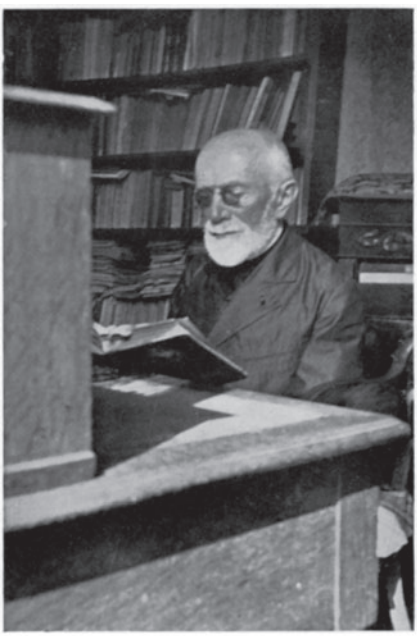
ALFRED LOISY



A Mon Maurice Petre
en souvenir de nos visites
à Ceffonds, 23-24 juillet 1934,
et témoignage d'affectueux
respects.

A. Loisy

ALFRED LOISY

His Religious Significance

BY

M. D. PETRE

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To
LOUIS CANET

CONTENTS

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MAUDE PETRE

THIS study of the life and work of Alfred Loisy was the last of the many contributions of Maude Petre to the literature of the modernist movement in the Roman Catholic Church. It was completed shortly before her death in her eightieth year in December 1942. Several chapters were written during air raids, and others at intervals between fire-watching, attending a L.C.C. nursery where she was idolized by the children, and ministering to French and other refugees. Though the shades of the prison house grew deeper towards the end, the flame of her indomitable spirit burned more brightly. This volume therefore may be regarded as a memorial not only of the great French heresiarch who suffered the extreme penalties of the Church, but also of the author who once described herself as 'a solitary marooned passenger, the sole living representative of what has come to be regarded as the lost cause of modernism in the Catholic Church'.[1]

While it is true that a great soul has little need of ancestors Maude Petre showed in *My Way of Faith* (Dent) that she had a deep, inherited, but not uncritical, loyalty to her family tradition. She was the seventh child of a family of eleven, her father being the younger son of the thirteenth Lord Petre, a descendant of Sir William Petre, Under-Secretary of State in the reigns of Henry VIII, Edward VI, and Mary. Her mother, a daughter of the Earl of Wicklow, was a convert to Roman Catholicism. While maintaining unswerving loyalty to the Church, several of her ancestors also maintained a tacit, and sometimes an overt, resistance to the extreme claims of ultramontanism. Thus despite the frequent fulminations of the Church against Freemasonry, which as early as 1738 had been banned by the Papal Bull of Clement XII, the ninth Lord

[1] *Vide* my article in *The Hibbert Journal*, July 1943, of which this introduction is an abridgement.

Petre, ignoring the possibility of excommunication, became the Grand Master of the English fraternity in 1772.

The characteristic thus exemplified was most deeply rooted in Maude Petre. Her almost 'ferocious independence', as she laughingly described it, above all in her spiritual relations, was, next to her abounding charity, the most fundamental trait in her rich and rare character. Where the soul was at stake she was as uncompromising as the most fanatical ultramontane who might wish to dictate to her. One of her earliest works, *Catholicism and Independence* (Longmans), was a call for spiritual liberty, for 'a faith not presumptuous but courageous even to audacity. To trust oneself is, in certain cases, to trust God, for if the light within be not from Him, then we are indeed of all men most miserable.'

The miracle was that she was able to maintain this rare independence of spirit with unwavering adhesion to the Church which had condemned her friends—Father Tyrrell whom it would have buried without a sign, Abbé Henri Brémond who was forced to retract his burial tribute in most humiliating terms, Baron Friedrich von Hügel who, although he escaped the major penalties, lived for many years under a cloud of suspicion from which he suffered deeply, and Loisy who gravitated after excommunication into complete severance from the Church, giving up all hope of a reconciliation, and even ceasing to desire it. To each of these leaders she was to the end, as Von Hügel used to address her, 'My brave dear Maude Petre'. She enjoyed their absolute confidence; they opened their hearts to her as to none other. She shared their troubles, and her courage and devotion provided a shield for them in the dark hours of their Gethsemane.

