

PRESENTATION

With immense exultation and a profound sense of gratitude, we publish the first scriptural dissertation defended in the Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome by an Indian. Fr. Canisius CMI has brought this glory to the Indian, especially Kerala Church. The doctoral work under the title *Cardinal Seripando: An Exegete and Biblical Theologian* was defended on 27 November 1952. Fr. Stanislaus Lynonet SJ, the well known specialist on St. Paul, was the moderator of the thesis. Alberto Vaccari SJ, the famous Bible scholar, served as the second director.

Unfortunately, no serious attempts were made to publish this scholarly work till this time. Fr. Canisius, who is well known for his humility, discouraged such attempts. He used to say that his dissertation does not deserve to be published, since it lacked scientific rigour and academic excellence. However, even a causal reading of this work will attest to the contrary. I was full of admiration for the meticulous presentation of the theme. The author proves that he had a masterly knowledge even of the primary sources. He is well versed in the original sources. He shows an admiring knowledge of the Greek, Latin, French, German, and Italian languages. At every page he cites the original texts and sources. Originally, the manuscript comprises of two volumes, the first being the text of 359 pages, the second, the notes of 156 pages.

It was due to the efforts of Fr. Jose Nandhikkara CMI that this enterprise could be realized. Fr. Jose traced out the manuscript of this dissertation, and Fr. Saju Chackalackal CMI and brothers Sinto Nangini, Arun Karaparambil, Jebin Kanjirathingal, Jinto Kuttookaran, Lipson Kokkadan, Noble Kavalakkatt, Jinto Chirayath, Lebin Vennattuparambil, and Praveen Puthenchirakaran helped in digitising the thesis. Fr. Canisius was meticulous in giving detailed notes with the citation of Latin texts, which, however, are not very essential to understand the arguments. Also most of the readers may not be familiar with the Latin language. Hence, in most of the notes mere references to the text are given, and the detailed citations are reduced to the minimum. We have also omitted some details on the life of Seripando. Fr. P. K. George SJ helped us in correcting the Latin texts and Fr. Sebastian Mullooparampil CMI and Fr. Benny Nalkara CMI corrected the Greek texts. Dharmaram College and Dharmaram Publications generously undertook the publication of this work, honouring her

first biblical scholar and saintly rector during the period 1960-1966.

Now let us enter into the world of the dissertation. The bibliography is divided into four sections, the works of Seripando, biographical studies, works which help for the study of Seripando's word interpretation, and books which help for the study of sense interpretation and biblical theology. It is worthy to note that Fr. Canisius' bibliography is thorough, and at the same time concise and precise.

The introductory part consists of three chapters. In chapter 1, the author presents his arguments for the choice of the topic. He finds in Seripando a great theologian, a good critic of exegetical works as well as an exegete and biblical theologian.

The author pinpoints the objective and relevance of the study. According to him, the study of the exegetical works of Seripando is most opportune at our time, when the many Churches are trying to search out and narrow down the differences among them, so as to hasten the realization of Christ's prayer, "That all may be one." For Fr. Canisius, Seripando was a theologian who did his level best to understand the mind of his dissenting brethren. He was "a scripturalist, who took in hand the exegetical works, with the dissenters' own oft-repeated ideal, 'to make clearer the mind of Paul'." Seripando showed them where and how they went astray from that ideal. At the same time he defended them in the Council of Trent on the issues in which he found their position right. This prophetic daringness brought tremendous suffering for him. His orthodoxy was questioned by many conservative council Fathers, even by the Pope. The author finds in Seripando "a man who burnt with the zeal for Church reform and firmly stood for it" "in the midst of misunderstandings and humiliations."

This objective induced Fr. Canisius to undertake a scientific study of the exegetical works of Seripando. Thereby he has done a great service to the Church and the future students of Seripandian theology. Enthusiastically he delved into the conciliar treatises and inedited works of Seripando and did "tedious task to fish out Seripando's exact mind."

The author deserves our unreserved appreciation and whole hearted commendation. He inspires us to follow his methodology in India, a land of religious pluralism and Christian denominations. Like him we have to defend the elements of truth in other religions

and churches. At the same time, the author sets the example in pointing out where and how the Christian and non-Christian brethren are going astray from the ideal of Christ, who is the way, the truth and the life.

In chapters 2 and 3, Fr. Canisius provides the exact and minute details of the works of the biblical theologian with the dates of composition and revisions. Here we have one of the many examples of the scientific mind of the author.

