

BRIEF STORY OF NEW TESTAMENT

(editio brevior)

We have to reconstruct, even if in a very rough and imperfect way, the **story of the text** that we have now. For most of us use translations of texts that have been written in another language and have been translated. The original text is not available.

By saying 'original text' I mean the manuscript written by the evangelist. It doesn't exist anymore. But that's how things work and all classics and original works are not here anymore; for example in Cicero and Aristotle's works there is nearly a hundred times distance between the original text and the copy.

Luckily it is not the same for the Gospels. There's a distance of just a few decades so we are sure we're using a text which might be considered 90-95% as the one written directly by the evangelist.

Let's try then to give an account of the text, since the moment it was written by the author until the one we have now. A church used to receive, for instance, a letter by St. Paul - the most ancient collection of letters.

For example at the end of the Letter to Colossians, we find, "*And when this letter is read before you, have it read also in the church of the Laodicea's, and yourselves read the one from Laodicea*" (Col 4.16).

Paul wrote a letter to the Church of Colossi and then he says "when you have read it, send it to the Church of Laodicea, then welcome the one from there".

How was the process? They didn't send the letter they'd received, but they made copies to be sent to other churches. All those copies were collected.

There's a very important issue which is still valid: unlike the Hebraic and Eastern worlds, where Scriptures were considered as sacred, the New Testament, which developed in a Greek culture, has never been considered like this.

What does 'sacred text' mean?

If we examine copies of the Old Testament, they are identical because there was a sort of reverential awe that led to make exact copies of texts, for they were thought to be sacred.

In Christian communities things were different.

Christian community considered the text as being a living one. What happened then? The Colossi church received the letter, made copies of it and sent them to other churches with some additions.

Additions were due either to the copyist who wanted to explain better or to the situation of the community leading to enrichments of the text.

We are talking about a text, not just letters but all the Gospels, that being transmitted, were enriched.

The criterion we may use to understand which text is the original one is brevity.

Why?

Let's form the hypothesis that in a Gospel we read: 'Jesus said'. The copyist, in order to avoid misunderstandings added 'Jesus Christ said'. Another one maybe would write 'Our Lord Jesus Christ said' - later adding 'to his disciples'. Here we are, among all those copies, the first one, the shortest, is the original.

And we know - it is tested - that copyists never eliminated but always added something to the text; it was created and then enriched, because the message of Jesus was never considered as external to man's behavior, a separate code to which man could adjust himself, but a living text that was always enriched by communities' experiences. Indeed, we have a text that has grown according to the church's needs.

An example: In Mark's Gospel - which is the oldest - the stand taken by Jesus about repudiation - not divorce, that didn't exist then - is clear: man is not allowed to repudiate his wife (Mk 10,11-12).

Then the Church adds to the text, there are new situations and in Matthew's community this text is differently understood: "*man is not allowed to repudiate his wife, except for the cause of πορνεία*" (unchastity) (Mt 5.32).

Because there were new situations, it was not the exact teaching given by Jesus, but the teaching of Jesus was adapted for the good of the community.

We arrive at Paul's letters, where he says: a wife shall not separate from her husband, nor the husband shall divorce his wife, but as God has called you to peace, let the quarreling partners separate (1 Cor 7.10-16).

Therefore we see that the message of Jesus was gradually transmitted, enriched and sometimes - as in this case - it was censured.

There was a passage in the Gospels that didn't go down well with any community, when it arrived they cut it out and sent it to another community. This passage is without doubt from Luke's pen or from his community: it is the passage of the adulteress pardoned by Jesus. An enormous scandal! That Jesus should pardon an adulteress! He says to her: "*go and sin no more*". Without giving her any penance. In an age and in a culture in which adulterers were lapidated, the fact that Jesus forgave this woman was scandalous. Even Saint Augustine was shocked and said: "...but will not our women take advantage of this text."

So, this passage in Luke's gospel was taken out and put in another place. And this for three centuries. No community accepted this passage, until, in all these rearrangements, we now read this passage in John's Gospel, in the 8th chapter, the first eleven verses. If you take it from John's Gospel and put it back in its original place, that is in Luke's Gospel-chapter 21 after the 37th verse, you'll see that both John's and Luke's Gospels sounds better. Therefore you see that there were passages that the communities didn't want, considering them dangerous and in need of censuring.

Finally in **180 a.c.**- now let's tell a short story, but it is important to understand what we have at hand - finally the four gospels were put together. To us it seems natural that the church collected four gospels, but indeed it was not at all like that!

