

# Vincent Zapletal and the Question of the Modernization Strategies in the Catholic Church at the Beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century



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modernisation — modernist crisis — secularisation — catholic church

## INTRODUCTION

The concepts of the modernization of society or the state are large themes of social history, which have undergone an enthusiastic conjuncture as well as subsequent critique and revision of the created models.<sup>1</sup> With an awareness of the limits of these concepts, they can provide a useful interpretational framework for an explication of the historical processes. Within social history, the process of modernization represents a great challenge also for the European Churches, not only as a process influencing the form of the external framework of their activities, something with which they had to come to terms, which reshaped the milieu of their existence, but also fundamentally touches their internal life and development, because it forced them to endeavour for their own modernization and adaptation. The most important problems of the development of religious society are the moments of development, changes, i.e. the questions of continuity and discontinuity.<sup>2</sup> For the emphasis of their credibility and authority, the relevant religious tradition usually stresses its stability and inalterability given by the declared divine origin of its teaching and its perfection, authenticity and completeness. At the same time, the transformations of the forms of religious practices, institutions and formulations of doctrine are inevitable, and their success or failure depends on the viability of a given tradition.

The Catholic Church has experienced several paradigm shifts, mainly successful, because it was therefore able to develop and acquire the religious, cultural and symbolic dominance typical of the late ancient and medieval periods. However, the situation changed in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when by the influence of a number of effects of confessional intolerance and the closed nature of the ecclesiastical elite it lost its innovative ability and power to create a unified cultural and civilizational framework

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1 See Lucie Storchová et al., *Koncepty a dějiny. Proměny pojmů v současné historické vědě*, Prague 2014, pp. 258–268.

2 See David G. Shultenover, *Vatican II. Did Anything Happen?*, New York — London — New Delphi — Sydney 2007, or Massimo Faggioli, *Vatican II. The Battle for Meaning*, New York — Mahwah — New Jersey 2012.



and lead the society in terms of culture and civilization, saturate its needs with sense and stimulate its development.<sup>3</sup> Western civilization has gradually created an alternative value framework and substitute religions and the process of the secularization of Western society came out fully already during the French Revolution, the first attempt for a state-led dechristianization of the entirety of a single European country. The Catholic Church realized its changed position, but the traumatic shock of the revolution and the subsequent changes did not allow it to adopt a differentiated position to the ideas of modernity. We speak of the time of Popes Pius's era of the lasting uncompromising struggle against the development of Western society, massively undergoing secularization etc. After the French Revolution, Christianity as a religion and value system was losing its position, which strengthened the trend of its marginalization, since it lacked the abilities, talents and energy of those who left the original tradition.<sup>4</sup>

Inside the Church itself, many endeavours for a change of the approach appeared, among the most significant was the birth of Liberal Catholicism at the end of the 1820s, the efforts for ecclesiastical reform around the revolutionary year of 1848 in a number of countries or the attempts for new theological schools, but precisely so is their suppression symptomatic and the repeated victory of the strategy of uncompromising confrontation with modernity, the peak of which is the declaration of the dogmas on the universal jurisdiction primacy of the pope and papal infallibility at the First Vatican Council of 1870. The phenomenon of the so-called modernist crisis of the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is one of these unsuccessful attempts to change the paradigm.<sup>5</sup> In traditional Catholic historiography, it is presented in the language of the victors as an attempt by the priests, who had lost the real faith, to infiltrate the heretical liberal and rationalistic ideas inside ecclesiastical society and its teachings, which was stopped by the hard disciplinary and doctrinal measures of the uncompromising and vigilant Pope Pius X and his co-workers. Since the 1960s, knowledge of the real history of modernism has shifted so much that today rather an antimodern crisis is spoken of, which deadened intellectual life in the Church for long decades and postponed the essential modernization measures, which could only be implemented under the pontificate of Pope Pius XII (1939–1958) and mainly by the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965).

The phenomenon of the modernist and antimodernist crises does not concern only the Catholic Church, many processes and transformations in a series of moments an-

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3 Cf. Tomáš Petráček, *Church, Society and Change. Christianity Impaired by Conflicting Elites*, Lublin 2014, pp. 7–22, 91–113.

4 René Rémond, *Religion et société en Europe*, Paris 2009; Hugh McLeod, *Secularisation in Western Europe 1848–1914*, New York 2000.

5 On the characteristics of the modernist and antimodernist crises see Otto Weiss, *Der katholische Modernismus. Begriff — Selbstverständnis — Ausprägung — Weiterwirken*. In: Hubert Wolf (Hrsg.), *Antimodernismus und Modernismus in der katholischen Kirche: Beiträge zum theologischen Vorfeld des II. Vatikanums*, Paderborn 1998, pp. 108–117. Out of the most recent synthetic works: Maurilio Guasco, *Le modernisme. Les faits, les idées, les hommes*, Paris 1995 and Claus Arnold, *Kleine Geschichte des Modernismus*, Freiburg — Basel — Wien 2007.

ticipates or follows the development of other segments of European society. From the point of view of social history, this crisis provides remarkable material where the strategies and mechanisms can be studied of how the community seeks to promote or prevent change, what the motives of actors were and the impacts of the chosen solution. In the following study, using the example of a Czech modernizing priest, we will show what game fields the men thinking in this way had at that time, which strategies they chose, and in what their potential success or failure lay, what impacts the power-driven stopping of the modernization efforts and the subsequent period of stagnation had.



