

Monsieur Pouget and Alfred Loisy*

by Erminio Antonello, C.M.

Province of Turin

When Alfred Loisy published his little red books, Guillaume Pouget was a nearly unknown Vincentian, teaching the theologians of his congregation in Paris. A few years later, in 1905, his blindness and removal from teaching confirmed definitively the common misunderstanding about him. While being relegated to a small room in the Maison Mère, it was only his friendship with a few young students that kept up his contact with the outside world (such as Jacques Chevalier and Jean Guitton).¹ The encounter between Loisy and Pouget, therefore, took place at a distance.

In his *Mémoires*, Loisy cited Father Pouget in two places. He had a vague memory of him, to the point that he did not even recall his name. Under the heading Fr. X. (P.X.), he quoted him: "The Vincentian Fr. X. had been removed from teaching Holy Scripture since he had published a letter in my defense."² Besides this mention, no information exists about this letter. We have only a few letters of Pouget, and there are no traces of any public position that he took in favor of Loisy at the time of the modernist controversy. In any case, this citation shows that Loisy believed that Pouget was favorable to his own position, as another passage in these *Mémoires* demonstrates: "... Fr. X., a good old Vincentian, who around age sixty began to engage in biblical criticism, and acknowledged its results."³

* Alfred Loisy (1857-1940).

¹ J. GUITTON, *Portrait de Monsieur Pouget*, Paris, 1941; PÈRE POUGET, *Logia, propos et enseignements, présentés par J. Chevalier*, Paris, Grasset, 1955.

² A. LOISY, *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire religieuse de notre temps*, Paris, Nourry, 1930 (3 vols.), II, p. 517.

³ *Ibid.*, II, p. 399.

Here, too, there is no precision, since the *Portrait de Monsieur Pouget* shows that Pouget began to engage in historical criticism in 1889,⁴ at age forty-two. In addition, his first work of historical-critical method dates from his fifties.⁵

Pouget's early sympathy for Loisy

By contrast, Pouget's attention given to Loisy was much clearer. Loisy's publications interested him. He read them and showed a sincere sympathy toward them, as unpublished letter from 1903 proves. This was a private letter for use within the Congregation,⁶ written in answer to a question from the superior general. He had wanted to know Father Pouget's thinking about Loisy's *L'Évangile et l'Église*, since he had rejected the protectionist criteria of the time by placing a copy of the book in the theology students' library. Pouget wrote:

This is what I have to tell you about the explanations that you asked of me. Since you asked me on other occasions about the book *L'Évangile et l'Église* by abbé Loisy, this is what I thought of it then: I had some clearly expressed hesitations about the first two chapters, ("Le royaume de Dieu," and "Le fils de Dieu"). Concerning the last one, in particular, I supposed that he allowed the traditional value of the proofs and was attacking only their form. Today, because of further writings, I believe that I cannot be so charitable, and I wonder how he can rationalize his faith in the divinity of the Savior. In the same chapter, I found what he said about the messianic consciousness to be naïve and

⁴ "I was a conservative of the strictest type. Vigouroux was my kind of man. I held for the agreement of geology with the biblical accounts. In 1889, I had read certain remarks of Loisy, although quite inoffensive, which bowled me over. I had no guide. It was Duchesne who opened my spirit. I started to follow his course on the Acts, but I gnashed my teeth and did not return. You understand: I had read the Bible, I don't know how many times, but why? To find geology there. Then reading Duchesne, I checked the text, and I told myself: there are not a lot of proofs, but they are good." J. GUITTON, *Portrait de Monsieur Pouget*, pp. 30-31.

⁵ G. POUGET, *La mosaïcité du Pentateuque d'après les données de l'histoire et les enseignements de l'Église*, Paris, 1897.