Why did the Church feel the need to collect and to put them together, giving the same dignity, to four gospels each one different from the other? Couldn't they take only one? Couldn't they have taken for example Matthew's Gospel, which is a gospel complete and responds to many needs? Why did they add to Matthew's Gospel, also that of Luke which have a different outlook from that of Matthew's? Or why did they even add that heretical evangelist John? John has always been suspect, and still today it is a gospel to be taken with a pinch of salt. Note that even today

John's Gospel is marginalized by the church. You know there is a liturgical year, a year dedicated to Matthew, a year to Mark, a year to Luke, John no. John is in some feast days, or during August, noted for the decline of church attendance. And John's Gospel has been declared a Gospel for the passively, very spiritual, harmless

How come the church has put these four gospels, all different for each other, together? And this is our surety, it is the freedom which there is still today to talk. The church realizes that the real life of Jesus and his message could not have been told in one interpretation, - that of Matthew's or Mark's or Luke's community - but had the need of all four interpretations, different from each other, as we saw those differences yesterday evening. And this is the security that has always been in the church, the liberty of thought and interpretation; there is not only one direction but many directions.

Like we saw yesterday evening, the message is one, the way this message is presented are many, and so, in 180, these four gospels were put together.

We have already said that the Gospels were written in Greek, which was the English of those days. That shows that the evangelists and all the authors of the New Testament, wanted to compile the work so it could be spread universally. The universal language, the commercial language of the time of the New Testament, was Greek. But what happened? The time to write these texts in Greek and the language died out and other languages began to take over, the same as has happen to us in the last 50 years.

When I went to school, the commercial language, the official language was French, but in about ten years, French had died out and today it is English.

And so it was for the texts in Greek.

It was written in Greek, but little by little

- to us in the West the Latin language took over,
- in Africa Copt language or Egyptian took over
- and in the East, such as Palestine, Syrian took over

So then the texts were no longer understood, and translations were made for the liturgy, although certain expressions of the Greek language were conserved and entered into the liturgy. Remember before the liturgy reform, when the church said the "Kyrie eleison, Christe eleison," they were expressions from the Greek tradition.

We are now in **250 a.d.** the western church, that is our geographical area, is a Latin church. Then not only the Old Testament, but also the New Testament were translated into Latin. And when one translates, one betrays the text, for a translation, however exact, however perfect, can never render the richness of the original language.

Now we have a pause of 40 years in the persecution of the Christians. After the persecution of Decius and Valerian, before the beginning of the tremendous Diocletian persecution, there were 40 years of peace in which the text was re-read, re-elaborated, enriched and modified. Therefore there were 40 years, a time long enough.

We are in **380 a.d.**, a great confusion arrives. The original Greek text is no longer used in our church, they have translations. Take 10 translations of the Gospels and you will find 10 different translations. Not only in the text: some had an episode that others did not have; others passages that others did not have, there was a great confusion.

Pope Damaso nominated an exceptional person, of grand culture, Jerome, to translate the Old Testament from Hebrew to Latin, and not to translate, but to check, the translation that was already of the New Testament. Jerome began this cycloptic work for one man, imagine he translated certain texts in a single night. Very clever of him, well done! Today Jerome is still a great person, but you understand, one man that doing such a cycloptic work, can make errors. Some were errors that made us smile, other have been tragic errors.

- One error that make one smile: do you know the statue by Michelangelo of Moses in St. Peter's in Chains in Rome? It has horns; because in all the Moses of the 16th century were always represented with horns, also in paintings. The Hebrew text (Es 34,29) says that Moses came down from mount Sinai, and there is a word -in the Hebrew language vowels are not written, but only the consonants and therefore difficult to interpret- so the sound of this word was *cheren*, which means shinning or rays, instead of an "e" Jerome interpreted with an "o" *choren*, which means one with horns. See what a simple translation.....
- Also, another error that has had great influence in the devotion to Mary. One of the images - every opinion is subjected - for me the most ugly representation, from the pictorial and artistic view, of Mary in that of the Immaculate, is the woman that crushes the serpents head, one has more compassion for the serpent than that grim woman. This image is also from a interpretation error. The text from Genesis (3,15) condemning the serpent says, "*I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring, he (the offspring - namely Jesus representing the entire humanity) shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.*"

That is the offspring of the woman, the humanity that will always win over the serpent, but then it was projected into Mary (*ipsa conteret caput tuum*).

Some errors have been fatal and have caused millions of deaths.

