

# I

## THE HOLY SCRIPTURES AS OUR CONSOLATION

BY Fr. F. Pavese, IMC

In the context of the Synod of Bishops on the Word of God, I am happy to propose the thoughts of our Founder on the importance of knowing, loving, and living the Holy Scriptures. I am undertaking this service willingly, also as a homage to our Founder who, on his 66<sup>th</sup> birthday, confidentially told the Consolata Sisters, "I would have loved to be engaged in Holy Scriptures, but now I have no longer the time."

Our Founder spoke very often about Holy Scriptures. In various conferences of his, he dealt exclusively with this theme. On other occasions, mentioning Holy Scriptures came spontaneously to him, in connection with the study of theology, meditation, spiritual reading, etc. Undoubtedly our Founder was in love with the Word of God. He took advantage of any occasion to recommend studying it.

I like to begin with one of his basic convictions: the Holy Scriptures are a "consolation", first of all for us, missionaries, but also for all the people we approach in our mission. I am dealing first with this aspect, because it seems to me that it is strictly connected with the central nucleus of our charism, as Pope John Paul II reminded us in his "message" on the occasion of the Centenary of our foundation (2001): Dearest Brothers, with the help of Our Lady Consolata, spread the true "consolation", i.e., the salvation that is Jesus Christ, the Saviour of all."

### **"Where can we find this consolation?"**

In the conference of 17 December 1916, entitled "Consolation in reading the Holy Scriptures", our Founder presented various aspects of this theme. I think he might have done so, also because of the historical situation of Italy and Europe at that time. World War I was at its height, and also in our Institute people had to necessarily accept many privations, but without losing heart. Our Founder pointed out to all of them a very efficacious way of succeeding in doing so.

Undoubtedly, the word "consolation" was understood by our Founder in its broad meaning, as it appears from his statements: consolation as "strength" of character, as "joy" in living he present, as "hope" for the future, as "courage" in facing sacrifices, as "perseverance" in resisting, etc. In other words, our Founder taught his people to turn to the Holy Scriptures so as to be missionaries (both men and women) as he wanted them to be: "first class" and not "slack people".

The thoughts I am reporting here below are taken from both his very accurate manuscript and his oral expression of it (as taken down by the seminarian V. Merlo-Pich), integrated with other previous and later statements of our Founder. He started by saying, "It is true that our times are painful, as long as we have no peace, and that we need consolation. And where can we find this consolation? Certainly [we will turn] to Jesus who is living with us. [...] We also have the B. V. Mary Consolata, our special Patroness and Mother, who consoles us... And we have also the reading of the Holy Scriptures." Therefore, after turning to Jesus and to Mary, we must turn to the Holy Scriptures.

First of all, our Founder pointed out that the very Holy Scriptures present themselves to us as a source of consolation and hope. Of the Old Testament he quoted the examples of the Maccabees and of Job, and of the New Testament the Letter of St. Paul to the Romans. Quoting freely 1Mac 12:9, he said, "Jonathan, who was the High Priest and leader of the army, and his brothers answered in this way to Arius, king of the Spartans, 'We do not need any alliance with you and any help from you; the consolation of the holy

books that are in our hands is enough for us! What a beautiful thing! [...] It should be the same for us: the Holy Scriptures must be our consolation.” “In fact, if one feeds on the very Word of God and is capable of benefiting from it, he does not need anything else.”

Quoting Rm 15:4, our Founder said, “Everything that was written...was meant to teach us something about hope’, especially, St. Paul says, ‘from the examples Scripture gives of how people who did not give up were helped by God.’ [...] The Holy Scriptures console us. They strengthen and support us in our tribulations, so that we remain firm in hope. We must read the whole of the Holy Scriptures, the Old Testament as well as the New Testament, in order to be consoled.”

### **“All the Saints found in the Holy Scriptures a source of consolation”**

To convince people that it is necessary to turn to the Holy Scriptures in order to receive consolation, our Founder, besides God’s Word, quoted also various statements of Saints, especially the Fathers of the Church. Here below are the main ones.

“St. Augustine said that the three beatitudes, ‘Blessed are those who thirst for justice’, ‘Blessed are those who weep’, ‘Blessed are those who are persecuted ... because they will be consoled’ belong to the understanding of the Holy Scriptures. You may see that St. Augustine used “consolation” as the beatitude promised by Our Lord in the Holy Scriptures. In fact, he said that there is no illness of our soul which does not find its remedy in the Holy Scriptures. [...] And so, he said, ‘Your Scriptures are my pure delight’”.

