the faithful had already been alerted by the aforementioned decrees against the deception of the heretics, which works in their specious zeal to spread the divine writings for the common use. However Pius VII, who understood that these societies founded in his time were flourishing, opposed their efforts by means of his apostolic nuncio, by his letters, by published decrees, [20] by various Congregations of Cardinals of the Holy Roman Church, and by two of his pontifical letters which he addressed to the archbishops of Gniezno [21] and Mohilev. [22] Immediately thereafter Leo XII continued the battle against the biblical societies with an encyclical letter addressed to all the bishops of the Catholic world, published on May 5, 1824, and Pius VIII did the same in an encyclical letter published May 24, 1829. And lastly, We who, though unworthy, have succeeded to his place have taken great pains to remind the faithful of the ancient laws concerning vernacular translations of the Scriptures. [23]

7. However We have reason to congratulate you, since, moved by piety and prudence and strengthened by these letters of Our predecessors, you warned Catholics to be on their guard against the snares which the biblical societies were spreading for them. Thus, by the efforts of God and His Church, it has come to pass that some incautious Catholic men who imprudently favored the biblical societies have understood how they were deceived. They have left the societies, and the remaining faithful have continued almost immune from the contagion which threatened them from this source.

8. In the meantime, the biblical societies did not doubt that they would obtain high praise for leading infidels in some manner or other to the profession of the Christian name by the reading of the sacred books published in their own language. They strove to distribute these in immense numbers by their missionaries and scouts, who even forced them upon the unwilling. But for the men striving to propagate the Christian name outside of the rules established by Christ himself, almost nothing happened according to plan. They were able at times to create new impediments for Catholic priests who set out to these peoples with a commission from this Holy See. These priests spared no labor to bring forth new sons of the Church by preaching the word of God and administering the Sacraments; they even prepared to shed their blood under all kinds of intense tortures for their salvation and for the defense of the faith.

9. Now, however, these sect members are deprived of their expectations and regret the immense outlay of money spent in publishing their Bibles and spreading them without success. Some have now been found who have directed their efforts toward Italians, especially the citizens of Rome herself, after the manner of a new first assault. Actually We learned from reports and documents just received that a number of men of various sects met in the city of New York last year on June 12 and founded a new society called Christian League. Their common purpose is to spread religious liberty, or rather an insane desire for indifference concerning religion, among Romans and Italians. They assert that the institutions of the Roman and Italian peoples have been so influential that anything of any consequence that has happened in the world had its origin in Rome. They arrive at this conclusion not because the Supreme See of Peter is here according to the plan of the Lord, but because there has been a certain residue of ancient Roman domination, usurped by Our predecessors, as they often repeat, but still active. Therefore they are determined to give everyone the gift of liberty of conscience, or rather of error; they liken it to a fountain from which political liberty and increased public prosperity may spring forth. But they feel that they can accomplish nothing unless they make some progress with Roman and Italian citizens, thereafter using their authority and efforts to influence other nations. And they are confident that they will achieve this easily, since there are so many Italians everywhere on earth, many of whom will return to their fatherland. Of these, some are attracted to new things, some have corrupt morals, and some are oppressed with poverty and may thus be lured to join the society voluntarily or to join for a price. Therefore the societies have concentrated on these people so that they will bring corrupt, vernacular Bibles here and secretly spread them among the faithful. They will also distribute other evil books and pamphlets composed with the aid of some Italians or translated into Italian in order to alienate the minds of the readers from the Holy Church and from obedience to it. Among these they designate particularly the *Histoire de la reformation* by Merle d'Aubigne and *Fostes de la Reforme en Italie* by John Cric. The nature of these books and of their future publications can be understood from the fact that no two members on the committee selecting books may ever be of the same religious sect.

10. When these things were first brought to Our attention, We were greatly saddened by the dangers to religion not only in places far from Rome, but in the very center of Catholic unity. We need fear little that the See of Peter may ever fall because the impregnable foundation of his Church was laid by Christ the Lord; however We must not cease to defend its authority. Besides the divine Leader of pastors will demand of Us a severe reckoning for the growth of weeds in the field of the Lord if they have been sown by an enemy while We were asleep, and for the blood of the sheep who have perished here through Our fault.

11. Therefore, taking counsel with a number of Cardinals, and weighing the whole matter seriously and in good time, We have decided to send this letter to all of you. We again condemn all the above-mentioned biblical societies of which our predecessors disapproved. We specifically condemn the new one called Christian League founded last year in New York and other societies of the same kind, if they have already joined with it or do so in the future. Therefore let it be known to all that anyone who joins one of these societies, or aids it, or favors it in any way will be guilty of a grievous crime. Besides We confirm and renew by Our apostolic authority the prescriptions listed and published long ago concerning the publication, dissemination, reading, and possession of vernacular translations of sacred Scriptures. Concerning other works of any writer We repeat that all must abide by the general rules and decrees of Our predecessors which are found in the Index of forbidden books, and indeed not only for those books specifically listed, but also for others to which the aforementioned prohibitions apply.

