

THE PRESENTATION OF THE "CATHOLIC COMMENTARY" TO THE HOLY FATHER

On Wednesday 26 August 1953 I arrived at Castelgandolfo, the Holy Father's summer residence in the Alban Hills, near Rome, accompanied by Fr Michael Collins, o.s.b., the Sub-prior of Newark Abbey, New Jersey, U.S.A., and two friends, Mr and Mrs Wilson. My ticket specified that I alone was to have a private audience, and when I presented it at the foot of the grand staircase to a member of the Papal Swiss Guard my companions were detained there. As soon as I got to the top I spoke to an officer of the Swiss Guard in a mixture of English, French and Italian, begging him to do his best to obtain permission for my three companions to rejoin me. I also asked the help of a gentleman in a light blue suit whom I subsequently discovered to be Signor Felici, the official Papal photographer. Both promised to do their best, but I was not allowed to go down to tell my friends of the efforts being made on their behalf. I was then led through a series of beautiful rooms to one containing a throne which proved to be the room nearest to the Pope's private apartments. There I stood or sat hugging the standard copy of *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture* (which I had earlier that morning picked up in Marietta's bookshop in the Piazza della Minerva) in its striking blue and white paper jacket, and rehearsed what I would say to the Holy Father. Half an hour passed and I began to feel warm, as the windows were shuttered to keep out the glare of the hot sun. From time to time a monsignor or gentleman-in-waiting would look in, nod and go away. Suddenly I heard the sound of footsteps and I saw the joyful faces of my three companions, who now joined me. Apparently my representations had worked, or it may have been that Mr Etherington-Smith, whom my friends had just telephoned from outside, secured their admission. Anyway, there we were, all four; three of us had driven from England by car and the fourth had come from the United States. It was evident that we were going to have an audience all to ourselves, and our anticipation was raised to the highest pitch. Little was said, and for the most part we remained seated in silence. One of my friends had brought a bag of small pious objects for blessing, and this was placed on the floor beside a chair.

And then suddenly without warning the door beside me opened, and with two monsignori accompanying him the Holy Father appeared. We all four immediately knelt down and kissed his ring in turn. He then signed to us to rise. Holding the *Commentary* open at the title-

page, and the letter of gift signed by the four members of the Editorial Committee on the page opposite, I said to him slowly and distinctly in English: "Most Holy Father, will you please read this letter and accept this book on behalf of our Committee". The Pope glanced at the letter but did not, I think, actually read it. He looked at the title-page and then at the printed letter-heading, which had the names of the editorial committee printed on it. He asked me if I was the chief editor. I said, "Yes". I pointed out the names of the members of the Committee. He inquired if I was English, and I said, "Yes, from England".

The Holy Father then turned over a few pages and asked what kind of commentary it was. I said that it contained a commentary on the whole Bible, both Old and New Testaments. He then said, "I congratulate you and thank you".

"Most Holy Father", I said, "we had prepared a special copy for you, which was sent by aeroplane from London, but which has failed to arrive: so that all I can offer you now is this ordinary copy. But I will have the proper one sent to you as soon as it comes". He said, "This is beautiful, perfect, I congratulate you and I thank you".

He then asked who it was written for, and I explained to him that it was for everyone, for priests, school teachers and scholars too, and that it was meant to be a summary of biblical knowledge down to 1950—"1950?", he said with a smile. "Why not 1952 or 1953?" I replied, "No, Holy Father, that was not possible, because as it contains about 2,000,000 words, the proof-reading and printing took a very long time, about two years, to complete". He then repeated with emphasis, "I congratulate you and I thank you, and I give my very special blessing to you and to all who have worked at it". I then asked, "And to the publishers also?" and he replied, "Yes, and to them also". I then said, "Most Holy Father, may I also ask your special blessing for my own community, for the Prior and for all, and also for the School of which I am the Head Master, the Rector?" He replied, "Certainly, I give a very special blessing with great affection for the Community, for the Prior and for all".

The Pope accepted the book as humbly as if I was conferring a favour on him instead of vice versa. He was so genuinely delighted to receive it and so grateful for it. Nor was he the least perturbed at receiving an ordinary copy instead of the specially bound one and was delighted with it.

BERNARD ORCHARD

*St Benedict's School
Ealing, London W 5*