Antonio Martini’s Sacra Bibbia secondo la Volgata (1782-1792)
The Classical Bible of Italian Catholics

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The history of Italian translations of the bible is a complicated one. The earliest Italian translations appeared at the beginning of the 13th century. These were either liturgical pericopes or piecemeal translations used by Dominican and Franciscan friars for popular preaching. In the next century anonymous translations of whole books such as the Psalms, the Gospels and the Apocalypse appeared. The first printed Italian Bible was produced at Venice in 1471. It was the work of a Camaldolese hermit, Nicolo Malerbi. For a century it became the standard Italian translation but it had some serious limitations: it was not based on original texts and was in the Venetian dialect. When Italian translations by Protestant reformers began to appear, the first were poorly done. But in 1607 at Geneva the Calvinist Giovanni Diodati published an Italian translation that would become the standard version for Italian Protestants for three centuries. It was not until the 18th century that an Italian Catholic scholar came along who was able to set forth a translation comparable in scholarly and literary merits to that of Diodati’s.

Antonio Martini was born on the 20th of April 1720 at Prato, a town in the Tuscan region of north central Italy, not far from Florence. He attended the seminary at Prato but when his superiors noted his gift for ancient languages, he was sent for advanced studies at the University of Pisa. Shortly after graduation in 1752 he was recruited by the King Carl Emmanual III of Savoy to become dean of the Collegio Superga at Turin. Meanwhile, however, Martini’s abilities came to the attention of Vittorio Amadeo Cardinal delle Lanze who knew that Pope Benedict XIV wanted a good version of the bible in contemporary Italian. And so he urged Martini to take on that task. Martini began a translation of the New Testament from the original Greek, but soon found the labor, in conjunction with his duties at the college, beyond his physical strength. He accordingly resigned the directorship of that college in 1765 and instead accepted from the king of Sardinia the position of a state councillorship together with a pension. In spite of discouragement upon the death of Pope Benedict, Martini persevered, completing the publication of the New Testament in 1771. In his work with the Hebrew text of the Old Testament, he was assisted by a learned rabbi, Daniel Terni of Florence. While Martini’s translation carries the subtitle “from the Vulgate,” this is because, though Martini worked with the original languages, he wanted his translation to be seen as a critical commentary on the older and historic Latin translation.

Its second edition was prefaced by a letter of praise from Pope Pius VI who, out of gratitude for Martini’s immense labors, rewarded him in 1781 with the archbishopric of Florence. As archbishop, Martini had to deal with bowdlerized editions of his translation published by Protestant bible societies—the deuterocanonicals were omitted and some doctrinal passages altered. The third authorized edition issued from the archdiocesan press at Florence in 1782-1792. Martini died 21 December 1809.
Martini’s translation because of its literary merits—it was written in fine Tuscan style—became the most widely used complete Italian translation of the Bible. It was reprinted numerous times in the two centuries after its first appearance, and, while it has been surpassed in scholarship by several 20th century Italian translations including one by the Pontifical Biblical Institute, Martini’s is still in print and still used to this day.