

PERE LAGRANGE--IN RETROSPECT

On March 10, 1963, we celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary of Père Albert Marie-Joseph Lagrange, O.P. Some modest tribute to his memory is fitting. All may not agree with Jean Steinmann that "Father Lagrange will probably be recognized one day as one of the greatest figures in the history of the Church." All will agree that Father Lagrange's influence for good or ill may not be ignored.

From almost the beginning of his career he was known in this country not only from the many reports concerning his research and activities but from his few writings in English mainly published, interestingly enough, in the *American Ecclesiastical Review*. From almost the beginning, too, Fr. Lagrange found himself the object of strong feeling, pro and con.

An example of the latter is found in the diary of the strongly opinionated Dr. Breen, a priest of the Rochester diocese, who attended St. Stephen's at the turn of the century. He wrote: . . . "I went to the class taught by Père Lagrange . . . It is very unpleasant to listen to the man. He has a very unpleasant face; and he grunts and mangles his words in . . . a manner . . . fatiguing. He seems to glory in the fact that he has such a bad enunciation. I judge that he is a proud man, proud of this wretched peculiarity. What he said did not have great weight . . . I believe that the man has been greatly over estimated."¹ After some months of class, Dr. Breen's unfavorable estimate broadened to include the school founded by Père Lagrange: "In an effort to be up-to-date in scientific study the professors of St. Étienne have adopted the worst conclusions of the rationalists . . . In the lectures one hardly ever hears the name of a Catholic writer mentioned unless he is on the *Index*. The evangelists of this new school are Delitzsch, Wellhausen, Lenormant, Winkler . . . It is a great pity . . . They could render the Church good service. But they have fallen under the influence of the modern hydra of rationalism."² The particular vantage point or, perhaps better, disadvantage point from which Dr. Breen surveys the scene is quite fairly indicated by such sentences as: "Their (i.e. the French) enormous egotism, lightness of character, and tendency to turn

¹ A. F. Breen, *A Diary of My Life in the Holy Land* (Rochester: 1906), p. 96.

² *Idem*. p. 345.

things into ridicule heighten the disgust of everything French.”³ Dr. Breen is not cited here for any intrinsic value in his judgments, but rather because he so well exemplified much of the opposition Père Lagrange was to meet, an opposition which was so frequently personally unsympathetic and ideologically obtuse.

Père Lagrange bore up very well under such judgments or mis-judgments. He seems to have providentially prepared for a life-time series of frustrations and misunderstandings whose motivations ran from the well-intentioned to the unfathomable and which could easily have crushed a lesser man.

The son of a lawyer, he saw his youthful hope of becoming a priest deflected by paternal persuasion to the study of law. Then after he had brilliantly obtained his doctorate in law and had expressed his desire to be a Dominican priest, he found himself persuaded to try first the Sulpician Seminary at Issy. Seemingly, he bore these delays with the amiability characteristic of him, for the only disgruntlement he later expressed with all this was to blame himself overmuch for not utilizing his opportunities better. In fact, he often expressed his gratitude for his year with the Sulpicians to whom he gave full credit for stimulating his love of Sacred Scriptures and within whose gates he made two close and life-long friends, the Abbes Battifol and Hyvernat.

Nor did the early years in the Dominican Order run very smoothly. The day after he made his profession, the Order was exiled from France. (*Post hoc non propter hoc*, may we hastily add). His superiors, well aware of his propensity for the Bible, sent him for specialized studies to Salamanca, but after his ordination a shortage of professors necessitated his teaching other ecclesiastical courses for several years. Still with determination, another of his characteristics, he somehow managed to further his biblical knowledge, and so he was ready when the opportunity came to study Oriental languages with the famous staff at the University of Vienna. It was a very busy but very happy two years, and after all the detours, the road ahead at last presented a soothingly straight vista.

But suddenly he received a vague directive about the possibility of founding a biblical school in Jerusalem. After some months of confused correspondence, he left for Jerusalem, not because of any gradual clarification of purpose or means, but simply because his immediate superiors wanted him to see the Holy Land at first hand before returning to France

³ Idem. p. 472.

to teach Sacred Scripture. A young man of thirty-five, he arrived in the Holy City on March 10, 1890. Père Vincent would later describe the discouraging scene he encountered: "Three or four religious, all more or less gravely incapacitated, were gathered together in a chance-dwelling, formerly the municipal slaughter house and now only tentatively adapted for its present inhabitants. . . . Not only the site and the men but everything else was lacking for the new foundation; there was no sign of a library, no academic material, nor resources to supply them. . . ."4 Père Lagrange later wryly admitted that the single encouraging note was the weather; it was by no means as bad for study as he had been led to believe by European friends.