⁶ Father Pouget was suspected of adhering to heterodox positions because of his conversion to historical criticism. Beginning in 1897, he had to defend himself before the superior general and, on the day after the publication of the little red books, the criticism of his teaching became more pronounced. Since the superior general, Antoine Fiat, was a little deaf, Pouget wrote him several letters to avoid misunderstandings, and to show clearly his proper position in relationship to biblical criticism.

needing some corrections concerning the redemption and especially the resurrection. For the last three chapters, on the Church, dogma and worship, I would judge them as the bishop of La Rochelle did, who said that these chapters had swept him away. They were the ones that pleased me both about the book, and I still supposed that many things could not have been said more explicitly, but I crossed out two sentences that neither the bishop of La Rochelle nor Father Grandmaison mentioned. You see, Father, I noticed some weak points in this book, and about others I was perhaps too charitable in my suppositions, but I cannot condemn in advance of competent authority. Now, Rome has not yet condemned it, and it is said that it is not probable that it will; that does not mean that it approves the book. And the cardinal has not prohibited reading it and has not examined it thoroughly.⁷

His judgment, although critical, manifests a certain benevolence, almost a tendency to excuse Loisy, and it certainly does not refuse an excuse. Pouget was in the group of thinkers who gravitated to such journals as *La Justice sociale*, *L'Observateur* and, in particular, certain ecclesial publications, like the *Revue du Clergé français*. This latter, although it pointed out dogmatic difficulties that the little book raised, tended to a certain confidence and sympathy toward Loisy for the whole of his studies.⁸ Beyond objective reservations of a dogmatic type, always minimized in the light of their benevolence, this sympathy evidenced the need to defend the critical method that had conquered Pouget.

Pouget's hesitations about certain theses in *L'Évangile et l'Église*

The point about which Pouget had the greatest hesitations arose from the theses about the divine sonship of Jesus, particularly where Loisy held that "the divine sonship of Jesus is a theological conclusion, not the expression of a doctrine or a thought that Jesus himself would have formulated."⁹ By contrast, Pouget was convinced that, beginning with the constant faith of the Church which recognized Jesus as the consubstantial son of the Father, it would be

⁷ Unpublished letter, 25 July 1903, Archives of the Congregation of the Mission, Paris, *Dossier Pouget*.

⁸ É. POULAT, *Histoire, dogme et critique dans la crise moderniste*, Paris, 1962; Ital. trans. Brescia, 1967, pp. 156-60.

⁹ A. LOISY, *L'Évangile et l'Église*, Paris, Picard, 1902, pp. 41-42. For the position of Loisy: É. POULAT, *Histoire*, op. cit., Ital. trans., pp. 58-60; 103-104; 175-179.

possible to find in the most ancient texts from the beginning of Christianity the historical fundament of such a dogma, as Jesus had indicated to the apostles. This conviction is the basis of an article by Pouget¹⁰ published in the *Rivista storico-critica delle scienze teologiche*,¹¹ in which he drew up an “indirect criticism of Loisy,” while upholding that faith in the divinity of Christ is not the fruit of the theological creativity of the community of believers beginning with the notion of Messiah. Rather, it was a truth unveiled gradually by Jesus himself to the apostles, in a semitic language, through his teaching and his gestures, without neglecting the development that had already taken place in the primitive Church and was clearly evident in texts of the New Testament.

At the time of this article, Father Pouget had already been removed from teaching (1905) and had nearly lost his sight completely. He began to use the young Jacques Chevalier to communicate with Loisy. According to Chevalier’s journal, we learn that there was some exchange of letters with Loisy, and we have confirmation of this in Loisy’s *Mémoires*. Pouget feared that Loisy might be separating himself from the faith of the Church¹² on account of some of his positions. Between 1906 and 1907, Chevalier and Pouget exhorted Loisy several times to examine his own positions and submit himself to the Church.¹³ But Loisy had already established his position and remained inflexible, determining instead that the Pouget-Chevalier position was “ecclesiastical fideism.”¹⁴

¹⁰ GUTOPE (anagram of Pouget), “La fede nella divinità del Cristo durante l’età apostolica,” *Rivista Storico-Critica delle Scienze Teologiche*, 11 (1906): 813-831; 1 (1907): 1-12; 2 (1907): 81-90; 4 (1907): 249-282. The text was translated into Italian by the editors of the journal. The French original is found in the personal papers of Maurice Vansteenkiste, C.M., Paris.

