

St. GASPAR BERTONI



73 MEDITATIONS

on

THE EXPOSITION ON FIRST KINGS

[*Prologue & 1 K 1:1-16:13*]

[MssB ## 4853-7340]

by

St. GREGORY THE GREAT

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Translator:

Rev. Joseph Charles Henchey, CSS

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INTRODUCTION ¹

Early in November 1810, Fr. Bertoni was assigned to the spiritual care of the local Diocesan Seminary of Verona. At that time there were 97 students on the College level, and 46 students in the major Seminary. On **Sunday, November 18, 1810, the Feast of the Patronage of Mary Most Holy**, very early in the morning, he offered his First Meditation that would be continued then for several years. He began – as did Gregory – with a *Prologue*, called **First Prelude**, in which he announced the themes that he would develop during the year. He began ²:

Since it is my duty to offer these meditationS to Clerics, who are already initiated into the various levels of Holy Order, it is only right that the material should be proper to them. The Church, to which they dedicate themselves to serve, is a House of God. And the purpose of these reflections is so that they will know how they should conduct themselves in the House of God ³.

‘These things I write to you...so that you may know how you ought to behave yourself in the House of God...’[1 Tm 3:14, f.].

First it is necessary to know just what kind of a house this is, where it is, and so on, and who the Master of this Household is; secondly, the vocation to this house; and thirdly, guilty in fleeing from it; and good to pursue it. [MssB 4853].

Fr. Bertoni always sought to give a biblical foundation to his Meditations, and found that:

The Books of Kings contain this doctrine, according to the manner in which the holy Fathers of the Church have expounded on it. The house and the master of the house-hold: Elcana and his home.

The vocation: based on the call of Samuel.

The conduct: guilty in Saul, good in David.

Our meditations will be on this place of Sacred Scripture.

¹ These comments may be found in: P. Nello Dalle Vedove, *Vita e pensiero del S. Gaspare Bertoni. Agli albori dell’800 Veronese*. Roma: Stimmadini Vol. III. 1977, pp.172-178, I.

² Translaator’s Note: Fr. Bertoni’s own words will be in **Bold Print** - for a more ready identification of them – and Scripture passages in *Italics*.

³ It can be noted that Fr. Bertoni often made use of various forms of the Latin: *absequi; obsequium, ‘ossequioso’* [cf. CF ## 1; 7; 57; 62; 125; 172; 185; 195; 237; 296; 304 – this is from St. Ignatius who wrote his Constitutions in Spanish – his Secretary, Fr. Polanco translated these into Latin, and varied the more than 1,000 appearances of the Spanish: *servire-servicio-servo* – as: *obsequi-obsequium/ auxiliari-auxilium; servire-servitium* – the most common being the *obsequi - obsequium*.

And since long Introductions are annoying, we will begin right away with the title of the First Book of Kings, which will be the key, as it were, to enter into this House. [MssB 4854].

There then follow those genuine Ignatian Preludes, so evident in his *Spiritual Exercises*⁴:

2. Imagine that our Master and Lord, Jesus Christ, of whom it is stated in Scripture that he has the keys in hand [cf. Ap 3:7], sends you now by an Angel of His the key to open His House: which is the very Title of this Book, saying: Consider first and see the manner how to use the key in order to open up this House, and so on.

3. 'Give me understanding' [cf. Ps 118:144], with which it might be fruitfully managed. 'Gate of Heaven': You who are the Gate through which one enters into the House of your Son, aspire for the propitious hour and receive us under your Patronage, under which we place all of our instructions [MssB 4855].

The First Book of Kings [Samuel] has been classified as an – Historical – Prophetic – Divine Book. This is the key in order to enter into it.

First of all, it is a Historical Book:

History is the Teacher of Life.

The difference between sacred history and profane history is this: the former – according to Cornelius a' Lapide – is written with a divine spirit, it narrates human events as these are governed by Divine Providence. Profane history, on the other hand, is composed with a human spirit, and relates those matters which proceed according to the prudence and industry of human beings [MssB 4856].

So, Sacred History teaches that divine prudence with which the mind adheres to God with a pious worship, and upon which it specially supports itself with its work and with its religion. Then, on the other hand, profane history teaches human prudence and those minute cautions of human industry and which for the most part have little power of their own, and very often bring danger. Therefore, there is nothing more opportune for the instruction of clerics than sacred History [In 1 Reg 209, 2, c.]. [MssB 4857].

