



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE PAUL VI
AT THE INAUGURATION OF THE EXHIBIT «THE BOOK OF THE BIBLE»***

Saturday, 25 March 1972

Mr. Director-General, Venerable Brothers, Dear Sons,

and all of you who have honoured us with your presence. It is a very remarkable circumstance, one without doubt unique of its kind, which brings us together today in this shrine of knowledge and culture, the Apostolic Vatican Library. It is a matter of the active and vocal witness given by the Catholic Church to its interest in and great esteem for what is at first sight a wholly secular initiative, the "International Book Year", which the Sixteenth Session of the General Conference of UNESCO has proclaimed for 1972.

A secular initiative it is so only in appearance. For everything- that touches the human soul, the progress of knowledge and the spread of culture necessarily has a moral aspect which in some way concerns man's relationship with God and which by this very fact comes within the ambit of religion and is the object of the Church's attentive care.

What purpose has UNESCO had in view in promoting this initiative? The answer to this question we have just heard, expressed in lofty- terms, by the Director-General, and the slogan of its programme conveys this purpose perfectly: «Books for All». This very worthy organization has; thus wished, above all, to draw the world's attention to the irreplaceable function of the book, considered as an eminent mean of culture and as an incomparable factor of spiritual progress and as an instrument capable of evoking thoughts of peace, which can contribute effectively to a better understanding among peoples. The Organization has, also desired – and this too its praise – to study the most appropriate means of ensuring the spread of books, especially among the young and in the developing countries.

The Church notes all this with lively satisfaction. By means of a letter from our Cardinal Secretary

of State we made the Church's voice heard at the International Book Festival held at Nice in May of last year. We expressed the conviction that the true role of the book, the aim that all those concerned with its distribution must pursue, is above all to instruct mankind, to raise it up and to guide it towards the achievement of its good.

In fact, anyone who reflects can see that material progress, however spectacular, is only a partial aspect of complete human progress. Man needs spiritual values in order to be fully human, in order to ensure the harmonious balance of his life and the fruitfulness of his earthly activities. And in fact, thanks to the technical aids that man has at his disposal, books are multiplying endlessly. But it is obvious that the test in this matter cannot be merely of quantity: it is not a question of producing an abundance of books of just any sort. It is through its quality that the book can play its beneficial part. It is in proportion as it is a vehicle for spiritual values that it really causes mankind to advance, that it helps to build up and not to destroy. And it is of course in this light that the Holy See and the Church see the initiative of UNESCO as worthy of approval and encouragement.

What we have said so far concerns what we might call the Church's «generic» interest in the book as a means of culture. But the Church has something more specific to say on this matter. The Church too has «her» book, the book of books, if we may be permitted to call it such; the book that has been translated into every language, printed in millions of copies, distributed and read in every country of the world, a sort of permanent best seller for mankind: the Bible. In accepting the invitation to participate in the International Book of the Year, the Church as the depositary and guardian of this most precious treasure, intends above all to promote a better and wider knowledge of the Bible.

She considers that she can and must act in this way. For all believers, the Bible is something radically different from all that the human spirit has produced, something far superior: it is the Word of God. The sacred writer, whatever his talents may have been, is in this case only an instrument used by God. What is thus before us in an inspired book, a book which has God for its principal author. In choosing and making use of men in full possession of their faculties and abilities (cfr. *Dei Verbum*, 11), God has in a sense consecrated the splendid mission of the writer.

Certainly, we can find rich food for thought in the fact that God chose the book in order to communicate with men, in order “to invite and take them into fellowship with himself” (*Dei Verbum*, 2) to make known to them, or to recall to them down the centuries, his loving plan for his people and for all mankind. We can say that the Bible realizes perfectly the highest goal that any book has ever been able to set itself: to put man into contact with his Creator. This the Bible does with a freshness that spans the centuries without ever growing old, and through a variety that charms the spirit and the heart.

The Bible in fact is not just a book: it is a library itself, a set of books of every different literary

genres. Sometimes through the clarity of the narrative genre, at other times with the vehemence of the prophets' chiding, at others again by means of the loftiest poetry reflecting all the nuances of divine wisdom and human psychology, God teaches successive generations, illuminates them and gives them the joy of his light.

By contact with the Bible, men of all times and of all lands have learned the language of faith and hope, of justice and peace; millions have had revealed to them horizons of light and joy, and have drawn from the Bible or rediscovered in it confidence in the destiny of man of the world.

It is to the whole of these spiritual riches – and certainly without any hidden motive of self-interest that the Holy See intends to draw the attention of men of good will. Its aim is to offer them, in all simplicity and cordiality, a fresh occasion for approaching this unique book, which has played so great a role in the history of culture and civilization. To believers it extends an invitation to deepen their edge of these pages, which are so familiar, and from them to nourish their spiritual lives more intensely, as the recent Council urges.

And now we are about to inaugurate, and you are going to be able to visit, the exhibition that has been prepared with great care and skill by the Prefect of our Apostolic Library and by his devoted collaborators. As we have just been told and as you are going to see, it is a collection of especially rare or important copies of the Bible, spread over the centuries and belonging to the most varied languages and regions of the Christian world. You will be able to admire both the old and the new acquisitions of the Vatican Library. One of the most recent – although it is a very ancient text – is the Bodmer Papyrus, given to us by the famous Swiss collector, whose name well deserved to be recalled here today. Among the older possessions is a manuscript that is remarkable both for its content and its calligraphy, one well known to the exegetes of the whole world, the Codex B, whose presence here gained for it also the name of Codex Vaticanus.

The desire to make, these precious documents better known has recently given us the idea of having certain number of photostatic reproductions made. We intend presently to offer to you, Mr. Director General, one such copy of Codex B, if you will be so good as to accept it as a gift from the Holy See to UNESCO and as a symbol of the Holy See's participation in the campaign that UNESCO is conducting.

It only remains for us to congratulate warmly all those who have so skilfully arranged this exhibition, to thank those who have done us the honour of coming here to inaugurate it with us this evening, and to extend our cordial good wishes for the complete success of "The International Book Year".

*ORa n.14 p.8, 12.

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