## THE STORY OF VINCENT ZAPLETAL, BIBLICAL STUDIES AND THE (ANTI-)MODERNIST CRISIS IN THE CHURCH

In the works dealing with Catholic modernism, we find the claim that Czech modernism does not express interest in the theological battles of the turn of the century and has the reform Catholic character of the German type (*Reformkatholizismus*).<sup>6</sup> However, at the very least in the area of biblical science, the Czech Catholic progressive exegesis was entirely on the level of contemporary European science, or even in its profiling personalities distinctly intervened in the dramatic history of this discipline in the period of the antimodernist crisis. A whole range of figures followed their Western European colleagues even in the difficult fate, which led them from the possibility to devote themselves to scientific modern exegesis. Their thought, scientific methods and approaches, results and motivation, are entirely comparable with people like the Dominican M.-J. Lagrange in France or the Jesuit Franz von Hummelauer in Germany.<sup>7</sup> At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Czech Catholic Church has a distinctive generation of creative personalities; it definitely was not an intellectually and organizationally dead milieu, but the antimodernist measures of the Roman curia disrupted their ambition not only in the biblical question.<sup>8</sup>

The last decade of the pontificate of Leo XIII (1878–1903)<sup>9</sup> is an extraordinarily favourable time of Catholic exegesis after a long period of stagnation. Many Catholics,

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- 6 On the Czech modernist personalities see Miroslav Kaňák, *Z dějin reformního úsilí českého duchovenstva*, Praha 1951; Zdeněk Kučera — Jan Lašek (eds.), *Modernismus, historie nebo výzva? Studie ke genezi českého katolického modernismu*, Praha 2002; Jaroslav Hrdlička, *Život a dílo Prof. Františka Kováře. Příběh patriarchy a učence*, Brno 2007; Pavel Marek, *Apologetové nebo kacíři? Studie a materiály k dějinám české Katolické moderny*, Olomouc 1999; Pavel Marek, *Český katolicismus 1890–1914, Kapitoly z dějin českého katolického tábora na přelomu 19. a 20. století*, Olomouc 2003.
- 7 On the other personalities in the context, see Tomáš Petráček, *Bible a moderní kritika. Česká a světová exegeze ve víru anti-modernistické krize*, Praha 2011.
- 8 About specific aspects of the history of Czech catholic church, still dominating national church at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, see Tomáš Petráček, *In the Maelstrom of Secularisation, Collaboration and Persecution. Roman Catholicism in Modern Czech Society and the State*, Lublin 2014, pp. 32–45.
- 9 See Owen Chadwick, *A History of the Popes 1830–1914*, Oxford — New York 1998, pp. 273–330.



including the pope, were then aware of the lag behind Protestant and rationalistic studies Bible at state universities mainly in Germany and France. Although the majority of the clergy, hierarchy and faithful continued in the policy of the absolute rejection of modern sciences, discoveries and methods to the extent that they were incompatible with the traditional interpretation of the Bible, the very possibility to apply the historical-critical method to the study of the Bible was questioned; a number of Catholic Bible scholars decided to master the modern methods, to verify the new theories impartially and borrow from the new directions everything that could aid in a better interpretation of the Bible and naturally to the defence of its authority.<sup>10</sup>

They were the thorniest issues, because the Church declares the books of the Old and New Testament as the inspired text, revealed by God, which contains the information necessary for the salvation of the faithful. All deviations from the orthodox teaching of the Church, but also any theological statements can be deduced from some verse of the biblical text. A text, which was created over many centuries in a culturally absolutely different context, and the original wording of which has been preserved in Hebrew, Aramaic and Ancient Greek, languages that no one has spoken for millennia. In the Catholic Church, an ancient Latin translation modified in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, called the Vulgate, had mainly been used since the Council of Trent.<sup>11</sup> The advancement of modern linguistic techniques and instruments of historical criticism in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the study of the original wording and the discovery of new codices and papyruses with the biblical text dramatically opened the question of the correct, adequate interpretation of the Bible.<sup>12</sup>

The group of progressive Catholic bible scholars included also Vincent Zapletal (1867–1938).<sup>13</sup> A Dominican from age sixteen, this native of Vilémov near Litovel underwent his order formation in Olomouc and predominantly in Vienna. In the autumn of 1891, he left for study at the just founded *Ecole biblique* in Jerusalem, the director of which Lagrange he already knew from Vienna, where they both had studied precisely the foundations of the modern methods of textual and historical criticism at the Faculty of Arts. Already in the autumn of 1893, Zapletal at age 26 was appointed professor of the interpretation of the Old Testament at the recently established Dominican Faculty of Theology at the University of Fribourg, Switzerland.<sup>14</sup> He gained

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Tomáš Petráček, *Bible a moderní kritika*, pp. 36–81.

