

## SAVING THE FATHERS

*An Essay in the Methodology of Interpreting the Scriptures*

EDMUND HILL, O.P.

THE question of saving something would scarcely arise unless first it were worth preserving, and secondly in danger of neglect or oblivion. That the biblical interpretation of the Fathers is worth preserving in general, need not be laboured; but lest this fundamental premise should be evaded, it may be useful to quote the authoritative pronouncement of Leo XIII in his encyclical *Providentissimus Deus*. He quotes the Council of Trent 'that it is permitted to no one to interpret Holy Scripture . . . against the unanimous agreement of the Fathers', and later he adds in his own words, 'The holy Fathers are of supreme authority whenever they all interpret in one and the same manner any text of the Bible, as pertaining to the doctrine of faith and morals; for their unanimity clearly evinces that such interpretation has come down from the Apostles as a matter of Catholic faith. The opinion of the Fathers is also of very great weight when they treat of these matters in their capacity of doctors, unofficially; not only because they excel in their knowledge of revealed doctrine, but because they are men of eminent sanctity and ardent zeal for the truth, on whom God has bestowed a more ample measure of his light. Wherefore the expositor should make it his duty to follow their footsteps with all reverence, and to use their labours with intelligent appreciation.'

Nevertheless, it does sometimes seem as if it has become increasingly difficult for even the most orthodox expositor to follow in the footsteps of the Fathers and to use their labours with intelligent appreciation. And this because of the immense development in recent times of exegetical resources and techniques. These are summarized in the present Pope's encyclical *Divino Afflante*, published in honour of the fiftieth anniversary of *Providentissimus Deus* in 1943. They include 'a fuller theological explanation of the nature and effects of divine inspiration'; a more scientific study of the literary forms of the ancient East; an increase, thanks largely to archaeological researches, in historical knowledge of the ancient East. The problem that confronts us

then is not one of an unorthodox contempt for the authority of the Fathers, but of modern techniques, which the Pope encourages scholars to use, yet which would seem to render the interpretations of the Fathers obsolete.

There is a further point. To indulge for the moment in a rather sweeping generalization, which I hope will be qualified as we proceed, we can say that the Fathers were more interested as a rule in what is called the spiritual sense, or the typology, of the Scriptures—at least of the Old Testament—than in their literal sense. To illustrate by a well-known example, Augustine's aphorism on Jacob's fraudulent filching of Esau's blessing, 'Non est mendacium, sed mysterium'. If the story is taken literally, it is of course a blatant *mendacium*. But the point of the story, for Augustine, is the *mysterium* of Christ which it symbolically portrays, his taking upon himself of our sins, as Jacob put on the hairy skins. The Old Testament is full of this sort of foreshadowing of the New (I Corinthians 10 gives a few instances), and the elucidation of these, rather than the literal exposition of the text was for most of the Fathers the crowning achievement of exegesis. But nowadays the emphasis is reversed. To quote again from *Divino Afflante*, 'Interpreters should bear in mind that their chief aim must be to discern what is known as the literal sense of the Bible, from which alone, as Aquinas excellently observes, an argument can be drawn'.

Are we forced then to conclude that for modern exegesis the major patristic contributions to the study of the Bible are not only obsolete but irrelevant? Apparently we are, in the opinion of some authors. To quote an eminent Belgian student of the Scriptures, 'Dans ces conditions, la typologie des anciens restera une source d'inspiration; c'est entendu. Elle restera aussi un domaine intéressant de recherches historiques; c'est clair. Elle fera les délices des poètes et même des méditatifs; pourquoi pas? Mais elle ne doit pas se lever du tombeau pour déambuler, ombre du passé, parmi nous.'<sup>1</sup> *Exeunt Patres*, bowed out with exquisite courtesy and unmistakable finality, to wander where they will through every mansion of sacred learning except that of scriptural interpretation. But surely this is scarcely the intelligent appreciation asked for by Leo XIII. Even respect for papal requirements apart, it seems anomalous that the Fathers should be treated as a source

1 Coppens, *Les Harmonies des Deux Testaments*, p. 94.

of very great authority for the dogmatic theologian, while to the exegete they are an unimportant backwater, suitable only for historians, poets, and contemplatives to make use of.

The dilemma is a real one; it will help us to set it in perspective, and may even suggest a solution, if we trace very briefly the history of the distinction between the literal and the spiritual senses. We shall see that the distinction has meant different things at different times, and may discover that further modification should be considered.