“St. Gregory the Great said, ‘Learn to know the heart of God, which is so good, through God’s Words, in the Holy Scriptures.’ And St. Jerome, ‘What good is our life without the knowledge of the Holy Scriptures?’ [...] It remains a life full of miseries: no longer life, but rather death.” “And to the young lady Eustochius, he said, ‘Keep always the book of the Holy Scriptures in your hands, up to falling asleep with your head on the holy book.’ He did not mean to read in a sleepy condition, but to read until her tired head fell unto the book.”

“And all the Saints said that the Holy Scriptures are like a store with all sorts of remedies; they are like an arsenal full of offensive and defensive weapons to be used in fighting against the enemies of our souls.[...] You may see how important the reading of the Holy Scriptures was considered by the Saints. They found in the Holy Scriptures a source of consolation and of life. The Word of God penetrates into our souls like a sword. And it provides for all our needs.”

### **“Your Words are fire”**

Our Founder was not satisfied with indicating the Holy Scriptures as a source of consolation; he went a step further, by stating that they “infuse ardour”. In other words, he proposed to his sons and daughters to look into the Holy Scriptures for the enthusiasm for being missionaries. Here are his words: “The Holy Scriptures warm us up with love for God: your Word, Lord, is full of fire: in my meditation the fire blazes.”

“The reading of the Holy Scriptures inflames our hearts with love for God. Lord, your words are fire and, as such, they warm us up. Consider the disciples of Emmaus: they had accompanied the Lord without having recognized him. When they had recognized him,

they exclaimed, ‘Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked to us on the road and explained the Scriptures to us?’ (Lk 24:32). The words of Our Lord are fire!”  
As a conclusion, let us read once again three statements of our Founder which were concerned with life in the missions. “In the missions, the Holy Scriptures will be your consolation; those who are able to meditate them well, will find in them their comfort. [...] This is the reason why in this house the Holy Scriptures have always been held in the highest place; and it will always be so.” “The Holy Scriptures provide also comfort: in the missions you will have at least the New Testament, and possibly the whole Bible; in times of discouragement, study the Holy Scriptures.” “I recommend you to meditate well on the Holy Scriptures; they are the ones that form the missionary and priestly spirit in people.”

(From “Da Casa Madre”, October 2008)

## II

### **THE HOLY SCRIPTURES MUST BE SCRUTINIZED**

By Fr. F. Pavese, IMC

Blessed Joseph Allamano did not limit himself to advising to “read” the Holy Scriptures, even if he was often using such a verb. He wanted us to go deeper. To make clear what he meant, he was using a series of other verbs that were familiar to him, such as to meditate, ruminate, take delight in, taste, scrutinize, dealing with, “stretch” and “twist” the Holy Scriptures. When he was speaking in such a way, he was conveying his own experience, of the “interior man” he was, capable of placing himself in front of God and listen to him with interest, love, and simplicity.

#### **“It is not enough to read the Holy Scriptures”**

Here are some suggestions, offered by our Founder at various times, that express well a conviction of his which not only never changed but, indeed, went on perfecting itself: the Holy Scriptures must not only be read constantly, but also meditated, penetrated, and searched thoroughly as much as possible, in an atmosphere of prayer and with the light of the Holy Spirit.

Let us listen to him: “We must take delight in the Holy Scriptures; we must not only know that the book is divine, integral, etc., but also taste it, read some part of it every day, make of it a vital nourishment. Let’s not be afraid, as St Augustine said, to ‘twist’ the Holy Scriptures for our spiritual advantage. It is the same as with those inspirations we experience during meditation: we do not check whether they flow logically from the premises, from what we have read; if they are beneficial to us, we follow them.”

On another occasion, about ten years later, he repeated the same ideas, showing clearly that he was deeply convinced of them, and that they were fruit of his very experience. “It is not enough to read the Holy Scriptures; we must scrutinize them, penetrate deeply into them. Our Lord did not say to just read them, but to study them: ‘Study the Scriptures [...] these same Scriptures testify to me’ (Jn 5:39); penetrate deeply into them; make use of them, especially when it is a matter of piety; then, as St Augustine said, we may also

‘stretch’ them for our good, even without too much hermeneutic: if it is good for me, I make use of it. But also ‘scrutinize’ them: not just read them in passing, but stop and ponder over them; take, for instance, three verses and stay with them.”

