

MARIE - JEAN - JOSEPH LATASTE, O. P.

LATASTE? The name will probably only recall the Marie Lataste who provides the sole entry under that heading in the *Catholic Encyclopedia*. She was a lay-sister of the Society of the Sacred Heart, and has recently been bracketed, oddly enough, with Pascal and The Sadhu Sundar Singh in a recent *Pelican* book. Marie-Jean-Joseph is, of course, another Lataste altogether, a Dominican friar. And if it be added that he was the founder of the Congregation of Bethany, even that does not help very much; for the *Encyclopedia* is again silent, and no account of that work has, so far as I know, yet been published in English. There are two good French books about it, and we must hope for translation or something original on our side. Meanwhile, it is time that something, however inadequate, was said, for Father Lataste and his foundation are remarkable among the many remarkable names and works associated with the Dominican revival in France.

Alcide Lataste was born at Cadillac-sur-Garonne on September 5th, 1832, seven years before Lacordaire took the Dominican habit in Rome. He joined the Order seven years after the canonical erection of the province of France; and before he had completed twelve years of religious life or his thirty-seventh year he was dead. Had that short religious life been five years shorter, there would have been little enough to write: that he was regarded as a good religious, that he was a promising preacher, that he lived as other young Dominicans lived. Some signs there were of what he was to become, but they would probably have passed unperceived; what was noticed was curiously misread even to near the end. Only after the event would the details be pieced together, the pattern be discerned.

He began his schooling in the Petit Séminaire at Bordeaux. Later, apparently at the wish of his father, he was sent to a diocesan school which prepared boys both for the professions and for the Church, and was entered as a lay boy. His reports were not entirely reassuring: there was no serious fault of character, but the boy lacked steadiness and his heart was better than his head. Years afterwards—only three years before his death, in fact, and *à propos* of the scheme which was to make the estimate seem very much at fault—the Master General wrote that in the province he had the reputation for being warm-hearted and impulsive, but utopian and not cut

out to be an organiser. But this was far in the future when, at sixteen, he found himself faced with the Superior's considered opinion that he had no vocation to the priesthood. Even at that age the loss of a purpose which had been long taken for granted and to which no alternative had even been considered was something of a shock. But the sense of disappointment weakened, desire for the priesthood died, and he accustomed himself to the prospect of a lay career with a thoroughness which he came to regret. The second stage of his life was opening.

Alcide Lataste went from school to the department of Direct Taxation, serving in offices at Bordeaux, Privas and Pau, finally becoming Surveyor at Nérac in 1856. All idea of the priesthood had gone, but there was nothing of the nominal Christian about him. Already he was showing signs of an attraction to the spiritually neglected and abandoned. His activity in S.V.P. Conferences was perhaps not unusual among the keener Catholics, but both at Privas and at Pau he began something of an apostolate among the soldiers in barracks. But a change was impending. At Privas he fell in love. For some reason his parents refused to allow an engagement, and his move to Pau even seems to have been due to their representations. He submitted, and prayed for guidance, hoping that all would yet come right. He received an unmistakable answer when, in 1855, the girl he loved died of typhoid. The blow was severe, but the spirit in which he had prayed remained. His spiritual life intensified, became more regular. He felt that he must either enter the religious life—the thought of the secular priesthood does not seem to have recurred to him—or live in the world a life of devotion and special service of the poor. Much reflection followed. He paid a visit to the family of the girl he had loved and prayed in her room; his desire for the religious life increased. Finally, by now at Nérac as Surveyor, he set himself to consider the rules of different religious orders. The needle ceased to swing and pointed to the Order of Preachers. There followed a retreat at the Dominican house at Bordeaux, and in 1857 he entered the novitiate.

