



## PÈRE LAGRANGE . . .

### AS I KNEW HIM . . .

In August, 1897, the fourth Catholic International Scientific Congress met at Fribourg in Switzerland, and among the papers read was one on the sources of the *Pentateuch*, by a French Dominican from Jerusalem, the Père Marie-Joseph Lagrange. Present at the reading was a Cardinal of the Church, and I have heard that at the end, amid the applause, he turned to his neighbor and was heard to say: "Monsignor, that man will save our Catholic exegesis!"

The clouds that presaged the coming storm, already hovered low over the world of Catholic Biblical studies, and indeed that storm had already commenced to break in places, notably in France. The Cardinal's statement would undoubtedly, at that time, have been fiercely contested in many quarters, but it is now certainly apparent to the Catholic world that there was a great deal of truth in it. Père Lagrange, although not alone and not single-handed in the battle, was, nonetheless, an important and perhaps a decisive figure in it. It has been said of him that he "baptized" the Well-hausian theory, and it is certain that after him and due in great part to him, Catholic Scriptural study that then seemed in its death agony, took on new life and grew into an adequate orthodox and scientific search into the truth and the meaning of the Sacred Scriptures.

I should be rashly presumptuous if I were to attempt any less general evaluation of Père Lagrange's contribution to Catholic scholarship, and I will attempt no such thing. But I did know him and lived with him for three years, being the last of a long line of those whom he taught at St. Stephen's, and even though not of the scholar, at least of the man I can and will speak.

Of a quick, penetrating intellect even as a young man, he had already taken the degree of Doctor in the difficult study of Roman Law and had the title of *Avocat*, that is, had been admitted to the bar, when he entered the Sulpician seminary at Issy. He was there only one year but during that time formed a close friendship with two young men who were later to be clerics of note and to be associated with Père Lagrange in some phases of his

work. These were the future Msgr. Battifol of the Institut Catholique of Toulouse and Msgr. Hyvernat of the Catholic University in Washington. At Issy the three friends became increasingly aware of the need of some change in the Catholic approach to the so-called "Biblical Question," and they decided to do something about it. At Issy it was undoubtedly that seeing the inadequacy of the "defensive" approach, Père Lagrange began to form his own proposal of a positive rather than a merely defensive effort towards the desired solution of the difficulties that faced the Catholic scholar. At the end of the first year at Issy, Albert Lagrange came to the decision that his was to be a life of service of Christ within the Dominican Order, and accordingly, that September he entered the Province of Toulouse at St. Maximin, taking the religious name of Marie-Joseph out of devotion to the Holy Family.

The picture of a young man, Gallic in temperament and in the warmth of his enthusiasm, generous of heart and effort, devoted to the search after truth, commences to emerge. In the Order, the discipline of the religious life would commence to take hold. Enthusiasm would be tempered and guided by disciplined study, and the devotion to truth fixed unswervingly by reason of the ideal and the rule of Dominicanism. In the obligatory periods of meditation, a nature such as that of Lagrange, could not but develop the tender loyalty and love for Christ and His Blessed Mother that had been in him since youth. It would harden in him, too, the core of Catholic orthodoxy that was to be such a great factor in his life and would make him say on one memorable occasion: "I was born a Catholic and I will die a Catholic!"

I remember well wintry years in Jerusalem . . . to rise in an unheated house after a frigid night, and get down to choir at six for the recitation of Prime and the Community Mass . . . but Père Lagrange was always there, long ahead of any one else. His age would have made dispensations reasonable but he never sought them and did not want them. He was at every exercise except during those short and infrequent periods when a *petite crise de coeur* kept him confined to bed. The *crise* never lasted long, and within a few days he was back on the regular schedule. I never knew him to miss a lecture in the classroom on account of them. He was difficult to follow in his lectures, I found, for he spoke very rapidly and one had to listen closely to follow him. Even the French found it difficult. One of them said to me one time that Père Lagrange's French style was a *chinoiserie* but Chinese puzzle or not, one got every word possible and it was worth all the difficulty.