¹¹ This review was defined by Ernesto Bonaiuti as being “the official Catholic face.”

¹² “I am really afraid that M. Loisy has lost the faith.” J. CHEVALIER, *Logia*, op. cit., p. 19.

¹³ “From Cérilly I wrote to abbé Loisy about his condemnation, the meaning that it assumed in our eyes, the duty to accept it: a letter that I shared with Fr. Pouget, who approved it and to which Loisy remains strangely insensitive”: J. CHEVALIER, *Logia*, op. cit, p. 6, 18 April 1906.

¹⁴ “J. Chevalier and some others began to find that I had gone a little far and they flattered themselves with organizing the best accommodations with orthodoxy. I have not noticed that, up to now, they had had much success.” A. LOISY, *Mémoires*, op. cit, vol. II, p. 522 (9 May 1907); “Some Catholics like J. Chevalier had understood better than Sabatier and even von Hugel the position that I had taken in my most recent books, but they judged it from a perspective that I could not accept. Chevalier wrote me on 4 March 1908: ‘A religious work that is not done within the Church is, sooner or later, condemned to failure, since all that she constructs that is strong and fertile should be taken up in the Church for generations to come. There is an

Pouget bitterly accepted this inflexibility because of the genuine esteem that he had had for Loisy. From this moment, Pouget separated himself from Loisy and kept his distance, less for his historical-critical method than for his very personal way of applying it to the Scriptures. According to Pouget the historical-critical exegesis practiced by Loisy was breaking down the delicate and necessary relationship between tradition and faith. Pouget would repeat it often during these months.

“For Loisy, Catholicism is nothing much more than the first of the natural religious. He has lost his sense of tradition.”¹⁵ “Loisy is lacking a sense of tradition.”¹⁶ “One of the disciples of M. Loisy told me: ‘As regards the manner in which M. Loisy explains it, the idea that he has of Jesus and his mission is more natural.’ ‘It certainly is too much, Monsieur,’ I told him.”¹⁷ “In the religious life, since it is only one, ideas are enormous, but that is not all. Indeed, it is a question of opportuneness; souls must be taken into account, since it is for them that authority has been established. One has to obey authority, to let it take its time, since little by little ideas get spread abroad. Mankind cannot take them in all at once. And not all of these ideas gain currency.”¹⁸

The occasion that allowed Pouget to deepen and develop his criticism was offered by the publication of Loisy’s commentaries on the synoptic Gospels,¹⁹ during the last months preceding his excommunication.²⁰ His attentive reading advanced slowly, since it depended on the good will of someone to read it to him, but it

unavoidable reality there, more unavoidable even than the anguishing difficulties that overwhelm someone, and which are not always his fault.’ This is ‘ecclesiastical fideism,’ and it seems to me perfectly useless to discuss its premises. Roman Catholicism has not always existed, and it will not exist forever, and it is quite another thing than a living absolute, a absolute of truth, an absolute of holiness”: A. LOISY, *Mémoires*, op. cit., vol. III, pp. 28-29 (4 March 1908).

¹⁵ J. CHEVALIER, *Logia*, op. cit., p. 20 (12 February 1908).

¹⁶ J. CHEVALIER, *Logia*, op. cit., p. 21 (29 February 1908).

¹⁷ J. CHEVALIER, *Logia*, op. cit., p. 17 (15 January 1908).

¹⁸ J. CHEVALIER, *Logia*, op. cit., p. 17 (15 January 1908).

¹⁹ A. LOISY, *Les Évangiles Synoptiques*, Paris, Ceffonds, 1907. This book was completed in March 1907, but went on sale only in January 1908. Certain parts of this commentary were previously published in *Revue d’histoire et littérature religieuses*; cf. J. CHEVALIER, *Logia*, op. cit., p. 19.