<sup>11</sup> See Sascha Müller, Richard Simon (1638–1712). Exeget, Theologe, Philosoph und Historiker. Eine Biographie, Würzburg 2005, pp. 33–98.

<sup>12</sup> Pierre Gilbert, *L'invention critique de la Bible. XV<sup>e</sup>–XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris 2010, pp. 54–63.

<sup>13</sup> On his life and work, see Tomáš Petráček, *Výklad Bible v době (anti-)modernistické krize. Život a dílo Vincenta Zapletala OP*, Praha 2006 or shorter French version Tomáš Petráček, *Le Père Vincent Zapletal O.P. (1867–1938), Portrait d'un exégète catholique*. *Studia fribourgensia Series historica* 6, Fribourg 2007.

<sup>14</sup> About the Dominicans at Fribourg University also compare Dominique Barthélemy, *Idéologie et Fondation, Etudes et Documents sur l'histoire de l'Université de Fribourg/Suisse*, Fribourg 1991, pp. 82–166. Otto Weiss, *Modernisms und AntiModernisms im Dominikanerorden. Zugleich ein Beitrag zum "Sodalitium Pianum". Quellen und Studien zur neueren Theologiegeschichte* 2, Regensburg 1998; Urs Altermatt, *Vorgeschichte und Gründung*, in:



recognition with his first works, predominantly a scientific monograph on the relationship of the Old Testament and Totemism, where he refutes one of the numerous rationalistic period theories, which were to compromise the authority of the Bible.<sup>15</sup> He also achieved recognition by the most famous personality of Protestant and liberal exegesis.<sup>16</sup>

Zapletal embarked on his master work, which is a commentary on the first chapters of the Book of Genesis.<sup>17</sup> In the German-written monograph, he provides an interpretation, which can be labelled as a breakthrough in the Catholic understanding of these texts. Instead of artificial attempts for a forced harmonization of the letter of the biblical text and period scientific discoveries of palaeontology and geology, Zapletal turned his attention to the religious content and emphasizes that the Bible is not a textbook of the natural sciences, but in that it is conforming to period ideas. According to Zapletal, the core of the narration comes from Moses's time, but its literary treatment is significantly later, he works with the theory of several sources of the final text. His narrative denies any trace of historicity or natural-science value and in no way hides its inspiration with the pagan cosmogonies of the surrounding nations.<sup>18</sup>

Progressive Catholic biblical scholars had to cope with administrative obstacles such as the prohibition on owning and reading the banned books written by Protestant authors or to participate in scientific conferences, organized by non-Catholics, despite that their engagement and results in 1890–1903 give the impression that the lead of rationalist and Protestant exegesis could be erased within one generation, especially when the human potential hidden in the Catholic clergy was only beginning to engage in exegesis. In the Czech milieu, seven different Catholic priests reviewed Zapletal's work positively in the *Journal of the Catholic Clergy* [Časopis katolického duchovenstva].

After the death of Jesuit cardinal Mazzella,<sup>19</sup> the main brake on modern exegesis on the official level, in March 1900, Pope Leo XIII could support the dynamic renewal of Catholic biblical scholars, for instance, by the foundation of the Pontifical Biblical Commission in 1902. Whereas Leo XIII saw the role of the commission mainly in the encouragement and coordination of Catholic biblical scholars, under the pontificate of his successor Pius X (1903–1914) the commission became an instrument of censorship and repression. The official line of Catholic exegesis was controlled by the traditionalists, the teaching of exegesis in Roman seminaries and order academies

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Histoire de l'Université de Fribourg/Suisse — Geschichte der Universität Freiburg/Schweiz, Bd. 1, Fribourg 1992, pp. 32–74.

- 15 Vincent Zapletal, *Totemismus und die Religion Israels. Ein Beitrag zur Religionswissenschaft und zur Erklärung des Alten Testaments*, Freiburg 1901.
- 16 See Petráček, *Výklad Bible*, pp. 46–53.
- 17 Vincent Zapletal, *Der Schöpfungsbericht der Genesis (1,1–2,3) mit Berücksichtigung der neuesten Entdeckungen und Forschungen*, Freiburg 1902.
- 18 See Tomáš Petráček, *Výklad Bible*, pp. 56–66.
- 19 On the dominant to exclusive influence of the Jesuit Roman Theological School on the performance of the papal magisterium, see Francesco Berreta, *De l'inerrance absolue à la vérité salvifique de l'écriture*, in: *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie* 46, 1999, pp. 500–501.



was entrusted to conservative exegetes, the protagonists of modern biblical science found themselves on the margins.

