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The Centenary of the Biblical Institute

With his usual finesse and conciseness, our former Superior General, Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, in 1989 pointed out that: “The checkered history of biblical exegesis, in which the Biblical Institute plays an important part, does not really hide the work and suffering that are indispensable in constantly reviving the letter, while welcoming the Spirit of the Lord into it”.

Quickly going over the part the Biblical Institute has played in that history calls for intellectual honesty in the search for historical truth. This was possible thanks to the well-stocked archives at the Institute, both in Rome and in Jerusalem. Up to the present, no one had consulted them, except for one dossier when, in 1954, Fr. Ernst Vogt, then rector of the *Biblicum*, recalled the role of Pius X in the foundation of the Institute.

Yesterday

As it happens, three periods in our hundred-year history still remain unknown or are the object of legends that are unverified.

I. – The first concerns the origins of the Institute, in Rome and Jerusalem. Fr. Vogt had opened the way, but it was still necessary to be more precise. There was first of all the wish of Leo XIII in 1903, a wish that continued throughout the last six months of his long and successful pontificate. He wanted an institute of advanced biblical studies in Rome which would answer the needs of the period of great archaeological and palaeontological discoveries and of the natural sciences, but would also provide answers to that form of rationalism which advocated a minimalist understanding of Scripture. Fr. Ferdinand Prat, a French Jesuit, was entrusted with drawing up a plan, a kind of organic statute for such an institute, a really serious sketch, which got the approval of the Pontifical Biblical Commission created by the same Leo XIII in October 1902. But in July 1903 death prevented the pontiff from carrying out his last dream.

Pius X took it up immediately but for lack of funds he had to put off its fulfilment until later. Matters were to find a first attempted solution in the creation in 1908 at the Gregorian University of a special programme of biblical studies aimed at preparing about twenty candidates for examinations which the Biblical Commission had, since 1904, been setting for a diploma in biblical studies. Cardinal Merry del Val, Pius X's Secretary of State, had suggested carrying it out to Fr. Lucien Méchineau, a French Jesuit, who had actually been teaching at the Gregorian since 1906. Méchineau spoke to Fr. General Franz-Xaver Wernz about it in September

1907 and even suggested the programme for this new “*Cursus superior Scripturae Sacrae*” to him in April 1908, but to set it up necessitated, in his opinion, an extra professor and he suggested Fr. Leopold Fonck.

Then aged forty-three, the latter had already made a name for himself at Innsbruck where he had been teaching since 1901. He had created a “Biblico-patristic Seminar” there in 1906 on which Pius X had congratulated him. As a doctor of philosophy and theology from the Gregorian and ordained priest for the Diocese of Münster in 1889, he had entered the Society of Jesus three years later. From 1894 to 1899 he had completed his training, especially with a long stay in the Near East and three years of studies in Assyriology and Egyptology in Berlin and Munich. In 1906 he had already published five books and many articles, including biblical hermeneutics in *La Civiltà Cattolica*. Forceful by nature and an excellent organizer, he was also a vigorous polemicist, a fierce defender of exegetical tradition and by now a staunch opponent of Fr. Marie-Joseph Lagrange, the founder of the Dominicans’ École Biblique in Jerusalem in 1890; Fonck had taken him to task in 1905.

Fr. Méchineau reported to Fr. Fonck in September 1908 that the choice bearing on his name corresponded to three criteria imposed by the Vatican: 1. that he be conservative, 2. that he be known to be such and, 3. that he give every assurance that he would not change!

In fact, the modernist crisis had been at its height since 1903. In 1907 the decree “*Lamentabili*” from the Holy Office and Pius X’s encyclical “*Pascendi*”, to say nothing of the early decrees of the Biblical Commission, were so effective that scholarly exegesis was muzzled. On the Biblical Commission Fr. Prat was swiftly replaced by Fr. Méchineau in 1906, then, in 1908, by Fr. Fonck who had just arrived in Rome.

At the Gregorian, the new “*Cursus superior Scripturae Sacrae*” continued as usual during the first semester, but in the course of the second, Fr. Méchineau’s health was failing; he was only fifty-nine, however.

Now it was just at the beginning of that second semester, on February 14th 1909 to be precise, that Fr. Fonck suggested to Pius X the creation of a biblical institute in the real sense. At that time Fr. Fonck did not know about Fr. Prat’s project and the ecclesiastical atmosphere really had changed. In his project, quite a vague one all told, Fr. Fonck speaks of trouble and fidelity to the norms established by the Holy See; this institute would not give any academic degree, the examinations giving access to them would be taken at the Biblical Commission; the institute would offer courses and practice, would possess a good library and publish books with sound doctrine in biblical matters.

