

The Popes And The Bible

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Vatican archives reveal Bible was once banned book

ROME, (Reuters) - The Vatican permitted scrutiny of one of the most notorious periods in Roman Catholic Church history yesterday when it opened the archives of the department once known as the Inquisition.

Scholars now will be able to study cases such as that of the astronomer Galileo, condemned by the Inquisition for claiming the earth revolved round the sun, and Giordano Bruno, a monk burnt for heresy in 1600 in Rome's Campo dei Fiori square.

Vatican officials say the secret files, dating between 1542 and 1902, will yield precious few juicy secrets — the Church officially rehabilitated Galileo in 1992, for example. But the archives do contain some surprises.

Opened on Thursday alongside the Inquisition archives was the infamous **Index of Forbidden Books**, which Roman Catholics were forbidden to read or possess on pain of excommunication.

They showed that even the Bible was once on the blacklist. Translations of the Holy Book ended up on the bonfires along with other "heretical" works because the Church, whose official language was Latin, was suspicious of allowing the faithful access to sacred texts without ecclesiastical guidance.

The Bible was banned by the Vatican

By J. J. Murphy

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CARDINAL GIBBONS in his much-published book *Faith of Our Fathers* says: "The Catholic Church the enemy of the Bible? As well might you accuse the Virgin Mother of trying to crush the Infant Saviour to her breast, as to accuse the Church, our mother, of attempting to crush the existence of the Word of God."

How the cardinal could have made such a statement is a matter that lies between his conscience and God. The fact remains, however, that **in Catholic countries**; especially in the Latin countries of Europe and America, **the Bible has been always withheld from the people**. At best the Catholic Bible was spoken of as a dangerous book, even an evil book. The Protestant Bible was always condemned as a tissue of lies.

In democratic countries like the United States, the competition of Protestantism has forced the Catholic church to adopt a different policy toward the Bible. Here it does not forbid Catholics to read it. In fact at times it superficially urges them to do so, knowing that **they have been so conditioned that they will not read it anyway**. All this was explained at length in a four-page article in the May 1942 issue of *The Converted Catholic Magazine*.

In Catholic countries, opposition to the Bible and especially to Bible Societies is as vehement and intolerant as ever. Four years ago, Cardinal Villeneuve of Quebec lashed out at Protestant Bibles in a pastoral letter read in all the churches of Quebec. From a copy of it printed in *La Presse* of Montreal on April 2, 1942, the following quotations are taken:

"On several occasions we have already denounced the heretical propaganda carried on among Catholics by an agency known as 'The Bible and Tract Depot' or more commonly known as the 'Bureau of Life and Freedom'... The priests are therefore requested to put the faithful on their guard with the greatest insistence each time that a campaign of this nature is brought to their attention.

"Priests will insist particularly on the danger, to which those who glance through this heretical literature expose the precious treasure of their faith. They will recall that this sort of literature can neither be read, kept, nor given to others in good conscience, and the best thing to do if we are insulted by having these writings sent to us is to throw them into the fire."

What Cardinal Villeneuve prescribed in Canada is infallible Catholic doctrine taught down through the ages by pope and council from the time of the Reformation, when Bibles first began to be widely spread among the people. The Council of Trent in its fourth article denounced reading of the Bible as hurtful and decreed penalties against whoever dares to read or possess a Bible without written permission. The usual condemnation then and in later times was of "the Bible in the vernacular," since if it were not in the vernacular it could not be read by the people. The Latin Bibles were not a source of worry to the Catholic church, for they were comparatively scarce and could be read by only a few of the more learned of the clergy under the direct supervision of the church.

Typical of official Catholic condemnations of Bible societies is that of Pope Gregory XVI issued as an encyclical under the name of *Inter Praecipuas* on May 8, 1844. From it we quote the opening paragraphs and other excerpts referring by name to the *Christian Alliance*:

"Among the chief machinations by which in our times non-Catholics of various denominations try to ensnare Catholic believers and turn their minds away from the holiness of their Faith, a prominent place is held by the Bible Societies. These societies, first instituted in England and since extended far and wide, **we now behold in battle array**, conspiring to translate the books of divine Scripture into all the popular languages, to issue immense numbers of copies, to spread them indiscriminately among Christians and heathen, and to entice every individual to read them without any guidance.

"To those societies, however, it matters, little or nothing into what errors the persons who read the vernacular Bible may fall, provided they are gradually accustomed to claim for themselves free judgment of the sense of Scripture..."

“From information and documents received, we learned that several persons of different denominations met last year in New York City in America and on the 12th of June formed a new society called *The Christian Alliance*... whose common purpose shall be to bring religious liberty – that and pursuit of religious indifference – to the Romans and other Italians, not realizing that for several centuries... there has been no great achievement in the world that did not begin in the Holy City.”

“Having, therefore, taken into consultation several cardinals of the Holy Roman Church... we again condemn with our Apostolic authority all Bible Societies censored by our predecessors, and by the same authority of our Supreme Apostolate we reprobate by name and condemn the above-mentioned Christian Alliance, founded last year in New York, and other societies of the same sort.”

“Be it known that all that lend their names or their help to such societies will be guilty of a grave crime before God and Church. Moreover, we confirm and by our Apostolic authority renew the commands already given against the publication, distribution, reading and keeping of Scripture translated into the vernacular... At the same time it will be your duty to snatch out of the hands of the faithful, not only Bibles translated into the people’s language, but also forbidden or injurious books of every sort, and thus provide that the faithful may learn from your warnings and authority what sort of pasture they should consider good for themselves and what sort is harmful and deadly.”

The Pope then continued:

“For it is clear and proved by repeated experience of past ages, that there is no easier way to withdraw people from their adherence and obedience to their royal princes than by that religious indifference which is spread under the name of religious liberty. Nor is this unknown to the new society called “Christian Alliance;” though it professes itself opposed to civil revolution, it admits that from the right interpretation of the Scriptures (claimed by them for even the lowest classes) and from the complete freedom of conscience which they would spread among Italians, the political liberty of Italy would naturally follow.”

This frantic appeal against the Bible and the freedom to which it gives rise is the same thing that other pontiffs have proclaimed. Pope Pius VII denounced circulation of the Bible as “a crafty device,” and “a pestilence,” as well as “a nefarious scheme threatening everlasting ruin.” Pope Leo XII condemned Bible societies as “strutting with effrontery through the world.”

Pope Pius IX in one of his encyclicals spoke of the Holy Scriptures in the people's tongue as "an old device of heretics."

These fulminations of the Popes against the Bible have not stopped its circulation. April 4, 1945, the American Bible Society announced that in 1944 – exactly 100 years after Pope Gregory XVI's condemnation of Protestant Bible societies – 12,403,541 copies of the Scriptures were circulated.