²⁰ On 14 February 1908, a general excommunication was issued by the archbishop of Paris; then, on 7 March, a personal one was issued by Rome, declaring him *vitandus*.

reinforced his conviction that, unfortunately, Loisy had come to a rationalist boundary. Finally, in the first months of 1909 he published in *Annales de Philosophie Chrétienne* his article on the synoptic gospels by Loisy.²¹

Pouget's Article on *Évangiles Synoptiques*

This article shows the lack of methodological coherence in Loisy's research on the Gospels. His intention was to try to reconstruct the history and work of Jesus by using exclusively the historical method,²² but in reality he broadened the "creative and interpretive action of the primitive community" to the point of making this responsible for a substantial manipulation of the facts of the Gospels.²³

²¹ G.P.B. (GUILLAUME POUGET BESSE) - J. CHEVALIER, "Les Évangiles Synoptiques de M. Loisy," *Annales de Philosophie Chrétienne*, January (1909): 337-366. This article is a work of collaboration; the final redaction was done by Chevalier on the basis of notes taken in conversations with Pouget between 19 March and 17 September 1908. These manuscript notes are kept in the personal files of J. Chevalier, Cérilly, *Lot-Pouget*, n. 7.

²² "It is properly as an historian and intellectual that M. Loisy undertook this task. He wanted to... try to reconstitute, with his own resources alone, the history and the work of Jesus. We will follow him on his own ground to see if it is solid.... While placing ourselves at the very origin of M. Loisy's attempt, we would simply like to investigate whether the task that he has undertaken is a task that one may accomplish with the forces alone that criticism uses; whether it should not be done for the simple correct interpretation of the data of the Gospels, and to appeal to other resources; and when in fact M. Loisy himself, without realizing it, has not acted in that way, and whether he is nothing more than an historian and critic." G. POUGET - J. CHEVALIER, "Les Évangiles Synoptiques," op. cit., pp. 338-339.

²³ "M. Loisy knows well enough the link between the texts of the Gospels and the work of Jesus, with the living faith of which that they are but a partial expression at a given moment. He had proved with great force, against Harnack, that the study of the Gospel should not be separated from the study of the nascent Church; and in the first pages of his major work, he has situated well the intimate union of the literary and the historical problem, such that one may be fearful of finding in his critique an ingenious interplay of texts, or a personal reconstruction based on preconceived ideas, inspired by a certain systematic representation of the work of Jesus and his disciples. And meanwhile, when one reads his two volumes slowly, you cannot protect yourself from a fear of this sort, and the fear keeps growing as you advance. What is this historical tradition for M. Loisy, in which as a good historian he hopes to replace the texts? From the beginning to the end of his book, M. Loisy seems especially worried about showing the role that 'the constant and progressive elaboration of received impressions and treasured memories' (I, 175) 'played in the formation of the apostolic tradition. He is searching for the elements that could have contributed to the amplification of the primitive data, and the psychological conditions that make understandable for us a

Loisy's hermeneutical insufficiency derived from the fact of his wish to hold unilaterally to the side of historical criticism, and he wound up by applying to the text the perspective of rationalism. In fact, in his exegesis, once the principle is laid down of the radical autonomy of criticism in relationship to faith, then "a small number of more or less admitted presumptions," as Pouget said, enter in between the exegete and the historical documents. These stealthily replace the interpretive horizon of faith and give, not the free and neutral exegesis that Loisy wanted, but an exegesis contaminated exactly by these *a priori* presumptions that direct interpretation. The *a priori* principles critiqued by Pouget are the following:

1. The exaltation of the creativity of the primitive community, stretched to inventing facts recounted in the Gospels;²⁴
2. The reduction of the events mentioned in the Gospels to pure symbols devoid of any historic reality, since their literary genre is prophetic and allegorical in style²⁵

"progressive accumulation of disparate ideas, whose success seems so much the more extraordinary to us, given that its rational base was so fragile" (I, 195)... For M. Loisy there took place a constant alteration and transfiguration of real events." G. POUGET - J. CHEVALIER, *Les Évangiles Synoptiques*, op. cit., pp. 339-340.

