

BLACKFRIARS

Vol. XIX

JUNE, 1938

No. 219

PÈRE LAGRANGE

On a ship in mid-ocean, buffeted by the fury of the waves, only the presence of an experienced captain, certain of his course and sufficiently master of himself to brave the storm untroubled, can stimulate the crew to action and inspire confidence in the passengers. But should the bridge be struck by lightning and the captain killed, then the danger is suddenly brought home to everyone in all its stark reality.

For nearly half a century, amongst the unceasing and furious storms loosed against Catholic exegesis by the excesses of unbridled rationalism, Père Lagrange stood facing the danger, his eyes fixed unwaveringly on the safe beacon-light of the Church's divine authority, never taken unawares by the most violent or most insidious assault. He was an unfailing source of confidence, because of the intensity and energy of his scientific labours, and an attractive and fruitful example, because of the steadfastness of his faith founded on a most fervent practice of his Dominican religious life and nourished by unfailing prayer. And now, in a supreme act of abandonment to the Divine Will, this voice has been forever silenced here below. Père Lagrange entered into eternal life on March 10th, and his going from this earth has plunged in sore dismay those whose course he has guided among the rocks and the perils of the storm which now more than ever before rages against Truth, that is to say against Christ and His Church.

Dismay, indeed, would turn into woeful confusion, were not thoughts and hearts raised to a higher and more consoling vision which restores our confidence and assures us that, in calling to Himself His valiant and faithful servant, God has not taken him altogether from the work he did on earth but will give gracious heed, in the luminous peace of

heaven, to his solicitude and intercession for those whom on earth he strove so hard to help. Moreover there still remains to us the teaching, the example and the spirit of this venerated master to enlighten our path, to prevent discouragement, to fire us again with zeal in the pursuit of that noble ideal to which he himself had consecrated his whole life: "to promote the reign of Christ, the honour of the Church and the good of souls." His work is well known to the readers of BLACKFRIARS and well appreciated by them. Ours is the task of manifesting briefly what manner of man our revered master was and what was the spirit that inspired the whole of his tremendous work; this we shall do without literary pretensions and without exaggeration, conscious throughout of his own urgent bidding: "Never let there be any panegyric about me nor any special pleading inspired by affection for me; only the humble and sincere truth about what I was, about what I have so much desired to be before God and to bring about for His glory."

A twofold and fruitful sap from the soil of the ancient Burgundian and Lyonesse provinces was united in the stock from which Père Lagrange sprang, whose private and social virtues, devotion to duty, to honour, to the fatherland, all flowed from deep-rooted religious convictions themselves vitalized by the fervent practice of an understanding Catholicism. Monsieur Lagrange was a worthy solicitor, in practice at Bourg in the Department of Ain in Bresse, and in the exercise of his profession he acquired a reputation for rectitude, disinterestedness, and above all large-heartedness. Into this milieu Albert Marie-Henri Lagrange was born on March 7th, 1855.

He was of a very delicate constitution which, during his childhood, caused much alarm to his family, especially to his devoted mother. Towards the end of his third year she took him to Ars to get for him the blessing of the holy Curé, John-Baptist Vianney, from whom one may well suppose she hoped to obtain some improvement in his health. God seemed to pay no heed to the anxious care of the mother, at any rate as far as her child's health was then concerned; but

it would not be temerarious to attribute to a special divine intervention, resulting from the intercession of the saintly Curé d'Ars, the exceptional gifts which were later to render fruitful the courageous and prolonged activities of that child who, at this period, seemed to show little promise of being able to undertake a career so laborious and so full.