When she was required to give interior assent to a solemn condemnation of the cause of her friends as denounced in the Encyclical Pascendi of Pius X, without any assurance of its infallibility, but with the knowledge that it was the work of a reactionary ultramontane clique at the Vatican, and when she learned further that owing to the strong protest of the German Government at the time, many Catholics in the Reich were

dispensed from the obligation to take the anti-modernist oath, her conscience and independence were outraged. She refused to take the oath, and, though often pressed to do so in later years, never wavered in her refusal. She would not compromise herself in this matter to the extent of von Hügel, who wrote to her in 1918:

> It is forcibly in my mind—as far as I know myself—from a strong desire not to appear (it would be contrary to the facts and contrary to my ideals and convictions) as though all that action of the Church authorities had, in no way or degree, been interiorly accepted by me. Certainly that action was very largely violent and unjust; equally certainly, if one had been required definitely to subscribe to this or that document without express reservations, one could not, with any respect left, have done so.

For her refusal she paid the penalty of 'a partial local pseudo-excommunication', being forbidden to receive communion in the Southwark diocese, and deprived of graveside rites at her burial.

* * * *

In pursuance of her religious vocation she made a pilgrimage to Rome at the age of twenty-two on the advice of her Jesuit confessor, who prescribed a course of study in the philosophy of St Thomas Aquinas, as an elixir that would fortify her faith and dispel all doubt. This event caused as much surprise to eminent ecclesiastics as to her family at home. Her aunt, Lady Lindsay, explained to enquiring friends, that 'Maude had gone to Rome to study for the priesthood'. The Jesuit to whom she presented her credentials and explained her purpose could scarcely conceal his astonishment: 'You are the only one', he said dryly. Tyrrell, recalling the event many years afterwards, penned a valentine in which he depicted the passengers of 'The Rome Express' trying to push the train which had stuck on the line:

> Lo, in the rear an Amazon who shoves,
> And murmurs to herself: 'I feel it moves';
> Herself immobile, nothing can defeat her;
> Rock versus Rock, and Petre versus Peter.

On her return home she entered the sisterhood of 'The Daughters of Mary', a community founded in France during the Revolution, having houses in many parts of the world, and there she displayed such zeal in promoting orphanages, settlements amongst the poor, and in the instruction of converts, that she was eventually, as she said, 'kicked upstairs'. She was raised to the rank of Superior of the English and Irish Province, a position which she held with distinction for more than ten years.

About 1900, when she was thirty-eight years of age, she became closely acquainted with Father Tyrrell following a Retreat which he gave to the Sisters, and this acquaintance ripened into a long and noble friendship, until affection for him became the dominant interest of her life. To help him in his difficulties, to share his hopes and fears, to strive above all to maintain him in the Church, became an integral part of her vocation. His debt to her abiding affection especially during the last tragic phase of his storm-tossed career, when she proved herself hard as a diamond and more tender than a mother, when but for her devoted ministration he would have died outcast and unhouselled, was incomputable in mortal eyes. To those who implied a reproach for what they regarded as reckless unorthodoxy in befriending a heretic she replied: 'I could never do less for man in order to think more of God.' The tragic story which she told in her *Life of George Tyrrell* (Arnold) silenced the ecclesiastical watch-dogs: whether from fear or shame they thrust the book on the Index, praying no doubt that it would be remembered against them no more for ever.

Some years earlier she relinquished her position as Mother Provincial of the Sisterhood in a deeply affecting farewell. She could not reconcile her life-long faith as a loyal daughter of the Church with the harsh military conception of obedience and authority enforced by the Vatican in the name of Pius X. This was for her then and always the root problem of the modernist controversy.

'My first resolution to take a definite line', she wrote to a friendly priest, 'even in external matters in regard to Church

authority dated from the condemnation of Abbé Loisy and not from any event in Father Tyrrell's career.'

That condemnation had made it clear to her conscience that the time had come for any who felt they had something to say to say it regardless of consequences. But as she explained to the next in authority in the Sisterhood: 'Of this you may be assured—even if I have to pain friends I will do my best never to be pained by them, because I will try to see motives of conscience and not of unkindness in anything they may do.'

She remained in this disposition to the end. No ostracism or deprivation could embitter her, no suffering cause her to lose faith and hope. When the cause seemed lost irretrievably and her friends were thrust 'like foolish prophets forth', she never ceased to work and pray that the Church might yet be freed from the dead hand of the past that it might enter into new life and holiness. She never lost the vision of that ampler day when the stone which the builders had rejected would become the corner-stone of the Temple, and the Church of the future would learn to revere the memory of those modernist martyrs who had lived and died His ambassadors in bonds.

JAMES A. WALKER

CARDIFF
December 1943