²⁴ "No matter what M. Loisy might think about it, general religious science, or the science of religions, is still in its infancy. It could be hazarded to claim that it had never even been born, since we do not see that it has either its own method or its own object. We do not know almost anything about what M. Loisy supposes to be so well known, such as the way in which a religious movement spreads abroad in a given milieu, the role of imagination and faith in the elaboration of facts; and on the other hand, the minimum of the objective reality needed for this work. Collective illusion, suggestion, the subconscious are only, in many cases, just easy and specious words, by which one covers over a reality which we do not wish at all to dismiss without reasons or explanation. It was this wave that allowed the erection of what is a simple accompaniment into a religious fact; it reacts with it, but it does not create it nor take it into account." G. POUGET - J. CHEVALIER, *Les Évangiles Synoptiques*, op. cit., p. 343.

²⁵ "It does not seem that M. Loisy has a clear idea of the difference that exists between reality and its clothing, between a fact and the formula given to it at a certain period." *Ibid.*, p. 348. "For the Jews, and for the apostolic generations, the allegorical meaning of Scripture did not destroy its literal meaning; we loved to find in the past a figure and prefigurement of the present: prophecy confirming history; allegory making history better for teaching; it does not erase in any way the reality of the fact itself.... The role of symbol in the gospel tradition is incontestable. The whole question is to know whether we are supposed to deal with full symbols or figures empty of reality.... Here and there we have an outline of history. Such texts should not be pushed. Criticism has no right to pull out of it objections against the historicity, in their whole and at root, of the facts that they relate." *Ibid.*,

3. The rational and naturalist conception that denies in advance all possibility of the supernatural manifesting itself in history, such that the Gospels' way of recounting miracles or the resurrection of Jesus itself would be none other than the literary form used by the disciples in expressing the idea of the divine transcendence of Jesus, an idea based on faith in him.²⁶

pp. 346-347. "If M. Loisy had been present to the spirit, as to what touches the facts of the gospel history, this elementary and fundamental distinction between the fact, and the formulation of the fact, he would have seen, and would have made us see, that the facts of the Gospel could have been elaborated in their formulation and for their meaning, by the mentality of the apostles under the influence of the Old Testament, the needs of apologetics, and of their proper beliefs, but making something up out of whole cloth could not be and cannot be, on the part of apostolic men, the result of a suggestion or of enthusiasm, or simply a lie." *Ibid.*, p. 348. "By a singular and doubtless unseen contradiction M. Loisy, who finds everywhere in the Synoptics the traces of a legendary elaboration, treats these same texts as if they were that which is not like a 'rigorous history,' which presents itself as such. These arguments would prevail against a history of this type, but applied to the Scriptures, they carry no weight. In all this, that which is missing the most is, we would say, an historical sense." *Ibid.*, p. 347.

²⁶ "One of the *a priori* principles that inspired the 'purely scientific method' of Loisy is the denial of miracles. And this denial rests on another principle: when a fact represents an idea, there is a chance that the fact has been invented for the idea. In summary, M. Loisy is relying on the meaning of a fact to deny its historicity." *Ibid.*, p. 353. "History is not to be explained, it declares that resemblance is not the measure of truth; and besides, every historical fact, taken from the moral point of view, that is, properly historical, is at the root of the word, a unique fact that will not be seen again. In history, there is no difference of nature between a miracle and an ordinary fact. The historian, as historian, knows only facts more or less established. A miracle is not a fact as such, but a conclusion derived from a fact, and this is why a historian knows nothing of miracles. To draw this conclusion a certain mind-set is required. As to the fact itself, an unheard of fact, and extraordinary event, if it is well established, the historian has no right to deny it. It is enough for me to know that there is contingency in nature, that the laws of nature are not inflexible, for me not to have the right to repress on principle a well established fact, no matter how normal it may be." *Ibid.*, pp. 355-356. "When the question is of extraordinary and not habitual facts that present for us, besides, a primordial interest (like the resurrection of Christ, history is not enough to produce certitude, but it cannot destroy it either. Finally, to affirm it, we have to have a good intellectual and moral mind-set. And even that is not sufficient: we have to have the grace of God." *Ibid.*, p. 353. "If Christ is not risen, the formation of the belief in the resurrection becomes unintelligible for us. Despite the psychology of M. Loisy, his explanation satisfies us rationally much less than the simple facts of the Gospel account. If the faith of the apostles in the resurrection is not born out of the resurrection, one wonders where this faith has been able to draw its assurance and the force of the conviction that it had from the beginning.... Indeed, this would be an even greater miracle than all that had

