

Jesuit to examine encyclical's impact on study

By Lee Strong
Senior staff writer

While World War II was still raging on, Pope Pius XII quietly issued a document that would eventually change the face of Catholic biblical scholarship.

On Sept. 30, 1943, the pope released his encyclical *Divino afflante Spiritu* ("On the Promotion of Biblical Studies"). For the first time ever the document allowed Catholic scholars to use modern techniques — the "historical critical method" — and newly discovered biblical texts when studying and interpreting Scriptures.

That decision continues to affect Catholics today, noted Father Joseph A. Fitzmyer, SJ, professor emeritus of biblical studies at The Catholic University of America in Washington D.C., and a member of the Pontifical Biblical Commission.

"You have to remember that up until that time that (Catholics) were 'abiblical,' they were without the Bible. Often times, Catholics thought of the Bible as a Protestant book," Father Fitzmyer told the *Catholic Courier* during a telephone interview from his office at Georgetown University in Washington.

"Since then, there's been a tremendous difference in the understanding of Catholics of the Bible," Father Fitzmyer said. That difference has affected not only the way the Bible is read and studied, but even its literal form today.

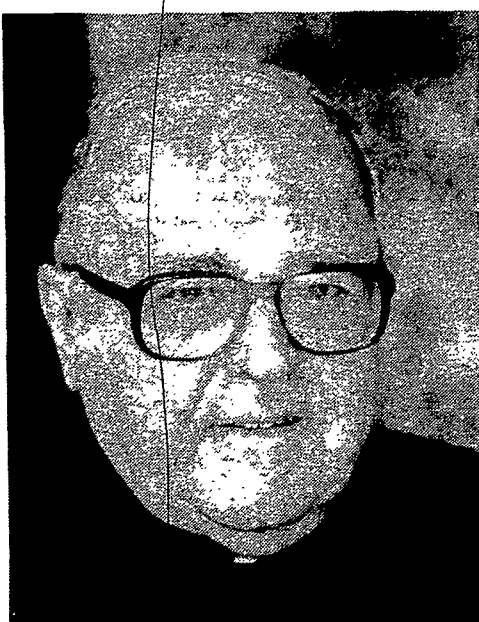
Father Fitzmyer will discuss this encyclical's continuing impact during a 7:30 p.m. lecture on Wednesday, Sept. 29, at Nazareth College of Rochester, 4245 East Ave., Pittsford. Sponsored by the college's Religious Studies Department, the event is intended to mark the 50th anniversary of the encyclical's publication.

Father Fitzmyer touched on some of the topics he will discuss in the lecture during the telephone interview last week.

The priest-scholar explained that, prior to Pope Pius' encyclical, Catholics took the Bible literally. They also relied on translations from Greek and Latin versions of the Bible, he added.

But Pope Pius said in his encyclical that the Bible need not be interpreted literally, the Jesuit scholar explained. The pontiff also wrote that — whenever possible — Catholic scholars must study the Bible's books in their original languages — Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic. And the pope insisted that henceforth translations be made from those languages when appropriate texts were available.

In making these new translations,



Father Joseph A. Fitzmyer

scholars were finally able to take advantage of more recently discovered texts of biblical books, Father Fitzmyer noted. These texts were often written in the original languages. They also sometimes gave variations in wording — helping to correct errors in previous translations — and

some even included more complete versions of stories.

Father Fitzmyer pointed to the *Book of Tobit* as one example of a work that was subsequently revised in light of these texts. Prior to the New American Bible — published in 1970 — Catholic Bibles in the United States contained a shortened version of this book based on a Greek text. Now, they feature a more complete text based on an earlier, more extensive Aramaic text.

"Consequently, we got a fuller story, with more details," Father Fitzmyer said.

In both versions, for example, Tobit (or Tobias as he was called in the earlier version) was forced to flee home to escape a king bent on killing Israelis. When the king was assassinated, Tobit was able to return home.

In the older version, the king's assassination and Tobit's return are described flatly in two verses of some 26 words (Tobit 1, 24-25). These verses contain few details other than a few scant facts.

In the new translation, however, these same two verses (Tobit 1, 21-22) are four times as long. They contain a variety of details that help to explain the circumstances surrounding the king's assassination and Tobit's return, and detail the help Tobit received from a relative in doing so — a situation never mentioned in the earlier version.

Pope Pius also declared in his encyclical that the "Bible had to be interpreted with concern for the literary sense, and by taking into account its literary form," Father Fitzmyer explained.

Thus each of the Bible's books could be considered individually with an awareness that some were intended as allegories, poetry and prophecy, and not necessarily as historical accounts, Father Fitzmyer acknowledged. Scholars could then use their knowledge of these literary techniques employed at the time the books were written — as well as knowledge of historical events — to help interpret what the authors intended.

As a result of Pope Pius' encyclical, Catholic biblical scholarship is now on par with Protestant biblical scholarship, the priest-scholar observed. He pointed out that Pope Pius' encyclical was itself intended to mark the 50th anniversary of an earlier encyclical touching on the subject of Scripture scholarship.

On Nov. 19, 1893, Pope Leo XIII issued *Providentissimus Deo* ("On the Study of Holy Scripture"), the first papal encyclical devoted to the Bible.

In light of that document's 100th anniversary, the Pontifical Biblical Commission will release a new document on the Bible, titled "The Interpretations of the Bible in the Catholic Church," on Nov. 19, 1993. Father Fitzmyer will share some aspects of that document during his Nazareth College address.

He acknowledged that this new approach to the Bible made possible by Pope Pius' encyclical is particularly important today in light of fundamentalism's rise.

While fundamentalists interpret the Bible literally, Catholic biblical scholarship now offers a challenge to that approach, Father Fitzmyer said.

"Anyone who uses the historical critical method can't possibly be a fundamentalist," he concluded.

Bible scholar to lecture at Nazareth College

ROCHESTER — Father Joseph A. Fitzmyer, SJ, professor emeritus of biblical studies at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., will deliver a free lecture at 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, Sept. 29.

His lecture will focus on the 50th anniversary of Pope Pius XII's landmark encyclical on Bible study, titled *Divino afflante Spiritu* ("On the Promotion of Biblical Studies").

An internationally renowned Bible scholar, Father Fitzmyer will discuss the encyclical's impact on Catholic Bible scholarship. He will also reveal details about a document on Bible study which the Pontifical Biblical Institute — of which he is a member — is scheduled to release Nov. 19 as part of the worldwide anniversary celebration.

Sponsored by the college's Religious Studies Department, the lecture will take place in the Otto Shultz Community Center at Nazareth College, 4245 East Ave. Call 716/586-2525 for information.

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