



FR. FRANCIS ALOYSIUS SPENCER, O.P.

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FATHER SPENCER'S NEW TESTAMENT



HE TRANSLATION OF THE New Testament from the original Greek by the late Fr. Francis Aloysius Spencer, O.P., recently edited and published, is attracting so much attention and receiving so much praise that the readers of *Dominicana* and our world-wide Dominican family will doubtless be glad to learn something more about it and its great author and to hear some of the encomiums that are being spoken in its praise.

The world of scholarship has long been aware that Fr. Spencer was singularly equipped to produce the work which is now being so widely admired. He was a Biblical scholar of the first rank. He had a thorough knowledge of Biblical languages and of his own tongue, as well as of all the background that is necessary to make a great translation of the New Testament. Furthermore, the most of his long life was devoted to a study of the Scriptures and of those branches of learning that have to do with an understanding of the Bible. Being zealous for the Church of Christ and the salvation of souls, he wanted to leave behind him some fruit of his great Biblical learning. He, therefore, about the year 1894 set about translating the four Gospels from the Latin Vulgate, and brought this work to completion apparently in the early part of 1897; for in his own long Preface to that completed work, dated "Pentecost, 1897," he says: "Although this version of the Gospels is a translation from the Vulgate, continual reference was made to the Greek original during the progress of the work." He then goes on in the rest of this Preface to his translation of the Gospels from the Latin Vulgate to explain his method. This first of Fr. Spencer's translations received formal approval in August, 1897.

About a year and a half after the translation of the Gospels from

the Latin, Fr. Spencer brought out his first translation of the Gospels from the Greek, the Preface to which was written by Cardinal Gibbons, and dated October 27, 1898. This work was reprinted several times, the last edition of which appeared in 1901.

So much praise had come to Fr. Spencer's work on the Gospels, first from the Latin Vulgate and then from the original Greek, that he next decided to translate the whole New Testament from the Greek, and to this labor he devoted the rest of his life, finishing the translation of the text only a few months before his lamented death in April, 1913. It is this final work of the great Dominican scholar that has been at length edited and brought up to date and completed with introductions and notes by Fathers Callan and McHugh, O.P.

The first reason why this last work of Fr. Spencer's is attracting so much attention is that it was the first translation into the English language from the original Greek by a Catholic ever to have been made in America, and even in the whole English-speaking world. Dr. Lingard's translation from the Greek was made in England and was of the four Gospels only, and other works that had been done by Catholics in this country, like that of Archbishop Kenrick, were mere revisions of existing translations from the Vulgate. It is true that the Westminster Version by the Jesuit Fathers in England, which came out in fascicle form, year after year, was completed for the New Testament a couple of years ago, but it was begun in 1913, the very year that Fr. Spencer had completed his translation of the whole New Testament.

Again, this new work has been greatly enriched by the thirty introductions, general and particular, that now appear in it, by the some 1050 explanatory and critical notes that it has, by the subject and alphabetical indices, by the chronological table of the Gospels and the Acts, by the luminous headings and divisions that appear throughout the work, and other features—all of which have been supplied by the editors, with the exception of some of the notes which Fr. Spencer had already made.

But it is with the text of Fr. Spencer's work that we are chiefly concerned. And as we look into its qualities we see, first of all, that it is from the original Greek, and therefore closer to the autograph copies than any translation could be; it is exact, giving as far as possible, the correct English rendering for each Greek word and expression; it is not confined to any one of the best Greek editions of the New Testament, but is selective of what the translator considered the best among many readings; it keeps in close touch with the Vulgate, and wherever it was thought useful in divergent passages, it gives the

Vulgate reading in footnotes; it is expressed in idiomatic, modern, luminous, flowing English, dignified throughout, but conversational where the context calls for it, though never colloquial or commonplace.

As explained in the Preface to the present work, Fr. Spencer uniformly employed a Hebrew spelling for Hebrew proper names, except in a few instances where such spelling would jar too much on our ears or would differ from the commonly accepted spelling, as in the name *Jesus*, and the *Mathathias* of St. Luke's genealogy. Fr. Spencer himself explains this in his own Preface to his translation of the four Gospels from the Vulgate, when he says: "As to personal and geographical names, those forms have been chosen which are familiar to the great body of English-speaking people, which are in use as Christian names, and are commonly used by English writers as the recognized forms, so that they may be said to have been adopted into the English tongue."

This is the great work which is now presented to the world, to the glory of the Catholic Church in America and to the honor of St. Joseph's Dominican Province. It would be too long to quote here all the praise it has so far received, but our readers will surely welcome some of these appreciations, which, however, for lack of space we must abbreviate. In the first place, the work has received the praise and blessing of the Holy Father and of Cardinal Pacelli, Papal Secretary of State.

After a thorough examination of the work in its final published form, Fr. Vosté writes from Rome: "The work is really perfect. Read the Epistles of St. Paul—they are light in Fr. Spencer's translation. Read the prologue to St. John's Gospel, or the great discourses of Our Lord in the Fourth Gospel—they are music."