The culmination of the battle against modernism was 1907, when the Congregation of the Holy Office, entrusted with oversight of the orthodoxy of the members of the Catholic Church, issued the decree *Lamentabili sane exitu*, which condemned the errors of the modern period expressed in sixty-five theses in questions of theology and the interpretation of the Bible.<sup>20</sup> Three months later, the pope issued the encyclical letter *Pascendi*, which introduced the new term *modernism* into official church documents. Both declarations of ecclesiastical authority were followed in 1908–1913 by a wide range of further disciplinary measures, which affected books and journals accused of modernism and their authors to an extent from Christian social and trade movements, through Catholic prodemocratic and republican political parties and movements all the way to philosophers, exegetes, theologians and even men of letters.<sup>21</sup> The encyclical letter *Pascendi* requires thorough personal purification at theological faculties and seminaries, the appointment of censors for all Catholic publications, and the establishment of a vigilance committee in each diocese.

In the area of biblical sciences, the battle was fought predominantly through the decrees of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, which in 1905 through 1910 issued a total of five resolutions concerning the interpretation of the Old Testament, in which, for example, it denied that historical biblical books might contain narratives that do not partly or totally belong in real, objective history in the true sense of the word, but in the form of historical narrative they express or explain truths that are not connected with the historical reality of the rendering. In another decree, the commission denied that the arguments brought by historical criticism are enough to question the Pentateuch's authorship by Moses. The resolution then of the commission proved to be unsustainable and were unsustainable already at the time of their declaration and had the result of the triumph of "reactionary conservatism", which lay like a shadow over all of the Catholic biblical studies of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>22</sup> No one wanted to get into the difficult questions of biblical exegesis in lectures and publications; creative activity was limited to linguistic and other auxiliary fields such as archaeology or Oriental Studies.

The official doctrinal-disciplinary measures of the ecclesiastical authorities comprised only one part of the problems, which prevented the work of progressive Catholic theologians and exegetes. Not only various individuals but entire well-organized groups self-declared themselves to be appointed to oversee their performance. The most powerful of them was the so-called La Sapinière (Sodalitium Pianum). Its activities lie in the accumulation of compromising data, in the organization of a print

20 On the creation of the document see Claus Arnold, *Lamentabili sane exitu* (1907). Das Römische Lehramt und die Exegese Alfred Loisy, in: *Zeitschrift für Neuere Theologieggeschichte* 11, 2004, pp. 24–51.

21 See Claus Arnold, *Modernism als Kampfbegriff? Das "Jubiläum" der antimodernism-Enzyklika von Papst Pius X.* In: *Herder Korrespondenz* 61, 2007, pp. 629–633.

22 Heinrich Fries, *Das kirchliche Lehramt und die exegetische Arbeit.* In: Heinrich Kahlefeld (Hrsg.), *Schriftauslegung dient dem Glauben*, Frankfurt a. M. 1979, p. 73.



campaign against the supposed modernists, and in relevant denunciations, which were usually directed directly to Rome and circumvented the authority of the bishops and order representatives. In 1909, the Italian priest Umberto Benigni, who was in a high position in the Roman Curia, built his developed network on a stronger institutional base and founded a secret organization run from Rome, which, however, had members from England to Russia. Although the organization was very close to the Consistorial Congregation and the most influential curial cardinals (de Lai, Merry del Val) and pope Pius X himself knew of its activities, Benigni did not manage that La Sapinière acquire official canonical status or even entirely conceal the existence of the network.<sup>23</sup> Progressive Catholic biblical scholars, historians and theologians were among the fundamental aims of the members of La Sapinière, especially those working at the Faculty of Theology in Fribourg.<sup>24</sup>

Zapletal enjoyed protection on the part of the Master General of the Dominican Order Hyacinth Cormier. He moreover stood out for his ability to formulate his conclusions dextrously so that he did not come into apparent contradiction with the decrees of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, he succeeded in withstanding the attacks of the integrists. In spite of repeated conflicts with censorship and gradual narrowing of the space for scientific activity, he managed to prepare and publish an excellent commentary on the biblical book of Ecclesiastes (1905) and on the Song of Solomon (1907).<sup>25</sup> Then, his publication activity gradually ceases; he orients himself on the relatively innocuous study of forms of Hebrew poetry, but still has the courage to publish his older works, and his rectorial address from 1910 can be described as a manifesto of Catholic progressive biblical scholars.<sup>26</sup> Cormier entrusted him with the demanding post of the superior of the Dominican convent Albertinum in Fribourg for twelve years. Later, he threw the remnants of his powers into writing extensive biblical novels. He died two months earlier than his confrere Lagrange, in January 1938 in Vienna.

## THE AIMS AND STRATEGIES OF THE ACTORS: THE AIMS AND STRATEGIES OF THE ANTIMODERNISTS

Why did the battle against modernists absorb the Catholic Church in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century? Did the long confrontational definition against the enemies

23 See Emil Poulat, *Intégrisme et catholicisme intégral. Un réseau secret international antimoderniste: La „Sapinière“*, Paris 1969, pp.188–206. For more detail on the activity of the network against Zapletal see Tomáš Petráček, *Výklad Bible*, pp. 112–114, 146–150, 198–202ff.