Pius X immediately declared: “*Sì, lo facciamo!*” Negotiations started, on which Fr. Fonck kept a firm hand. A bishop, always generous towards the Holy See, Mgr. Theodor Kohn of Olmütz, was contacted that same day by Fr. Fonck and there is

every reason for thinking that he provided some first financial help without delay. On March 30th, Fr. Fonck submitted the first draft of a founding letter to Pius X; it was already entitled “*Vinea electa*”, and the Institute was entrusted to the Society of Jesus. Finally, after some last minute adventures, the papal document appeared in the *Osservatore Romano* on May 30th 1909, Whitsunday, but it bore the date of May 7th, the first Friday of the month.

The first academic year opened on November 5th at the Leonine College, located in the district called “*Prati*”. In the meantime everything had to be got ready. The Institute would not have a building of its own straightaway. Morning classes would take place at the Gregorian, 120 Via del Seminario, and afternoon seminars at the Leonine College. Fr. Fonck was able to buy six thousand books and subscribe to some three hundred periodicals; this budding library was installed at the Leonine College. In October, the teaching staff was set up: ten Jesuits, including two for exegesis - Frs. Méchineau and Lino Murillo, both very traditionalist - but also Fr. Anton Deimel for Assyriology. Orientalism was in fact already well represented. Lastly, when school started on November 5th, ordinary students numbered forty-seven, all doctors in theology, out of a total of one hundred and seventeen registered students. So it was a success. Among these very first students, I notice the future Cardinal Achille Liénard, Lucien Cerfaux, Joseph Bonsirven and even Felice Cappello, the future canonist at the Gregorian.

The Muti Papazzurri Palace was acquired by the Holy See only on July 1st 1910. It had to be adapted to its new function, especially by building an *Aula Magna* and the library in the inner courtyard of the palace, so that the solemn inauguration took place only on February 25th 1912. The Coëtlosquet family, from Nancy, had generously covered all the expenses.

The first two decades of the Institute were characterized by two main problems. The first was the distinctly anti-modernist slant in the exegesis taught in it. Fr. Paul Joüon’s *Grammaire de l’hébreu biblique*, published in 1923, is the only thing that survived from this period. Being in a tight corner, the Institute redeemed itself with philology. The second problem is the one of academic degrees. In 1909 it was agreed that only the Biblical Commission would confer them. However, in 1914, Fr. Fonck had clearly seen the anomaly of that dependence but he did not receive any answer; despite Fr. General Włodimir Ledóchowski’s insistence, Benedict XV would not hear of it and ended up by making that dependence more burdensome. It was only in 1928 that Pius XI, a real scholar, by creating the *Consortium* of the Gregorian, the Biblical Institute and the Oriental Institute, decided upon the complete autonomy of the Biblical Institute, with the power to confer academic degrees.

In Jerusalem, the branch of the Institute could only be opened in July 1927, after some quite incredible adventures. Fr. Fonck was responsible for them, for if he had been successful in Rome, in the Near East, on the other hand, he only made things

worse, with his opposition to Fr. Lagrange being so ingrained. In 1909 it was felt in Rome that the opportunity of a long stay in the land of the Bible should be offered to students. A first plan was outlined very soon: in 1911 Fr. Fonck, with the approval of the Vatican and the Fr. General, concluded an agreement with the oriental faculty of the Jesuit Université Saint-Joseph in Beirut where our students would follow practical courses in languages and archaeology from November to March. He further envisaged locating the Institute's branch on Mount Carmel. Students would stay there from April to October visiting the country. But opposition from the Carmelite Fathers led to choosing Jerusalem for this establishment. In May 1912 Fr. Fonck is thinking about the plot of land we occupy at present and his plan is even more modest than the one carried out in 1927. But in March 1913, whereas Fr. Lagrange is away from his *École Biblique* after the interdict placed on some of his books, Fr. Fonck gives up his first idea and sets his sights on a large eleven-hectare plot of land two kilometres from the Old City. To acquire it the Jesuits proceed with the greatest secrecy, but the 1914 war stops everything.

Fr. Alexis Mallon had been working on the negotiations since 1913. This French Jesuit, who is not yet forty, is a good Coptic scholar and is certainly more peaceable than the fiery Fonck. During the Great War, Fr. Mallon also had to leave Jerusalem. Before he gets back there in December 1919, Fr. Andrés Fernández, who succeeded Fr. Fonck as rector of the Institute, takes a firm stand against Fr. Fonck's great project which frightened the Master General of the Dominicans, Fr. Louis Theissling. These misgivings, expressed by the latter, led to the Vatican asking Fr. Fernández for an authorized opinion, which Benedict XV followed in the letter he sent to the rector in June 1919: there would be only a branch in Jerusalem.

