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## The Douai-Rheims Bible, 1582-1982

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Brother Daniel Burke FSC

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# **he Douai - Rheims Bible, 1582-1982**

This spring we celebrate the 400th anniversary of the Douai-Rheims Bible, the long-lived translation which has been standard in English-speaking countries. La Salle is commemorating the occasion with an exhibition which attempts to illuminate the work of four great men who renewed the life of that version for many generations.

By Brother Daniel Burke, FSC, Ph.D

## GREGORY MARTIN



**h**is name was Gregory Martin. He is unknown to the average English-speaking Catholic, and he gets only two paragraphs in the new *Catholic Encyclopedia*. But in his day he was perhaps, the most brilliant scholar produced by Oxford. As a refugee from Elizabeth I's harsh laws against Catholics, he became a priest and a theologian in France—and the first translator of the Bible for English-speaking Catholics. We celebrate the 400th anniversary of his Douai-Rheims Bible this March. Over the last four centuries, his translation was revised and updated several times. But, until quite recently, it held its ground as the standard text for the English-speaking world. Especially for those of us who were brought up on its language and who may now regret, as we listen to texts of the New American Bible at Mass, that the "Magi" of old are now "astrologers" or that the "unjust steward" has become merely a "devious employee"—Gregory Martin and his later editors deserve some attention.

Actually precision of language, if not the niceties of style, was a major consideration for Gregory Martin and his colleagues at the English College at Douai in northern France when William (later Cardinal) Allen, founder and president of the seminary, proposed a new translation in 1578. These men were concerned to achieve as accurate a translation as possible, but not for the uses of personal piety or, for what indeed was to come much later, the liturgy. They wanted simply to protect English Catholics from what they considered the deadly errors of the Protestant versions already in current use—Tyndale, Coverdale, Mathews, Bishops, Geneva. They had in mind also to use the translation to attack the Protestant theologians and controversialists and, hence, they would follow each chapter of the text with scholarly, but often quite trenchant, notes. And no ground was more disputed than the Protestant appeal to the individual reader, rather than to the accumulated wisdom of tradition and church, for the interpretation of God's word. Already, said Martin, there was "such diversity and dissension, and no end of reprehending one another, and translating every man according to his fancy."

With these purposes in mind, Gregory Martin began his work on October 16, 1578—and now at Rheims where the English College had been moved temporarily because of political troubles. A man of "incredible industry," he had written before he was forty a dozen books on Greek and Hebrew, on theology and personal devotion, and he now set himself the arduous task of translating two chapters of scripture a day. His colleagues—other Oxford men now on the faculty of the English College: Richard Bristow, Thomas Worthington, John Reynolds and Allen himself—would review the results daily and help develop the sometimes lengthy notes for the text.

The undertaking of these exiles was also fueled, of course, by the thought of their families and compatriots, so many of them now lost to the Church after years of sectarian struggles and persecution. Their note to

Apocalypse 2:5 puts the matter honestly but sadly indeed: *Note that the cause why God taketh the truth from certain countries, and removeth their Bishops or Churches into captivity or desolation, is the sin of the Prelates and people. And that is the cause (no doubt) that Christ hath taken away our golden candlestick, that is, our Church in England. God grant us to remember our fall, to do penance and the former works of charity which our first Bishops and Church were notable and renowned for.*

There was also the thought of their own graduates, filtering back now to minister to an underground church. Some three hundred went back; more than a hundred lost their lives. Joining the latter for execution at Tyburn was the daring and eloquent Jesuit. Blessed Edmund Campion, Martin's closest friend during their days at Oxford.

In March, 1582, the College's *Diary* noted that "in this month the finishing touch was put to the English edition of the New Testament." The Old Testament had been finished earlier, but because of a lack of funds it would not appear until 1609, at Douai. The New Testament "translated faithfully into English out of the authentical Latin" was, however, printed immediately at Rheims. Martin himself, exhausted by the work, fell victim to tuberculosis and died in the following October. His sudden death, in his early forties, seems an answer to the moving prayer which concludes the notes to the New Testament:

*And now O Lord Christ, most just and merciful, we thy poor creatures that are so afflicted for confession and defence of the holy Catholic and Apostolic truth, contained in this thy sacred book, and in the infallible doctrine of thy dear spouse our mother the Church, we cry also unto thy Majesty with tenderness of our hearts unspeakable, COME LORD JESUS QUICKLY, and judge betwixt us and our adversaries, and in the mean time give patience, comfort, and constancy to all that suffer for thy name, and trust in thee.*

