

The first Catholic Bible into Space

On February 6, 2020 the Sojuz MS-13 capsule brought back to Earth an important testimony: the first Catholic Bible – and the first Bible in Italian – ever flown into space.

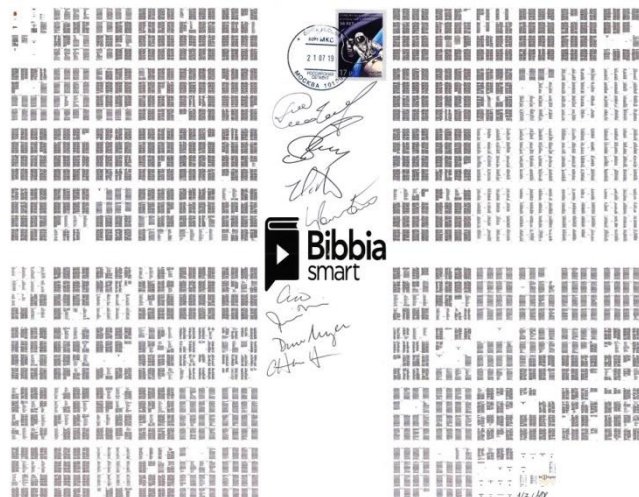
It was not the first time that a Bible flew into space. Americans already did it in the Seventies, during the Apollo program, when they brought the King James Bible or KJB, known as the official Anglican version in the USA. At the third attempt they had even managed to bring it to the surface of the moon aboard the Apollo 14. But this was the first time that the Catholic Bible flew into space, and a Bible in the Italian version.

The idea was born just over a year ago, around Easter 2019, when, in a cottage in the Orvieto countryside a group of friends, including two space enthusiasts and a theologian, were sitting at a table, celebrating the upcoming Easter holidays, and were discussing about religion and the cosmos and religious symbols brought to space by various astronauts. It was around that table that the "Genesis Project" took shape with the aim of sending the Catholic Bible into orbit, as an inclusive and non-divisive religious symbol. In fact, Genesis is emphasized in the project as the beginning that characterizes the ancient testament, the part of the Bible which is common to the three great monotheistic religions. One of the friends knew the initiative of the Smart Bible which had just been launched by the diocese of Verona.

The Smart Bible is a book that combines the classic version of the text of the Italian Episcopal Conference with an innovative approach, aimed at the younger generations "to deepen, pray and live the Word of God every day": each page features a small digital QR-Code matrix legible on smartphones through a special app (hence the name of Smart Bible) which allows the reader to deepen the topics of greatest interest by accessing a rich repertoire of multimedia content, in constant evolution. But this book was also a voluminous and heavy document, and not suitable for flying in space, where there are serious constraints in terms of volume and weight.

Since one of the diners knew who coordinated the initiative, they thought they would ask him to study a miniaturization project of the book.

An important digital printing Company in Trieste, with great effort, managed to transfer all of the over two thousand pages of the Bible onto a single A3 sheet. A real miracle, also because this resulted in a printed Bible, and not a microform or digital Bible. The printing company did not want any payment for its work because it understood its social significance. Now the most difficult step was how to send into orbit the Bible, or rather the Bibles, since 15 copies had been printed. Some of them had been numbered from 1 to 7 and others, printed on higher quality paper, had been marked with the letters from A to H, and were intended to be donated to important Libraries and cultural institutions around the world.



Here ASITAF entered the game, with one of its comrades from Orvieto, the space enthusiast Marino Massimo De Caro, who is a Member. This was immediately quite complex. It is never easy to make something flying to the Space Station, and there was the further complication of time limitation. From the conception of the idea to its realization, time had flown quickly: everything was done in less than two months. But between one thing and another we had already arrived at the end of May 2019.

Given the complex procedures of the ESA it was now impossible to ask the Italian astronaut Luca Parmitano, who would then become commander of the expedition. Carrying out something into space requires due authorization, and the process with the European Space Agency takes at least a year.

After a few attempts, it was decided to turn to the Russian cosmonaut Alexander Skvortsov who willingly accepted. But also to make the small envelope arrive at the military "Star City", in Moscow (where the mail must follow very rigid protocols) proved to be far from easy.

It arrived when Skvortsov and the crew were moving to Baikonur for their quarantine before the launch. It was not possible to have confirmation that the operation had ended positively and the doubt remained for many months, until a letter came in October from the station and it was reassuring by confirming that the Bibles were aboard the ISS. They had been embarked at the last moment on the Soyuz MS-13 and had arrived at the space station on July 20, on the day of the 50th anniversary of the first historical Moonlanding.

On the next day – on July 21 2019, on the anniversary of the first step of the Man on the Moon – the Bibles were franked with the 17 rubles stamp featuring Leonov in its first historical EVA, and canceled with the postmark of the official post office of the Space Station, "Moscow 101000", the ISS Post Office being in fact the Branch #1 of the Moscow Central Post Office.



The letter – which arrived on a rainy day - by which Sasha Skvortsov confirms that the Bible is on-board and will return in February.

Finally the 15 copies were signed by the astronauts present on the International Space Station. But once again fate left its mark, in fact in that moment, for the first and only time so far, in the history, astronauts of Christian, Jewish and Muslim religion were simultaneously on the Station: a chilling coincidence.

On February 6, 2020 the Kazakh steppe welcomed the return to Earth of Sojuz MS-13 with its load of "religiosity". The Bible no.1 had to be on display at Milanofil 2020 for the joy of the Astrophilatelists and for those who believe in inter-religious Peace, but the Coronavirus emergency has postponed this Exhibition. But this emergency will end and then we will

all be able to see how a discussion around a table in an Orvieto countryside has turned into a sign of hope even in an emergency like this one.