

COMMON BIBLE AGREED ON

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Details of the common Bible have finally been worked out, and Pope Paul VI has approved the plan.

A document co-published (June 2) by the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity and the United Bible Societies outlines the shape of the common Bible.

The contents of the common Bible are the same that Catholics have always known in the Bible, but the order of the books is different, and there are other features that make the common Bible something new. The document that gives the blueprint for future Bibles is called "Guiding Principles for Interconfessional Cooperation in Translating the Bible."

The UBS, which has its headquarters in London, includes the American Bible Society, the British and Foreign Bible Society, and 33 other national Bible societies around the world. Until now they have, for the most part, served the Protestant churches. They have produced translations in more than a thousand languages. They keep revising their versions to adapt them to progress in biblical studies and modern languages. At the same time, they are trying to provide translations in languages and dialects that still have no Bible. It is estimated that there are about 1,000 such languages and dialects.

The UBS agreed to extend its services to include Roman Catholics because the Second Vatican Council adopted as one of its goals the aim and purpose of the Bible Societies: Easy access to holy Scripture for all. The slogan means translations in the living languages of people everywhere and publications priced low enough to put them within the actual economic reach of the people.

Shortly after the close of Vatican II, Pope Paul encouraged the predominantly Protestant Bible Societies to take seriously the possibility of collaboration with Catholics, when he gave Cardinal Augustin Bea, S.J., and the unity secretariat, a mandate to study implementation of the Vatican II decree on the Bible, which recommended cooperation with "the separated brethren" in translation of the Bible.

A group of UBS experts and Catholics scholars worked out guiding principles for the project. By approving these and authorizing their publication, Pope Paul and the leaders of the Bible Societies have taken a major step toward the goal of easy access to the Scripture for all.

Up to now, the only Bible accepted by all churches, and therefore worthy to be called common, has been an edition of the Hebrew Old Testament and an edition of the Greek New Testament based on the best manuscripts. Agreement on improvements in these editions critically established by modern interdenominational scholarship has been assured by establishment of an editorial committee of Catholic and Protestant scholars.

The term "common Bible" has been used in recent years to describe not a fact but a hope, namely, that the various Christian denominations and Jewish scholars would be able to agree on a translation of the Hebrew and Greek texts which would be acceptable to their various constituencies. The "common Bible" provided for in the document published by the Vatican and the United Bible Societies will contain agreed translations of all the biblical books including the deuterocanonical texts, which most Protestants call "Apocrypha." The order of the books, however, will not be the same as that found in Catholic Bibles. In the new common Bible translations, the deuterocanonical texts will be grouped together after the books of the Hebrew Old Testament and before the books of the New Testament. (The

deuterocanonical texts — Tobit, Judith, Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, Maccabees I and II, parts of Esther and Daniel — come from the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Scriptures made before the time of Christ and before the Hebrew canon as we know it today was established by the Jews. The Gospel writers frequently quoted from the Septuagint.)

This arrangement does not involve any change in Catholic doctrine. The Council of Trent listed the books of the Bible in a certain order, but even that order has not always been followed in Catholic editions. Not long after the Council of Trent, Pope Sixtus V approved an edition of the Bible in Latin which did not follow the order given in the council.

The arrangement of the books in a Bible is simply a disciplinary matter which a Pope can alter for good reasons. Pope Paul VI's reasons for approving the new order of books to be found in the "common Bible" reflect the new spirit of respect and esteem for other Christians. In the same spirit, the Protestants in the Bible Societies were willing to include the deuterocanonical texts in a common Bible wherever Catholics request them provided the order already mentioned was preserved.

Some people thought it would be hard for the different denominations to decide what explanatory notes should be introduced in the common Bible," but this problem was solved rather easily.

Catholic Church law requires such notes in all Catholic editions of the Bible. Vatican II added that these notes should be "necessary" and "adequate" to convey the meaning of the Scriptures and to express their "true spirit." The Bible Societies, following a general trend among Protestants, have usually produced Bibles with no notes at all. The constitutions of the oldest societies called for Bibles "without note or comment."

In modern times the Bible Societies found that people, especially in Asia and Africa, needed and wanted helps for understanding the Scriptures, and they began to include a number of notes in various editions. The Bible Societies were able to adopt this policy because recent

studies showed that the phrase "without note or comment" in their constitutions meant "without controversial note or comment:" the Bible Societies were to serve all the churches and therefore should avoid controversy.