In ordinary language the phrase 'literal sense' is used to exclude all figures of speech. It means 'id quod littera sonat'. Taken in this way, the literal sense of the anthropomorphisms of the Bible is that God has arms, hands, eyes, and so on; and to warn people off misunderstanding such expressions, we say 'You must not take them literally, they are meant to be taken metaphorically'. It is quite certain that this is what Origen, in the early third century, meant by literal sense. It is clear that taken this way the literal sense is often false and gives occasion to the errors of fundamentalists and people like the Manichees, who interpret the Bible, as St Augustine would say, in a carnal fashion. That is the last thing that anyone would accuse Origen of doing; but in order to avoid doing it, and to get at the truth which the Scriptures contain, he thought that it was often necessary, and always profitable, to leave the literal sense behind and look for the spiritual sense, because 'the letter kills, but the spirit gives life'. In other words, says Origen, the best way to understand most of the Bible is to take it not literally but symbolically. All Scripture has truth-value when so taken, only some of it has truth-value when taken literally—namely those parts which yield an historical sense. Origen did not deny the historical reality of Old Testament stories. But on his premises it was reasonable to prefer a spiritual exegesis, because it alone was capable of giving the Bible harmony of meaning and unity of purpose. Taken literally the Scriptures are a tangled mixture of history and fable.

But it seems clear that there was a strong party in the Church for whom the truth of the sacred *narrative* as such was of the first importance, so that they could not at all accept Origen's playing down of the historical or narrative sense. For them the whole of Scripture has *prima facie* narrative, historical, value. The most extreme exponent of the anti-Origenist exegesis was

Theodore of Mopsuestia, at the turn of the fourth and fifth centuries, a man of dry and parsimonious intelligence, who seems to have been influenced by Jewish exegetical learning. It was perhaps Jewish Christians in the early Church who were most keenly aware of the Old Testament's value as sacred history. Unlike Origen, they would be more interested in the historical preparation for Christ than in his symbolic prefiguration. Jewish Rabbis would of course insist even more on the value of Old Testament history for its own sake, and would refer prophecy to later Old Testament figures, to Zorobabel for example, or the Macchabees instead of to Christ. This is just what Theodore does. Except for the fact that he sees the old economy as a preparation for the new by training the people from whom Christ was to come in true monotheism, his exegesis of the prophets might have been written by a Jew.

For him the literal sense is the historical or narrative sense, a wider concept, then, than it was for Origen, and it is the only one that interests him. He does indeed allow for spiritual or figurative senses, in fact he writes *ex professo* on the senses of Scripture in a way that other patristic authors seldom did, and his theory of method is not without virtue. But when it comes to the actual practice of interpretation, he seems to avert his mind deliberately from these tiresome concepts, and as a result his exegesis is woefully jejune. His actual principle, one feels, is to keep the two Testaments in water-tight compartments, and to refer the one to the other as little as possible.

A good illustration of the different schools of exegesis at that time is to be found in *Questions on Genesis*, qu. 39, by Theodoret, a younger contemporary of Theodore's. The question is about the coats of skins which God made for Adam and Eve (Gen. 3, 21). Both Theodore and Origen are quoted at length. Origen says bluntly that the literal sense is absurd, turning God into a tanner. He suggests that the coats of skins stand for these mortal bodies we possess; and he explains the body Adam was created with in Paradise as itself not a literal body, but containing some treasure hidden in the letter. Theodore, to avoid the idea of God slaughtering animals, says that since the bark of trees is commonly called skin, Adam made himself clothes from that at God's suggestion. Finally Theodoret rejects Origen's solution as mythical (it is also unorthodox), and Theodore's as pettifogging,

and says we must just take the episode as an example of God's inexhaustible goodness. Augustine, *In Genesim ad litteram*, XI, 39, says briefly: 'Hoc significationis gratia factum est, sed tamen factum'; and *In Gen. contra Manicheos*, II, 21, he gives the signification: 'that death which God had threatened them with, was symbolized by the coats of skin'.