In the entirety of the article, Pouget is convinced that this quarrel does not concern simply matters of exegesis which could be changed by the development of biblical science, but rather matters the directly threatened the foundation of the faith itself.²⁷ In fact, Loisy's *a priori* principles remove all historical consistency from the Christian faith and reduce it to "pure feeling," or to "a good natural religion, perhaps the best that we have, but lacking supernatural character."²⁸ If it was true, as Loisy seems to support, that the faith of the apostles developed on its own just through their subjective perception, cut off from the objectivity of the facts of the life of Christ, then the witness of the apostles and the faith would be cut off from any historic connection with Christ. It was in this direction that Loisy was developing his exegesis, when he held that Jesus "is not, properly speaking, the founder of the Church nor even of the Gospel. He was only the occasion for it: ... such is the meaning of the sentence so dear to Loisy: 'They were waiting for the Kingdom; what arrived was the Church.'²⁹

If the result of Loisy's exegesis is the dissolution of the Christian faith in its essential characteristic of being founded on the singular history of Jesus, Pouget nevertheless did not want to reject

been able to be produced without a miracle.... We have to accept the testimony of the apostles, without which we would have to admit that they had been tricked, that there was a hallucination from one end to the other of apostolic history: but an hallucination followed by a colossal fact, which is not an hallucination, and which can be proven!" *Ibid.*, p. 351. "What does the following mean for Loisy: 'I believe in the resurrection of Christ?' It means this without a doubt: 'I believe that Christ survived in the belief of his apostles.' For us, we hold to the sense that the apostles gave to it and which the Church gives: 'I believe that Christ is risen.' Indeed, the religious value of a fact like the resurrection, which is (M. Loisy does not answer this) the keystone of all Christian tradition, does not dwell only in the spiritual interpretation given it, but, and before all, in the fact itself. It is on the basis of the fact of the resurrection that the hope of human redemption is based.... In demeaning the witness of the apostles, in denying the fact of the resurrection and the important circumstances that surround it, when he writes, for example (I, p. 223) 'One may suppose that the soldiers took the body down from the cross before evening and placed it in some common grave, where they threw in a jumble the remains of the executed,' M. Loisy has clearly gone beyond the rights of history." *ibid.*, p. 352.

²⁷ "There is no more question here of a battle on a middle ground between the prolongation of the faith or its formulation in a certain era, and the results of science, themselves being subject to revision. This is rather a matter of a conflict on vital points, and of an even graver conflict than a conflict of ideas, since our logic always collapses somewhere; whereas here, in history, the results obtained have an appearance of objectivity. Faith either has to deny the results or adapt to them." *Ibid.*, p. 362.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 362-365.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 364-365.

historical-critical exegesis. Rather, he held that it should follow another path, not that of a “exegesis divided” between history and faith, but an exegesis “coordinated” between faith and its tradition. This means that it had as a preconception the living framework in which the examined documents were generated.

It was not for this reason that Pouget adhered to the idea of a direct and immediate passage between the facts of history and the faith, such that the simple apology of history had to lead to the faith, but it would show that the impossibility of dissociating faith from the history of the Gospels is a singularity of Christian revelation. This path of the exegesis of the Gospels within the tradition, Pouget held besides, agrees better with the historical development from which it developed. In fact, it took shape in, and was received by, the community of believers as the witness to the encounter of the apostles and their experience with Christ, and it is true that the evangelists expressed the witness of the apostles in the form of catechesis, and so used the literary genres proper to the synoptic tradition. However, it should not be deduced that they have deformed or, worse, invented, historical events as part of their teaching.³⁰ In the last analysis, what Pouget did not accept in Loisy’s work was the weakening of the Christian faith in its relationship with history and the reality of the Gospel facts.