⁴ Not only is Fr. Bertoni's style 'Ignatian' here, but the content of this classic by St. Gregory the Great could have also drawn him due to his familiarity with St. Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises* – as his reflections on the choice of service under two realms, "Two Standards", and the "Reign of Christ", the first conference of the Second Week. [cf. Fr. Stofella, *Collectanea Stigmatina*. Vol. I, Fasc.II.

From Cornelius a' Lapide, Fr. Bertoni records the example of Scipio who read the *Cyropedes* of Xenophon – Alexander the Great who read Homer – and he added a personal example of 'our politicians' who read Tacitus, and 'our generals' who read Polibius, or Caesar. With Fr. Cattaneo, SJ, Fr. Bertoni recalls that St. Jerome [cf. Letter 22 to Eustochius, c. 13] was punished severely for having read more Cicero than Scripture! [MssB4857]. Fr. Bertoni's challenge was therefore: ***Study, or some commitment to understand the Sacred Scriptures. Thank God that He has written for our instruction*** [MssB 4856]

The Book is also **Prophetic**:

Fr. Bertoni quotes from Cornelius a' Lapide and uses St. Augustine's declaration⁵:

...the Scriptures, though they seem but a bare relation of the successive deeds of each King in his time, yet being considered with the assistance of God's Spirit, will prove either more, or as fully, prophecies of things to come, as histories of things past...

- and that of St. Gregory – which as might be recorded from the reflections above, could have been the work of the Abbot Claude:

...St. Gregory states regarding this history: Gentle in its recording of history, more sublime in the types of allegory, useful for the instruction of morals, lucid in manifesting examples. They narrate historical matters, that point out spiritual principles; they speak of exteriors, and allude to intimate matters; they propose earthly matters, so that they might lead to heavenly matters... [***Prologue***].

Then, on his own, Fr. Bertoni went directly to attain from the text of this second Father noted above, in order to draw from it the analogy of the Books of the Bible, with a stairway, that needs to be climbed, and concludes:

...Scripture, therefore, is a ladder, in order to arrive at knowing God through the faith. It is not required to stop just at the letter, but to ascend to the spirit. The letter is the foundation of faith: it is necessary to build on this, with hope in God, and charity through works. How many priests care the material of the letter in order to build the houses of others! [While] the people builds up in the spirit on the letter, the Priest remains with the letter, quite bereft [of spirit]. They bring the ladder, and others climb it: they remain always down low, as the directors of St. Teresa... [MssB 4859]

Therefore, one should approach with the commitment of our own edification. *With fear and trembling work out your salvation...*[cf. Ph 2:12; 2 P 1:10]. [MssB 4858].

⁵ *De Civ. Dei*, Bk 17, c. 1]

In the end, the Book of Kings is a **Divine Book**:

...All Scripture is inspired of God...[2 Tm 3:16] – St. Gregory quotes – and in proportion does it surpass the most illustrious intelligences, in so far as the most illustrious men themselves are inferior to God: and they see nothing in that spiritual sublimity, except that which has been revealed to them from the goodness of the divine condescension. No one, therefore, in his knowledge is so advanced that he cannot progress even further, because every human progress is inferior to the height of the divinity which inspired the Scripture... [MssB 4860].

Fr. Gaspar imagined that he was standing before a vast forest growing on a very high mountain. At first sight, everything seems equal – but, as soon as he enters into it, he sees that it contains level spaces and deep valleys, and the more that he remains looking at it he uncovers more than what he had first seen. This forest – he tells us himself – is Sacred Scripture [MssB 4855]. And therefore, one needs **humility to investigate these sacred pages. There can only be admiration for the divine sublimity.** [MssB 4860].

Once he had completed the Points for Meditation, Fr. Gaspar then offered a few pointers along the style of St. Ignatius:

...This, then, is the key. But, it will be necessary for you to learn well its use, by trying it yourselves, if you want the Lord to open up this house of His more to you. When the time comes that you actually understand less by your own efforts, that little will also provide you with greater consolation. This you will do if you would like for a few moments to make your own examination and reflection for about a quarter of an hour on this present meditation ⁶. And you will experience this yourselves, if for a few hours today, or this evening, you will go over this meditation ⁷ – and further, if you would briefly write down for yourselves, after the headings, not for the purpose of science but for wisdom [‘sweet science’], and not for others, but for yourselves. [MssB4162].

Following the First Meditation, Fr. Gaspar did not abandon totally the work of Cornelius a’ Lapide, and also used other commentators, here and there, like the Venerable Bede. However, for the overwhelming most part, he will entrust himself almost entirely to that which he believed to be the work of St. Gregory the Great. St. Gaspar offers this commentary that is both allegorical and incomplete [16 chapters out of 22] of First Samuel, known then as **First Kings [I Reg.]**. Fr. Bertoni does not seem aware of

⁶ Fr. Stofella offers a footnote here, indicating that this is from the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius, n. 77.