The thesis is mainly divided into two parts, Seripando the Exegete, and Seripando a Biblical Theologian. Part I is further divided into two sections: Seripando's Word Interpretation and Sense Interpretation. Fr. Canisius begins the first part with an introduction on the nature of Bible exegesis and the scope of exegesis according to Seripando. Bible exegesis has to provide a lucid explanation of the mind of Paul, which has the functions of word interpretation and sense interpretation. "The scope for the exegesis is to make clear what the apostle deals with and what he looks up to." Seripando finds fault with the Protestants since they neglected "the scope of exegesis itself, trying to explain themselves rather than the mind of St Paul." Further, "the exegete has also to adapt his exposition to the condition of those for whom he is writing." He has "to propose the truth taught by the sacred author, in such a way that it may be easily assimilated by the persons whom he addresses." Here comes the need for contextual hermeneutics. Indeed, this is one of the contributions of Fr. Canisius' dissertation on Seripando.

Section I on Seripando's Word Interpretation has three chapters: Search for Original Texts, the Latin Rendering and Helps for an Easy Understanding of the Latin Rendering. Here Fr. Canisius finds fault with Seripando's preference for longer readings for the reason that they express the mind of the author more fully. Every modern exegete will agree with Fr. Canisius, since any scribe could have added apt explanations so as to express the original idea more fully. Further, he does not agree with Seripando's seemingly arbitrary change of the word order.

Fr. Canisius commends Seripando in exposing St. Paul's mind in the most apt and the most ordinary expressions. He unearths fifty instances in which Seripando substituted the Vulgate rendering by more apt expressions. He adduces forty three instances where Seripando used more ordinary expressions in

order to give St. Paul's word more force. The author of the dissertation finds out that "Seripando's word interpretation is, indeed, well planned, and as a rule well worked out." He tries to justify the aberrations, as Seripando lacked at that time the modern critical editions of the Greek text and of the Latin versions, perfect grammars and exhaustive lexicons. He is full of admiration for "Seripando's determination to bring home to his readers the full force of the apostles' words in all possible clarity." He has employed all the methods known at that time in order to make the full meaning clear to his readers.

The author concludes section I with the following observation: "He had himself studied the Vulgate text, comparing it with Greek original and had found that in many cases it did not represent the original text with exactitude, and that in many cases, its rendering were far from being exact." Thereby Seripando could fight in the Council of Trent for the study of the original text and their translations into vernacular. The exegete's primary duty is to study "the original text, the restoring of it into its original purity, and rendering of it into the exegete's language, in as apt and as ordinary word as possible." Indeed, Fr. Canisius' apt observation should serve as the *élan vital* for the modern scriptural scholars.

In section II on Sense Interpretation, the author distinguishes three different steps taken by Seripando in exposing the sense of the letters of Paul. Accordingly, he entitles the chapters as Investigation on Paul's Mind in Its Outlines, Personal Reflections on Paul's Doctrine and Exposition.

According to Fr. Canisius, two fundamental rules guided Seripando in investigating Paul's mind: the rule of flow and the rule of stability. The rule of flow, by itself, is not a sure guide; it receives help from the rule of stability, to have its results checked and to proceed with ease, in places where obscurities abstract the passage.

After discovering Paul's thought in its outline, Seripando had recourse to deeper speculations on the mind of the Apostle. Here he is guided by the authority of the Church, the Council as well as that of the Fathers. He consulted the works of the contemporary theologians. He also makes personal study and research work, and depends upon parallel passages of Scripture. Also he was helped by classics, history, philosophy and personal observations from nature and social life. Fr. Canisius admires Seripando for this

mature attitude. According to him, this methodology helped Seripando to discover the real mind of Paul. The author compares it to the methodology of the Protestants which was based on their individual judgments. Thus, they were trying to read their own minds into the writings of Paul. To use the phrase of Seripando, they confuse and cover up the contents of the Bible “by straw of their verbosity.”

Seripando wanted to avoid all such defects in his exposition. Brevity and clarity are his watchwords. He disdained ornamental language, which he considered as puerile. In his commentary on the Romans we find 382 references, out of which 164 are mere references, allusions or adaptations and only the remaining 218 are full quotations. Seripando took care to abstain from long digressions in his exposition. He carefully avoided occasions for self-glorification or for the humiliation of his adversaries. His language is clear and flowing. There we do not find rigid terminologies of the scholastics as well as the exaggerated flourishes of the humanists.

In concluding the part I, Fr. Canisius points out that Seripando was a student of the reform movement of the sixteenth century. In the last years he became the intellectual leader of the party that stood for a complete reform within the Church. He advocated for an existential interpretation of Scripture. Only after studying minutely the works of the Protestants, did he criticize them. Unfortunately, his dreams failed to inspire the Church authorities of that time. They virulently attacked him. Still he tried to maintain in all his works an upright, undisturbed and serene spirit. He was not ready to put into fetters his human intellect, under the pretext of blind submission to the Church. Here we find the prophetic figure of Seripando, the exegete. We owe great obligation to Fr. Canisius for discovering this prophetic portrait of Seripando, who will ever serve as a model for every biblical theologian of today.