We may ask, “Why did our Founder insist so much on the duty to scrutinize and search thoroughly the Word of God?” Obviously, because of its sacredness, but also because its contents are inexhaustible: the deeper we go, the more we uncover new aspects of it. This was certainly his personal experience which he wanted to convey to his sons and daughters.

### **“The Holy Scriptures are a mine”**

Our Founder was convinced, then, that the contents of God’s Word are inexhaustible. To express this conviction of his, he was using words and images very efficacious. We know that he was rather severe in regard to choosing books to read. He confessed downright that he had “never found time to read novels, because I have been thinking that, if I could read novels, I could as well study.” Nevertheless, to his young people he offered a criterion that is still very sound and valid even today: “Always prefer the Holy Scriptures: they are a mine...” The word “mine” allows us to understand how much he was able to find in the Word of God.

As St. Augustine, also our Founder used the image of the well: “The Saints used to say that the Holy Scriptures are a deep well: ‘puteus altus’ [high well]. If we look from the bottom, what is deep becomes high. And St. Augustine spoke of the ‘admirable depth of the Words of the Lord’; therefore, it takes work, effort to scrutinize them, as if we have to draw water from a deep well, but then it is consoling and sweet.”

### **“What are the attitudes required to read ‘well’ the Holy Scriptures?”**

Our Founder suggested various attitudes that are needed to “read well”, as he used to say, i.e., to penetrate and scrutinize, the Word of God. There is a preliminary attitude, which consists in approaching it, convinced of its supernatural origin: “Let’s remember that the whole of the Holy Scriptures is ‘Verbum Dei’ [God’s Word] and, consequently, we should study and appreciate them as such. The ‘Verbum Dei’ fortifies us and animates us to perfection. Therefore, we must have affection for, love, and study the Holy Scriptures.”

Starting off from the Encyclical “*Spiritus Paraclitus*”, which Pope Benedict XV wrote on the occasion of the fifteenth centenary of St. Jerome’s death, our Founder explained with simple words the meaning of the “inspiration” of the Bible. “[The Pope] said that we must, first of all, believe that the whole of the Holy Scriptures, up to the last word, is inspired word of God.[...] Therefore, there are no errors. To make themselves understood, the divinely inspired writers expressed themselves using the common terminology of their time, as we say that the sun goes down, while it is we who go down. St. Jerome venerated and considered the whole of the Holy Scriptures as Word of God.”

After this introduction, at various times he indicated individual attitudes. In regard to some, he limited himself to mention them, because they are so obvious. The first one that he considered was the “purity of life”. The Holy Scriptures have to be approached with a life that is consistent with the Christian faith, otherwise they become only reading matter, like any other. If we consider that our Founder was convinced that between the Holy Scriptures and sin there is total opposition, we understand why this attitude was

considered first: “The Holy Scriptures are at our service against sin; and this means that they are a means to overcome temptations [...]. Keep well in mind these words of St. Jerome: ‘Love the science of the Scriptures, and you will not love the vices of the flesh.’”

A second attitude required to penetrate deeply the Holy Scriptures is “prayer”. Our Founder affirms it with conviction: “[...] And then, prayer: while we read the Holy Scriptures, we must pray that Our Lord may enlighten us; put in many short invocations; the Holy Scriptures themselves really are already prayer!” The Holy Scriptures are not just any book. To understand the Word of God, the “Verbum Dei”, we need a special light that only the Holy Spirit gives.

Here is the third attitude: “We must read the Word of God with ‘purity of intention’.” By “purity of intention” our Founder meant many things, but above all simplicity and respect for God’s Word, as well as fidelity to “the teaching of the Church” to which belongs the task to guard and propose the Word. In this regard, our Founder at times was sliding into theological controversy, common at that time, and was suggesting to read it “not like some big doctors [...] who read the Holy Scriptures in order to find in them confirmation for their errors.” After having stated that we must also use hermeneutical criteria, he concluded: “But above all we must read the Holy Scriptures with the same spirit with which they were written, read it with reverence, without trying to penetrate them more than it is possible to do so.”

I think that in this context I could add, without affecting the spirit of our Founder, what he used to say when speaking about faith: “When it is a matter of the Holy Scriptures, we should simply believe, without searching for too many things; it is the devil that does so. [...] The Imitation of Christ says, ‘What good is it for you to dispute profoundly about the Holy Trinity, if you lack humility and, so, displease the Trinity?’ [...] We need simplicity. St. Augustine said, ‘The unlearned arise and steal the kingdom of heaven, and we, with all our doctrine, are left with only the earth.’”