⁷ Cf. *Spiritual Exercises*, n. 2.

the views that some thought this Prologue was the work of the Abbot Claude. Fr. Bertoni did not pause over all the allegorical, or tropological applications of the original author of this *Expositio in I Regum*. Fr. Bertoni followed his own well thought out plan to the extent that from the images of *Pseudo-Gregory*⁸ he often used only as the occasion to proceed in his own development, while at times he by-passed this imagery completely in order that his own plan would not be disrupted.

St. Gaspar was able to see developed in this *Expositio in I Reg.*, a central idea applicable in his own age to the renewal of the priestly ministry, based on the precedence to be given to contemplation with respect to activity, and on the real need of embracing poverty and the self-renunciation lived by the Apostles, in order to pursue the salvation of their neighbors. Fr. Gaspar approved profoundly this program, because he realized its urgency for his own days. However, in presenting to the seminarians of Verona the necessity of preparing themselves for the priesthood, with a renewed spirit – he looked beyond the immediacy for what he was actually doing. In this, he pondered for the future to establish a group of priests and religious who would be closely united with him in order to constitute a kind of advance squadron of highly trained operatives for the restoration of priestly ministry.

[Fr. John Ceresatto, CSS, in his work noted that the secondary motive of Fr. Bertoni's plan for the Stigmatines, was to bring about the renewal of Church life, also through renewal of the priestly and consecrated way of life – and for this, among the central aspects of his Apostolic Mission, there is insistence in the Founder's *Original Constitutions*, especially among the *Means by which this Institute is to promote the Salvation of its neighbors*⁹ – and emphasized very much in the early ministries of the Community¹⁰. Furthermore, some questions would arise: would Fr. Bertoni's consummate prudence have him speak about his own future plan for his own personal vocation to prepare for a future Community of men to the already committed Diocesan Seminarians? A further question readily comes to mind: if it is legitimate also to apply St. Gregory's emphasis on the Risen Christ also to Fr. Bertoni's thoughts on the Stigmata^{11?}]

Fr. Bertoni's Sunday reflections were held early in the morning. For this purpose, he would go to the Seminary the evening before as his vigil. And these nights would not be spent much in the room provided for him, but rather before the Blessed Sacrament.

⁸ Fr. Nello Dalle Vedove reflects the view of some scholars that St. Gregory the Great was not the real author of this original work.

⁹ Cf. **CF ## 67; 164**

¹⁰ cf. the Early Chronicles of the Community. It should be noted that with the problems facing him as Roman Pontiff, St. Gregory the Great had concerns about the basic need of preaching in every age for dedicated priests: cf. G.R. Evans, *The Thought of Gregory the Great*. Cambridge University Press 1986. 'The Art of Preaching' – 'The Preacher', pp. 75-86.

¹¹ For this question, cf. this web-site: www.st-bertoni.com - under "Life & Spirituality", cf. *Stimate Integre*.

This bit of information comes from Fr. Louis Bragato in a Letter to Fr. John Mary Marani, Superior General, dated December 12, 1856:

...You know that our Venerated Father, Don Gaspar, for many years gave the meditation, very early in the morning, every Sunday, to all the students and clerics of the Seminary. These were held in the little Church, which is now set aside for the use of the College, because the large chapel did not exist at the time. Therefore, Fr. Gaspar would go to the Seminary the evening before, where he would find there a room all set up for him, with a comfortable bed, right next to this little church.

You might also know that one time, I was sent to keep him company, with Fr. Gramego. I say 'one time' because I do remember this time quite well. I was given this invitation, on a Saturday evening, so I made my way to Fr. Gaspar's home, where I also met Fr. Gramego. As it was about 9:00 p.m., all three of us set out for the Seminary. Going along the way, we were able to recite comfortably our night prayers, because the streets were quite empty and dark – there was not yet the gas-lights that would convert the night into day. Once we arrived at the Seminary and entered the room set aside for Fr. Gaspar, following a brief conversation, he told Fr. Michael and me that we ought to make ourselves comfortable in his room. As we stretched out, Fr. Gaspar prayed the words of Psalm 4:9 – *In Peace in the selfsame I will sleep and I will rest...* He then went on to explain these words and gave us one of those wonderful little talks that you remember so well, full of unction and wisdom.