24 Otto Weiss, *Modernismus und Antimodernismus*, pp. 42–45, 220–276.

25 Vincent Zapletal, *Das Buch Kohelet. Kritisch und metrisch untersucht, übersetzt und erklärt*, Freiburg 1904. *Ibid.*, *Das Buch Hohelied, kritisch und metrisch untersucht*, Freiburg 1907. On the circumstances surrounding the edition and the reception: Tomáš Petráček, *Výklad Bible*, pp. 82–85, 102–108.

26 Vincent Zapletal, *Über einigen Aufgaben der katholischen alttestamentlichen Exegeze. Rektoratsrede*, Freiburg 1910.



besieging the fortress have to flip sooner or later into seeking an internal enemy? It is not a dispute of intelligent open-minded researchers with the conservative Roman Curia, the hierarchy and duller colleagues from the ranks of the biblical scholars or theologians. There were very intelligent people among the integristic cardinals and people like Benigni knew how to work with scientific thoroughness and systematicity. The integristic attitude cannot be explained by a lack of intelligence. Its causes lie in the clearly defined conception of the Church and in the vision of the world as the places of the intrigues of the forces of Judeo-Masonic inspiration, the Church of the enemies. With the majority of them, we see anxiety from the world in the look at the church, which is losing influence on the public, gradually losing internally alienated workers, the intelligentsia and the world of trade and politics and saw correction in the renewal of the idealized medieval harmony between the church, state and society. In the documents fear can be felt; fear for identity, for a possible disintegration of society, fear of the domino effect and immense impacts, if it allows change or doubt in important questions like the infallibility of the Bible is. In its essence, it was a struggle for the character of the Church, for its future development and direction.<sup>27</sup>

They have facilitated their struggle with a very broad, vague definition of modernism, which is labelled as a pack of all heresies, where anything could be included, anyone who did not share the ultramontanistic, traditionalistic, anti-reformation and antimodern conception of the role of the Church and this narrow, negative, self-defined against others Catholicism. The integrists in their treatises and even in the church documents, such as the decrees of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, not only ignore, but calmly even deny scientific evidence (although it is revisable and developing knowledge) and imposed their positions with power and manipulation on the entire Church. They forced Catholic professors of exegesis and everyone at all who deals with the interpretation of the Bible to defend the opinions of the Pontifical Biblical Commission publicly.<sup>28</sup> This means forcing the denial of their scientific erudition and rapping the consciousness of scientists, who forced under threat to think and say something with which they cannot according to their scientific knowledge agree. In some moments, the position is heard so explicitly that the Catholic priest and scientist must know when it is necessary to settle and accept the official position that it recalls the later slogan “It is better to be wrong with the Party than to be right against it”.<sup>29</sup>

The majority of the bishops, priests and believers look at the attempts for modern exegesis as at unfortunate concessions to Protestant biblical studies or as a compromise, which betrays the fundamental principles and traditions of the Catholic

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<sup>27</sup> Josef Blank, *Das politische Element in der historisch-kritischen Methode*. In: Paul Neuenzeit (Hrsg.): *Die Funktion der Theologie in Kirche und Gesellschaft*, München 1969, pp. 40–42.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Raymond E. Brown, *Rome and the Freedom of Catholic Biblical Studies*. In: Raymond T. Stamm — Jacob M. Myers, — Otto Reimherr, *Search the Scriptures. New Testament Studies in honour of Raymond T. Stamm*, Gettysburg Theological Studies 3, Leiden 1969, p. 132.

<sup>29</sup> See Tomáš Petráček, *Bible a moderní kritika*, pp. 180–183.



Church. The position of Catholics even in formally and mainly Catholic countries like Austro-Hungary or Italy was made uncertain and vulnerable, so that the mentality of the besieged fortress connected with the strict rejection of everything foreign and different was a psychologically natural reaction. The animosity and envy on the part of the conservative exegetes also played its role, who could not digest the successes and respect that Zapletal or Lagrange enjoyed with the Protestant and agnostic biblical scholars.

In the battle against the supposed modernists, the integrists without hesitation used all the methods: anonymous denunciation, false accusation, espionage, opening of letters, organization of seditious campaigns in the purposely founded press. The popular tactic are accusations of the modernists for the practices, which are in fact those of the integrists. Today, we already know for sure that no modernistic movement plot existed; it is not possible to speak of any organization or centre.<sup>30</sup> On the contrary, the integrists have a well-organized structure, cover names, conspiracy meetings, plan events and set aims, have influential defenders at the highest places of the Roman Curia and financial means. What is problematic is also the dehumanization of the opponents, supposed modernists, who are not only labelled as men of a mistaken and deviant modernist opinions, but also in the relevant documents they are also betrayed by the infidelity and moral perversion of those who merely pretend to be of Christian faith in order to disrupt and destroy the Church. The diction of ecclesiastical documents of that era are reminiscent of the language of late medieval and early modern malevolent responses to witches, heretics and Protestants.

