

MAURIAC'S "LIFE OF JESUS"

IF this book¹ could take over something of the prestige enjoyed until recently by Renan's *Vie de Jésus*, it would be a great blessing for France and for us all—instead of the portrait of Christ according to Rousseau, to have one which despite many faults and insufficiencies is at least genuinely Catholic. It is not a preposterous hope. In our own country already the *Daily Express* has been placarding generous excerpts from the book. And—a more serious factor—it has found a translator who has supplied a sufficiently attractive text. However, this article is not concerned with the external success of the book, but only with certain of its internal failures. Not with the idea of condemnation, but of reaching a sober appreciation. Fortunately, it is possible in this task to make use of an article contributed to the July issue of the *Revue Biblique* of last year,² in which Père Lagrange, O.P.—whose judgment in such a matter is pre-eminently valuable—has expressed himself freely and at some length. But only when appeal is made explicitly to this authority can the views here expressed be taken as having any supercharged value.

The first thing that invites criticism is the title of the book, "*Life of Jesus*," which is clearly over-weighty; for what is provided may be described as notes on selected passages from the Gospels, unified by a progressive study of the character of Christ, but assigning no satisfactory plot or plan to the course of events. Chronology is not transcended, it is treated haphazard. Perhaps the author supposed that the arrangement of the material in the Gospels is only haphazard. For it requires some careful and, one may say, scholarly study to discover that the Gospels present—not always a chronological arrangement of events in a meticulous order of time sequence or in the spirit of a Blue Book, it is true, but an arrangement or rather a multiple but har-

¹ *Life of Jesus*, by François Mauriac of the French Academy, translated from the French by Julie Kernan. (Hodder & Stoughton; 7/6.)

² Now reissued in the form of a pamphlet and published by J. Gabalda et Cie, Paris.

monious arrangement of the material in accordance with definite conceptions of the significance and drive of events and doctrine. M. Mauriac has missed these "inspired" patterns, to supply instead one of his own carefree making which is scarcely valuable.

It would be unkind to insist on this were it not for the claim M. Mauriac seems to make in his spitfire preface that his freedom from Biblical scholarship is not the least important part of his qualifications for writing this *Life*. That preface is quite deplorable indeed. It has the spiteful tone that a man will often assume to whip up his confidence in himself. Five lines barely acknowledging that excellent work has been done by five French Catholic scholars; for the rest five pages of truculence: the scholars who do not believe, "all their learning is not worth a farthing"; those Catholic writers who present a portrait of Christ in which the Divine obscures the outline of the human figure, it is they who are to blame that men have come to deny the historical existence of Christ; to recapture the full meaning of the words of Christ what is needed is that they should be "relieved of those layers of assuasive commentary accumulated over a period of nineteen hundred years." Not a word about Jerome, Augustine, John Chrysostom, Bernard, etc. No, one must begin all over again: Chapter I then follows, and one can only suppose that it offers itself as marking the dawn of a new era in world history. Now at last we are to "hear again the voice that is to be confused with no other voice," and to see clearly the human psychological configuration and workings of the mind and soul of Christ. "A sinner would blush for his temerity in undertaking such a work," says the author. A saint likewise, we might add, if such were its real inherent pretension; but in fact we are sure that M. Mauriac is here expressing himself with something of that madness and illogicality which in the course of the narrative he on occasion attributes to Christ.

The ill-consequence of his neglect to study the genuine traditional Catholic portrait of Christ will presently become apparent. But first to consider what he has missed by ignoring the data of the scholarly commentaries. Most impor-

tantly, he has missed the wealth of meaning which the Old Testament pours into the New. And this means the loss, not of any mere logical background, but of a whole world of divine pre-commentary on the things he is relating. And in missing this he also misses—the very thing he needs for his chosen purpose—one of the chief sources we have for studying the mind and consciousness of Christ: in fact what is perhaps *the* chief source for the study of the mind of Christ as to its formation, its education, its background and horizon. Strange that one who is a novelist by profession should not have seized upon this material. One suggests that, for example, the *Benedictus* and the opening address of Christ at Nazareth are wasted on him; that with such supremely luminous events as the Baptism, the Transfiguration, the Last Supper, he receives none of the light that shines *through* them from the mighty past: he is too busy supplying light himself from his Catholic present, from the fund of his own sensibility. In this it is he who assumes the character of the mere commentator; the classic commentators are more widely receptive.