Speaking concretely about “purity of intention”, our Founder suggested also that we should approach the Holy Scriptures with respect. As an example, he mentioned St. Charles Borromeo: “St. Charles used to read the Holy Scriptures, always with head uncovered and on his knees; and, in spite of always being very busy, he read them often. [...] He used to say that the Holy Scriptures were his garden, where he could relax. When somebody invited him to go for a walk, or to go for a while into the garden, he used to say that a clergyman’s garden was the Holy Scriptures.”

As a conclusion, I would like to quote the following words of our Founder: “If we read the Holy Scriptures with the required attitudes, they will do us good: they will rouse in us love for God and the desire for perfection [...]. Let’s do so, and Our Lord will console us and those who are dear to us.” “Let’s love them [the Holy Scriptures] very much, especially the Gospels and the letters of St. Paul; we must grow in love for them.”

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### III

## THE HOLY SCRIPTURES ARE OUR BOOK

By Fr. F. Pavese, IMC

Speaking to his young missionary men, our Founder stated with conviction that the Holy Scriptures “are our book”; and with his young missionary Sisters he insisted, “They should be our daily book”.

This conviction of his was manifested on many occasions, especially when he was speaking about theological studies. It is interesting to notice that the most meaningful expressions are found in the conferences of the last years of our Founder’s life. It is almost as if he wanted the commitment to study Holy Scriptures to be part of his last will.

### **“What should be studied?”**

In 1920, at the beginning of the new academic year, the activity of our Founder was still in its fullness in all aspects, and his human and spiritual maturity was considerable. Because of his great experience, he was well aware of the qualities that are indispensable to missionaries, the ones that he favoured as an educator. Among them, the intellectual preparation stood high in his esteem. To his young seminarians he told, “You have just begun your studies and, at the beginning of the academic year, I usually like to tell you something about studying.” And on this occasion, his conference was very long. His handwritten notes consisted only of a few lines, but the notes of what he said, as taken down by the seminarian V. Merlo Pich, are almost six pages long: one of his longest conferences! This seems to suggest that the matter he was dealing with was very familiar to him: he felt well prepared for it, and certainly had it at heart. First he talked about the need for studying in general, because “without studying one cannot acquire knowledge, and knowledge is a must.” In another earlier conference, he had already stated that “an ignorant missionary priest may be compared to an idol of sadness and bitterness.”

Then, he started talking about studying theology. At this point, it is convenient to follow his talk, which is still (surprisingly) relevant today. “And now, let’s see: what should be studied? First of all there is sacred knowledge. Therefore, in order of importance, the Holy Scriptures are first. All the Fathers of the Church of old formed themselves with the Holy Scriptures: they did not yet have Philosophy and Theology as we do, and all of them formed themselves by means of the Holy Scriptures, e.g., St. Gregory of Nyssa, called the Theologian. This is why in our Institute we give so much importance to studying the Holy Scriptures, beginning on the first day till the end: this is a study that never ends... [...] Therefore, the Holy Scriptures are definitely the first subject for the seminarians, as well as for the Brothers.” The last words express clearly his thinking and also the formative programme of our Institute; this is why he repeated in a peremptory tone a little later, “Therefore, for us the Holy Scriptures are our first study, the highest and inexcusable!” (cf IMC Conf III, 465).

### **“Have the Holy Scriptures, know them, and study them more than they do.**

In the teaching of our Founder about Holy Scriptures, there is a particular aspect, which today we would readily overlook, but which, I think, is convenient not to omit. In some conferences, when dealing with this matter, our Founder made a comparison with the Protestants who, at least as it was believed at that time, know the Holy Scriptures more than the Catholics do. As an example, he used the famous explorer Henry M. Stanley. It almost seems that he was proposing a competition to his young men. In fact, it was only a pedagogical device to impress them, and place the study of Holy Scriptures among their

most important commitments. Naturally, we should keep in mind the rather polemic mentality of that time, in order to properly understand our Founder's expressions. He told them, "I was greatly impressed by the fact that the British explorer Stanley, now and then, retired under his tent to read the Holy Scriptures. This is what we missionaries should do, and not allow the Protestants to beat us. [...] We must have the Holy Scriptures, know them, and study them more than they do." That "more" should not be overlooked. It indicates our degree of involvement. Once, as he was bringing the example of Stanley, he made the following comment in Latin: "Utinam talis vir esset noster! (I wish that such a man would be one of ours!)." (cf IMC Conf III, 411).

