

The Douay Bible: A Testimony to Tradition (First in a Series)

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Intro

Msgr. Philip Hughes, the distinguished Catholic historian from an earlier generation, paints a bleak picture of Catholic life within Protestant England during the Sixteenth Century:

In England, on the accession of Queen Elizabeth (1558—1603) the work of restoration accomplished by her sister Mary was completely destroyed. The old anti-papal laws of Henry VIII were re-enacted, the doctrine of the royal supremacy revived, the Mass once more forbidden, and a new religion set up with a new *Book of Common Prayer* (1559) for its rule of worship, the *Thirty-Nine Articles* (1563) for an official code of belief to mark it off from the old religion, and acts of parliament for the basis of the change with appropriate penalties for all who resisted. These penalties went as far as death for refusing the Oath of Supremacy.

The bishops were all deposed and a new, self-consecrated hierarchy of heretics took their place. The clergy, for the most part, accepted the situation.ⁱ

England has yet to recover fully from this ecclesiastical upheaval described above. Nevertheless, from this milieu of the 1500s would come forth a treasure of our Catholic heritage: *The Douay-Rheims Bible*; usually known as *The Douay Bible*.

A Vernacular Bible for England

There were legitimate reasons for a reliable, vernacular Bible translation for Catholics residing in England within the Sixteenth Century.ⁱⁱ First, it was understood that a dependable English translation for the faithful was beneficial: the accessible vernacular translations of the day were in need of improvement. Incidentally, *The Latin Vulgate* was also undergoing revision at this time in Rome.ⁱⁱⁱ Second, in light of the situation described by Hughes, religious confusion and controversy were rampant because of the proliferation of Protestant versions of Sacred Scripture. These non-Catholic works were often polemical; manifesting a bias with their pro-Protestant renderings and containing anti-Catholic notes to “aid” the reader. Some of these non-Catholic versions, each varying in their degree of polemics, were *Tyndale’s New Testament* (1525); *Coverdale’s Bible* (1535); *Matthew’s Bible* (1537); *The Great Bible* (1539); *Taverner’s Bible* (1539); *The Geneva Bible* (1560); *The Bishops Bible* (1568); and the *Thomson/Beza New Testament* (1576).^{iv} Catholic scholars in England, aware of this theological dilemma, decided upon a course of action to safeguard the Catholic Faith. The remedy: a Bible for the faithful, composed in the English tongue, and containing notes that explained and defended Catholic doctrine. This solution would yield *The Douay Bible*.

The Translators of the Text

An examination of *The Douay Bible* should mention the characters and history that accompanied the text's composition. Five men entailed a small group who contributed to the translation project: William Allen; Gregory Martin; Richard Bristow; William Reynolds; and Thomas Worthington. These names are likely unknown to many Catholics. Yet, these noble men warrant a special place in the annals of Church History. These Scripture pioneers deserve our attention.^v

William Allen (d. 1594) was age fifteen when he headed to Oriel College, Oxford; taking a B.A. in 1550 and M.A. in 1554. He was elected Fellow at Oriel, and later became Principal at St. Mary's Hall. Elizabeth I came to power in England in 1558, paving the way for the country's re-establishment of Protestantism. Within this climate, Allen's refusal to embrace the "new religion," along with his defense of "the old Faith," played a significant role in sustaining Catholicism in England. Allen would eventually flee England in 1561 and settle in Louvain, Belgium. Returning to England the next year; he evangelized the natives to hold fast to Catholic truth. Allen's labors proved fruitful, to the point that for his own safety he had to abandon England once more. Not to be deterred, Allen set up a missionary center near Oxford. The year 1565 saw another forced and final exit from his homeland. Soon, Allen was ordained to the priesthood in Mechlin, Belgium. While visiting Rome in 1567, he became convinced that England would return to Catholicism if supplied with trained clergy and controversialists. For this purpose, Fr. Allen founded the English College at Douay, France in 1568. This center of learning would send missionaries to educate England's Catholics; bringing them back to the Catholic fold. During a second journey to Rome in 1575, Fr. Allen helped Pope Gregory XIII launch another English College within the Eternal City. The first college at Douay would transfer in 1578 within France from Douay to Rheims: these two locales would serve as future hosts for the production of *The Douay Bible*. In 1579, Fr. Allen's third visit to Rome ushered his appointment to the Papal Commission for the revision of the Vulgate under Pope Sixtus V. As well, Fr. Allen would collaborate in the Sixtine edition of the Septuagint (i.e. the Old Testament in the Greek tongue). Fr. Allen was made a cardinal in 1587. Two years later, he would assist in establishing a third English College in Valladolid, Spain. Cardinal Allen was nominated in 1589 to be Archbishop of Mechlin, Belgium (although this nomination was never confirmed). This loyal son of the Church died at Rome's English College in 1594.