Still, Fr. Fonck kept to his idea of a great biblical institute in Jerusalem. In 1924, Fr. John J. O'Rourke succeeded Fr. Fernández and is a stronger character. He is of Fr. Mallon's opinion that a return should be made to the modest plot of land that Fr. Fonck had proposed first of all in 1912. Fr. Fonck does not give up, in spite of Benedict XV's letter, so that, to get a better picture, Fr. General Ledókowski sends his Assistant, Fr. Norbert de Boynes to Jerusalem and the latter upholds Fr. Mallon's choice, ruling out Fr. Fonck's. This was in February 1925. In October the first stone of the branch was at last laid. Four years later, Fr. Mallon discovered the prehistoric site of Teleilat Ghassul, in the Jordan Valley.

II. – The second period, a difficult one, begins in 1937 when Fr. Augustin Bea is directing the Institute. It goes through three phases which all have the same aim, the rejection of scholarly exegesis. The events recounted here are better known than the preceding ones, but it seems helpful to recall them with some clarifications.

First of all, from 1937 to 1941, there were some attitudes taken against scholarly exegesis. They came from a Neapolitan priest, Dolindo Ruotolo who, under

the pseudonym of Dain Cohenel, published commentaries on the books of the Old Testament; basing himself on the Vulgate, he proposed interpretations using accommodation and a psychologizing approach. Fr. Albert Vaccari, the vice-rector of the Institute, had advised against them but some bishops came to the defence of Ruotolo and even went so far as to criticize Pius XI who publically upheld the work being done at the Institute. The crisis came to a head when, in May 1941, an anonymous pamphlet repeating Ruotolo's ideas was widely distributed in Rome and among the Italian bishops. That was just too much; in August the Biblical Commission, with Pius XII's approval, refuted point by point the assertions made in the pamphlet; and that was the starting point of the encyclical "*Divino afflante Spiritu*" which Pius XII issued in September 1943.

Opposition came again as from 1954 when, on the initiative of Fr. Vogt, Fr. Bea's successor, the Institute put the recommendations of Pius XII's encyclical into effect. The chief opponent was Mgr. Antonino Romeo; in 1927 he had just managed to get the licentiate at the Institute and at the time was *Assistente di studio* at the Congregation for Seminaries and Universities. His fundamentalist attacks on the Institute were cunning. However, in October 1955, Fr John Janssens, in a fatherly manner, while recognizing that the accusations were without foundation, thought fit to call for prudence on the part of the professors at the Institute. In 1957, Mgr. Romeo came back to the charge, this time by attacking the first volume of the new *Introduction à la Bible*, published in Paris under the direction of André Robert and André Feuillet. On July 2nd 1958 the *Osservatore Romano* published, right on the front page, a tirade against this introduction. On being told about it by a shocked and worried cardinal, perhaps Cardinal Joseph-Ernest van Roey of Malines, Pius XII acted by sending a letter of support to the international biblical Congress which was held in Brussels in August 1958.

Under John XXIII the attacks took a more dramatic turn. In 1960 Don Francesco Spadafora roundly criticized the exegesis of *Romans* 5,12 that Fr. Stanislas Lyonnet was proposing and Mgr. Romeo attacked the interpretation of the passage on the primacy of Peter in *Matthew* 16,16-18 that Fr. Max Zerwick had given the previous year. The two objectors were misrepresenting the interpretation given by those they were aiming at. Then, in August 1961, Cardinal Ernesto Ruffini published a violent attack against literary genres in the *Osservatore Romano*, in particular against Fr. Lyonnet and Fr. Zerwick. On several occasions, Fr. Vogt had loyally defended the orthodoxy of the two professors at the Institute but, despite approaches made by the Father General to John XXIII, the two Fathers being accused, on unjustified orders from the Holy Office, had to suspend their exegetical teaching at the Institute. That interdict lasted two years, from 1962 to 1964, until Fr. Roderick A. F. MacKenzie, the new rector at the Institute, spoke in person with Paul VI in February 1964.

III. – The third crucial period in the history of the Biblical Institute comes during the second Vatican council.

In April 1960, like all ecclesiastical faculties, the Institute had sent its “*votum*” to the Council’s preparatory Commission. This text actually touched upon the main questions the council Fathers were soon going to discuss: ecumenism, the rejection of all forms of anti-Semitism, the rejection of the theory of the two sources of Revelation, the historicity of the gospels, confirmation of the encyclical “*Divino afflante Spiritu*” and a review of the methods used by the Holy Office. On all these points the council was to prove the Institute right.

However, the Institute never intervened directly during the council itself. During the first session, the one in 1962, it was at the request of some council Fathers that it gave its opinion four times: twice to call upon the Fathers to reject the projected “*De fontibus revelationis*”, which John XXIII withdrew in November, in face of the opposition that project encountered; and on two other occasions concerning the historicity of the gospels. Frs. Ignace de la Potterie, Stanislas Lyonnet and Max Zerwick had drawn up three of these opinions.

