

From —

***PROVIDENTISSIMUS DEUS***  
ENCYCLICAL OF POPE LEO XIII  
ON THE STUDY OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

— on Scripture and Science

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18. In the second place, we have to contend against those who, making an evil use of physical science, minutely scrutinize the Sacred Book in order to detect the writers in a mistake, and to take occasion to vilify its contents. Attacks of this kind, bearing as they do on matters of sensible experience, are peculiarly dangerous to the masses, and also to the young who are beginning their literary studies; for the young, if they lose their reverence for the Holy Scripture on one or more points, are easily led to give up believing in it altogether. It need not be pointed out how the nature of science, just as it is so admirably adapted to show forth the glory of the Great Creator, provided it be taught as it should be, so if it be perversely imparted to the youthful intelligence, it may prove most fatal in destroying the principles of true philosophy and in the corruption of morality. Hence to the Professor of Sacred Scripture a knowledge of natural science will be of very great assistance in detecting such attacks on the Sacred Books, and in refuting them. There can never, indeed, be any real discrepancy between the theologian and the physicist, as long as each confines himself within his own lines, and both are careful, as St. Augustine warns us, "not to make rash assertions, or to assert what is not known as known." (51) If dissension should arise between them, here is the rule also laid down by St. Augustine, for the theologian: "Whatever they can really demonstrate to be true of physical nature, we must show to be capable of reconciliation with our Scriptures; and whatever they assert in their treatises which is contrary to

these Scriptures of ours, that is to Catholic faith, we must either prove it as well as we can to be entirely false, or at all events we must, without the smallest hesitation, believe it to be so." (52) To understand how just is the rule here formulated we must remember, first, that the sacred writers, or to speak more accurately, the Holy Ghost "Who spoke by them, did not intend to teach men these things (that is to say, the essential nature of the things of the visible universe), things in no way profitable unto salvation." (53) Hence they did not seek to penetrate the secrets of nature, but rather described and dealt with things in more or less figurative language, or in terms which were commonly used at the time, and which in many instances are in daily use at this day, even by the most eminent men of science. Ordinary speech primarily and properly describes what comes under the senses; and somewhat in the same way the sacred writers-as the Angelic Doctor also reminds us - "went by what sensibly appeared," (54) or put down what God, speaking to men, signified, in the way men could understand and were accustomed to.

19. The unshrinking defence of the Holy Scripture, however, does not require that we should equally uphold all the opinions which each of the Fathers or the more recent interpreters have put forth in explaining it; for it may be that, in commenting on passages where physical matters occur, they have sometimes expressed the ideas of their own times, and thus made statements which in these days have been abandoned as incorrect. Hence, in their interpretations, we must carefully note what they lay down as belonging to faith, or as intimately connected with faith-what they are unanimous in. For "in those things which do not come under the obligation of faith, the Saints were at liberty to hold divergent opinions, just as we ourselves are," (55) according to the saying of St. Thomas. And in another place he says most admirably: "When philosophers are agreed upon a point, and it is not contrary to our faith, it is safer, in my opinion, neither to lay down such a point as a dogma of faith, even though it is perhaps so presented by the philosophers, nor to reject it as against faith, lest we thus give to the wise of this world an occasion of despising our faith." (56) The Catholic interpreter, although he should show that those facts of natural science which

investigators affirm to be now quite certain are not contrary to the Scripture rightly explained, must nevertheless always bear in mind, that much which has been held and proved as certain has afterwards been called in question and rejected. And if writers on physics travel outside the boundaries of their own branch, and carry their erroneous teaching into the domain of philosophy, let them be handed over to philosophers for refutation.

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23. In order that all these endeavours and exertions may really prove advantageous to the cause of the Bible, let scholars keep steadfastly to the principles which We have in this Letter laid down. Let them loyally hold that God, the Creator and Ruler of all things, is also the Author of the Scriptures - and that therefore nothing can be proved either by physical science or archaeology which can really contradict the Scriptures. If, then, apparent contradiction be met with, every effort should be made to remove it. Judicious theologians and commentators should be consulted as to what is the true or most probable meaning of the passage in discussion, and the hostile arguments should be carefully weighed. Even if the difficulty is after all not cleared up and the discrepancy seems to remain, the contest must not be abandoned; truth cannot contradict truth, and we may be sure that some mistake has been made either in the interpretation of the sacred words, or in the polemical discussion itself; and if no such mistake can be detected, we must then suspend judgment for the time being. There have been objections without number perseveringly directed against the Scripture for many a long year, which have been proved to be futile and are now never heard of; and not unfrequently interpretations have been placed on certain passages of Scripture (not belonging to the rule of faith or morals) which have been

rectified by more careful investigations. As time goes on, mistaken views die and disappear; but "truth remaineth and groweth stronger for ever and ever." (61) Wherefore, as no one should be so presumptuous as to think that he understands the whole of the Scripture, in which St. Augustine himself confessed that there was more that he did not know, than that he knew, (62) so, if he should come upon anything that seems incapable of solution, he must take to heart the cautious rule of the same holy Doctor: "It is better even to be oppressed by unknown but useful signs, than to interpret them uselessly and thus to throw off the yoke only to be caught in the trap of error." (63)

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51. *In Gen. op. imperf.* ix., 30.

52. *De Gen. ad litt.* i. 21, 41.

53. *S. Aug. ib.* ii., 9, 20.

54. *Summa theol.* p. I, q. lxx., a. I, ad 3.

55. *In Sent.* ii., Dist. q. i., a. 3.

56. *Opusc.* x.

61. 3 Esdr. iv., 38.

62. ad Ianuar. *ep.* lv., 21.

63. *De doct. chr.* iii., 9, 18.