But it is necessary to carry the present complaint further. And here one can walk safely in the steps of Père Lagrange. It is a principal purpose of the book to capture the words of Christ in their primal naked meaning, stripping off the wrappings of the effeminate commentators. An excellent purpose. (On which, however, Père Lagrange comments: "Les laïcs, que nous suspectons volontiers de subir l'influence des esprits libres, sont souvent plus intransigeants que des prêtres ou des religieux, voire des évêques, tels Louis Veillot ou Léon Bloy, qui n'ont pas été les derniers à tancer le clergé de sa tiédeur." Mention of Bloy here revives one's suspicions that it is *his* example and influence imprudently assimilated that account for a good deal of what is violently excessive in the attitude of Mauriac)—it is an excellent purpose, but one that could only be carried out with the aid of some scientific criticism, and for lack of that M. Mauriac will often precisely fail: he will mistake for literal what is meant figuratively, he will fail to recognize the Semitic device of making headway by means of a dialectical process of violent opposing

MAURIAK'S "LIFE OF JESUS"

statement, he will dismiss as mere "assuasive" commentary what very often will be, in Lagrange's phrase, "une appréciation nuancée parfaitement légitime et même la plus juste." And, incidentally, in failing to interpret the sayings of Christ in accordance with their Semitic character he again frustrates one of his own principal motives: for to present Christ the teacher in a way which Lagrange describes as "le confiner dans un sens littéral précis comme un aphorisme d'Aristote" is to do violence to His true historic humanity, to tend to make of Him a Super-Everyman. To his deficiency in critical sense, then—and perhaps in part to his insufficient acquaintance with the theology of the precepts and counsels—we can attribute a good deal of the harsh unamiability he brings into his portrait of Christ. It explains his intemperate comments on the words "If anyone hate not his father and mother . . ."; the ill-judged irony of this: "he went on pouring out to them the absurd and unbearable truth . . ." etc.

But perhaps the truth is rather that M. Mauriac plays the Nelson, and will often turn a blind eye to the need there may be of gentle interpretation or reassuring explanation in order to give free rein to an inclination to ply the scourge against all second-rate Christians. Lurking in this vindictive mood of his one seems to detect something of the romantic attitude that loves the flamboyant sinner or ex-sinner, detests the mediocre churchgoer, out of a sensational snobbery. And one suggests that in his interpretation of Christ in His denunciatory rôle he perhaps unconsciously lends to Him a flavour of this same bitter-romantic mentality. However this may be, the histories of the pardon of Mary Magdalen and of the woman taken in adultery are superbly treated; but there is very little sympathy shown in the accounts of Christ's handling of prosaic earthy-mindedness and dullness and selfishness in His disciples: in face of such dispositions it is a Christ "irritated," "furious" that one is shown. The patience and forbearance of Christ, His schoolmastering of souls, these are neglected. The Good Shepherd is beautifully clear in the portrait, but not the divine Physician.

And it is at this point that it is most appropriate to protest

against M. Mauriac's treatment of Jesus's relations with His Mother. For his failure to discover human tenderness there introduces a further and a still more disastrous bitterness into his portrait of Christ. In Père Lagrange's view this is the most serious failure of the book. The matter is delicate, and one will be content here to keep within the bounds of his criticism. This is the complaint: that in minimizing in Christ as he does the expression of, the enjoyment of an intimate fond relationship with His Mother, M. Mauriac detracts from the perfection and form the loveliness of Christ's human nature. Moreover he goes against the mind of Catholic Tradition which has been inspired to see in the relationship of Jesus and Mary a summary of, a sort of gracious sacrament of, the lovingkindness of the Incarnation. According to this understanding Mary was divinely chosen to mother her Son not only into this world but also into the hearts of men, as they should see and delight in, knowing too that they were meant to share in, the homely, kind, human-courteous love between that Mother and that Son. Of course not a word from M. Mauriac of any deliberate denial of this. But he covers over this love with a Lenten-purple veil, making wholly ascetic and repressed what if it was truly, perfectly human, and also meant to be sacramental for us, must have enjoyed some gracious expression and expansion. From the Finding in the Temple onwards M. Mauriac goes to pains to present us with a Christ who relentlessly keeps His Mother at arms' length. On the difficulty of the saying "Knew ye not that I must needs be in my Father's house" he remarks: "Yet did her Jeschou ever say kind words to her until just before the end, when He spoke to her from the height of the cross?" And again he writes: "None of the words of Christ to His Mother related in the Gospels (except the last) but show His hard independence of the woman; as if He had made use of her for His Incarnation, and having issued from her flesh, there was apparently no longer anything in common between Him and her." While acknowledging his merit in avoiding the silly piety that would make the attitude of the Mother to her Son during the hidden life at Nazareth "one continual genuflection every time she passed before Him,"

