St. Anthony Mary Claret

POPULAR AND PARISH LIBRARIES

Las bibliotecas populares y parroquiales

From the Spanish of the 1864 booklet

English translation

Contributed to Mind of the Church by a friend of the library who wishes to remain anonymous

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About this translation

Translated from *Las bibliotecas populares y parroquiales* (Madrid: Aguado, 1864). **An abridgement**: Claret's prologue, chapters I–II, and the opening of chapter III are given; the rest is not.

The notes give the references to Claret's sources and the notes he printed himself; the modern editors' commentary and the translator's own remarks are not reproduced.

The Popular and Parish Libraries

Prologue

Dearest reader, in this little booklet we present to you a very large plan, one that is destined to produce enormous results.

This plan covers the popular and parish libraries. We show why they are needed and how useful they are, and give the very simple and easy way to carry it out. Read it carefully and you will be convinced. *Vale* \[Farewell\].

Notice. On the feast of the Immaculate Conception of Most Holy Mary, Patroness of the Spains, in the year 1864, these Libraries were inaugurated and placed under the protection of that most exalted Lady. So we hope to receive from God all the help and graces we need to carry so great an undertaking forward.

Chapter I. The Need for Popular and Parish Libraries

It is true that in the chief towns of the Kingdom there are large and handsome libraries, well attended by studious people. But they are open only at certain hours of the day. A great many men who want to learn cannot go then, because at those very hours they are busy with the work of their state. So for them it is as if such libraries did not exist: they cannot go at the appointed hours, and they cannot take a book out to read at home in their free time.

It is also true that all priests, doctors, lawyers and other learned professional men have their own libraries. But these are only for their own use. They will not lend a book for fear of losing it, and so these libraries are of no use to ordinary people, who today are hungry to read.

Society's need for books has been greatly relieved by the multitude of volumes the Librería Religiosa has brought out, from its foundation in 1848 until now. Thanks to God, to our subscribers and to all the others who continue to favor us, the Librería is in the best of health. It works without stopping and moves with the greatest energy and speed toward the object and purpose it set itself.

To help it and share in its labors, the Academy of St. Michael was joined to it, approved by Her Majesty's Government on 6 May 1859.[1] It has given out books in abundance through the members of its many "choirs". And since each choir has its own library, many are the books they lend to all kinds of people to read in their homes.

Great and effective as these means are, they are still not strong enough to meet every need of Spanish society in this field. So, besides strengthening the means already mentioned, we have thought of adding another. In our view it will be the best suited to our aim: to set up and organize the popular and parish libraries of Spain. We cherish the hope that it will fulfill all our desires and satisfy all the demands of the people who ask for books to read and to learn from.

Not long ago a great many men could not read, and the number of women who lacked this branch of learning was larger still. But today very few children, girls or even uneducated adults of either sex fail to attend the schools. Some are public and some private. Besides the schoolmasters and schoolmistresses appointed by the

Government, the members of the Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul have opened schools, full of zeal and charity and with the greatest unselfishness. Ladies of high society have done the same. With the greatest self-denial, charity and zeal they have opened Sunday schools in various places, attended by thousands of housemaids and young working girls.

We must also remember the very many girls who are educated in various convents of nuns as boarders, pupils and lodgers. Others are educated in all the colleges and houses of the Tertiary Sisters of Carmel, of St. Dominic, of Charity, of the Heart of Jesus, of Loreto, the Ursulines, the Sacramentines, the Piarist Sisters, and other modern institutes, all devoted to teaching.

This great means of instruction, thank God, is so widespread and so generally taken up by all that it has created a new need in society: the need for books to read. People need them so as not to lose what they have learned in school, and also to develop their minds and abilities more and more every day.

Today, then, society is hungry and thirsty for books, and we must satisfy it. Let it be well understood that if we do not hurry to help it with good books, it will take up the bad books, which unhappily are so plentiful. Then, where it thought to find life, it will find the death of mind and morals. For reading is to morals and the mind what food is to the body. If food is wholesome, it keeps life going and strengthens it; if it is harmful, it kills. Reading does the same. If it is wholesome, it preserves, increases and perfects mind and morals. If it is bad, its consequences are fatal, because of the very many errors and vices it produces.

Chapter II. The Usefulness of Reading Good Books

Among learned men a question is debated that is still unresolved: which kind of instruction produces greater results, that given by word of mouth or that given in writing?

There is no doubt that instruction given by word of mouth from the pulpit, as in preaching, comes alive with the spirit of the speaker. It is also accompanied by the voice, the tone, the expression, the gestures and the other things with which the preacher knows how to adorn it. Instruction given in writing, by contrast, lies in the dead letter of a book.