Theodore's attitude was by no means representative of his contemporaries, whether Greek or Latin. The general tradition was much closer to Origen. But at least in one respect there had been change since his time; in the fourth century the literal sense was generally identified with the narrative sense. And so literal exegesis involved explaining all those hyperboles and figures of speech, which to Origen's way of thinking often rendered the literal sense false or absurd. It also involved a great labour of reconciling the many apparent inconsistencies of Holy Writ. An example which St Jerome mentions in a letter to Pope Damasus is the apparent fact that Ishmael was carried pick-a-back by his mother Agar when he was a strapping lad of eighteen. But the equation of the literal sense with the narrative sense, besides cumbering the interpreter with this sort of perplexing triviality, also gave the literal sense an extension which will appear to us very surprising. Take, for example, St Augustine's exposition of Gen. 1 and 2 *ad litteram*, which he undertook no less than four times. Certainly he sees more in the text than most modern scholars would accord to its literal sense; and this is because he is concerned only with the words of the text before him, considered in isolation from any historical context of author, date, circumstances, and so on. So he will try out on every key word, e.g. 'beginning', 'heaven', 'light', all the meanings, primary and secondary, literal and symbolic, which it can be shown to possess elsewhere in the Bible, including the New Testament; a procedure that was common form in his day, but which he had an undoubted flair for.

What has happened, then, since Origen, is that what was with him a clear but superficial distinction, has become both more profound and more confused. The meaning Origen gave to literal sense absolved him from any serious consideration of it, and left him free to explore the multiple depths of the spiritual senses. But for Augustine and Jerome the importance of the Old Testament narrative as narrative, sacred history, cannot be

evaded. But now this narrative sense has stolen some of the profundities, many of the figures, of Origen's spiritual senses. The distinction was still used, but it may be imagined that St Augustine would have found it hard always to be consistent in stating precisely where it lay.

A measure of clarity was brought back into a question which has always been prone to engender a rich confusion of terminology, by the scholastic statement of the distinction which is sponsored by St Thomas. Here the literal sense is given a greater range than ever by being defined as 'the sense which the author intended to convey by the words'; this clearly goes further than the mere narrative or historical sense. The spiritual senses on the other hand are 'what God, the primary author of Scripture, intends to convey by the things signified by the words'. The spiritual senses, that is to say, involve what we might call symbolism at one remove.

The development of the distinction from Origen to St Thomas has been gradual and homogeneous—and has ended, verbally at least, in a complete reversal of position. For whereas in Origen's terms only some Scripture has a true literal sense, while all of it has one or more true spiritual senses, by St Thomas's definitions the exact opposite is the case. But it hardly needs stressing that they meant very different things by literal sense, and had therefore a very different notion of the spiritual senses.

St Thomas indeed, in his clarification of the position, keeps very close to St Augustine. Even his principle that arguments can only be drawn from the literal sense, quoted in *Divino Afflante*, is adopted from a letter of Augustine's in which he is dealing with sectaries who defend their schism by a fantastic interpretation of a text from the Canticle. St Thomas makes the distinction clear, but never rigid or cut-and-dried. And let us notice that it is a distinction between the meaning conveyed by words, and the meanings conveyed by things, *not* a distinction between the meaning of the human author (conveyed by words) and the meaning of the divine author (conveyed by things). God is as much the author of the literal sense as is the human inspired writer, and because of this divine authorship, says St Thomas, again following St Augustine, there is a certain infiniteness of meaning to be found even in the literal sense; that is, the human author, and even more the Holy Ghost who inspired him may

well have intended to convey more than one meaning by the words written.

None the less, this distinction, elaborated and in some measure hardened by later writers, is partly responsible for the threat of superannuation that hangs over patristic exegesis. In the first place it has led to the chief emphasis being put on the interpretation of the literal sense. This is natural enough, seeing that the literal sense as now defined is the foundation of all the other senses, it is the basic and primary meaning of the text. But as a consequence the spiritual interpretations of the Fathers are pushed to one side. In the second place the definition of the literal sense as what the author intended has led to a concentration of study on the circumstances of the human author, linguistic, historical, and cultural, and has gradually paved the way for those refinements of modern textual criticism which have revolutionized the old accepted beliefs about the authors of the sacred books.

The fact is that antiquity did not question the authorship of the sacred books in the sense that it has been questioned in recent times. But modern literary and historical criticism and research seem to have shown that certain assumptions, at least, about authorship were without foundation in historical fact. There is reason to suppose in some instances a collective rather than an individual author, a type rather than a historical person. This helps to explain the obsolescence of much of the literal exegesis of the Old Testament on the part of the Fathers.