*O Lord God our only helper and protector,  
Tarry not long. Amen.*

The English version which Martin left, however, was to prove quite sturdy and long-lived. Its language was direct and vigorous: the serving maid who approaches Peter in the courtyard of the High Priest (*Mark 14:69*) is not a "damsel" but a "wench." If there were odd Latinisms—"But your very hairs of the head are all numbered" (*Matthew 10:20*)—this was because St. Jerome's Latin version of the fourth century, the Vulgate, was being translated with a passion for accuracy that left no room for apologies. In this stand, Martin anticipated Alexander Pope's judgement in the eighteenth century: "If there be sometimes a darkness, there is often a light in antiquity, which nothing better preserves than a version almost literal." But Martin could be smooth and cadenced in the Queen's English as well, as when he

translates St. Paul's exhortations in *I Timothy, 6:*

*Piety with sufficiency is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world: doubtless, neither can we take away anything. But having food, and wherewith to be covered, with these we are content. For they that will be made rich, fall into temptation and the snare of the devil, and many desires unprofitable and hurtful, which drown men into destruction and perdition. For the root of all evils is covetousness: which certain desiring have erred from the faith, and have entangled themselves in many sorrows.*

Indeed not only a significant part of Martin's varied diction but also his careful grammatical distinctions were borrowed, though without acknowledgement, by the authors of the King James or Authorized Version of 1611, the version which became the standard of literary elegance for centuries.

Later editions of the Rheims New Testament were few and far between; the second and third were printed at Antwerp in 1600 and 1621, the Fourth in Rouen in 1633. It was, of course, proscribed in England. Ironically enough, what made it more available to Catholics was its publication in 1589, and several times thereafter, by William Fulke, a professor at Cambridge who was appointed to answer, as his title-page puts it, "the manifold cavils, frivolous quarrels, and impudent slanders of Gregory Martin, one of the readers of Popish Divinity in the traitorous Seminary of Rheims." Helpfully enough, Fulke printed the whole Catholic translation in parallel columns with the Bishops' version and then set about to refute its errors.

What is thought of as the fifth edition of Rheims appeared in England in 1738, but with no editor or place of printing indicated. For there were still Penal Laws against Catholics. They could be fined for holding services; under some circumstances, their property could be confiscated; they were excluded from public office and from taking degrees at the universities. Such penalties were lifted only with the Emancipation Act of 1829. The administration of the scattered Church in those years, as in missionary countries, was left to Vicars-Apostolic. And among the most notable of these was the saintly Richard Challoner (1691-1781), who was probably responsible for the anonymous edition of 1738.

**T**hough he was baptized a Protestant, Challoner was brought up in the country home of a Catholic squire where his mother was employed as a housekeeper. As a boy, he was fortunate to get some lessons from John Gother, a priest in the English Mission. John Dryden is reported to have said that Gother was the only man, other than himself, who could write decent English. In any case, when young Richard converted and went off to the English College at Douai, he got advanced standing because of his previous training—and a scholarship. He was to remain at Douai for some twenty-five years, getting a doctorate from the University of Douai, being ordained a priest, becoming vice-president of the college.

## RICHARD CHALLONER



In 1730 he returned to the mission in England. While enforcement of the Penal Laws was slackening, a priest could still be imprisoned for life for exercising his ministry. Challoner, therefore, dressed as a secular, used aliases, and moved his place of residence frequently. What he was involved in was clearly a holding operation, an attempt to save the remnants of a Church which would in the next century—with an influx of Irish Catholics and of notable English converts like Newman—have a “second spring.”