As soon as Albert was of an age to devote himself entirely to the studies which he had already begun at a local school, his parents, not allowing themselves to be discouraged by fears about his health, decided to send him to the *Petit Séminaire* at Autun where the masters were justly renowned as experienced teachers and educationalists. If his private notes are to be trusted, Albert Lagrange was but a mediocre pupil. As a religious he later reproaches himself with touching sincerity for what he calls his "indiscipline" and the "fancifulness" of his tastes which inclined him more towards languages, classical and modern (but especially Greek), than towards science. Other more impartial witnesses, however, and still more the actual results of his studies, considerably temper this humble confession. Indeed, in spite of enforced interruptions caused by only too frequent illnesses, at the early age of sixteen he crowned with brilliant success the course of his "humanities" (to use a term then common) by taking his degree as Bachelor. At that time France was steeped in the horrors of the war with Germany. The youthful Bachelor of Arts dreamed of following his elder brother into the army and becoming a professional soldier. He abandoned this noble design only out of deference to the considered wish of his father, and forthwith applied himself to civilian occupations better suited to his age and more proportioned to his strength, perfecting at the same time his literary and artistic attainments. When peace was restored in France, Albert was able to speak and write in English, German and Italian and was constantly engaged in the study of the literary masterpieces in these several languages. He had, moreover, a keen interest in history, in art and above all in music, even attaining to some degree of virtuosity as a 'cellist.

But already there had been implanted in his heart the desire of consecrating himself to God in a religious and apostolic life, and a secret aspiration was drawing him towards the Order of St. Dominic. When he spoke of his desire to his father, Monsieur Lagrange was too good a Catholic to oppose himself to this generous design, only he advised him to let it mature. He thought that, before embracing, in a moment of hasty and inconsidered enthusiasm, a life of abnegation and austerity, it would be better to make fitting trial of his moral and physical strength, acquire some experience of life, to become above all more clearly convinced of the divine call. He therefore suggested to his son that he should devote several more years to the examining of his vocation and at the same time pursue the study of Law which would complete his intellectual formation, prepare an assured future for him should his religious vocation not materialize, and would prove of undoubted value to him even if he did eventually become an apostle and defender of the truth in a monastic Order. As an obedient son, Albert Lagrange could only follow the wise advice of his father, and it was decided that he should follow this new course of study in the Faculty of Law at the Catholic University of Paris. But in order that his studies should not be interrupted by his military service at the end of his first year, he arranged to join the colours a year before his proper time. After that was finished he devoted himself for five years principally to the study of Law, yet without neglecting literature and art, making good use of the favourable opportunities provided by his sojourn in Paris. In this way he was able to develop still further his knowledge of Greek by frequenting the practical courses in Greek language and literature recently inaugurated at the Sorbonne. To his studies he added besides many works of charity, particularly that of visiting the poor, in the district allotted to that section of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society of which he was an active member. He could not be indifferent to any of the religious questions in debate at that time; and though his own estimate of the years he spent in Paris as a student

was rigorously severe, the unanimous witness of those who were in contact with him during what he himself called the barren years of indolence, caprice in study, taste for the theatre and for concerts, worldliness, and similar defects, warrants a far more favourable judgment. He accuses himself in vain of negligence, of lack of assiduity in the faculty of Law; for, in 1878, he obtained the degree of Doctor of Laws by a brilliant defence of a thesis in both Roman and French Law. Being at once numbered amongst the juniors at the Court of Appeal in Paris, he was chosen by his colleagues to direct their practice, and very soon he was appointed counsel for the defence in a small case. Very sensible, as he was, to the art, the appeal, the power of the spoken word, he was nevertheless instinctively repugnant to the possibility of the resources of oratory being used in support of a bad cause and obstructing the course of justice by clever sophistry.

The call of God was now beginning to influence him more than any other consideration and from now on was so manifest that Monsieur Lagrange gave his unqualified consent thereto. The better to effect the transition from life in the world to the austerity of a religious Order, but above all in order to become decisively clear about his vocation, the young barrister followed the expedient of starting clerical life by staying for a time in a seminary. Accordingly in October 1878, he entered the Sulpician Seminary at Issy-les-Moulineaux, near Paris. There he was attracted by philosophy without being entirely engrossed in it, for he became almost immediately smitten with an intense interest in the word of God as contained in Holy Writ to the beauty of which his Sulpician masters opened his eyes. For this great benefit he was deeply beholden to them and remained constant in his gratitude to them until the end of his life. This "passionate taste for Holy Scripture" was not limited to relishing its charm, to finding therein nourishment for his spiritual life, or to meditating in a speculative way upon its profundities; he was concerned also to find, as far as possible, its precise sense, character and implication, to spread