### **THE AIMS AND STRATEGIES OF THE ACTORS: STRATEGIES AND METHODS OF THE MODERNIZING AUTHORS**

Since no real modernistic movement existed and there were great differences among the individual theologians, bible scholars and historians in the approaches,<sup>31</sup> we should rather speak of modernizing scholars. Their aims were with most entirely ecclesiastical endeavours in the sense of the effort to harmonize the teachings of the church with the discoveries of modern science. The modernizing authors also noticed with a sense of wrong the process of the secularization of society and mainly the massive departure of the educated elites from the church, but they saw the solution in something else — if the church had such an influence in European history, then it was thanks to the fact that the church actively shaped this history, entered into them and offered a solution for the problems of the times. When the church found itself on the margins of society, the solution is not a return to the once-proven solutions, approaches and mental structures. It is not possible to compel the entire society to return to religion by restoring some monarchic, authoritative regime, which will impose a Christian moral and religious life by force. On the contrary, it is necessary to

<sup>30</sup> Alec R. Vidler, *A Variety of Catholic Modernists*, Cambridge 1970.

<sup>31</sup> See Emil Poulat, *Histoire, dogme et critique dans la crise moderniste*, Paris 1996, p. 9; Alec Vidler, *A Variety of Catholic Modernists*, Cambridge 1970, p. 15.



adapt to the modern period and master all in it well, like Thomas Aquinas utilized the newly discovered Aristotelian philosophy in the 13<sup>th</sup> century in the services of scholastic philosophy and theology.<sup>32</sup>

Considering the strict oversight of the theological production and overall conservatism of the Church then, they had to present their innovative approaches and conclusions thoroughly as a return to the old tradition, most often the Church Fathers of Christian antiquity, as rediscovery of the ancient entirely orthodox positions. Whatever was new could easily be branded and rejected as accepting rationalistic and Protestant ideas. The struggle to shape the living tradition in the Catholic Church often has the form of a competition for the interpretation of the tradition. In order to assert its positions, it is necessary to find support in the teachings of the ancient Church authorities.<sup>33</sup>

Vincent Zapletal was in a certain regard the most successful modernizing scholar: he entirely escaped the punishments and bans, despite the original ban of pope Pius X he became the rector of the university in Fribourg in 1910, he managed to get more texts with pioneering theses published than anyone else, his re-editions of earlier books even after 1907 and his rectorial address from 1910 translated into eight languages became a symbol of the resistance of Catholic progressive biblical science.<sup>34</sup> Why did precisely he manage to succeed in this way?

Zapletal perfectly used the possibilities of the given existing framework; he did not spare quotations and references from the works of the Church Fathers, creatively interpreted the existing ecclesiastical documents, because, what had been allowed by pope Leo XIII could simply not become bad under the pontificate of his successor. Furthermore, he added outstanding work with the censorship. All of the texts were subject to order censure. Zapletal utilized the fact that German was not his native tongue, proposed with initiative to the leadership who could be the censor for his new works, he then gave them his texts in an ongoing fashion with the request also for language correction of the text. He selected Dominicans from his community in Fribourg, those were then engaged from the beginning in the process of the formation of the texts and Zapletal could explain to them himself possible ambiguities. In this way, Zapletal got texts by, which would have had serious problems with other biblical scholars.

An important role was also played by order appurtenance. Generally, regular clergy resisted better in the antimodern crisis, in terms of excommunication and complete departures. Their leadership managed to bring them into line more effectively, which was painful but also protected them. The order possibly offered them an alternative fulfilment of their priestly life, which in the context of order discipline was more easily acceptable. Their leadership could then protect them more successfully thanks to the overall influence of the order and its contacts and involvement of the members of the order in important decisive places in the Roman Curia. Zapletal seemed to the general leadership of the Dominicans to be a devoted and reliable Dominican, and Hyacint Cormier resolutely stood up for him several times.

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32 Cf. Marie-Joseph Lagrange, *La Méthode historique*, Paris 1902, p. 3–4.

33 See Tomáš Petráček, *Bible a moderní kritika*, pp. 111–119, 146–164.

34 On the impact see Tomáš Petráček, *Výklad Bible*, pp. 135–140.



In the case of Zapletal, his personal characteristics included intransigence, mettle and resilience, conviction of the correctness of his approach and the importance of his mission within the Church. Thanks to his hard work and academic successes, he was in a strong position at the Faculty of Theology and the entire university. When the attacks did not quieten down, he prepared a concession strategy for the case that he would have to leave the theological faculty and take up in 1912 the post of a professor of Hebrew, Syriac, Coptic and Arabic at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities. Until his retirement in 1928, he held both professorial posts, other auxiliary teachers took part of the teaching load.

Since scientific research and publication are not possible, he turned to the writing of biblical novels already during the war: the first is *Jephthah's Daughter* with the subtitle "cultural historical narration from biblical times",<sup>35</sup> in the following years he prepared two novels on King David and again two on Moses, a work capped by a sixth novel on Joseph.<sup>36</sup> Zapletal took the skeleton of the biblical story, adds a dramatic element, dialogues, a description of the events, psychological portraits and primarily the cultural-historical, ethnographic and religionist contexts and interpretations as well as the geographical data. The result is a distinctly didactic and learned treatise, Zapletal does not even deny his profession and method, even here he hits upon censorship. Thanks to the simplicity, he celebrated significant successes with his novels, which turned him to writing books of several hundred pages, which received translations into Czech and French.