In the London district to which he was assigned, Challoner's effort was to strengthen the Catholics simply by his kind and personal contact, his encouraging homilies of their secret Masses, his availability for the sacraments and for counseling. But he also began a ministry of the written word in a varied series of controversial works in which he defended his flock and devotional works, including lives of earlier English saints and martyrs, in which he offered them inspiration. By 1741 he was consecrated a bishop, as coadjutor to the Vicar-Apostolic; his territory included most of southern England and even the American colonies. Despite his duties, Challoner continued his writing and with the aid of Francis Blyth, a Carmelite priest, was able to publish a version of the whole Douai-Rheims in 1749-50. As Stanley Morison puts it, the new edition presented the Scripture to eighteenth century believers “in words that had the warrant of contemporary understanding.” For by this time, Gregory Martin's rather latinized Elizabethan English was offering some difficulty to the average reader—if, indeed, he or she was able to get a copy of Douai-Rheims. Challoner's revision was so extensive that some, like Cardinal Newman, said that it was really a totally new translation from the Vulgate. Others, like Ronald Knox in our century, thought of it as a “darning and patching” of Martin's version. All agree, though, that Challoner smoothed out most of Martin's more challenging passages. Thus, in the *Psalms*, Martin's literal rendering gave us the puzzle of “a vineyard was made to my beloved in horn, the son of oil”; in Challoner that becomes “my beloved had a vineyard on a hill in a fruitful place.” The end result was that the Catholic text was brought closer to the King James version, with indeed a number of borrowings that returned the compliment of that Protestant version's borrowings from Gregory Martin.

Challoner's long life was not to end peacefully. In his last years, there was a resurgence of anti-Catholic feeling, and in 1780 a week of destructive turmoil with a mob led by the extremist Lord George Gordon (Dickens recreates the scene in his *Barnaby Rudge*); the bishop had to flee London to save his life. He was ninety when he died of a stroke; his last word was “Charity,” as he pointed to a few coins in his pockets. The largest charity to his people, however, was the shelf of books he wrote to sustain them. Of those books, none was more important than his revision of Gregory Martin's Bible.



**T**he later history of the Rheims-Challoner Bible involves rather frequent but partial revisions, especially of the New Testament, in Ireland, England, and America. For the present purpose, it may suffice to glance at two nineteenth-century Irish-Americans, of radically different temperaments, who figure in that history—the Philadelphia printer Mathew Carey (1760-1839) and the third bishop of the same city, Francis Kenrick (1796-1863).

Actually, there were no English bibles printed in America until after the Revolution; the mother country reserved those printing rights to herself exclusively. The first English bible was Robert Aitken's King James version of the New Testament printed in Philadelphia by order of Congress in 1777; the first Catholic edition was a reprint of Challoner's 1764 version, produced by the enterprising Mathew Carey in 1790. Carey's list of subscribers included Bishop John Carroll (a major patron, he was down for twenty copies) and Philadelphia notables like Stephen Girard.

Carey himself was, to say the least, a colorful figure. Having been crippled by an accident in his infancy, he had limited formal education but did develop a flair for writing. He was only nineteen when he addressed a pamphlet to his countrymen, pointing out that their wrongs under the British were heavier than those of the Americans and so, for all the more reason, they should follow the fine example of America in revolution. At this juncture, his family thought it best to get him out of the country, for a year in Paris. There he met Benjamin Franklin and began to learn the printing business at Franklin's small press at Passy. After his return to Ireland, there were inevitably more confrontations with authorities and a stint in Dublin's Newgate prison. But, then, not so inevitably, there was an escape in woman's dress, an eventful voyage to America, aid from the Marquis Lafayette in Philadelphia, publishing ventures with several new magazines, a duel in which Mathew was wounded, the courting of Bridget Flahanen, the beginnings of a successful printing and bookselling firm, and the publication of the Challoner Bible—all in eight years. Thereafter, however, Carey became very much the established businessman and civic leader. He fathered nine children, became a member of the American Philosophical Society, the author of several books on economics and an autobiography, a supporter of social causes and philanthropies in his adopted city. He was almost eighty when he died in a carriage accident in 1839.