### **"Look up also some Commentary".**

There is another aspect I would like to emphasize. We know that, when speaking about the means to know well the Holy Scriptures, our Founder insisted very much on the spirit of faith, prayer, the Church's teaching, and simplicity. However, he did not forget to emphasize also the importance of a proper exegesis. The terminology he used is the one that was common to the biblical studies of that time: "It is not enough to study the authenticity, the integrity...; also the literal and mystical meanings should be studied." (cf IMC Conf III, 477). "Certain criteria of hermeneutic, both natural and supernatural, should be used: the natural ones as you do also with other books, and the supernatural ones, especially for Theology." (cf IMC Conf II, 826). In his handwritten notes, a certain caution may be seen, but it was not expressed in his talk. He just invited them to use the criteria of hermeneutic "with moderation and taken from sound sources". (cf IMC Conf II, 822).

At the end of 1923, our Founder was old and his health was weak, so that the medical doctors had ordered him to avoid anything that could worsen it. To the newly professed seminarians who had gone to visit him at the Consolata Shrine on 9 December, he told, "You come to see me, because I can no longer go to see you; when the weather is better, I will try to go. [...] But you are young and have no problem with walking, and so you come to see me here." Then, starting from his morning meditation, he went on to speak about the Holy Scriptures for a long time. It clearly appeared that it was something which, with the passing of time, he had more and more at heart. With those young people, he improvised a long talk about various aspects which, I believe, are very interesting. First he emphasized the importance of Holy Scriptures for priestly and missionary ministry. Then he insisted on the need to make good use of modern books, with which the Institute was well equipped, even if in the past they did not exist and the first Fathers of the Church formed themselves with the very Holy Scriptures. He reminded them, with some pride, of the fact that the Bible section of the Institute's library was among the best equipped in town. Finally he invited them to read every day some passages from the Holy Scriptures. This talk was especially important, because he concluded it by saying, "Therefore, keep all this in mind as a remembrance of me." (cf IMC Conf III, 702).

Even if there may be some repeating of what I said above and/or I wrote in other articles, I think that it may be pleasing to read the very words of our Founder on these aspects, because they are very vivid.

Here are some of his words about the importance of knowing well the Holy Scriptures in view of ministry: "Today I made my meditation on a good book which was dealing with Holy Scriptures. It was commenting on St. Paul's words, taken from the Epistle of

today's Mass ("2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent, at that time), 'Indeed everything that was written long ago in the Scriptures was meant to teach us something about hope, from the examples Scripture gives of how people who did not give up were helped by God.' (Rm 15:4). The book said that, when St. Augustine was ordained a priest, he was entrusted by his Bishop with the task of preaching. As he could not refuse, he asked to be allowed, at least for a month, to prepare himself by meditating the Holy Scriptures. His profane scholarship was quite extensive, but not his sacred one; for this reason he asked for some time to prepare himself, and he was right! St Jerome said, 'Presbyters' talks should be seasoned with teaching from the Holy Scriptures.' In them, there is everything: we should love them."

Here, instead, is regret, and a confession: "It is shameful to know that many priests, and even many of you, have not yet read the whole of the Holy Scriptures. Not even I myself may say that I read the whole of them systematically, even if I have been reading here and there as it occurred, and I also know many passages by heart. It is necessary that we read the Holy Scriptures for our good and the good of others: they are a sacramental for preaching and for conversion. They penetrate and go to the heart: they are God's Word. To quote Holy Scriptures is much more valuable than to quote poets... [...] We need the Holy Scriptures. They are warm words and, as St. Paul says, 'All Scripture is inspired by God and can profitably be used for teaching, for refuting error, for guiding people's lives and teaching them to be holy. This is how the man who is dedicated to God becomes fully equipped and ready for any good work.' (2 Tim 3:16-17)." (cf IMC Conf III, 701-702).

And finally here is a practical teaching: "I am telling you this so that you may continue to read the Holy Scriptures; some time can always be found for it. Look up also some Commentary, e.g., the one by Cornelius a Lapide. Consult also some other books. Our library is one of the best in the area of Holy Scriptures. There are several copies of A. Martini's publication: it is very good and written in classical language. What is important is that you may grow in love for the Holy Scriptures: they are our book." (cf IMC Conf III, 702).

Let's conclude by listening once again to his ideal: "In the missions the Holy Scriptures will be your consolation; those who are able to meditate them well, will find in them their comfort... [...] This is the reason why in this House the Holy Scriptures have always been given the highest place; and it will always be so." "This is a study that never ends."

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