Msgr. Barton, Consultor to the Pontifical Biblical Commission, says: "Fr. Spencer's translation of the Greek New Testament is exquisite. It is a joy to read his Epistles of St. Paul, so obscure and difficult in our Douay Version."

Bro. Claudius Anthony of St. Mary's College, Berkeley, Cal., says: "The reading of Fr. Spencer's translation of the New Testament from the best critical Greek, Latin and Syriac editions, is a thrilling experience. We have at last a New Testament in English that is a notable achievement in typography and scholarship."

A prominent pastor of the Archdiocese of Dubuque has the following comment: "Fr. Spencer's translation of the New Testament is the best work that has appeared on the Bible in centuries."

Fr. Wilfrid Parsons, S.J., recent editor of *America*, writes in the *Commonweal*: "It can be said at once that the late Fr. Spencer's

translation, carefully reviewed by eminent Scriptural scholars here and abroad, is perfectly fitted to be an authorized American Catholic version."

Writing in the *Month*, Fr. Keating, S.J., editor, with Fr. Lattey, S.J., of the Westminster Version, states: "Fr. Spencer's New Testament was entrusted to the capable editorial hands of Frs. Callan and McHugh, O.P., who have supplied introductions and many additional notes, etc., and moreover, have been aided by distinguished scholars of their Order in Rome, viz., Fathers Vosté and Garde. So the version as it now appears has the highest recommendation."

Msgr. Smith in the *Denver Register* speaks of this work as "the delight of scholars and the pleasure of the laity who want a clear and easily understandable New Testament."

The editor of *The Preservation of the Faith* writes: "The book is indispensable for Scripture scholars and for all priests and seminarians. It is complete and profound and new, and represents much painful labor and study."

In the *Brooklyn Tablet* we read: "This is an excellent translation of the New Testament from the original Greek. . . . Its easy arrangement into topical paragraphs, its modern page arrangement, and its flowing prose, will recommend it to all for daily reading."

These are but a few of the laudatory comments that have already been given Fr. Spencer's monumental work during the few months since its appearance. They have come from a great variety of writers at home and abroad, from priests and laity, from Scriptural specialists, pastors, missionaries, editors, teachers. But what is perhaps even more encouraging is the praise Fr. Spencer is receiving from non-Catholic scholars. Our space will allow us to quote only briefly from a long article on Fr. Spencer's New Testament by one of the foremost of Protestant authorities, Dr. Ismar Peritz, of the *Journal of Bible and Religion*, who says:

"It is not too much to say that this new version possesses qualities, judged by the highest standards, that are calculated to make it an epoch-making event in the history of Bible translations and religion. . . . Fr. Spencer has full knowledge of the science of textual criticism. In many instances, too numerous for mention here, he has adopted the findings of foremost textual critics, and proves himself one of them. . . .

"Translation is a most delicate task. It requires a thoroughgoing and intimate acquaintance with the idioms of both languages and a genius to be just to both. . . . Fr. Spencer was well aware

of the pitfalls. He not only avoided them, but in some instances he excelled above others in accuracy. . . .

"The style of a version is of paramount importance. Experience of centuries has set the standard. It must be vernacular, free from obsolete terms, understandable, neither pedantic nor vulgar, and in accordance with its lofty theme. Judged even by such standards, Fr. Spencer's English deserves unstinted praise. We move (here) in the atmosphere of the greatest English classic. . . . It is evident that we meet here in general with the grace, euphony, and dignity which made the English Bible famous. In some cases it has even improved on the renowned cadence of the Authorized Version. . . .

"Among modern attempts to give the Bible a presentable literary form Fr. Spencer's New Testament will take first rank; and not enough can be said in its praise. . . . It is not too much to say that Fr. Spencer's is in form the best New Testament in the market."

Dr. Perritz concludes his long article by recommending Fr. Spencer's work as a model for the American Standard Edition of the Revised Version now in preparation. He also says that the use of this new Catholic Version by ministers and Bible students, along with their own versions, would not only be profitable but would also serve to break down prejudice and promote Christian union.

How much more, therefore, may we say that Catholics of all classes, both clergy and laity, can with profit read and ponder Fr. Spencer's New Testament, as a means of acquiring a greater knowledge of the lofty spiritual teachings of Christ and the Apostles and of increasing and intensifying their own spiritual life! As Fr. Vosté says in his Preface to this work, "It was the purpose of the very Rev. Fr. Spencer, in preparing this translation of the New Testament, to provide for the faithful and the clergy a text which they could read with ease and pleasure. Above all, it was his hope that the inspired word should become more widely read, and thereby exercise a greater influence on the lives of Christians by making them conform more exactly to the words and example of Christ."

Note.—Father Spencer's translation is published by the Macmillan Co., 60 Fifth Avenue, New York City.