The next stage—novitiate, profession, studies, common life—is, with personal differences, that of every young Dominican. In view of the judgment passed on his character at school, certain details are worth mention. His determination of purpose was marked: he did not apply for long leave from his office in order to try his vocation, but resigned at once. Threatened with inability to become a priest through illness, he would resolve to be a lay-brother. His purpose in entering the Order had been not to do this or that, but, simply to do the will of God. It was no impulsive romanticist who prayed

in his first fervour as a novice, 'With thy grace I will accept suffering, but do not count on me to make myself suffer.' The general impression is by no means of instability or merely emotional force. Less easy to weigh, but surely counting for much, is the influence of the district in which he did his studies. Lacordaire had brought the Dominicans back to Saint-Maximin, and there Marie-Jean-Joseph was in the country of St. Mary Magdalen, a saint particularly venerated in his Order. It is unthinkable that la Sainte-Baume and its pilgrimage should not have had their effect upon him. The name and thought of the saint must have been constantly present to his mind. Indeed, we know from a letter of 1862 that he had felt an attraction for the degraded and lost, had realised how much sin was due to a misguided search for happiness and how far penitent love might travel. There were already faint signs of the future, and the union of innocence and penitence in the house of Bethany had already made an impression on his mind. In 1863 he was ordained priest and assigned to Bordeaux. There followed the usual round of work—retreats, missions, sermons. And then came the turning point, when the direction of all that had gone before suddenly became plain to him and his work stood revealed. The last stage, a stage that did not end with his death, had begun.

In September, 1864, Father Lataste was sent to give a retreat to the women in the convict prison at Cadillac-sur-Garonne. It was not perhaps a very promising field, and he confessed later that he had had little hope of doing much good. But this retreat was to have great results, and fix the course of his ideas for the rest of his life. The results of the retreat were, in fact, twofold. It was, to begin with, a success: out of 380 women prisoners, 340 received the sacraments. But not only this: the preacher himself learned a great deal, and what he learned haunted his thoughts and prayers. He learned how large a part weakness and ignorance had played in those disastrous lives. He learned how greatly many of them had been sinned against; and that they were not the only ones who were guilty, but only the ones who had been punished. They were, indeed, sometimes less criminal in type than many of the women serving short sentences, professional criminals who knew the ropes too well to get into the convict prisons. Moreover, the effect of a long sentence was, for good or ill, likely to be more profound and lasting. And among these women he found some who had undergone real conversion, and were transmuting their enforced imprisonment by deliberate penitential acceptance; who forgave and prayed for those who had wronged them; who had a real desire to leave the world when they left the prison, and give themselves to God. When they

left the prison—that was the thought that haunted him. What was to happen to such women when they were discharged? What sort of chance would they have? They would be faced with the alternative of a return to their ordinary life, or of going to a refuge. A return to the world was almost bound to end in disaster. Old conditions, rendered tenfold more difficult and dangerous by the known fact of conviction and imprisonment, would be more than they could resist, as they well knew. On the other hand, conversion was real. They might be spiritual convalescents, but they were no longer spiritually diseased. Were they to be permanently relegated to a kind of inferiority? But penitent sinners had become saints. St. Mary Magdalen was a patron of the Dominican Order. ‘God does not ask what we were,’ he told them, ‘before giving himself to us; he is only moved by what we are now.’ And again, ‘the prize is not for those who have never fallen, but for those who run farthest.’ It was not a case, with those of whom he was thinking, of trying to convert. That had been done, though much would remain to do and the battle was not over; but the need was not for yet more punishment. They had had enough of suffering and tears. As things were, it seemed that whether in the world or not they would be set apart for the rest of their lives. It was all very well to say that they had paid the penalty and could turn over a new leaf; in practice they would be marked. The law might declare itself satisfied, but of real rehabilitation, whether moral or social, there was little hope. Rehabilitation: the word almost suggested itself. It was the key-word of the idea. What could be done?