However, there have also been developments in exegesis, and new approaches to the question of the senses of Scripture, which are making it possible to bring the Fathers up again from the shadows. What particularly concerns us here is that expositors of the sacred text have become increasingly aware that its authors, both individually and collectively, can have had, and are perhaps likely to have had, more than one meaning in their heads at once. Thus the literal sense acquires a hitherto unsuspected depth, when it is appreciated, for example, that the account of the Exodus or the narratives of Samuel and Kings do not just record events like the Anglo-Saxon chronicle, but are written within a definite religious tradition, in order to reveal the significance of what the authors themselves are aware of as a *sacred* history. So the Exodus is written in terms of the creation story, it is seen as a creative act of



God—or perhaps it is the other way round, and the creation story is written with the Exodus in mind, as providing a cosmic archetype of the events in which the nation of Israel was born. Likewise the exile and return from Babylon are seen by the prophets as a new Egyptian captivity and Exodus. Or again, the rejection of Cain, Ishmael, Esau, Saul, can be seen—and were seen, the suggestion is, by the sacred authors—as variations on a single theme.

Thus we can observe, it has been said, the unfolding of a typology within the Scriptures themselves, even within the limits of the Old Testament, a typology which must undoubtedly be grasped if we are really to understand the New. Furthermore there is good reason to suppose that the historical writers as well as the prophets made use of a natural symbolism in their narratives, which we with our much less symbol-conscious minds easily overlook. It is a commonplace that the well of Sychar (John 4) is not just brought into the story of our Lord's encounter with the Samaritan woman as a piece of local colour. It is not such a commonplace, but an equally reasonable supposition, that the many wells of Genesis, and the trees and the stones and the coat of many colours, the grapes of Eshcol and countless other details of Old Testament stories were weighted by their authors with symbolic values.

This treatment in depth of the literal sense has been stimulated and confirmed by a comparison of the Scriptures with the religious texts of ancient Egypt, Syria, and Mesopotamia. There is no denying nowadays that symbolism and a sort of typology are the very marrow of ancient religious literature. Now one conclusion from this that leaps to the mind is, 'How similar is this many-tiered literal sense to the multifarious spiritual senses which the Fathers discerned!' The distinction between literal and spiritual senses which St Thomas did so much to sharpen—the difference between meanings which men express by words and those which God expresses by things and events—begins to become a little blurred once more, when we realize that the meanings which God intended to convey by things may sometimes have found their way into the minds and the words of the human authors too.

What seems to be happening is something like this. Just as the literal sense of the fourth-century Fathers, what we called the historical or narrative sense, had absorbed many of the meanings



which Origen had ascribed to the spiritual senses, so now the literal sense of the moderns has absorbed much of the signification of the spiritual senses as defined by the scholastics. In other words we are getting behind that distinction, and as a practical instrument of exegesis it is falling into disuse, although it is still propounded in the manuals. But few if any serious interpreters devote sections of their commentaries to expounding or searching out the spiritual senses, except when they record the mystical interpretations of the Fathers as a sort of light relief. As we saw above, St Thomas, following St Augustine, mentions the possibility of there being many meanings in the literal sense, and this seems to be a sufficiently wide concept to cover all the practical requirements of exegesis.

It might be objected that, granting the depth of meaning of the literal sense we have been pointing to, the incipient typology of the Old Testament, this is none the less not sufficient to cover all the potentialities of Scripture. For to say that some Old Testament authors thought and wrote about the Exodus, for example, as a type of the return from Babylon, is not to credit them with knowledge of it as a type of our redemption in Christ, which is how the Church Fathers saw it. Or just because the Jacob-Esau story was probably read by the contemporaries of the prophets as a sort of parable on the election of Israel and the rejection of the gentiles, it hardly follows that it struck them forcibly as a type of the future rejection of Israel and election of the gentiles, which is how St Paul and the Christian tradition regarded it. But the answer to this is that the literal sense, if we are to follow St Thomas and St Augustine, is determined by the mind of the Holy Ghost, the divine author, as much as and even more than by the minds of the human authors he inspired.

However, concurrently with these developments in the practice of biblical interpretation, thought has been given to its theory, that is to say to the problem of the distinction of the senses of Scripture; and a new concept has been brought into play, and is very much under discussion, the concept of the *sensus plenior*. Actually, it would be more accurate to call it a phrase than a concept, because there seems to be as yet no general agreement on its meaning. There is, in other words, a general feeling that the old instruments are no longer adequate, that a new instrument of interpretation is required, but the instrument is still being experi-

mented on, and has not yet been given a standard form. It is still allowable then, we may presume, to offer suggestions on how to give this new instrument the most efficient and economical shape that is possible.