Gregory Martin (d. 1582) was a scholar at St. John's College, Oxford. Martin's residence of thirteen years in Oxford drew him acclaim as a first-rate linguist and scholar. At St. John's, Martin became a close friend of the future Jesuit martyr and saint, Fr. Edmund Campion. Similar to Allen, Martin refused to conform to the "new religion." This stand forced Martin's departure from Oxford to Douay in 1570. At Fr. Allen's academic center in France, Martin presented himself for the priesthood and was ordained in 1573. He would accompany Fr. Allen to Rome for the founding of the second English College within the Eternal City. Fr. Martin was given the key task of organizing this Roman institution's course of studies. Making his journey back to France in the late 1570s, Fr. Martin settled at Rheims. In France, his intense labors for the Catholic Faith would soon take its toll: Fr. Martin's deteriorated health caused his passing in 1582.

Richard Bristow (d. 1581) was a student and Fellow of Exeter College, Oxford. He took his B.A. in 1559 and three years later the M.A. as a member of Christ Church. Bristow was known for his erudition and oratory skills; being chosen for public disputation before Elizabeth I in 1566. Eventually, Bristow began to focus his attention on the study of theology. His intellectual abilities might have garnered Bristow additional honors, however, his religious opinions started to change. This change resulted in Bristow's argument and confutation with the Regius professor of Divinity. A departure from Oxford followed the end of Bristow's appointed fellowship. This departure led the erudite scholar to Louvain, Belgium where Bristow met Fr. Allen, who detected Bristow's talents. He would embrace the Catholic Faith, and join Fr. Allen at Douay. Bristow, ordained in 1573, became Fr. Allen's "right hand," and was placed as his prefect of studies for the nascent English College at Douay. After teaching at Douay until 1578, Fr. Bristow was put in charge when the institution moved to Rheims. Regarding his skill level, Fr. Bristow was said to rival Allen in prudence and Martin in languages. Fr. Bristow's academic efforts were too much for an already weak constitution, bringing his life's end in 1581.

William Reynolds (d. 1594) became a Fellow of New College, Oxford. Ironically, his younger brother John Reynolds was one of the chief Anglicans who produced *The King James Version* of 1611. As the case with Bristow, Reynolds would come to embrace "the Roman religion" after studying the controversy over Catholicism. Reynolds' personal contact with Allen certainly facilitated this conversion. Reynolds came to Rome in 1575 to make a public recantation of his past errors. This started his sojourn to Douay's English College to study for the priesthood; culminating in ordination in 1580. After the transfer to Rheims, Fr. Reynolds lectured on the Hebrew language and Sacred Scripture; with particular attention to the writings of St. Paul. In addition to his work as a Biblical scholar, Fr. Reynolds was also a skilled apologist, penning treatises in defense of the Catholic Church; the Mass and the Blessed Sacrament. After leaving the English College, Fr. Reynolds became a chaplain in Antwerp, Belgium. He expired in 1594.

Thomas Worthington (d. 1627) descended from an ancient, wealthy family that contributed many members to the service of Holy Mother Church. He studied at Brasenose College, Oxford; attaining a degree in arts in 1570. In 1573, Worthington headed to Douay to study theology. After ordination in 1577, he remained at the college teaching theology until 1578, and the next year earned his B.D. at the University of Douay. After a stay in Rheims, Fr. Worthington accompanied Fr. Allen to Rome. Fr. Worthington went back to England in 1580, where his zeal for the Catholic Faith led him to labor for the poor among the land. In 1584, Fr. Worthington attempted to rescue his four nephews, seized at Great Sankey near Warrington. Eventually, he was captured and sent to the Tower. In 1585, accompanied by twenty other priests, Fr. Worthington was placed aboard ship to Normandy for "perpetual banishment" from England. He settled later in Rheims, and become vice-president and procurator of the school. Fr. Worthington was appointed president of Douay College in 1599. His presidency ended in 1613 among some difficulties. Fr. Worthington was eventually granted a place on the Congregation of the Index. He reached his final rest in 1627 while working in England's Staffordshire.

This glance at the life of these five translators is inspiring; we discern the excellent qualifications and noble character of these men. The piety and scholarship of this small group would soon benefit the entire English-speaking world.

The Work of Translation

The process of translation for *The Douay Bible* reveals great care and sustained effort.^{vi} Fr. Martin is believed to have been the main translator for the entire Bible. Beginning with the New Testament in October of 1578, he attempted to translate two chapters per day. During this process, Fr. Martin's labors were reviewed and fine-tuned by Fr. Allen and Fr. Bristow. Some believe that Fr. Bristow and Fr. Reynolds participated in the translation work with Fr. Martin. A key component was the New Testament annotations that were added by Fr. Bristow and Fr. Allen. The annotations to the Old Testament were penned by Fr. Worthington. These notes were designed to explain the truths of the Catholic Faith and to repel theological error.