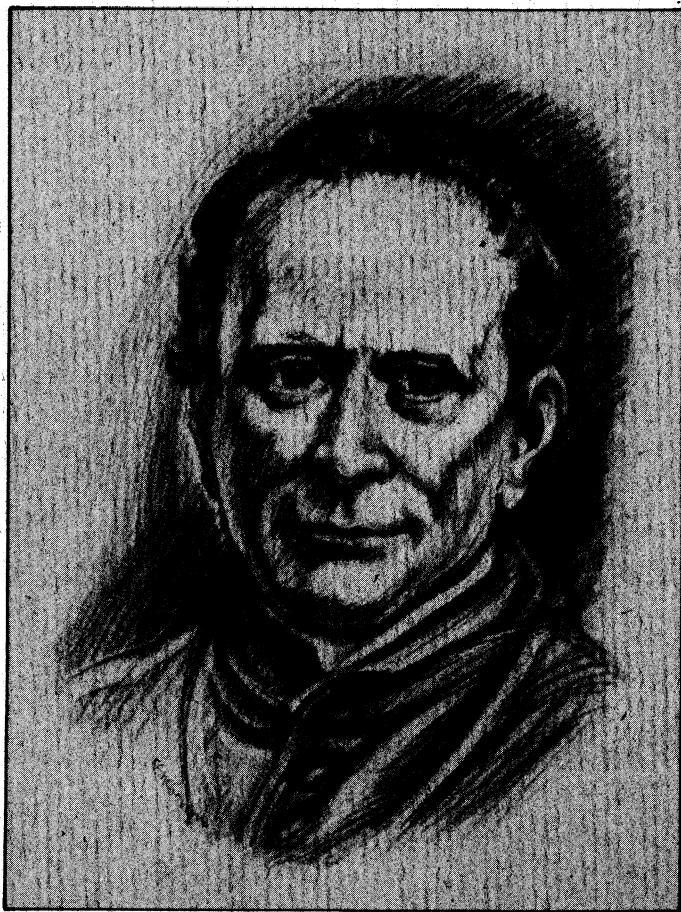
Besides the first Catholic bible in America (and the second, in 1805, from an Irish revision of Challoner), Carey published several other books by Challoner: *The True Principles of a Catholic* (1789), *Think Well on't* (1791), *Garden of the Soul* (1792), and the Bishop's translation of the *Following of Christ* (1800), among others. But he also made an ecumenical plea to Protestants to support the publication of his Rheims-Challoner in 1790, published several editions of the King James version and had as one

of his salesmen "Parson" Weems, whose moralizing biography of Washington ("I must not tell a lie") was a resounding success. For Carey was always a shrewd businessman. There was his practice, for instance, of obtaining the most popular English novels of the day—and, since there was no copyright, re-publishing them quite cheaply. So extensive was this practice that some believe he inhibited the development of the American novel. By the same token, he may have stimulated the emergence of the American short story, which was soon to become one of the chief glories of our national literature.

## MATHEW CAREY



## FRANCIS KENRICK



While Carey's bibles were simply reprints of Challoner and Challoner revised, another Irishman who followed him to America some years later was to undertake a more significant examination and revision of Douai-Rheims in the light of the earlier Latin and Greek texts. This was Francis Patrick Kenrick, third bishop of Philadelphia. Francis left Ireland at the age of eighteen to enter a Roman seminary devoted to missionary work. After several years of brilliant work there in theology and Scripture, he volunteered for a mission in Kentucky. In 1830 he was named a coadjutor bishop in Philadelphia and dealt immediately with turmoil over lay trusteeship of parishes. He founded St. Charles Seminary (and wrote seven volumes of theological texts for the students), established other schools, started construction of the Cathedral, and later as bishop dealt with the anti-Catholic riots of 1844 which left three churches in ruins. In 1851 he was named Archbishop of Baltimore, the Primate of the United States.

His interest in revising Rheims-Challoner was a response to the call of the Provincial Council of Baltimore (1829) for an updated and annotated edition suitable for Americans. In spite of his heavy administrative duties—they included nineteen visitations by stagecoach and horseback to cover each time a diocese which was then the size of England, Scotland, and Wales—he persisted in his translation project, checking the ancient texts and a wide variety of commentators. The tone of his notes is open, if not conciliatory—"I have availed myself of the researches of modern writers, unhappily estranged from Catholic communion"; he is modest—"I cannot hope that a work which demands so much erudition and such exercise of judgement, is in every respect faultless"; but he has a firm faith in the Church's role in interpreting the sense of Scripture, which "otherwise becomes a labyrinth from which there is no issue."