The next few months were as clearly decisive in Père Lagrange's life as any short space of time save birth or death can be. He rode off from Jerusalem on horseback to see the country, and he was figuratively knocked off his horse on his own road to Damascus; for he quickly realized that the Holy Land and its environs were truly the "Fifth Gospel," a living commentary on the Bible. He came back with a grand design, and for once he did not meet frustration. The clear command from his superiors awaited him: he was to organize a biblical school. The means? Not so clear.

On November 15, 1890, the feast of his natal patron St. Albert the Great (then Blessed), the school had its opening ceremonies before an audience described as looking somewhat surprised. Well they might be, for the equipment consisted in Lagrange's words of a "table, a blackboard, and a map"⁵ to which he might have added a strong belief in miracles. Well was St. Albert's patronage sought, for the first few years of the school would find Père Lagrange by necessity as diversified a specialist as Albert. Nevertheless, Providence favoured the young Dominican's determination. A newly passed French law peculiarly encouraged Dominican superiors to send students to Jerusalem and the Pope, Leo XIII, was ardently desirous of such a school.

From the very start Père Lagrange knew substantially what he hoped to accomplish in the years ahead. By his own comparison he wished to form Catholic savants who could do a work of scholarship analogous to that of St. Thomas when he christianized Aristotelianism. He agreed with Newman's words on revelation and considered them applicable of extension to his own problems. Newman had said: "He who believes Revelation

⁴ H. Vincent, O.P., "Père Lagrange," *Blackfriars* XIX (June, 1938), pp. 406-407.

⁵ *Idem.* (July, 1938), pp. 480-483.

. . . is sure, and nothing shall make him doubt, that, if anything seems to be proved . . . in contradiction to the dogmas of faith, that point will eventually turn out, first, *not* to be proved, or secondly, not *contradictory*, or thirdly, not contradictory to anything *really revealed*, but to something which has been confused with Revelation."⁶

The apparent reluctance to have a confrontation of science and faith disturbed Lagrange. He thought it absurd to attempt to throw a veil of silence over the work of liberal Protestant German exegetes, not only absurd but harmful. "Twice within the memory of many of us," he said in a lecture to a Parisian audience, "the earth seemed to shake. I refer to . . . the publication of Renan's *Life of Jesus* . . . and . . . Loisy's . . . *The Gospel and the Church* . . . refutations . . . all written in haste . . . were offered to a public . . . ill-prepared for such an assault. We know what the work of the eleventh hour is worth in warfare. It may ward off supreme catastrophe, but it can never completely supply for long and patient preparations. Let us not wait until danger is upon us."⁷

What should be done? Lagrange's answer was definite: "The work to be done by Catholic scholars is suggested by the experience of their enemies. The anti-dogmatic exegesis of the Germans profited by their philological and historical studies. . . . We must have scholars of equal competence, able to discern between what is based on the scientific knowledge of language and of history, and what is derived from the philosophical theories of the exegete. . . . These Catholic exegetes must be sufficiently trained in textual criticism to call attention to arbitrary alterations or rejections of texts; they must be sufficiently versed in the comparative study of religions to judge the various manifestations of the religious spirit, and to denounce the prejudice which would place on equal footing manifestations which are very unequal."

But even more than this is needed, Lagrange points out. Work and organization are the secret of German efficiency. ". . . The collaboration of many scholars is necessary for the success of an encyclopedia, a dictionary, a collection of inscriptions." And besides collaboration, continuity is required since "Nothing is more favourable to the advancement of learning than handing down the same work in editions kept strictly up to date. . . . This continuity favours the success of works. One prefers to do busi-

⁶ J. H. Newman, *Idea of a University* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1947), p. 342.

⁷ Lecture quoted in C. Kearns, O.P., "Legacy of Père Lagrange," *Irish Ecclesiastical Record*, LI (1938), pp. 618, 619.

ness with an old firm, honourably known, provided it keeps up with modern improvements."⁸

As Père Lagrange spoke these words twenty-seven years after the founding of the biblical school, he must have thought of the headaches and heartaches those years of implementing such a program had brought. The first years of the School had been hard ones, physically and mentally. The physical plant had to be built; the library, a highly technical one, had to be collected. He had to train a faculty for the School, establish and maintain a scholarly tradition for his 1892 foundation—the *Revue Biblique*. On the whole, he had chosen his men well, though their diversity of temperaments ranged from the sunny-dispositioned Père Abel with his wondrous puns to the intense and energetic Père Vincent who, incidentally, had to be diverted to a love of archaeology from a burning ambition to do missionary work in the far-off State of New York. His young faculty had busily forged the first link in that greatly desired continuity which would reach down to our own days with such priests as Pères DeVaux and Benoit. How well Père Lagrange had inspired his followers with the importance of their task would be illustrated during the First World War when one exiled faculty member spent his time collecting inscriptions in distant Aden while another Army-drafted faculty member wangled four soldiers out of his Commander-in-Chief to carry out archaeological digs in the front line trenches of the Gallipoli Peninsula.