There were more strategies of concession and other activity some went entirely into pastoral activities and resigned on academic and scientific work, others left or were excommunicated from the Church. Some selected another field of scientific activity; we can mention the transition of Alois Musil to Oriental Studies, or they dealt with nonproblematic areas of biblical science like archaeology or linguistics, or they set into a translation of the Bible like Jan Hejčl. One other reaction was a conservative conversion, e.g. Vojtěch Šanda, who began to defend the entirely conservative conception of exegesis according to the demanded Roman model.<sup>37</sup>

## STRATEGIES MEDIATING STRUCTURES AND PERSONALITIES

The majority of the Catholic Faith did not belong to either of the clearly defined groups. Even within the Roman Curia and their congregations there was a group of people, who did not share the ambition and methods of the modernizing scholars but also rejected the repression against them. Analogically to the concept of Timothy Snyder, we can state that functioning official institutions helped mitigate the repression and sanctions, while the most oppressive were the power interventions that came directly from the influential members of the Curia and bypassed these institu-

35 *Jephta's Tochter*. Kulturgeschichtliche Erzählung aus biblischer Zeit, Paderborn 1920.

36 *David und Bethsabe*. Kulturgeschichtliche Erzählung aus biblischer Zeit, Paderborn 1923. The novel *David and Saul* has been translated into Czech, Praha 1926.

37 Tomáš Petráček, *Bible a moderní kritika*, pp. 182–229.



tions. A number of influential cardinals, archbishops, secretaries of Roman congregations, and order superiors were able to protect or mitigate repression against attacks from La Sapinière and other denunciation structures. The curial employees at the relevant Roman congregations and order representatives were bothered by how they were circumvented and in a number of cases were able to intervene on behalf of the accused authors. Thanks to a knowledge of the Roman Curial relations and people and networked for instance by the members of the Dominican Order, Master General Cormier could discover what was being prepared and influence things still in the creation of the final resolution and thus dampen the greatest repression to the members of his order such as Lagrange or precisely Zapletal.<sup>38</sup> Order discussion before the relevant congregation or commission also provided a chance at an appeal, in short at least some possibility of a defence.

Cormier is an extraordinarily interesting figure in this respect.<sup>39</sup> As an old, theologically conservative man of the Church, he certainly did not share the enthusiasm of his regular subordinates for the historical-critical method and other modern approaches to the Bible, nor did he probably understand them. But as a leader of the Order, he believed and trusted his confreres to know what they were doing, that their motivation was authentic and that their work for the Church was important. He disciplined them and narrowed their space of expression, but in order to protect them and he did not hesitate to use not only his prestige as the Master General of an influential order, but also his respected personal authority, always a perfectly loyal man to the papacy and Church, to protect them both from intrigues and the attacks of integrists. Although he was a Frenchman, he had a more cordial relation to Zapletal than to Lagrange. It manifested itself in an affair around the election of Zapletal as the rector of the university in Fribourg, when in a personal audience Cormier gave pope Pius X an ultimatum that if he did not allow Zapletal to be elected that he would resign from his post, because it meant his failure: either he had selected a bad man for the place of the professor of the Old Testament in Fribourg or he was not capable of protecting him from unfair treatment. The course of the audience was so stormy that Cormier passed out, but from fears of a possible scandal in the end pope Pius X yielded and Zapletal truly became the rector.<sup>40</sup>

Although also the instruction was observed and the students and colleagues denounced their professors, the main danger was research and publication activity. The leadership therefore often tried to maintain the possibility of institutional work at a university or priestly seminary, but they prevented them from attempting to publish their work, namely through direct or indirect prohibition. Cormier in Zapletal's case used the tactic that he gave him a new demanding post as the leader of the Dominican community in Fribourg, which he held in 1906–1918. Cormier purposefully appointed Zapletal as the vicar of the convent Albertinum for a long twelve years

38 Cf. Angelus Waltz, Andreas Kardinal Frühwirth (1845–1933). Ein Zeit- und Lebensbild, Wien 1950, pp. 329–332.

39 See Guy Bedouelle, Le P. Hyacinth-Marie Cormier. In: *Le Père Cormier, Être à Dieu. Textes présentés et annotés par Gilles Berceville o.p.*, Paris 1994, p. 7–56.