In conferences between the Bible Societies, Cardinal Bea's secretariat and the Pontifical Biblical Commission, it was seen that requirements of the Catholic Church and of the Bible Societies could be met in common Bible publications by having aids for readers that avoid controversy. This solution now has the approval of the highest Catholic authority and all 35 national Bible Societies.

What does remain a problem in the working out of a common Bible translation is the fact that Catholics and Protestants often spell (and pronounce) biblical names differently. This problem has to be worked out at the local level in each language, but the Vatican-UBS document of guiding principles gives helpful general rules for finding a solution. In English, this problem has been resolved by the British and American Catholic Bishops' acceptance of the spellings that prevail in English, namely, those of the King James Version. Thus, for example, Catholic editions of the Bible will now use Isaiah instead of Isaias or Isaia, and Hosea instead of Osee. Here, as in the case of the order of the books, there has been no doctrinal compromise.

It is clear from a reading of the guiding principles that there is not yet a common Bible in English. The common Bible envisaged in this document will be the work of Catholics and Protestant combined in the following Committees:

Working Committee, which does the basic translation work; 2) Review Committee, made up of experts in exegesis and style who will check the translators' work; 3) Consultative Group, consisting of 25 to 50 persons (Catholic Bishops and other Christian leaders) who will review the work for approval of their Churches.

In countries where English has been spoken for a long time, it is often taken for granted that the Revised Standard Version should be the English common Bible. The RSV, originally the work of a team

of Protestants, has subsequently been given an imprimatur by a British and an American Bishop. It may well be that for some time to come people in these countries will find the RSV serves their needs. However, many of the people in the world who use English, especially many of those who are in Asia and Africa, find the traditionally high-level English style of the RSV too difficult for them.

Obviously, this group of the English-speaking people needs a translation that can be easily understood. If that translation is the work of committees following the procedures set forth in the Vatican-UBS document, there will be a common Bible in English far more serviceable than the RSV.

Meanwhile in 107 languages where there is greater need than in English, work on a common Bible translation has already begun. Catholic-Protestant groups in Nigeria, Congo, India, the Philippines, the Caroline and Marshall Islands have set to work to produce a Bible translation according to the approved guiding principles. In some of these cases the principles have been undergoing a testing period. Now the document, tested and approved, serves as an authoritative guide.

Will it work? Can these groups always agree as they translate the various books of the Bible? Only one project has published its work in part, but it is a stunning proof that the job can be done. The French common Bible project, which involves practically all leading Catholic and Protestant biblical scholars who speak French, produced agreement not only on the translation and rates but also on a great amount of interpretation. This agreement is all the more noteworthy in view of the fact that the first book translated in this project was Paul's Epistle to the Romans, the interpretation of which contributed much to the split of the churches in the Reformation.

The French common Bible project now has five more books of the Bible ready for publication. Confronted by translations provided with over-plentiful notes, the Bible Societies were afraid people would shun rather than read the new publications. The UBS therefore requested and secured an arrangement whereby moderately annotated editions will bear the Bible Societies imprint and the fuller commentary will be given

in other editions. As many as two dozen common Bible projects in other languages may have one or more books of the Bible ready for publication before the end of 1968, with notes less extensive than those of the French project.

It is no secret that some of the fundamentalist groups look at all this collaboration and agreement with some apprehension. They fear there may be a Roman plot afoot to tamper with the Scriptures, to infiltrate Roman Catholic doctrine into text or notes, and gradually to take over the Bible Societies, perhaps thereby eventually even absorbing the Protestant churches that up to now have been the controlling forces in the Bible Societies.

This, however, overlooks the fact that the guiding principles co-published by the Vatican and the UBS apply only to editions of the Bible where cooperation of Catholics and Protestants is desired and agreed upon.

The blueprint in no way affects existing editions of the Scriptures, such as the King James Version which some fundamentalist groups regard as the only acceptable English translation. The Bible Societies can, and no doubt will, continue to provide Bibles with neither deuterocanonical texts nor notes for all groups that request them, just as Catholic publishing houses can, and no doubt will, continue to produce editions of the Bible with the books in the Tridentine order and with notes that give copious catechetical or homiletical material.

It is likely, of course, that a good common Bible translation in any given language will prove to be immensely popular and will achieve wider circulation than any previous edition of the Scriptures. All who are dedicated to the word of God should rejoice that the message will thus reach more people than ever before. If the common Bible translation also brings the Churches closer together and makes the Christian message more credible to the non-Christian world, we must surely conclude that it is the work of the Holy Spirit in our time.