The translation's main point of reference was the Latin Vulgate. However, the translators didn't ignore the Hebrew and Greek tongues, or disregard the vernacular versions that were in circulation at the time. When needed for reference, Fr. Martin placed the Greek in the margin of the New Testament. Concerning the finer points of the Greek language, Martin paid attention to the article, conjunctions, and tenses.^{vii} Non-Catholics admit that *The Douay Bible* influenced the 1611 *King James Version*.^{viii}

The New Testament was released in 1582, published at Rheims by John Fogney; to a cost of 1,500 crowns (derived mainly from collections). The title page states:

The New Testament of Jesus Christ, translated faithfully into English out of the Authentic Latin, according to the best copies of the same, diligently conferred with the Greeke and other editions in diverse languages, with Arguments of bookes and chapters, Annotations and other necessary helpes, for the better understanding of the text, and especially for the discoverie of the Corruptions of divers late translations, and for clearing the controversies in religion of these daies; In the English College of Rhemes...^{ix}

The translation was reprinted in 1589 by Protestants in London. Later, our separated brethren reprinted the text in 1601; 1617; and 1633. Across the sea, American Protestants reprinted the Rheims New Testament in 1834 in Boston and New York. Catholic reprints were done in 1600; a second edition printed at Antwerp by Daniel Veroliet (with a few alterations and corrections). A third edition came in 1621 and a fourth in 1633. Reprints began to appear with "modernized spelling" in 1738 (5th ed.); 1788 (6th ed.); and 1816-1818 (7th ed.).

Because of a lack of funds, the publishing of the Old Testament at Douay was delayed until 1609-1610. This text was published by Lawrence Kellam. A second edition was released in 1635; the same year which saw the issue of the complete Bible (i.e. Old and New Testament).

Conclusion

The Catholic hierarchy of the 1500s in England addressed a problem that had both pastoral and theological dimensions: the need for a dependable translation of Holy Writ. Regarding *The Douay Bible*, we should ponder the moving comments taken from the Dominican scholar Fr. Hugh Pope:

To appreciate rightly the translation these men produced, we must bear in mind the following points: These exiles were the pick of the University which had driven them out; they were most learned men. Further, they were apostles in the truest sense of the term, for their whole lives were devoted to the cause of the Catholic faith. Both Martin and Bristow died at a very early date as the result of their strenuous labours, and we can call them “martyrs.” Again, they all lived in an atmosphere of controversy such as even in these days we can hardly understand.^x

In the next article, we will continue our examination of other significant points concerning *The Douay Bible*. We shall address in more detail the translation methodology; survey the revisions by Challoner, Haydock, and the Confraternity edition; glance at a few verses of *The Douay Bible* in comparison to some contemporary Scripture translations; and look at today’s reprints of *The Douay Bible*.

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ⁱ Philip Hughes, *A Popular History of the Catholic Church* (NY: The Macmillan Company, 1961) 240-241. Hughes’ dreary sketch is echoed by Warren H. Carroll, *A History of Christendom, Volume 4: The Cleaving of Christendom* (Front Royal: Christendom Press, 2000) 381-382; Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c. 1400—c. 1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992) 565-593; Martin P. Harney, S.J., *The Catholic Church through the Ages* (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1980) 264-270; and H. Daniel-Rops, *The Catholic Reformation*, translated by John Warrington (NY: E. P. Dutton & Co. Inc., 1962) 204-207.

ⁱⁱ Cf. Bernard Orchard, et al., *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture* (NY: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1953) 34-35. Allen is quoted as revealing dissatisfaction with the vernacular texts available to him at the time: “. . . all the English versions are most corrupt.”

ⁱⁱⁱ Cf. A. E. Breen, *A General Introduction to the Study of Holy Scripture*, 2nd ed. (Fort Collins: Roman Catholic Books, 1908 reprint) 754-765.

^{iv} Cf. Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible: Revised and Expanded* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986) 606-610. These two Evangelical scholars provide a valuable list of English translations of the Bible, pp. 605-635.

^v Biographical data is taken from Charles G. Herbermann, et al., *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (NY: The Encyclopedia Press, Inc., 1913) I:322-323 [Allen]; II:791 [Bristow]; IX:727-728 [Martin]; XIII:18 [Reynolds] and XV:713-714 [Worthington].

^{vi} Cf. Hugh Pope, O.P., *English Versions of the Bible*, revised and amplified by Sebastian Bullough, O.P. (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1952) 249-307. I have highlighted some of the main points from Pope

concerning the actual translation process. His approximately sixty pages on this point are extensive and worth reading.

^{vii} Cf. S. L. Greenslade, ed., *The Cambridge History of the Bible, Volume 3: The West from the Reformation to the Present Day* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 161-163.

^{viii} Cf. W. Kenneth Connolly, *The Indestructible Book: The Bible, its Translators, and their Sacrifices* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996) 163.

^{ix} Francis E. Gigot, S.S., *General Introduction to the Study of the Holy Scriptures*, 4th rev. ed. (NY: Benziger Brothers, 1900) 346, n. 2.

^x Hugh Pope, O.P., *The Catholic Student's "Aids" to the Bible: the Old Testament* (NY: Benziger Brothers, 1913) 120.