All this is true. Yet instruction by book sometimes has so many advantages over the spoken word that on some occasions it is almost to be preferred. We will point out some of these advantages. A preacher cannot be found as easily as a book. Even when one is found, he cannot be kept with us as long as a book. What the preacher says passes by, and so it makes a less deep impression. But a good book we can keep constantly in our hands, turn over whenever we like, and meditate on and ponder at leisure, and so it produces the happiest effects. In general it can be said that instruction by word of mouth gives quick results, but they are not as lasting as those received through a book, which are slower but more permanent.

Good writings, in which the spirit of Jesus Christ reigns, are without any doubt the most useful means, the one that produces the ripest fruit, and the one most needed today, when everyone knows how to read and wants to read. Good books are the best counselors, always firm in their judgment. They do not get angry if they are despised. If you ask them again, they give the same answer in peace and calm. They are ready at every moment to teach. They do not fear labor and do not seek honors. They announce the truth with candor. They *reprove, entreat, rebuke in all patience and doctrine* (2 Tim. 4:2). Our self-love never rises up against a good book that opposes our opinion without bitterness. What is more, not only do we yield easily to what it tells us, but little by little we become defenders of its teaching, and we are proud to admit that reading it has convinced us and opened our eyes. In short, the fruits we gather from reading good books are not weak flames or passing stirrings of the spirit, which vanish easily unless they are strengthened. They are ripe fruits, seasoned by inner conviction. They leave in the soul an exquisite taste for truth and justice, which makes us recognize and detest captious reasoning and the poison of falsehood and deceit.

For this same reason the effects of bad books and writings that flatter human desires are fatal. When they are read, even if they do not convince the reader, they still leave a perverse impression that moves him to abandon his conscience and follow the errors he has read in them. That is why we see Satan and his followers making every possible effort to print books, leaflets, newspapers, pamphlets and so on in such abundance. They circulate them so fast that they spread to every place and reach every person.

We find no period in history when the faithful have been in greater danger than in our own times. So never has the duty been more pressing to exhort by means of writings according to sound doctrine, to convince those who contradict it (cf. Titus 1:9), and to forewarn those who might carelessly read harmful writings. Since the wicked work so hard at writing and spreading their writings, let us do as much ourselves. Then the Lord will not have to complain that *the children of this world are wiser in their generation than the children of light* (Luke 16:8).

Chapter III. How to Set Up the Popular and Parish Libraries; Where They Are to Be Set Up; Who Is to Approve Them; the Librarian's Duties

Q. What means do you judge best suited today to make the reading of good books easier?

A. The creation of popular and parish libraries.

Q. In what places do you think they should be set up?

A. In every town, and even in every parish of each town. That is why I call these libraries "popular and parish": each belongs to its own town and to each parish of the town.

Q. Who do you think should look after this parish library?

A. A layman who is a man of zeal, prudence and energy.

Q. Would it not be better for the parish priest, or another priest of the town, to look after it?

A. No, sir. The parish priest and the other priests are busy with the affairs of their ministry. Nor do they have the chance to mix among ordinary people that a layman has. Besides, in these latter times God seems to want lay people to have a large part in the salvation of souls, as we see in the happy results of the Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul.

Q. Can women take part in these libraries as men do?

A. Yes. Women as well as men may form libraries, but separately from the men's, in the way followed in the Conferences of St. Vincent. I do not doubt that they will give results as good as the men's libraries.

Q. How many people are needed for each library?

A. One is enough. But it will be good for this person, the librarian, to choose someone from the town in whom he has complete confidence, to take his place when he is absent; he will be called the vice-librarian. Finally, when the library grows larger, the two will appoint a third, who will act as secretary and be called by that name.

Q. What are the librarian's chief duties?

A. He must be a prudent and charitable man, of very fervent zeal, for without zeal he will do nothing worthwhile. He must keep a well-made index of the books of the library in his care. He must see that all the books are kept in good condition, without being stained or damaged, and that none is lost. Rather, he will try to increase their number, by asking for books and by buying them with the money he collects from gifts and from the subscribers. He will keep a notebook in which the names of the subscribers are written.

He will try to get both subscribers and non-subscribers to read some book from the library, inviting them with holy zeal. On Sundays after High Mass, or on whatever day and at whatever hour he thinks most suitable, he will tell them that he is ready to hand out books to read and to take back those already read. Finally, each year at the beginning of January he will give a brief account of the year. He will state how many books he had at the start of the year and how many times he lent books, or which books he lent out to be read during the year.

[End of the abridged text.\]

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[1] *coros.*