MAURIAC'S "LIFE OF JESUS"

Père Lagrange can reproach M. Mauriac for substituting the equally gratuitous surmise of this, for example (for accuracy here one borrows the original French, from Lagrange's article): "Aucune colloque entre eux n'est imaginable. Ils prononçait en araméen les mots ordinaires des pauvres gens, ceux qui designe les objets usuels, les outils, la nourriture." Really it is going too far—one agrees with Lagrange—to want to limit their conversation to the affairs of carpentry and housekeeping. Of that period of the hidden life M. Mauriac elsewhere remarks: "God had so far sunk Himself in man . . .": but if things were as he would represent them, it must rather have seemed to Mary that precisely the humanity of her Son eluded her. Yet again M. Mauriac has betrayed his own cause, and this time partly through textual misunderstandings from which a little scholarly science could have saved him (see Lagrange for some details) and partly through his disregard of Catholic Tradition.

There are some serious faults, then, in M. Mauriac's portrait of Christ. But now something must be said of the chief purpose that inspired—if it did not altogether successfully control—its composition. To dwell on the humanity of Christ in order to form a definite image of his human personality,³ to break away from the pious school of portrait-painting which often allows "the man named Jesus" to be "swallowed up in the lightning power of the Second Divine Person"—there you have the dominant motive. In his preface to the second French edition of the work (on which this present translation is based) he makes this beautiful avowal: "Shall I admit it? If I had not known Christ, 'God' for me would have been a word devoid of meaning. Without a very particular grace, the Infinite Being would have been unimaginable and unthinkable to me. The God of philosophers and sages would have had no place in my moral life. For me to believe it was necessary for God to clothe Himself in humanity, and at a certain

³ There is no room here to criticize this particular project; but it is perhaps more efficacious to be able to refer the reader to two chapters, entitled *Der Menschensohn* and *Das Ganze*, in the book by Guardini that is mentioned further on.

moment of history, on a certain point of the globe, for a human being made of flesh and blood to pronounce certain words and perform certain actions. Then only could I bend the knee." One can admire the spirit of all this, but not the resultant Christological concept. In order to vindicate the reality of Christ's human nature M. Mauriac presents it as though in fact it were a rival entity to the Godhead in Christ, and asserted for itself some kind of independent existence. In effect he gives us a double personality in Christ; at one moment he envisages Christ the Son of God—he takes fright: that is not the Christ with whom he is concerned or with whom he is in sympathy. He hurries away to show us the Christ who is the son of man. He plays a game of hide-and-seek: siding with the human in Christ and dodging the Divine, which every now and then will surprise and pounce upon him for all his nimbleness. A pity he did not learn more from his study of Grandmaison—his is one of the five Catholic names he mentions with approval.

Finally it may be added that he could have done very well too with something of the doctrine of a recent book by Romano Guardini—*Das Bild von Jesus dem Christus in Neuen Testament*.⁴ This might have saved him from a further division he too violently, too crudely, imposes on the being of Christ: that is, from his too realistic setting of the mortal-physical Christ, the Christ of the "going in Galilee," over against the immortal-spiritual Christ, super-temporal, Head of the Church, King of the world, eternal Priest. It might be said that in this book of Guardini's one has a providential companion-book to Mauriac: supplying—with equivalent charm of style, too—the Johannine and Pauline Christological doctrine with which the *Life* needed to be more leavened. From it one would learn how to disapprove of this outburst: "All efforts to minimize the human element in Him violate my deepest instincts, and doubtless to this tendency must be attributed my obstinacy in preferring to the visage of Christ the King, of a triumphant Messiah, that humble and tortured face of the

⁴ Werkbund-Verlag, Würzburg, Abt. Die Burg. Auslieferung, Burg Rothenfels am Main (pp. 126, n.p.).

MAURIAC'S "LIFE OF JESUS"

man . . ."; and one might learn to regret duly that the beautiful concluding sentences of the *Life*—"Already He was lying in ambush at the turn of the road which went from Jerusalem to Damascus, watching for Saul, his beloved persecutor. Thenceforth in the destiny of every man there was to be this God who lies in wait"—should have the air of saying "but this is quite another story."

This is perhaps more than enough of railing over faults which are always generous faults and have a way of turning at any moment into virtues. The book is a noble and most inspiring protestation of Catholic faith and love, and there is no need for bitterness to see it already a brilliant success in circles where many books theologically its betters can have no hope of being received.

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