G. Pouget distances himself from Loisy in the context of biblical modernism

In the Pouget-Loisy confrontation, although Loisy had been an actor in the issues of the biblical question at the beginning of the twentieth century, Pouget confronted these issues only at a distance and privately, as a simple onlooker. The center of the debate was the

³⁰ “The faith of the apostles is based on facts. We have to accept these facts from them if we do have a decisive reason to deny their testimony, since history is not a matter of experimentation, and since, today, we cannot see or determine them. It is true that their faith is expressed in documents. But what kind of documents? This is a matter of conjecture. If the documents were alone, they would leave us more in doubt that they guarantee their affirmation. But behind the documents there is a living society that produced them and accepted them. The documents of the Gospels belong to a society that would not have turned back on what it believed to be their religious duty: that is, to honor Christ as he should be. This is our guarantee. The evangelists made historical catecheses, and so the books teach us. But did they invent, or even simply deformed, history because of the need to teach? This would have to be proved, and the witness of the apostles is difficult to establish. Certainly, a critic has a duty to pull out what was believed at the time that the synoptics were written. They have not been edited by the apostles, but they continued the roots planted in the immediately preceding period, which is the period of the very activity of the apostles.” *Ibid.*, pp. 362-363.

possibility of introducing some historical-critical information into exegesis and theology. Pouget favored this but, in seeking to check Loisy's exegetical method, he distanced himself from the latter since Loisy insisted that it be done under certain conditions. In particular, historical-critical exegesis had to respect the proper nature of the writings under investigation, since it was not a matter of simple literary texts, but of documents coming out of the tradition of the faith of the Church. It was on this point that the difficulty with Loisy arose.

1. In his defense and clarification of *L'Évangile et l'Église* expressed in his work *Autour d'un petit livre*,³¹ Loisy supported with conviction his view that historical and theological perspectives had to be understood in terms of reciprocal independence, and hence exegesis could "be developed only by the critical method;"³² and the Church was not competent to give "guidelines for the historical analysis of sacred texts."³³ This separation of methods seemed decisive for Loisy to resolve the disagreement between dogma and criticism since, because of their mutual exclusion, one could avoid every possible conflict. For Pouget this method was inadequate since, if it were correct to maintain a distinction of method, this should not be transformed into a separation or worse, into a rupture.

But Pouget did not arrive at this conclusion in the way that the conservatives did, by simply defending the "rights" of dogma. Instead, he pointed out the impasse that the "separated exegesis" of Loisy was leading to. He correctly remarked that putting dogma into parentheses within exegesis did not safeguard the presumed

³¹ A. LOISY, *Autour d'un petit livre*, Paris, Picard, 1903.

³² "Theological and pastoral exegesis, and scientific and historical exegesis, are two very different things, which cannot be governed by a single law. Although the material for it seems identical, the object is not really the same. The law of ecclesiastical exegesis, which is to teach, by way of the Bible, Catholic faith and morals, could not be the law of simple historical exegesis. By the same token, the law of historical exegesis, which is the determination of facts and of the primitive meaning of texts, could not be the law of ecclesiastical exegesis. If this latter would impose its conclusions on the former like facts or opinions of the past, it would stifle it. And if historical exegesis were to impose its conclusions on ecclesiastical exegesis, like dogmas to be believed now, it would ruin it.... Criticism should keep to its own area; it should not trespass on the domain of the faith and its dogmatic interpretation. It is not the job of the historian, if he is only an historian, to pronounce about the basis of religion and the object of revelation.... Likewise, the theologian should stop identifying history with theology and consider his speculations as the only adequate and unchanging form of religious knowledge and the science of religion." A. LOISY, *Autour d'un petit livre*, op. cit., pp. 51-53.

