An Illustrated Edition of the Clementine Vulgate
Published by the Giunta Press at Venice, 1625

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“The Vulgate” is the title given to the first authoritative translation of the Bible into Latin. In 382, Pope Damasus I commissioned the pre-eminent biblical scholar of his time, Saint Jerome, to make a translation of the bible into vulgar Latin, that is, the common Latin of Roman Christians in the time of Damasus and Jerome as distinguished from the classical Latin of the great Roman writers, Cicero, Virgil, Livy, etcetera. Until Damasus’ time, there had been only piecemeal translations of the bible into Latin but these were of varying quality, moreover, in those editions the Old Testament was translated not from the Hebrew but from the Greek Septuagint. Jerome’s Vulgate was the first Latin translation to be done by a major biblical scholar who worked critically from both the Greek Septuagint and Hebrew Old Testament.

The Protestant Reformation produced several vernacular translations of the bible as well as critical editions of the original Hebrew and Greek which at times served the doctrinal themes of the Protestant Reformers. To counteract this, the Council of Trent not only reaffirmed the Vulgate Latin translation as the sole authorized Latin text of the Bible, but that council also commissioned the pope to sponsor the production of a critical edition of the Vulgate out of the countless manuscripts produced in the Middle Ages and early Renaissance, a critical edition which could serve as the standard text for Catholics.

Pope Sixtus V (1585-1590) was the first to take up this task and under his sponsorship was produced an edition of the Vulgate called the Sistine Vulgate. But because it was hurried into print, it suffered from many printing errors and was soon replaced by a new edition commissioned by Pope Clement VIII (1592-1605). This new edition of the Vulgate was called the Sixto-Clementine Vulgate, or, simply the Clementine Vulgate even though it is Sixtus’ name which appears on the title page. The Vatican issued three printings of this Clementine Vulgate, in 1592, 1593 and 1598. After 1598, the Vatican issued no other official printings. Instead, various editions were published by commercial presses with authorization from the local bishop.

This 1625 edition of the Clementine Vulgate is a product of the famous Venetian publishing house of Giunta. Lucantonio Giunta was one of the major figures in a distinguished family of Florentine publishers, printers and booksellers. He was born in Florence in 1457 and was a bookseller there until he moved to Venice in 1477, where he continued his trade until 1489 when he established his own press. Active in Venice between 1489 and 1538, Giunta and his heirs distinguished themselves particularly for their large number of liturgical books, missals, and breviaries, many with beautiful woodcut illustrations, as well as illustrated books in the vernacular for the mass market.

This product of the Giunta press contains no less than 250 woodcut engravings. A woodcut is a pictorial image which has been carved into the surface of a block of wood. The
parts of the image which were to show “white” when printed were cut away from the surface of the block by means of a knife or chisel, while the outline and texture of the image to be printed were left at the original surface level. The engravings in this publication are distinctive for their compositional density (delineation of landscape and sky) and the influence of popular Renaissance taste as seen in use of a large decorative border containing classical motifs such as columns, urns, foliage, birds, and putti, a motif derived from the sarcophagi of Christian children in the 2nd century.