He was a lover of the beauty of the written word, in secular literature as in sacred. Among the secular writers, poets were his favorites, and there was hardly a European language in whose literature he was not well versed. He used to spend the early hours of the afternoon, sitting in the sun on the steps that lead from the cloister ambulatory to the garden, there meditating or reading poetry. When in 1932 the German community in Jerusalem celebrated the Goethe centennial, it was the patriotic Frenchman, Père Lagrange who was called on to deliver the principal encomium of the German poet. The same thing had happened in 1921 when the Dante centenary was celebrated. The classic poetry of Greece and Rome, and especially where it touched upon the history of the Near East was always very familiar to him. His memory was prodigious in this, as in the identification and locating the origin of any one of the thousands of variant readings of the Scripture texts.

Of course his knowledge in the matter of Sacred Scripture and the coordinate sciences was amazing. He said one day: "I am not a theologian, as you know," but I knew nothing of the kind and I am sure only he would have ever made that judgment. His own written works are the best refutation of that modest and humble self-estimate. An English Dominican, himself a man of outstanding learning and intelligence, used to say of Lagrange that he was the greatest mind in the Church since Cajetan.

Père Lagrange was not given to controversy. It is true of course that he was the center of a great deal of controversy over some thirty years of his life, but he himself rarely indulged in it. One may recur to the figure of a tropical storm, where the winds rage about a center that is in itself quiet and calm. I think he was never really interested in besting anybody in debate. He was interested rather in forwarding the truth. One of the ideals of the Issy days was the desire to present the truth positively, not merely defend it against erroneous charges. "It is," he once wrote, "unworthy of the dignity of the Scriptures to be constantly defending them."

He was all patience and kindness and toleration. Everyone knows what excruciating torture it is for a Frenchman to have to listen to a foreigner speaking French, but when I first arrived in Jerusalem, Père Lagrange, then a man of seventy-four years and an eminent figure in the world of Scriptural studies, had nothing but kindness and toleration for my inept bouts with the French language. "We will go for walks alone," he said, "and we will speak French always, and soon you will be able to express yourself fluently."

His kindness and toleration were not for friends only. Once when a

response of the Biblical Commission was widely construed as directed at some teaching of Lagrange, he made no attempt to justify that teaching. "It is good for us," he said, "to have such an authority to direct us and even restrain us, for thereby we can be freer in our advance towards greater knowledge." I cannot but think that much of the extraordinary criticism and savage denunciation that he had to undergo during the stormy days must have hurt him deeply, but by all report, he never showed the least resentment. It was the cause of truth that he was interested in, not in his own feelings. When in 1912 he was ordered to quit St. Stephen's and return to France, he made a poignant farewell address to the community, evidently supposing that this was the end of all his labor and study. "There must be no bitterness, no holding back. You must continue here and while my heart and my prayers will always be with you, you must expect no other help from me. To give such would be, as you know, disloyal to the spirit of this command. We are soldiers and must obey when commanded."

It was told me by a Father who was in Jerusalem during this period, that after about a year of such exile, Lagrange was called to Rome by Pope St. Pius X, and in that audience exposed what his principles and methods of teaching had been. Then casting himself on his knees before the Pontiff he said: "Holy Father, I was born a Catholic and I will die a Catholic. If I have taught or written anything contrary to the doctrine of the Church, I do now retract it with all my heart. Tell me what I must do, and I will obey you." And the saintly Pope got up from his chair, lifted the saintly priest to his feet and said: "Père Lagrange, go back to Jerusalem and teach and write as you have taught and written in the past, and pay no attention to anybody but me!" And Lagrange went back to his beloved Jerusalem, and he taught again as he had always taught and wrote as he had always written, and the storms of accusation and vituperation commenced to blow themselves out, and there came many years of blessed calm and peace, and the peaceful years were even more abundant and fruitful in labor and writing.

Père Lagrange had had another encounter with one who was to become a canonized saint. When he was a child in arms, he was taken by his parents to the Curé of Ars for his blessing. I think that holy man's blessing proved very effective, also.

—William A. McLoughlin, O.P.

*The last student of Père Lagrange, Fr. McLoughlin, is author of the book Holy Years of Mary (Winston: 1954).*