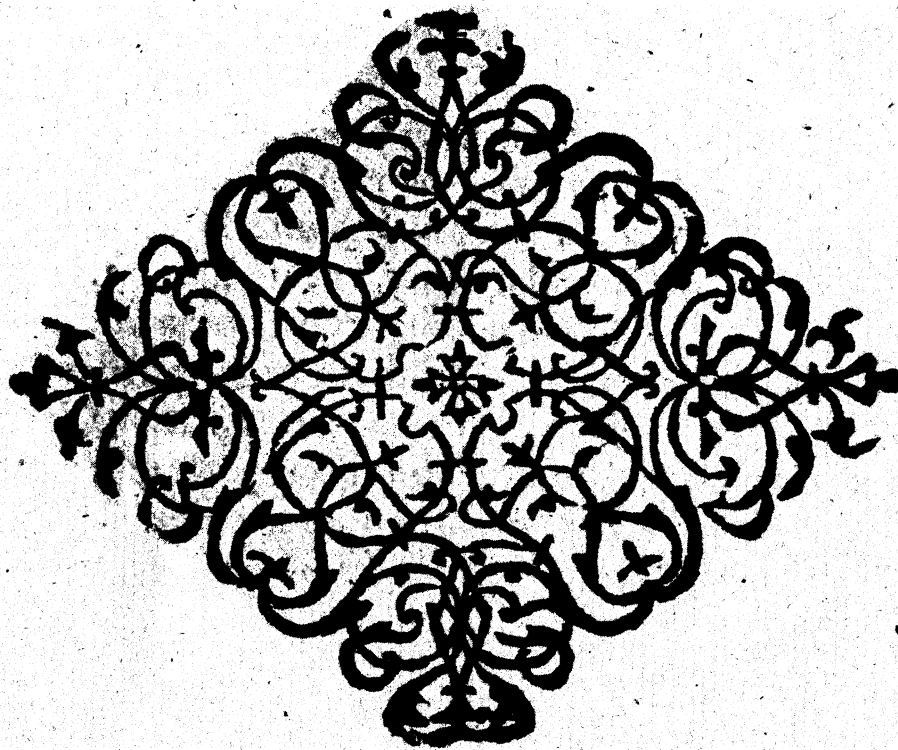
The bishop's first publication (1849) was the *Four Gospels*; over the next eleven years, he followed it with five other volumes. The work was well received by American and English authorities, especially Cardinal Wiseman and Newman. But strangely enough, it was not adopted by the American bishops as the standard text. In part, perhaps, this was because Newman had been asked by the English Bishops to do a new translation; hopes were high for it, but it never materialized. Also, several American bishops were less than enthusiastic about Kenrick's work—including his own brother Peter, the Archbishop of St. Louis. In the end, Kenrick was to say simply "I present my work as a literary essay, rather than as a substitute for the Douay translation." For he was indeed a holy man; in fact authorities in Philadelphia considered promoting his cause for canonization, before supporting his successor, John Neumann.

Our emphasis here has been on the history of the Rheims translation into the nineteenth century. There were, of course, important further developments until the middle of the twentieth century. And two basic directions marked this last stage. First, the Vulgate gradually lost favor as the authoritative standard among the early texts, unofficially in translations like those of the Rev. Francis Spencer at the turn of the century, officially in the later work of the Confraternity committee. Second, the modernization of the English became increasingly thorough. What especially undercut any effort of New Testament translators to achieve a solemn or refined level of English was the contention of scholars like Goodspeed that the Greek of the gospels and epistles wasn't classical Greek at all but an everyday colloquial Greek: it was "you" not "thou," "did" not "didst." Nevertheless, in England Father Knox said that he attempted "a sort of timeless English that would reproduce the idiom of our own day without its neologisms, and perhaps have something of an old-fashioned flavor about it." The American Confraternity edition (and its final form in 1970, the New American Bible) was the work of a committee, and perhaps simply for that reason has less consistency in the level of modern American it attempted. It can, in fact, be remarkably awkward and jarring at times.

But the four men we have discussed here—Martin, Challoner, Carey, Kenrick—created, revised, and sustained an English translation which, despite its faults, had a remarkably long and fruitful life. They were strong characters: intelligent, hardworking, patient, persistent. The three translator-editors especially had none of the resources or the support of the large committees that managed some of the earlier and most of the later editions of the English bible. They pursued their work practically alone because they saw a pressing need among their people; they persisted despite opposition and persecution. And their efforts over the centuries kept viable for successive generations a vigorous translation of the Bible which admittedly did not have the elegance of some others, the minute accuracy of still others over those years, but which effectively served its basic purpose.

The last chapter in the history of the Douai-Rheims translation and its later revisions has come in our own times. It has now been replaced officially by the Knox translation and the New American Bible, unofficially by the Jerusalem Bible and a number of common and ecumenical versions. What is certain, however, is that the work of Gregory Martin and his successors served well the needs of English-speaking Catholics in harder times. They are men who, this year especially, deserve our remembrance and our gratitude.





*The portraits accompanying this article were sketched by Robert F. McGovern, a painter, sculptor, and printmaker who teaches at the Philadelphia College of Art.*