Bourassé and Janvier’s 1866 Edition of “The Bible of Tours”
A Modern “Illuminated” Bible

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In the early 19th century, the establishment of a Protestant Bible Society in France for the purpose of translating and distributing a modern French edition of the Bible moved two Catholic priest-professors at the Archdiocesan Seminary of Tours to produce their own modern French translation of an ancient manuscript edition of the Bible.

In 1843, Father Jean-Jacques Bourassé and Father Pierre Désiré Janvier began work on an elegant French translation of a sixth-century Latin Vulgate manuscript of the Bible called “The Bible of Tours.” Bourassé and Janvier were reputable scholars in their own right. Bourassé was a pioneer in France of the modern science of biblical and Christian archaeology. A student of natural science before he entered the seminary, Bourassé after ordination began a course on archaeology at the seminary of Tours, a course that soon attracted great attention. In 1841 he published Archéologie Chrétienne. Pierre Désiré Janvier taught church history at that same seminary at Tours and published several works on French church history. The city of Tours also contributed to the peculiar character of the bible translation project these two men undertook.

Tours, in north central France was a center of Christian evangelization since the time of Constantine (the early 4th century). Its most famous saint, its second bishop, Martin of Tours (316-197), divided his cloak to warm a freezing beggar. Early on its cathedral school became a center of Christian culture producing the great historian Gregory of Tours (538-594), and when in 796 Alcuin of York, the most learned man of his era, became abbot of St. Martin’s he founded a school of calligraphy. In the 9th century the cathedral school at Tours became the heart of the Carolingian renaissance.

The inhabitants of Tours (Tourangeau) have always been renowned for speaking the “purest” French. To this day the pronunciation of Tourain is widely regarded as the standard pronunciation of the French language, devoid of any perceived accent that characterizes the speech of most of the other regions of France, including, Paris.

Bourassé and Janvier’s translation of the Bible into elegant modern French might have had great popular success except that its publisher, Alfred Mame, a printer at Tours, hit upon the idea that in order to make this new translation a true modern-day counterpart of its source, the illuminated Bible of Tours, he would produce a large-format, luxury edition of Bourassé and Janvier’s translation with illustrations by France’s most famous contemporary graphic artist, Gustave Doré (1832-1883). However, the problem resulted that Dore’s brilliantly executed engravings of scenes from the Bible (originally commissioned for an English Bible) eclipsed any interest in Bourassé and Janvier’s translation. Indeed, Doré’s scenes soon took on a life of their own, being reprinted numerous times to accompany many different translations of the Bible not
only in French and English but even in German. Thus French Catholics had to wait until 1955 for a truly masterful French Catholic translation of the Bible—the *Bible de Jerusalem*—named for the French Biblical Institute at Jerusalem which produced its own historic translation of the Bible not from the Vulgate but from ancient manuscripts, Hebrew and Greek.

Nevertheless, Bishop James Roosevelt Bayley wanted his new diocesan seminary to have a copy of this great contemporary French literary and artistic achievement. And thus this first edition copy came into the possession of the library at Immaculate Conception Seminary where it has been treasured ever since.