12. Thus, We emphatically exhort you to announce these Our commands to the people accredited to your pastoral care; explain them in the proper place and time, and strive mightily to keep the faithful sheep away from the Christian League and other biblical societies, as well as away from their followers. Also take from the faithful both the vernacular Bibles which have been published contrary to the sanctions of the Roman Pontiffs and all other books which are proscribed and condemned. In this way see that the faithful themselves by your warnings and authority "are taught that they ought to consider what kind of food is healthful for them, and what is noxious and deadly." [24] Meanwhile be more zealous each day to preach the word of God, both through yourselves and through the individual pastors in each diocese, and through other ecclesiastical men fit for the task. In particular, watch more carefully over those who are assigned to give public readings of holy scripture, so that they function diligently in their office within the comprehension of the audience; under no pretext whatsoever should they dare to explain and interpret the divine writings contrary to the tradition of the Fathers or the interpretation of the Catholic Church. Finally it is proper for a good pastor not only to safeguard and nourish his sheep, but also to seek and recall to the sheepfold those who have gone to a distant place. So it will also be your duty and Ours to direct Our fullest zeal to this end, that all who have been seduced by such sect members and the distributors of evil books recognize the gravity of their sin and strive to expiate it with penance. Nor indeed are the seducers to be deprived of the same priestly solicitude, especially the teachers of impiety themselves;

although their sin is greater, We should not shrink from their salvation, which We may be able to procure by some means.

13. We ask those of you who rule churches in Italy, or in other places where Italians live in great numbers, or where there are trading centers and ports from which passage into Italy is frequent, that special and intense vigilance be exercised against the deceits and labors of the members of the Christian League. Since it is there that the sect members have determined to bring their plans to fruition, it follows that the bishops in those places especially must collaborate with Us in ready and constant zeal to dissipate their machinations. We earnestly desire the help of the Lord in this task.

14. We have no doubt that these cares of Ours and yours will be seconded with the aid of the civil powers, especially by the more influential princes of Italy. This is because of their exceptional zeal for preserving the Catholic religion and because they realize that the state would benefit if the efforts of the above-mentioned sect members should fail. Experience shows that there is no more direct way of alienating the populace from fidelity and obedience to their leaders than through that indifference to religion propagated by the sect members under the name of religious liberty. And this not even the members of the Christian League conceal: although they profess themselves strangers to inciting sedition, they advocate allowing every man of the masses to interpret the Bible as he likes. As complete liberty of conscience, as they call it, spreads among the Italian people, political liberty will result of its own accord.

15. But what is truly first and foremost, let Us raise Our hands together to God and let Us commend to him, with the humility of prayer as fervent as We can make it, Our cause and that of the whole flock and of the Church; let Us also invoke with pious petitions Peter the prince of the apostles, the other saints, and especially the Blessed Virgin Mary, who has the power to end all the heresies in the whole world.

16. Finally, as a pledge of Our ardent love, We grant the Apostolic Benediction with an outpouring of affection to all of you, venerable brothers, and to the clergy and faithful laity committed to your care.

Given at Rome at St. Peter's, May 8, 1844, in the fourteenth year of Our Pontificate.

1. Epistle to Paulinus, 7, which is epistle 53, vol. 1, of Vallarsius edition of the Operum of St. Jerome.
2. 2 Pt 3.16, 17.
3. Tertullian, de Praescriptionibus, chaps. 37, 38.
4. Council of Trent, session 24, chap. 4 on reform.

5. Lateran Council (1215) under Innocent III, chap. 11 (chap. 4, de Magistris).
6. Council of Trent, session 5, chap. 1 on reform.
7. Council of Milan 1 (1565), de Praeb. Theol. par. 1, tit. 5; Council of Milan 5 (1579), quae ad Beneficior collat. attin. par. 3, tit. 5; Council of Aix (1585), de Canonicis, et al.
8. Tit 1, chap. 6ff.
9. In the letter of indiction of the Council, 24 December 1724.
10. Constitution Pastoralis officii, 19 May 1725.
11. From the constitution of Sixtus V, Romanus Pontifex, 20 December 1585, and the constitution of Benedict XIV, Quod Sancta Sardicensis Synodus, 23 November 1740, vol. 1 of the Bullarium, vol. 1, and from the instruction that is found in the Appendix to vol. 1.
12. In three letters given to the people of Metz, and to their bishop abbots of Morimond and LaCrest, and the capitulars, and to the Cistercian, letters 141; 142, bk. 2, and 235, bk. 3, in the edition of Balutius.
13. Council of Toulouse (1229), can. 14.
14. From the statement of Cardinal Pacecco at the Council of Trent (in Pallavicinus, Storia del Concil. di Trento, bk. 6, chap. 12).
15. Constitution Dominici gregis, 24 March 1564.
16. Rules 3 and 4 of the Index.
17. In addition to the previous Rule 4 from the Congregation of the Index, 17 June 1757.
18. The proscription of propositions 79 to 85 of Quesnel.
19. Condemnation of proposition 67 of the Pseudo-Synod of Pistoia.
20. Especially through the letter (3 August 1816) of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith to the apostolic vicars of Persia, Armenia, and other Eastern regions, and through the decree (23 June 1817) concerning all such versions published by the Congregation of the Index.
21. 1 June 1816.

22. 4 September 1816.

23. In the monitum added to the decree (7 January 1836) of the Congregation of the Index.

24. From the mandate of Leo XII.