The attempt has been made by a number of very learned scholars to fit this new idea into the traditional casing, into the distinction between the literal and spiritual senses. Immense erudition and ingenuity has therefore been spent on elaborating and ramifying that traditional distinction in order to make room for the *sensus plenior*. The concept we need, what we would like *sensus plenior* to mean, is something like 'fulfilment sense'. The idea would be that the Old Testament Scriptures are full of meanings which are open, so to say, in one direction, stories which are waiting to be capped, types pointing to their antitype, and recorded as such types by the sacred authors. What we would say now about both the Exodus and the return from Babylon is that each event is seen by all the Old Testament authors who record or allude to them as great but partial instances of that divine redemption pattern which was still to be 'fully-filled' in Christ. The full Christ-sense was there in potency (fully actual, of course, in the mind of the divine author) from the moment both of the event and of its inspired recording, although it was only actualized in the New Testament. One need not say the inspired author, or the patriarch or prophet, was *actually* aware of the *actual* fulfilment sense as fulfilled in Christ; we can say, as a reasonable consequence of our faith in the inspiration of Scripture, that something sacred was written, something therefore of infinite possibilities, which pointed to some fulfilment beyond itself as yet unknown.

The *sensus plenior* so taken as fulfilment sense seems to be only a slight modification of that literal sense with possibly many meanings which we have seen St Thomas and his predecessors talk about. It makes certain that those many possible meanings do not reduce the sense of the Bible to unrelated equivocation, but are arranged in depth as so many analogues of the supreme meaning, Christ. The analogy between them unifies them into so many levels of one full sense. It is the same principle that St Thomas himself uses to explain the relation between the literal sense and the spiritual senses.

The value of this concept of the fulfilment sense, apart from its proper attraction as a simplification of method, is that it makes it

possible for us to re-absorb two traditional strains of patristic exegesis which Catholic theology was in danger of losing. First is the typology and the mystical interpretations. As we have seen, if taken at their exponents' own estimation as *spiritual interpretations*, they cannot help but appear irrelevant to the modern scholar; not only irrelevant, but arbitrary and subjective. But now if we abstract from the old-fashioned label attached to these interpretations, which is just part of an antiquated method, and look at their substance, we may often notice that they were traditional commonplaces in the early Church and not fanciful inventions; and that far from being arbitrary, they followed the lines of conventional biblical symbolism as used in countless metaphors and parables by the sacred authors themselves. The rather too clear-cut distinction between the spiritual sense on the one hand, and parable or metaphor on the other as part of the literal sense, has obscured the identity of symbolism in them both. For example, St Paul gives a mystical meaning to the rock which Moses struck water from, 'and the rock was Christ' (I Cor. 10, 4); but it derives naturally from the common biblical use of 'rock' as a simile for the God of Israel.

Applying then the concept of fulfilment sense, we can see these interpretations not as completely *other* than the literal sense, but as direct extensions of it, connected to it by that typology internal to the Old Testament which we have already remarked on. Let us look again at Augustine's 'Non est mendacium sed mysterium'. As a spiritual interpretation it is ingenious, intriguing perhaps, but not likely to convince the literal-minded modern. The real meaning of the Jacob-Esau story for him is that it concerns the ancestor of the chosen people, and casts rather an odd light on God's methods of choice. But now the fuller modern exegesis, with its interest in the author's mind, would see the story as being originally intended as a sort of historical parable, significant of the people's election in their ancestor over the heads of gentiles with better natural claims; and this is in a direct line with Augustine's interpretation of it as a parable of the new Israel's election in Christ (of whom Jacob in his view was the type) at the expense of the old Israel with its better legal claims. His interpretation can claim to be, that is, the fulfilment sense. It is, incidentally, the interpretation implicit in the parable of the prodigal son, if that parable is read, according to Mgr Knox's most plausible sugges-

tion which develops a hint of St Ambrose's, as a deliberate play on the Jacob-Esau story.