‘From the very first,’ wrote Father Lataste, ‘when I was praying for them before the Blessed Sacrament, God suddenly inspired me with the idea of this work almost as distinctly as it exists to-day.’ The rest of his life was to be dominated by the desire, the urgent need, to express that idea in act. The full story of that expression is beyond the scope of a short article; but it happened that the plan which the founder worked out proved to need no serious modification as the work took form and developed. This is indeed one of its most remarkable features. Most human schemes need a good deal of adjustment when they are translated into practical life and have to meet the changes of time. And this was a plan combining boldness of conception with close attention to detail. The work to be done was admittedly difficult and delicate; the means to be adopted struck many as rash. Only a rare combination of heart and head could hope for success, and anything like romanticism or sentimentalism would be fatal. That ideal and realisation were able to keep such close company is surprising when we reflect that the founder

had been judged to lack just those qualities which were most essential. He was thought unlikely to be a good organiser; yet the organisation of Bethany was careful, not to say intricate. He had been judged to err on the side of heart and to be rather utopian; yet Bethany displays no less prudence than daring. What, then, was the 'idea of this work'?

In a sentence, it was to offer penitent women complete rehabilitation in a joint religious life of innocent and penitent, of Martha and Mary, in a new house of Bethany. The goal would be the assimilation of penitent to innocent; but because this would always take time and might not be possible for all, penitent and innocent should be indistinguishable to the world outside. In all the penitents who sought admission to Bethany there would be a real desire, a real change of direction, but there would inevitably be a long way to go and great need of formation before desire would issue in consistent action. This formation would be the work of the innocent. 'Give me,' wrote the founder, 'a few women of unblemished reputation and undefiled heart who, impelled by a generous resolve to walk in the steps of the Master, do not disdain to stoop, as he did, to poor degraded women to hold out a hand to them and comfort them; and even more, women who, winning them over and gradually raising them, consent to share fully with them the glory of their own purity and submit in return to share in a measure their dishonour if any still clings to them. If I am given such women, the dream has become reality and Jesus has successors in the rehabilitation of fallen souls; and the House of Bethany has begun, for that is the name we shall give to this work.'

One might almost say that he was given little else. Authority showed signs of alarm at the idea of this new and hazardous kind of religious life. Even sympathy went with grave doubts of its practicability. The 'utopian' met it all with high Christian realism: 'if we got nothing but encouragement and sympathy, where would the mark of the Cross be?' 'Things are going almost too well,' he wrote a little later, 'I am afraid lest the seal of our Lord should vanish gradually.' Money came in, enough to make possible a life of primitive poverty. But he was given the women he had asked for, and Bethany began, on August 14th, 1866, at Frasnes-le-Château near Besançon. This article must not attempt to be a history of the Congregation of Bethany, but even the veriest mention of the work demands that Mother Henri-Dominique should be named—Mother Henri-Dominique, Superior of the first house and for forty-one years Superior-General of the Dominicans of Bethany. Within three years of the foundation Father Lataste was saying: 'Be always

very united to your Mother. Once upon a time there were two to look after you, now there will only be one.' And on March 10th, 1869, he died.

Bethany grew, and grew, as has been said, without serious modification of the rule and organisation made for it by its founder. They are of great interest and betray what one is very tempted to call a sanctified ingenuity. For at Bethany love sees with the mind; it is an imperious necessity of the work. It is only too easy to imagine the *rehabilités* as a pleasing succession of attractive victims of romantic frailty. The reality is very different, so different that the love that sees with the eye alone would sometimes hardly survive it. But Bethany, Dominican-wise, is not afraid of the truth, and mind works hard at the difficult and sometimes disappointing process of rehabilitation. There would be something wrong if they came to want only 'people who do not give us much trouble.' That is one side. But on the other, it is always love that sees. Bethany is a family. There must be nothing of the prison about it, nothing even of the convent that might suggest the prison—for example, no grille. It must have the proper family spirit, the true family solidarity. These are Bethany sayings: 'A family does not discuss the faults of its members or talk about them to outsiders'; 'Who will take it upon herself to do penance? The most guilty? No, the most generous'; 'One sign of perfection is not to notice the imperfections of others.' There are very many others, but it must suffice to say that the whole spirit of Bethany is the spirit of charity. 'Love the souls God sends you,' said Mother Henri-Dominique, 'but, I beg you, love them for God and not for yourselves.' 'Love one another,' the founder had said, 'and to do that, love our Lord. If you love him, everything will be easy.' And in this spirit the work of Marie-Jean-Joseph Lataste survives.

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