abroad the knowledge of it and to become its apostle and defender. Amongst his predecessors at Issy, though they were considerably younger than he, the Abbés P. Batifol and H. Hyvernât were possessed of the same enthusiasm and this community of tastes and ideals was soon to establish between them and the Abbé Albert Lagrange a friendship whose ties were to be broken only by death after a fruitful collaboration, albeit their ways varied, for the triumph of the same cause.

But already the consuming desire to devote himself unreservedly to this cause and the advice of an enlightened director was definitely fixing the resolution of the Abbé Lagrange. He would be a religious in an Order where the apostolate went side by side with prayer and the continual study of theology, that is to say of the treasures of supernatural truth contained in divine revelation. He would become a Dominican, then, so that under the safeguard and the illumination of the principles of St. Thomas Aquinas he could devote his efforts in a special way to the gaining of a more profound knowledge of the word of God and to the spreading of that word abroad. Without doubt he was well aware that, once he had embraced the obligations of religious life, he would be rigidly bound to follow no longer his own personal bent, most worthy and lofty as it might be in itself, but might have to take a path perhaps quite different indicated to him by the will of his superiors. He was no less well aware, however, that the subsequent consecration of this personal attraction of his through the approval and commands of his superiors would become the most precious safeguard of doctrine in the finely balanced studies that he would have to undertake by adding thereunto the merit of obedience. He opened his mind on the subject to Père Colchen, then Provincial of Toulouse, who was quite ready to forward the aspirations of the young cleric as far as circumstances allowed of this . . . At the beginning of October, 1879, instead of rejoining his friends Battifol and Hyvernât at Issy, he entered the Dominican noviceship for the Province of Toulouse, established in the Priory of St.

Maximin (Var.). He was then half-way through his twenty-fifth year, and he now became in religion Frère Marie-Joseph Lagrange, O.P.

According to the canonical rules in force in the Order, there is no room during the year of noviceship for any study but that of the Dominican Rule, history and customs. Nevertheless Frère Marie-Joseph was authorized to make Holy Scripture the main subject of his reading and meditation. The day after his religious profession, October 6th, 1880, he had just begun his theological studies when the Community of St. Maximin had to go into exile and took refuge in Spain. It was fortunately able to be re-established very soon at Salamanca where our theological student was allowed to follow the course in biblical Hebrew in the Oriental Faculty of the once famous University; for his superiors still intended him to devote himself exclusively, as soon as possible, to the technical study of the Bible. Nevertheless adverse circumstances were to hinder for a long time the realization of the purpose.

Having been ordained priest on December 22nd, 1883, Père Lagrange, who had rapidly acquired a working knowledge of the Spanish tongue, had to take some share in priestly ministrations to the people round about. In the following July, after a brilliant examination, he was promoted to Lector in Sacred Theology, a title customary with Dominicans and equivalent to an ordinary University doctorate. An unfortunate shortage of professors forced his superiors to assign him at once to the teaching of Ecclesiastical History, and, two years later, when the Dominican College was able to be established again at Toulouse, his course in Ecclesiastical History was replaced by courses in Philosophy and Introduction to Sacred Scripture, not to speak of his many priestly duties, so that it seemed clear that Père Lagrange would have to renounce the ideal which he had so laboriously pursued for years. Through his contact with the Abbé Thomas, a professor at the *Institut Catholique* of Toulouse and a very distinguished biblical scholar and orientalist, he nevertheless felt more than ever

the urgent necessity of bringing biblical study into line with contemporary needs, yet he no longer saw any possibility of preparing himself effectively for that work, for it implied a specialization incompatible with the other tasks he had to perform.