Once this was over, he took his lamp, and went to the near-by choir loft of the Chapel, to pray over the meditation that he was to deliver to the Seminarians early the next morning, before the Most Blessed Sacrament. He left the room about 10:00 p.m. and I do not know when he returned. His subject matter for those meditations was the **First Book of Kings**. We had a very good rest, and on arising in the morning, we did not see Fr. Gaspar until we entered the Church. And, I believe that this was his custom every Saturday night ¹².

In those nights spent in personal prayer, abundant light and inspiration poured down on Father Gaspar – and not only for the meditations for the following morning – but also for the very broad scope in his plan for his Apostolic Missionaries.

This broad Apostolic Mission is well presented in **Part IX**, of the **Original Constitutions [## 158-186]: Verbi Dei quodcumque ministerium**. Some of the adjectives used by Fr. Bertoni to describe the *ministeria* included in the Apostolic Mission are: **graviora...accomodata... varia et propria**. [cf. **CF ## 158; 185; 262**]. Recent General Chapters through the Community's Actual Constitutions, have presented the Founder's concept of the **Apostolic Mission** as follows:

...Through the particular charism received from God, Fr. Gaspar Bertoni intended it to be a group of religious, consecrated to the following of Christ, sent by the Father [Jn 20:21] as *Missionarii Apostolici in obsequium Episcoporum*

¹² Cf. *Summarium Additionale*, p. 279.

[CF # 1], and assigned it the purpose of serving the Church through the various ministries proper to its vocation [CF # 185]. [n. 1].

The vocation of the Congregation is indicated by the expression ***Verbi Dei quodcumque Ministerium*** [cf. CF # 163]. This embraces an openness to all the apostolic ministries according to the needs of the times, places and circumstances by being available to the requests of Bishops. Certain types of the apostolate better respond to the Stigmatine tradition, beginning with the Founder and his first companions: preaching; counseling ¹³ priests, religious and seminarians and the Christian education of youth... [n. 2].

Fr. Nello tells us how this particular commentary by Fr. Bertoni came to an end:

When the Easter festivals were over [in 1813]. Fr. Bertoni took up again his commentary on Gregory's ***Expositio in I Reg.***, with **Meditation 71 [1 K 16:1-3] [MssB 7285, ff.]**. His **73rd Meditation** was his last one, commenting on 1 K 16:11-13 [MssB 7321]. ¹⁴

This would seem to indicate that Fr. Bertoni gave about 30 months to these 73 Meditations – for Sundays and Feast Days at the Seminary – from late November 1810 until after Easter 1813, a considerable portion of his ***Manoscritti Bertoni [## 4853-7340]***. He then went on to his 41 Meditations on Matthew, based on the 28 Homilies of St. John Chrysostom. These are found on this same website, also under '**Translations**'.

He would also provide Meditations on St. John Chrysostom's Homilies on Genesis.

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¹³ This seems to be a mis-translation of the Italian word: ***assistenza***, which is more broad – and would include other forms of 'assistance', like **teaching, conferences, retreats.**

¹⁴ Cf. Fr. Nello, o.c., Vol. III, pp. 389. ff.

St. GREGORY the GREAT

In St. GASPAR BERTONI'S ORIGINAL CONSTITUTIONS

There are two direct quotes and both of which fall in that area which St. Gaspar found in his favorite author for these Constitutions, Francis Suarez, SJ and his *De Religione Societatis Iesu* :

CF # 186 : *Furthermore, no one will contrive to be sent in one place rather than in another, but each will allow himself to be transferred, although it is not wrong to show oneself prepared for some undertaking. For Isaiah [6:6, ff] offered himself, and Jeremiah [1:6] excused himself. However, Jeremiah did not resist God sending him, nor did Isaiah presume to go before being purified by the coal of the altar. As Gregory has said, no one should dare to undertake the sacred ministries without first being purified, nor should anyone chosen by a superior grace, proudly refuse to go, under the pretext of humility.*

This Constitution is actually the Conclusion of the very central Part IX of St. Gaspar's Constitutions, in its Chapter 7: **Concerning the Principal Scope of the 'Professed' Fathers**. This Constitution is taken *verbatim* from Fr. Suarez' Book VI [*De Professione quae in Societate fit...*], regarding the Jesuit Fourth Vow, Chapter 4¹⁵.