Those first years, too, had seen the rise of the heresy called modernism and the ecclesiastical nightmare of mistrust which accompanied it. While Père Lagrange was urging the Catholic exegete to fight the enemies, in his phrase, with rifles instead of cross-bows, he was more than a little startled at being stabbed by some of those he sought to defend. His modernization was confused with modernism though he had been among the very first to question the ideas but not good faith of such as Loisy. He was always ready to discuss ideas yet quick to show his distaste when the talk turned to personalities. He knew Loisy was a shrewd opponent with a flair for the eye-catching phrase, who could reword the problem of inerrancy so it appeared that the real problem was not whether the Bible contained any error but whether it contained any truth. He soon realized, too, that Loisy and his followers were masters of the verbal subterfuge, who could distort words or drain them of real meaning to an extent scarcely attained by the communists. Even their writings reached print under a multitude of pen names to

⁸ Idem.

the confusion and consternation of the faithful. In fact, one of Loisy's contemporaries, Abbe Turmel, wrote in fourteen periodicals under different pseudonyms; he was not unmasked and excommunicated until 1930, and his downfall was due partially at least to clever detective work on the part of Dr. Georges Saltet who made use, ironically enough, of literary forms in reaching his discovery.

The real trial for Père Lagrange, however, came rather from those who constituted themselves champions of orthodoxy and repeatedly, though vaguely, accused him of rationalism. Scholarly men of good will found themselves the victims of distressing ecclesiastical measures. The Sapinière, the secret organization under the direction of Msgr. Bernini of the Secretariat of State in Rome, shows how far some went in their mistaken zeal. Documents concerning it, you may recall, were found accidentally during a German search raid in Ghent, Belgium, during World War I. It had already been suppressed and formally censured by Benedict XV in 1914, but it was some years before outsiders realized how far-reaching was its sweep, how avid its delations, and how embracing its denunciations—the Dominicans of Fribourg, for example, were a "broth of modernistic tendencies," and the Jesuits of the *Civiltà Cattolica* were called "mealy-mouthed ferrets."⁹ Such and like measures were portrayed as defending the faith, but since the living faith includes charity, what faith they were defending remains obscure.

The *Revue Biblique* during these years rarely made explicit mention of the modernist controversy. Not that Père Lagrange had deliberately adopted a mood of detached aloofness. Far from it. He had already suffered among other harassments almost a year of silencing because of it. But he was simply convinced that the stressing of what he considered "positive achievements" was the more effective course. He was fully aware of the tenor of the times and wrote so rapidly that his French was occasionally far from academic in quality. When one of his brethren chided him on this, he replied, "A soldier in battle doesn't stop to polish his weapons."

He not only wrote fast but he wrote much and usually on a highly technical level—about 30 books, nearly 500 scholarly articles, and despite the thick glasses his frustratingly weak eyes required, almost 1300 book reviews.¹⁰ He not only wrote much but he wrote about much, for the scope

⁹ J. Levie, S.J., *The Bible, Word of God in Words of Men* (New York: Kenedy, 1961), p. 73.

¹⁰ F. M. Braun, O.P., *Work of Père Lagrange* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Co., 1963).

of his interests are somewhat formidable. How much has stood the test of time so far? Not all, of course, but it is interesting to note that a recent work *The Bible in Current Catholic Thought* lists him along with his friend Dr. Albright as its most quoted reference source.

The last two decades of his life happily gave Père Lagrange an evening of greater tranquility. By 1923, an editor of the *American Ecclesiastical Review* would write that Lagrange's scriptural erudition was "frank in expression within the limits of Catholic orthodoxy." And not too many years after his death on March 10, 1938, Lagrange would be hailed by another priest of the Rochester diocese, Edward Byrne, as a "magister magistrorum"¹¹—a phrase he borrowed approvingly from Fr. Vaccari, S.J.

We do not feel capable of estimating his worth, but we do feel that with his passing some greatness left the earth. Some considered him a saint, and certainly his famous last testament heightens such an impression—not a bad saint for our times, may we say. Surely, the *École Biblique*, the *Revue Biblique*, and the *Etudes Bibliques* are a triune memorial and a living force, but more than all he taught us how to act and react in the face of adversity. He was always the gentleman as well as the scholar whose whole life pulsed with the spirit of intellectual adventure guided by the faith, the living faith.

—Alan Smith, O.P.

¹¹ R. Murphy, O.P., *Père Lagrange and the Scriptures*, (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Co., 1946), p. 5.

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