It was at this point, when his dream appeared doomed to vanish, that Providence turned the tide in favour of its realization. The Provincial of Toulouse decided to reorganize the teaching of Sacred Scripture in his college and to this end he bade Père Lagrange prepare himself for this work by going for a period to some University offering the best courses in semitic languages and oriental studies. The University of Paris was first considered, but finally set aside for that of Vienna, made illustrious at that time by masters of the fame of David H. Müller, O. Reinisch, and Wahrmond for the teaching of Hebrew, Assyrian, Egyptian, Arabic and History of the Ancient East. In October, 1888, Père Lagrange went to the Dominican Priory at Vienna, where he immediately made close contact with the Very Reverend Father Frühwirth, future Master General of the Order, and he was entered at the University for all the courses of oriental languages. He had the prospect of two years to devote himself to this formative work and he was labouring with the most enthusiastic ardour when, at the beginning of February, 1889, a letter from his Provincial, Father Colchen, informed him, without any other explanation than that of a simple call of obedience, that he was assigned to the Priory at Jerusalem, for several years at least, with the mission of founding there a School of Sacred Scripture.

Till that time Père Lagrange knew little or nothing of the "Jerusalem Priory," being scarcely aware even of its existence. Soon he was to learn, however, that it was a very modest "vicariate" founded a few years before by Père Lecomte of the Lyons Province, at the gates of Jerusalem amongst the ruins which preserved the memory of the proto-martyr, St. Stephen. Père Lecomte's idea had been to establish, under the shadow of Calvary and the Holy Sepulchre and immediately dependent on the Master-General

of the Order, a little foundation where a few religious, preachers and missionaries worn out from their apostolic labours, might find a temporary haven in which to recuperate their strength and to steep themselves again in prayer and meditation on the Holy Scriptures in close contact with the Holy Places. His object had not much in common with the biblical studies envisaged by Père Lagrange and his immediate superior. Moreover Père Lecomte had died prematurely in the preceding year, before his humble foundation could be in any way stabilized. Three or four religious, all more or less gravely incapacitated, were gathered together in a chance dwelling-place, formerly the municipal slaughter-house and now only tentatively adapted for its present inhabitants. There was only one younger man attached to it, namely, Père Séjourné, recently brought into the Order by Père Lecomte for the Jerusalem foundation and then finishing his Dominican training at the Priory of Fiesole, and he could not come to Jerusalem till the following year. 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; there was no hope whatever of finding in Jerusalem the means of providing what was wanting even in a temporary make-shift way; there was no likelihood of being able to gather students there, and, to crown all, the climatic conditions were as unfavourable as they could be, people said, to the intense and arduous work demanded by a seriously scientific study of the Bible. It would have been difficult to imagine a more complete undermining of the hopes that had been raised.

True to his filial obedience, Père Lagrange did not raise the slightest complaint. While awaiting instructions, or at least a definite command, from the General, he peacefully pursued with still greater keenness his studies of semitic languages and of things oriental. At the end of his University course he returned to France in the hope of obtaining more practical information as to what was expected of him. Since neither instructions nor command of

any sort had been sent to him, his Provincial suggested to him that it would be best for him to resume his studies in Vienna until such time as the General of the Order made his intentions clear. At the end of the first term, if he was still without explicit instructions, he was to journey to Palestine with the dual object of completing his training by personal contact with the biblical lands and of giving him an opportunity of examining at first hand the possibilities of the indefinitely proposed foundation.

Père Lagrange acted as he was bid, and eventually arrived at Jerusalem on March 10th, 1890. It was only too easy for him to ascertain that the information he had but lately received had not been painted at its blackest, except perhaps where the rigour and bitterness of the climate was concerned. Everything was in very truth wanting in the humble little vicariate at Jerusalem, and the Holy City itself, notwithstanding the moving and consoling appeal of the great sanctuaries, offered not the slightest resource of a scientific nature proper to the development of scriptural studies.