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The other Constitution is taken from Part XI, Chapter IV of St. Gaspar's **Original Constitutions # 288** - 'Concerning the two conditions through which the means of Conversation might be an accommodated ministry of the Religious State':

CF # 288: *There are two principles by which there can be ascertained the decency of such familiar conversation, or the lack of decency for the whole matter.*

The first principle would be if this activity was already prohibited, either because of itself it is evil, or because it is prohibited to clerics by common law, and religious are comparable to them in this matter [cf. II-II, q. 187, a. 2], or, if it is forbidden by one's own institute and special law.

Another principle is whether this endeavor is of such a nature that it could hardly be undertaken without danger of sin, as St. Gregory has said [Hom. 24, in Evangelia]. This same principle holds with due proportion if the undertaking would excessively occupy the spirit with the care and solicitude of temporal matters.

¹⁵ Cf. Suarez, p. 862 a & b.

However, since there can be such latitude in this matter, therefore, having put aside any legislation in this regard, obedience to the Superior, no certain rule can be prescribed. There has to be employed here prudent judgment, and the custom of the observant and respectful religious is to be observed, as well as the common sense of those rightly considering and judging what this whole enterprise is, and that it is not in their view, alien to the religious state.

This Constitution # 288 is taken practically *verbatim* from Suarez' Book IX, Chapter VIII [*De Medio iuvandi proximos, conversando familiariter, etc.*], n. 13: [*Quibus regulis dignoscatur dicta indecentia.*]. St. Gregory's **Forty Gospel Homilies** have been translated into English ¹⁶. Homily 24 is a reflection on Jn 21:1-14, 'Jesus Standing on the Shore'. Jesus' tribulations led to comparing Him as a broiled fish to be consumed! Gregory concludes:

Jesus ate the honeycomb and the broiled fish because those who endure affliction for the sake of the truth are satisfied there with true delight...Act upon these things, my friends...¹⁷

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It might be of interest to offer an insight derived from a great modern Benedictine Scholar – which might shed some light on the phenomenon of Fr. Bertoni's copying vast segments from other authors. Fr. Jean Leclercq, OSB, already quoted above, has noted in the old monasteries, regarding "**The Monastic Scriptorium**":

... The task of the copyist was an authentic form of asceticism...It was work that was both manual and intellectual...copying a book was, like prayer and fasting, a means [of asceticism]... When the book was completed, offering it to God was, at times, a kind of Liturgy: *Suscipe, sancta Trinitas, oblationem huius codicis...* it was also a way to exercise an apostolate in the Church...[For those unable to take to the plow], Then let him take up the pen, he will sow the seeds of the divine words...He will preach without opening his mouth; without breaking silence...The transcribed books are so many proclamations of the truth....¹⁸

Fr. Bertoni often used what he copied for the instruction of others, and was more at ease using other people's words than his own. This phenomenon has been noted by Fr. Nello Dalle Vedove, CSS, the Stigmatine Founder's most important biographer:

¹⁶ Cistercian Publication. Kalamazoo MI. Homily 24 is on pages 179 – 186.

¹⁷ o.c. pp. 184,f.

¹⁸ cf. Jean Leclercq, OSB, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God. A Study of Monastic Culture*. NY: Fordham 1994

... [Fr. Cesari] gave to Fr. Bertoni a copy of the *Spiritual exercises* of St. Ignatius of Loyola. He studied them night and day, and indeed, even copied them entirely in his very neat hand-writing. He would then preach these retreats to the Clergy with such enthusiasm and unction of piety, that this produced extraordinary fruit in those who heard them...¹⁹

... [For his continuing meditations to the Clerics of the seminary, Fr. Bertoni] ... transcribed St. John Chrysostom's Commentaries on Matthew, without adding any of his own reflections. He delivered 41 such meditations, which correspond to the 28 Homilies of the Holy Doctor of the Church. Thus he felt much more secure in nourishing his clerics with a totally heavenly doctrine without mixing into it anything of himself...²⁰

... After these 73 Meditations on the First Book of Kings, and the 41 Meditations on St. Matthew, Fr. Bertoni believed that his seminarians were now ready to take on a deepening of their understanding of Genesis [and once more, from St. John Chrysostom's Commentary]...²¹

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¹⁹ cf. Nello Dalle Vedove, *Vita e pensiero del Beato Gaspare Bertoni agli albori dell'800 veronese*. Roma Stigmatini 1977, p. 108. [It is worthwhile noting here that clergy formation was long a privileged Stigmatine Ministry, legislated by the Founder – cf. CF # 164 - where Fr. Bertoni considers the 'Grade' of the 'Professed Apostolic Misisoanries'.

²⁰ Cf. Nello, o.c., p. 391.

²¹ Cf. Nello, o.c., pp. 606, f.

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