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Commentary on the Four Gospels - 4 vols.



Fr. Cornelius a Lapide S. J.

Sewn Hardcover — 375 Pages — \$199.00

Scott Hahn - Book Review

from *Letter & Spirit*, Volume 4 - 2008

Cornelius a Lapide, S.J. (1568-1637) is a giant figure in the history of Catholic biblical interpretation. Born in a tiny Catholic enclave in the Calvinist Netherlands in the bloody generation after the Reformation, Lapide grew to be one of the Church's most gifted scholars and spiritual interpreters of the sacred page.

Ordained as a Jesuit priest in 1595, he became a spell-binding lecturer in Scripture and Hebrew, first at Louvain and later at the Roman college. He was known for weaving in topical allusions and references to classical literature, philosophy, and history, along with quotations from the Church Fathers and insights into the Greek, Hebrew, and Latin texts. These were also characteristics of his writing, which was nothing short of prodigious. Between 1614 and 1645, Lapide wrote commentaries on every book of Scripture except Job and Psalms.

Yet despite his historical importance, Lapide today is largely unknown. His works have long been out of print and hard to find; many remain untranslated. Loreto Publications has now published the first complete translation of his commentaries on the four gospels as the launching point for a planned thirty-volume reissue of Lapide's exegetical writings that will also be made available to subscribers online.

To read Lapide four hundred years later is to enter a nearly forgotten world of biblical interpretation – where there are no clear lines between the historical, the literary, and the spiritual reading of the text; where philosophy, archeology, philology, and even the natural sciences are brought to bear in illuminating the divine meaning of the text.

Lapide's reading of the parable of the wise and foolish virgins (Matt. 25:1-13) includes: a discussion of numerology in Philo and Plato; a study of the possible Arabic background to certain expressions in the text; detailed considerations of Virgil's

fourth *Eclogue* and *Aeneid*, Catullus, Martial, and Pliny (all in relation to the symbolism of “nuptial lamps and torches”); not to mention citations of more than two dozen Church Fathers along with a quotation from Rabbi Achabia and the Mishnah. It is hard to say what is more striking – the sheer breadth and density of Lapide's interpretative matrix or his audacity in summoning all these resources to the interpretation of the sacred text.

Lapide himself takes a breathtaking high view of Scripture's purpose: “The dignity, usefulness, and majesty of sacred Scripture are so great that it surpasses the books of all philosophers and theologians, among the Hebrew and the Greek and Latin authors, as much as divine wisdom surpasses all human wisdom. For sacred Scripture is the Word of God. It is the very utterance and speech of God, by means of which God enunciates his wisdom to us, and shows us the way to virtue, salvation, and eternal happiness. Wherefore St. Augustine (*Epistle 3*) ... asserts that sacred Scripture is an encyclopedia of all the sciences.

... Sacred Scripture is the art of arts, the science of sciences: it is the Pandora and the encyclopedia of wisdom.”

Lapide prefaces his commentary with thirty-eight “canons of interpretation,” which reflect a wise and prayerful method. Canon 35, for instance, explains the “marvelous... and wondrously consonant... harmony of the New Testament with the Old in the economy of salvation. This hermeneutical presupposition has consequences for Lapide's method. “Hence, in order to explain a Scripture passage of the New Testament from its roots and foundations, examine and trace the figure, the prophecy or thought of the Old Testament to which it alludes. For the old Law was the prelude to the new, and the new is the completion of the old.”

It is clear that the Fathers hold pride of place for Lapide in his interpretative work. He systematically catalogues all the Fathers' comments on individual verses of Scripture. In places, his commentary recalls the beautiful and rich chain of patristic wisdom found in Saint Thomas Aquinas' famous *Catena Aurea*. Lapide's four-volume work should be a welcome addition to the libraries of scholars and pastors alike.

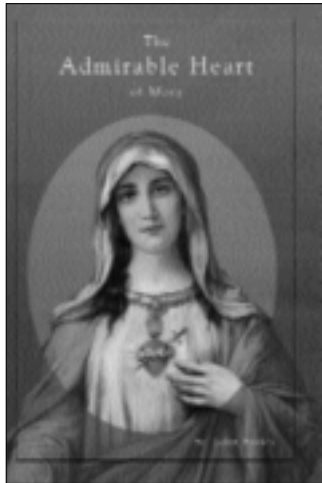
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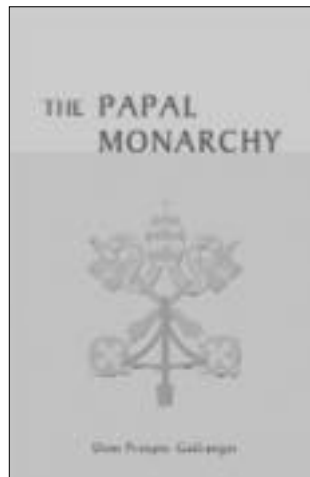


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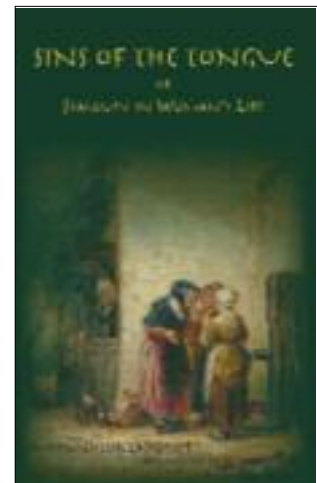


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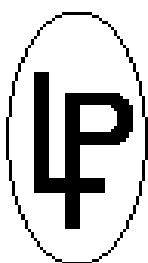
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