Humanly speaking everything was lacking; but in the eyes of the young religious this was in truth the first clear indication of divine Providence; since the higher superiors of his Order, themselves urged on by the ecclesiastical authorities, had envisaged the realization of this scheme so unlikely from a human point of view, a courageous obedience in attempting it would be all the more justified in relying upon the support of Providence. Moreover, from his first setting foot on this soil that the Christian tongues love to call the "Holy Land" Père Lagrange felt himself profoundly moved, overcome by the powerful appeal, indefinable yet impelling, of the harmony that God Himself seemed to him to have established between "the land and the book." After a stay of several weeks at Jerusalem, in order to imbue himself with the atmosphere of the Holy Places whilst he meditated the possibilities, theoretic at least, of the proposed foundation, he set out on horseback for a long trip across Palestine and Transjordan. For

several months, careless of discomfort and of fatigue alike, he lived in direct contact with the country of the Bible, with its modern inhabitants, its thought-provoking landscapes, its ruins loaded with overwhelming memories. From the depths of the centuries the happenings recorded in the Bible were re-fashioned in some sort under his very eyes and his labour of exploration developed into what he was tempted to call no longer merely the "historical sense" but a very "historical ecstasy." The land showed itself to him as the most helpful and precious commentary on the Bible. It must be in the very heart of this land that a centre should be established for the practical, modern study of the Sacred Scriptures.

On his return to Jerusalem he drew up, for presentation to the General of the Order, a memorandum formulating this conclusion, paradoxical as it appeared from a human point of view. He declared himself ready to take the work in hand the moment he received the commission to do so and any instructions that it might be desired to attach to it. The order actually came in the summer of that year, without any practical instructions, however, and without any effective help other than the arrival of Père Séjourné. Everything would therefore have to be the work of Divine Providence.

On November 15th, 1890, in the presence of the religious and civil notabilities of Jerusalem and some of their rather surprised friends, there was opened, in a meagre room of the erstwhile municipal slaughter-house, the "*Ecole pratique d'Etudes bibliques*" of the Dominican Priory of St. Stephen. The opening took the form of a discourse by Père Lagrange, who outlined its object and determined the programme that it was to follow. He relied on Providence to provide the means of its actual realization. For the moment these means amounted to "a table, a blackboard and a map of Palestine," but also included Père Lagrange's already great knowledge, his passionate zeal for the Bible, his courageous enthusiasm, his unconquerable supernatural faith, and finally the devoted, but hitherto inexperienced, help of Père Séjourné. Père Lagrange was then scarcely more than

thirty-five years old, and one might very well say that himself alone was the Biblical School.

Already, however, a quite providential circumstance had brought three young Dominican students to the cradle of the nascent school. As early as the following year their number was almost tripled by the arrival of the first non-Dominican students; the school had a new building, spacious and practical; it had started its Quarterly, the "*Revue biblique*," and a theological college had been added to it. A Brief from the Sovereign Pontiff, Leo XIII, dated September 17th, 1892, brought to Père Lagrange's foundation an approbation and encouragement of inestimable value which infused new ardour into the undertaking.

What characterized the work inaugurated by Père Lagrange in the field of biblical studies was not so much, to speak truly, the development of the auxiliary studies, covering the whole groundwork of oriental studies, as the application to the Bible of a fruitful method of study already held in honour by students of the classics which is expressively crystallized by the phrase "the historic method." Everyone must realize, indeed, that to grasp the full sense and exact implication of any piece of writing it is indispensable to penetrate as deeply as possible into the author's thought. It is therefore necessary to obtain the most precise possible information as to the personality of this author, as to his surroundings, the conditions under which he wrote, the knowledge and customs of his time, the literary style of his work, in a word as to all the details likely to make clear the qualifications of his thought and his expression of it. A moralist does not see facts in precisely the same perspective as a historian, and amongst the historians themselves those of the Elizabethan age, for example, had not the same notions of English history as our own contemporary historians. The proper understanding of a work depends therefore quite strictly upon the historical reconstruction of the period and the milieu from which it emanates. The effecting of this reconstruction demands the simultaneous collaboration of philology, archeology, geography, ethnography,

everything that can give definite form to some aspect or moment of the historical setting; that alone will show the immense labour and the difficulties of this synthesis, which would be vain, not to say dangerous, if it were to be merely superficial.