³³ A. LOISY, *Autour d'un petit livre*, op. cit., p. 50.

neutrality of the researcher, but introduced surreptitiously certain rationalist principles that demolished exegesis in terms of history. As a result, Loisy's historical method perverted the "inspired" texts reducing them simply to documents of scriptural archeology. Pouget reproached him: "Loisy treats the texts as fragments totally disarticulated from their context. But in reality they constitute a whole within an uninterrupted movement of life in the bosom of a community. The Church has its own psychological laws gleaned from Tradition. Loisy has lost all sense of Tradition."³⁴

Pouget therefore claimed, against Loisy, the interpretation of history as a "moral science," for which one could not go beyond a certain interpretive postulate, namely, "The Church has one of them, and she recognizes it ; Monsieur Loisy has one, too, and we would do well not to hold it against him, but he does not seem to recognize it."³⁵ In this way, the position of the Catholic exegete who conforms to the "pre-understanding," or *mentalité*, as Pouget called it, of the tradition of the Church, seemed more coherent with the nature of the texts being examined. It alone, in fact, could safeguard the hermeneutical continuum between the acts of history and the faith witnessed to by these texts, since it had developed as an expression of the apostolic catechesis. In other words, the debate over Loisy's exegetical method was based on the claim that the texts submitted to exegesis were texts of faith, already interpreted by the living tradition of the Church, and not simply historical texts. In this way, one could not, in historical-critical exegesis, separate the faith of the Church from its hermeneutical context.

2. In his confrontation with Loisy, Pouget found himself in unison with a good number of Catholic scholars who took an intermediate path in Loisy's claim. It was not the opposition of those who reacted on an emotional and defensive basis, but of those who, better advised critically, like Father Lagrange or Maurice Blondel, pointed to the insufficiency of the historical-exegetical method Loisy proposed. Although the historiography of modernism split, a little schematically and quickly, into the two opposing camps of those in favor of and those opposed to the application of historical criticism, and although it reduced at the same time the intermediate positions to simply compromise positions, in fact this historiographical line does not take into account the complexity of the debate.³⁶

³⁴ J. CHEVALIER, *Logia*, op. cit., p. 21.

³⁵ G. POUGET, *Les Évangiles synoptiques*, op. cit., p. 353.

³⁶ J. BELLAMY, *La théologie catholique au XIX^e siècle*, Paris, Beauchesne (1904), p. 193; É. HOCEDEZ, *Histoire de la Théologie au XIX^e siècle*, op. cit., pp. 124-125; Ch. THÉOBALD, *L'entrée de l'histoire dans l'univers religieux et théologique au moment de la crise moderniste*, Paris, Beauchesne, 1973, p. 13.

Underestimating the originality of the intermediate positions has sometimes allowed the superficial establishment of a direct development between modernism and Vatican II. But in reality it is exactly in these intermediate positions, which have not yet been sufficiently studied, that one should recognize the irreplaceable function of having provided a link between old and new, or nearly a backdrop, thanks to which the polemics were cooled down. Now, it has been slowly possible to carry out a reflection on the historical-critical method in exegesis and to formulate in another way the method of understanding in theology. Pouget should be placed in the front line here.

To support this thesis, it is possible to cite a unique episode. According to the account of Loris Capovilla, his secretary, John XXIII took from his personal meditation on the *Portrait de M. Pouget*³⁷ the hermeneutical criterion of distinguishing between the “deposit of the truths of faith” and the “language in which they are expressed,” proclaimed in the pope’s opening discourse at the Second Vatican Council. His text, *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*, is recognized in historiography as the “salient point of the spirit of the Council to mark the passage of the Church to a new historical era.”³⁸

This episode is a little witness to how a position at the secondary level, such as Father Pouget was able to play, can be so important in the development of the understanding of the Faith.

(JOHN E. RYBOLT, C.M., translator)

³⁷ Cf. J. GUITTON, *Une siècle, une vie*, Paris, Laffont, 1988, pp. 180-181.

³⁸ *Storia dei Concilii ecumenici*, Brescia, Queriniana, 1990, pp. 406-407. In this discourse (*Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*, 11 October 1962) we read: “Est enim aliud ipsum depositum Fidei, seu veritates quae veneranda doctrina nostra continentur, aliud modus, quo eadem enuntiantur, eodem tamen sensu eademque sententia.” The critical text of the discourse, established from the various editions in the hand of the pope himself, is found in G. ALBERIGO - A. MELLONI, *Fede - Tradizione - Profezia. Studi su Giovanni XXIII e sul Vaticano II*, Brescia, 1984, pp. 185-283.