Faced with the attacks from Spadafora of which it was the new target during this first session of the council, the Institute gave great prominence to the defence of Fr. Norbert Lohfink’s doctoral thesis. It took place in the atrium of the Gregorian on November 22nd 1962, just after John XXIII had withdrawn the schema “*De fontibus revelationis*”. Many council Fathers and experts at the council were present at this solemn act. The young expert Joseph Ratzinger was one of them.

In 1964 and 1965 the Institute again gave its opinion on the third and fourth schema of the constitution “*Dei Verbum*”, but it did so again at the request of the Brazilian bishops. Among the propositions coming from the Institute, the following one, given its theological importance, is to be mentioned: “*Cum Sacra Scriptura eodem Spiritu quo scripta est etiam legenda et interpretanda sit, ...*”. This addition, put forward on January 25th 1965, probably at the suggestion of Fr. de la Potterie, was inserted in no. 12 of the constitution. In any case it shows how the Biblical Institute conceived of its work.

Today

Faithful to its predecessors, the Biblical Institute goes on its way. Our oriental faculty, created in 1932, has always had a good reputation. The biblical faculty, with larger numbers, since 1963 has also been offering an important propaedeutic course in biblical Greek and Hebrew; the best doctoral theses in biblical studies appear regularly in our series *Analecta Biblica*. The library is still one of the most complete in the world in the oriental and biblical fields. Our two periodicals, *Biblica* and *Orientalia*, keep up their reputation. In short, the Institute has its moments of happiness, but others as well which leave it perplexed.

I. – In a calm atmosphere, which was a result of the council, the Institute entered into co-operation agreements with two academic institutions of great renown, both located in Jerusalem.

The first agreement was concluded in 1974 with the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The initiative came from Fr. Carlo Maria Martini, then rector of the Institute. Thus it is that, since 1975, more than five hundred students from the Institute have taken a programme lasting a semester in Hebrew, history and archaeology which is offered by the best teachers in that famous Israeli institution. A second agreement was reached in 1984 with the *École Biblique* of the Dominicans in Jerusalem. It was my privilege to be at the origin of that agreement which finally turned the regrettable page which the Institute had written at its origin! Now that all the arguments are over, let's have some collaboration!

II. – As regards the exegesis we go in for and teach at the Institute, it has never ceased to be at once scholarly and theological. Our publications show it.

Perhaps it is on the level of methods that we have widened our field of research. At the Institute, the renewal of literary studies of the Bible dates from the beginning of the 60's of the last century, with the theses by Fr. Luis Alonso Schökel and Fr. Albert Vanhoye. Later on, we did not wait for the Biblical Commission's document on "*The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*", which came out in 1993, to open up to narrative and rhetorical methods, for example, or again to either diachronic or synchronic reading of the texts, as a complement to the historical critical method. In fact, we do not impose any method on our students; on the contrary we propose several to them, provided that each of them follows the biblical text in its critically-supported original form.

III. – In another connection, for about twenty years the Society of Jesus, which has seen its numbers drop, has only with great difficulty been able to send us talented young professors. The Institute has therefore opened up to working along with non-Jesuit teachers. Moreover, since 1969, the *Catholic Biblical Association of America* and, since 1990, the *McCarthy Family Foundation* have both, up to the present, sent us a renowned professor. So that, up to now, the Institute can continue to offer high-quality academic programmes, we believe, in any case recognized as such by the best universities throughout the world, as well as by the bishops and religious superiors who continue to send their young recruits.

IV. – The fact remains that the training we offer is tough. Our students can bear witness to that. Even John Paul II humorously admitted one day that he didn't feel able to register at our Institute!

The problem today lies not so much in the requirements of serious exegesis as in the questions being raised about scholarly exegesis. It is said to be too concerned

with history, not theological, separated from tradition, hard to swallow because of its technical nature and hence far removed from pastoral concerns listening to the Word of God these days.

It is true that our exegesis does not have pastoral concerns directly in mind, that dogmatic theologians, specialists in systematic theology, no longer manage to follow our research and our results and that quite often they do not even consider us theologians in the full sense, but as unapproachable technicians, whereas theology is first and foremost humble and respectful listening to Holy Scripture. In theology and pastoral work it will never be possible to make light of those far-off times when God intervened in word and deed in our history and when he entrusted the record of his interventions to people like us. Seeking out the original meaning of the texts is the opposite of a fundamentalist reading, but it is also an arduous undertaking which makes only slow progress, like any science, with losses and gains. And when regret is expressed that our exegesis is so far removed from tradition, care should be taken not to reopen the wounds that vitiated relations within the Church in the last century. The golden rule in this matter is still: the literal sense of the texts alone forms the basis of faith and morality. That is the sense we are feeling our way towards. That is how the Church calls us to its service.