- Think of the what a fatality - if one thinks of Jerome - when he translated the Gospel of John chapter 10 , the expression of Jesus;" *There will be one flock, one shepherd*" (gr. καὶ γενήσονται μία ποίμνη, εἰς ποιμήν)" (*John 10.16*) Jerome got confused over this verse and translated: "*..there will be one fold, one shepherd.*" (*et fiet unum ovile et unus pastor*)" Jesus had said the contrary: it is the end of the folds, there will be no more fences, for at least sacred ones; it is the end of confines. There is a flock, that is the community of persons that welcome Jesus and His message. Enough with the folds. Jerome was mistaken: instead of " flock" he wrote "fold". There will be one fold, one shepherd", and from here on each church claimed to be the only one and made war with the other churches, the religious war.

Jerome did this opera, than again revised, etc. and yet again; each community believed it was still able to add something until Jerome put his hand to the text. Then, later, this edition of the Bible and New Testament, becomes considered the churches official edition. So the church has founded all its theology, its liturgy and its moral teachings on an imperfect translation, like all translation of texts, for 1500 years with sometimes tremendous consequences.

In the Protestant world already **about the 1500** there is the need to return to the original Greek text, and an edition was made - it was Erasmus of Rotterdam - but the catholic church, like the action to Luther's translation, - Luther was the first to translate the Bible into the spoken language of the people, in German - forbade the reading of the Bible to the lay people. There is a decree of a pope, Pio IV, which says: "*..for experience it has resulted clearly that if the Sacred Bible is allowed indiscriminately in ordinary language, more bad with come from it caused by human fragility*".

Therefore here we have a discrepancy: the Protestant world begins the translation into the language of the people, and therefore studies. The

Catholic church, unfortunately, fortifies itself on the defensive and the Bible becomes seen as a Protestant book.

And so we go forward, not with the original text, but with this Latin translation, which presented gaps everywhere.

One of the great disasters was made by Pope Sixtus V. **In 1590** he appointed a commission to review this text. The commission did a good job. They took him the results, and the Pope was not in agreement with them and personally corrected the Bible. It was an unimaginable disaster because he was incompetent. He personally cancelled some parts, added others and it was a disaster. But he was the Pope and amongst other things put the "major excommunication" and any change of his edition of the Bible [whoever changes my edition of the Bible - and the Pope can do it - will be excommunicated for ever] So according to the Pope, that was the Bible that was to serve though the centuries, for all the churches.

In Rome there is a proverb that says: "one pope boils and the other comes off the boil" meaning that normally one pope does exactly the opposite to his predecessor (naturally it is done with white gloves saying "according to the wish of the august predecessor", but then doing the opposite!)

The Pope that succeeded Pope Sixtus V, Pope Clement VIII found this disaster on his hands, also with the threat of excommunication. He ordered a new commission to look it over modify and therefore was corrected, the translation wished by Sixtus V, the product was not perfect but it was good enough, it was said that this was the edition wished by the august predecessor. This Bible became known as the Bible Sixtus-Clementine, that which still, until the Vatican Council, was the official text of the Church.

The Council with white gloves, kindly pensioned it off. It is written in the constitution the Divine Revelations (*Dei Verbum*) that "the church has always honored the other oriental and the Latin versions, particularly the said "Vulgata", but because the word of God should be at the disposition of all at all times, the church takes care with maternal concern that appropriate and correct translations will be done in various

languages, preferably from the original texts of the Sacred Books". And the Spring and begun that we are now living.

So, you see that there are less than thirty years that the translation began. The study and with great surprise, the original Gospel's text was Discovered at the end of the eight century, by a Russian, von Tischendorf, in Monastery of St. Catherine on Sinai, it was quite different from the Latin translation that had been presented: certain parts that were in the Latin translation that were in the original text were not there. The studies begun and now, in the Catholic church, finally, we are making up for the delay of four centuries - but not only have we made uptime but I think I can say that we have suppurated the Protestant world in the quality and profundity of study in the field of the Bible or at least we are at a good level, the positions are the same - in the recovery of the original texts.

Today we find ourselves - and now begins the part that interests us - to read the text that has been buried for centuries, a new text that presents difficulty in understanding, because it is not enough to translate from the original Greek text into our language.

The last Bible known to the Italians, other than the Paoline Editions Bible - very good - is the Bible of the Conference of Italian Bishops, that was reviewed for the first time in 1974, the last edition, which unfortunately was passed under the counter, that was not popularized - and this is really sad - it is in 1997, and I can recommend it to you as a good job was done. Certain expressions and basic theology have disappeared, and they have done a good job, naturally not perfect. But good.