According to Seripando, there existed then two extreme positions: “the exaggerated indulgence of the scholastics in dialectics, and the audacious arbitrariness of the Protestants, in dealing with biblical texts.” He opposed the existing custom of mingling up of polemics with exegesis. The Protestants were boasting of their pretended fidelity to the Gospel of St. Paul. Under the veil of the Apostle’s words they were presenting a new

doctrine which won the hearts of the ignorant and ill-instructed Christians. In this background Seripando was forced to lay bare the devices of the reformers. He, then, exposed and defended the genuine Gospel preached by Paul. These are the themes of the part II of the dissertation.

Section I deals with the devices employed by the reformers to sustain their fundamental error of justification by mere faith. Fr. Canisius pinpoints four devices presented by Seripando: neglect of the fundamental rules of interpretation; neglect of the common rules of logic; positive distortions in handling similes, in quoting the Fathers, in representing the good customs of the Church, in interpreting the words of Scripture, in speaking of the authority of the Church, and in inculcating the wrong doctrine; arrogation of unclaimed authority.

In section II, Seripando exposes and defends Paul’s genuine Gospel. It consists of two chapters entitled as man’s helpless state, and sufficiency of Christ’s grace to save man. In chapter 1, the author studies two themes in Paul: Adam, sin and death, the law, the flesh, and the spirit. Fr. Canisius makes insightful and inspiring comparison between Luther and Seripando. Both of them wished to be instructed directly by Paul. Luther, however, depended on his impulsive nature alone. He did not allow anyone to interfere with his freedom of thought. Thus, he began with Scripture and ended with self. Thereby he gave form to his new theology of the total and irremediable corruption of human nature. Seripando, on the other hand, wanted to remain a biblical theologian in the strict sense of the word. He would draw his conclusions from the words of the Bible, without swerving from the norms of exegesis. Seripando did not depend simply “on the brilliance of his intellect”; rather he counted on the divine help and guidance of the authorities of the Church and the Fathers. Thus, he could affirm the triumph of the Holy Spirit and the liberty of the just, at the same time pointing out at the weakness of the law and the virulence of the faith.

Both Seripando and the Protestants were convinced that the grace of Christ was abundantly sufficient to lead man to eternal life. But here was a great difference between the ways they understood the truth. This is the theme of the chapter 2, which has two articles: faith that justifies and justification.

To the Protestants, faith was a naked faith (*sola fide*); for Luther faith was trust. Seripando's faith was the full faith. According to him, no one can be justified by naked faith. For, "one without the spirit of Christ, is not of Christ; one who is not of Christ, is not united with Him. One, who is not united with him, cannot receive the grace of justification. Hence, he who does not possess besides faith, the Holy Spirit also will not be justified." It is wrong to confuse faith with trust. The certainty of faith is based on the authority of Christ and on the conviction of the debility of our intellect. The absolute necessity of faith for salvation is obvious from the fact that it is faith that unites us with the fountain, from which also, divine pleasure and good will flow to us.

Article II is entitled Justification. Here the author exposes the concept of justification according to the commentaries of Seripando. It deals with justice of God, of Christ, of the Holy Spirit; justice by faith; the source of justice; the just and the sinner; liberation.

In conclusion Fr. Canisius makes a critical evaluation of the doctrine of Seripando. First he showers praise on this prophetic voice at the Council of Trent, who "earnestly sought to restore theology to its biblical simplicity." According to him, Seripando appealed to the science of the Spirit. This biblical theologian appealed to the Council Fathers to avoid the language of philosophers which closed up divine doctrine in narrow terminologies, and to adapt Paul's expressions which are simple and intelligible to all, adducing, if necessary, appropriate explanations.

Then, the author points out some errors in the position of Seripando. The expert in the Council of Trent mistook the picture of the sinner drawn by Paul in Rom 7:7-25. Consequently, he insisted on applying the strong expressions used by Paul to describe the state of the sinner, to the state of the just. Thus, we see Seripando designating concupiscence remaining in the just, by the word 'sin', calling the just still slaves to sin, and asserting that there remains in the just that something which is displeasing to God. "But for this mistake, his ideal of a biblical theologian is pursued all throughout, with uncommon courage." Seripando vehemently fought against understatements of biblical truths.

The dissertation concludes with the final retrospect, in which Fr. Canisius evaluates Seripando as the first Catholic biblical theologian. He has left us, especially to the exegetes and theologians of today, a valuable message through his Commentaries and *Quaestiones*.

In giving this short summary of the scholarly work of Fr. Canisius, I know that I have not done justice to him. Many of his original comments and contributions are not noted down. However, this brief presentation may inspire at least some to read the whole dissertation.

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