40 Overall and with careful documentation, Tomáš Petráček, *Výklad Bible*, pp. 125–140.

which was uncommon for Dominicans, a total of 4 three-year mandates to keep him away from scientific work and thus actually protect him during the critical years. No one else in the period 1890–1940 held this post for longer than one three-year mandate, moreover in the difficult personal situation of constant attacks on Zapletal, others of his confreres, the Faculty of Theology and the entire university.<sup>41</sup>

The change on the papal throne between 1903 and 1914 was radical and part of the Catholic exegetes had to leave biblical studies or even leave the Church. It is possible to label the period 1914–1943 as a phase of stagnation, when the society of the Catholic exegetes awaited a change of the approach of the Roman magisterium, which came in the form of the encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu*. The main instruments of the battles against progressive exegesis was the decrees of the Pontifical Biblical Commission. These are, however, subtly formulated, so that the ecclesiastical and canonically trained minds of exegetes can find small gaps and space to express themselves freely. Still, it was a thorny problem of how to change the situation after 1943, to open space officially while not admitting a mistake openly. In the new issuance of the official summaries of the ecclesiastical documents on the biblical question in the 1950s, they still published the decree of the Biblical Commission, but two secretaries of the Pontifical Biblical Commission wrote “review”, commentary, where they thus half-officially but bindingly let it be known that the documents have only a historical value and Catholic biblical scholars now have full freedom (*plena libertas*) for the study of the authorship or age of biblical texts and in other previously problematized and forbidden questions of research.<sup>42</sup> The traditional strategy used by the Vatican in the correction of the thorny problem was to wait until the protagonists from both sides die, so that they could not interpret the change as the triumph of their position. None of the most significant modernizing biblical scholars survived to 1943; there was no satisfaction for those who were right too soon.

## CONSEQUENCES OF THE ANTIMODERNIST CRISIS

Although the antimodernist repression in the Catholic Church on the part of the ultramontanistic integrism according to some authors contributed to the greater resistance of the Church during the turbulent 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is impossible to be blind to the fact that rejection of legitimate plurality inside the religious society and power assertion of only one direction as the only authentic form of the Catholic Faith led to further alienation between modern society and culture on the one hand and the Catholic Church on the other hand. It took the Church another five decades to recognize the non-productiveness of its strategy and decide to change. The further fates of Catholic exegesis in the era after the Second Vatican Council showed with time

41 See Tomáš Petráček, *Výklad Bible*, pp. 261–262.

42 Miller, *Das neue biblische Handbuch*, *Benediktinische Monatschrift* 31, 1955, pp. 49–50. English version: Athanasius Miller, *Enchiridion Biblicum*, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 18, 1956, pp. 24–25. Arduin Kleinhans, *De nova Enchiridii Bibliici editione*, *Antonianum* 30, 1955, pp. 63–65.



that Lagrange and Zapletal were right when they judged that the prohibitions did not correct anything and that Catholic biblical science could manage to regulate itself without power interventions and rigid controls. The breakthrough in the biblical question required different human and character types. Resolute warriors capable of shouting out their opinion and then fall silent or go into another field. A scholar able to articulate his opinions adroitly and maintain a minimal space for passing on the baton to the next generation of Catholic biblical scholars. And finally, ecclesiastical diplomats, who know how to wait for the right moment and implement, albeit late, the necessary change.<sup>43</sup>

With these disputes, the Catholic Church lost too much time and energy, which were not left for more fundamental problems and questions. So, as in other questions, the ruling representatives of the Church underestimated the seriousness of the situation. Whereas in earlier periods the mistaken resolution could be “sat on”, in the medial period of modernity such approaches do not work anymore. Similar disputes and their correction, moreover explicitly unstated and too late, contributed to the erosion of the authority of the teaching office of the Church, which marks the entire twentieth century. The Church only started a revision of its position the moment it was obvious that not even the engagement of the power means and all of the weight of ecclesiastical authority could return biblical science to its traditional interpretations. Except that such a late adaptation looks forced and actually embarrassing. A number of biblical scholars and some workplaces after decades of oppression developed a wary distrust to the Roman centre and magisterial authoritative resolution, which not even the publication of the encyclical *Divino afflante Spiritu* (1943) or the constitution *Dei verbum* (1965) did not heal immediately.

The story of Vincent Zapletal tells of the significance of even attempts that look unsuccessful at first sight. The first generation of Catholic progressive biblical scholars were the first to lay aside the ineffective apologetic position as well as the unfortunate “blissful” ignorance and accepted the challenge of Protestant and rationalist exegesis and the modern critical spirit, “by criticism of criticism” they showed its limits<sup>44</sup>, the dependence on philosophical assumptions and also discovered its gigantic potential in the service of knowledge. It was a generation of pioneers and founders, who had to face multifaceted challenges and difficulties. To the credit of the generation of their students, the spirit of progressive biblical science was transferred, under trying conditions and in the Church milieu in essence illegally, to the next generation and prepared the soil for a fundamental change. From the long-term perspective, their strategy of authentic settlement with the challenges of the new methods, discoveries and approaches to the study of the Bible was successful, although none of them lived to see in their lifetime official changes of the course or personal satisfaction.

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<sup>43</sup> See Tomáš Petráček, *Bible a moderní kritika*, pp. 252–257.

<sup>44</sup> Jean Guitton, *Portrait du père Lagrange. Celui qui a réconcilié la science a la foi*. Paris 1992, pp. 74, 153.