Such was, in substance, the method advocated at the opening of the School, and actually applied to the study of the Bible by Père Lagrange, long before he expounded its principles, or at least set forth its essential elements, in the six conferences given, in November 1902, at the Institut catholique of Toulouse; which conferences were reproduced in their original form in the little book entitled "*La Methode historique*" which itself became the subject of a debate as heated as it was prolonged.

In Catholic circles what is called "traditional" exegesis had felt itself to be in peaceful possession of the Sacred Scriptures, the doctrinal implication of which was guaranteed by the living magisterium of the Church. In a spontaneous reaction against the extremes of Protestantism and its presumptuous individualism which had destroyed scriptural interpretation, traditional exegesis would only consider the transcendent nature of the Bible, and endowed with a divine infallibility every least sentence of Holy Writ, in the historical narratives or the genealogies of the Patriarchs as well as in the statement of some purely natural fact. Such an attitude put exegesis at the mercy of the more or less contradictory fluctuations inevitable in the evolution of human knowledge. Catholic exegetes were forced either to challenge the obvious progress that had been made in human knowledge or to bring earlier interpretations into line with it by a hasty and always precarious show of agreement. Side by side with the technical triumphs won in the laboratory, the historical sciences had made noteworthy advances. As the result of keen archeological investigations and the deciphering of its hitherto hidden writings, the ancient East was revealing its astounding civilizations. Rationalism eagerly claimed these latter for its own and used them triumphantly as weapons with which they expected to des-

troy in a single attack both Sacred History, that is to say history as recorded in the Bible, and all the divine teaching of which that history is the support. Many a worthy soul felt exceedingly worried by the assertion—which they could not verify but which had the appearance of truth—that the Biblical accounts of Creation, Original Sin and the Flood were nothing but a late edition of very ancient Babylonian myths. And it was more or less the same with the whole story of the Patriarchs, the whole of the Mosaic Law and all the institutions, sacred or secular, of the people of God. The very history of this people, with every suggestion of divine intervention eradicated from it, seemed to be the petty and commonplace account of an almost insignificant fraction of the human race; it was a history, moreover, completely coloured and cleverly elaborated at a late period, that any critic learned in philology and oriental science flattered himself he could expose.

The Catholic Faith, founded on the immovable rock of the Church, was obviously in no real peril from this impetuous and formidable assault. In theory, at least, it could remain aloof from the tumult. Happy, indeed, were those who were not in duty bound to tear themselves away from a peaceful enjoyment of the word of God in order to engage in the bitter struggle its defence required. Even if his Dominican apostolic vocation and the mission which had devolved on him by obedience to the commands of his superiors had not imposed such an obligation on Père Lagrange, the ardour of his zeal for the Kingdom of Christ, the honour of the Church and the good of souls would certainly have sufficed to throw him into the melee. Moved no less by the vehement chiding of St. Jerome, never to let wickedness “rant against the Church” with impunity, than by the precept of St. Thomas, not to expose the Scriptures to “the mockery of unbelievers” by feeble interpretations or an apologetic deprived of solid foundations, he made up his mind to conduct the affray with effective weapons. To be content to oppose the modern attacks on the Bible, insidious yet positive as they were, by a blunt refusal to accept any-

PERE LAGRANGE

thing or by merely re-affirming the self-styled "traditional" assertions, would be equivalent in his estimation to "fighting against rifles with cross-bows." He wanted to have the rifles on his side, in other words to excel in the knowledge of all the sources of new information whence rationalism drew its weapons and to turn these latter against that formidable adversary by employing them still more methodically. The whole programme of the School and of the *Revue biblique*, adhering strictly as it did to the "historical method," converged towards this end.

L. HUGUES VINCENT, O.P.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The second half of this important Memoir, giving the history of Père Lagrange's monumental labours and courageous persistence in this splendid programme of defence of the Sacred Scriptures will be published in the July issue of BLACKFRIARS.