The second strain of patristic exegesis which the fulfilment sense comes to the rescue of, is the interpretation of so many prophecies as literally and directly signifying Christ. Let us take as an example the Emmanuel prophecies, or Psalm 109, 'The Lord said to my Lord'. The Fathers followed the lead of the New Testament itself in referring these texts directly and immediately to Christ. The moderns, who include the most eminent Catholic scholars, consider that the primary reference of the prophet must have been to some person more or less contemporary, who was of immediate concern to his own generation. Emmanuel after all was promised as a sign, and the birth of Christ seven centuries in the future cannot have been much use as a sign to king Achaz. To us the idea of prophecy *in vacuo* many centuries in advance seems, not impossible of course, but perhaps pointless. But it seems to me that this was not an idea which was entertained with any seriousness by New Testament or patristic writers. What interested them was that these prophecies fitted Christ, not the question how to explain the correspondence. Invoking the fulfilment sense we can say that the prophets saw in the destinies of Ezechias, let us say, for the Emmanuel prophecies (the prophet's own son, coming between the significantly named Shear-jashub and Maher-shalal-hash-baz, has also been plausibly suggested), and of David or some other great king for Psalm 109, a figure, a revelation of one facet of God's redemptive action, which was only to be perfectly accomplished in Christ. As Theodore of Mopsuestia says, stating one of the excellent principles he was so pusillanimous in applying, the prophets would speak of some Old Testament restorer (Zorobabel was one of his favourites) 'by hyperbole'; that is to say they intentionally pointed beyond him to one who is greater than Solomon or Jonas or Zorobabel's temple. What the New Testament and the Fathers did, in fact, was to state the conclusion—'this prophecy means Christ'—and leave out the stages of the argument. It is gratifying for us to be able to supply the argument, but rather fruitless if we then proceed to throw away the conclusion. From this temptation we are saved by the fulfilment sense.

We are also saved from the tendency to departmentalization. Or at least we have the means of checking this vice in one particular

field, and of knocking communicating doors between what might have become the mutually isolated hermitages of 'Patristics' and 'Sacred Scripture'. For the chief value of the interpretations of the Fathers, especially of their typology, is that being so often traditional and not just the fanciful inventions of this or that patristic rhetorician, they may well be an important witness to the mind of the sacred authors, especially of the New Testament authors. And these in their turn, in the typological use they make of prophecies, may be a witness, through tradition, to the mind of the Old Testament authors. This is only an hypothesis, it is true, but it seems a reasonable one which is worth testing. Now since neither of these two classes of witnesses had any interest in or direct access to their authors' minds, but were only concerned with the objective—often, incidentally, very defective—texts in front of them, the symbolic interpretations of those texts which they received from tradition, according to our hypothesis, would not strike them as being the literal sense. As we have seen, what they meant by literal sense is not at all the same thing as what modern exegetes mean by the literal sense. Their method then of justifying such interpretations was to invoke the concept of the spiritual, or typical, or mystical senses, when they wished to justify them at all; the aptness of the symbolism was itself usually enough to carry conviction in their eyes. Thus paradoxical as it may sound, it is not usually the literal exegesis of the Fathers that will be of use to us as evidence to the minds of the Sacred authors; their remarks on the literal sense were often quite superficial, since they lacked the scientific equipment to investigate it. It is their spiritual interpretation which will aid us in reaching a deeper understanding of the full literal sense, the fulfilment sense, the *sensus plenior*.

In conclusion, this concept enables us to satisfy the requirements of the present Pope in the encyclical *Divino Afflante* that the chief attention of commentators should be concentrated on the literal sense, for the fulfilment sense is the literal sense in its fulness. It also enables us to carry out his even weightier demand that we should be seeking first and foremost the theological doctrine of each book and text, for the fulfilment sense is of its very nature theological. Above all, while respecting these fundamental *desiderata*, it enables us, in accordance with the express wishes of His Holiness, to save the Fathers. For 'it is to be regretted', he

writes, 'that these precious treasures of Christian antiquity are but too little known to many of our modern writers, and that the historians of exegesis have not yet taken all the measures necessary to give this important matter the careful attention and the esteem it deserves. We should rejoice to see great numbers devoting themselves seriously to the study of Catholic scriptural exegetes and their works; in this way, by drawing upon the almost unlimited accumulation of riches which they contain, they would effectively contribute to showing more and more clearly how well the ancients understood and explained the divine doctrine of the sacred books, and at the same time encourage modern interpreters to follow their example, and to borrow opportune arguments from them. Thus will come about that happy and fruitful combination of the learning and spiritual unction of the ancients with the greater erudition and maturer skill of the moderns, which will bring forth new fruit in the field of Sacred Scripture, a field ever fertile and never cultivated enough.'