

REVIEWS

THE FIRST MONKS AND HERMITS. By S. G. A. Luff. (St Albert's Press, Aylesford; 2s.)

WESTERN ASCETICISM. *The Library of Christian Classics*, vol. XII. Edited by Owen Chadwick. (S.C.M. Press; 35s.)

A modest little essay from the Aylesford Press deserves the attention of all who are stirred by the inspiration of the solitary life, and it can be said with confidence that Professor Chadwick's fine book, which has so much to say on the same theme, is one of those rare volumes that will long be sought after, even when it goes out of print. Both writers witness to that contemporary revival of genuine sympathy with the primitive sources of religious life, which has doubtless been warmed by experiences that make the reactions of the desert Fathers much more credible to us than they once were, and which is saved from the touch of mere romanticism by the effort of sound learning. 'The monks always looked back to the apostolic Church as the source of their way of life. Medieval monks supposed that their corporate societies were successors, in a continuous line, of that primitive group of disciples who possessed all things in common. . . . Though a stronger sense of history discarded this faith, it contained more truth than the nineteenth century suspected', says Professor Chadwick in the magisterial introduction to his volume of translations. He insists upon the special colour which the memory of the martyrs gave to primitive Christian asceticism. 'The blood of the martyrs not only propagated the gospel: it ensured that the kind of gospel propagated was that which showed the Christians as strangers and pilgrims upon earth.' Professor Chadwick sees two developments as being necessary to transform the primitive groups of Christian ascetics into monks: (1) withdrawal from the congregation, (2) common discipline and rule. When those developments begin to come, he sees Basil's work as 'best understood not as an off-shoot of Egyptian monasticism but as a continuation and extension of the idea of the primitive ascetic society'. In the lives of Anthony and Pachomius we observe a progressive movement 'mentally as well as geographically' away from the congregation. The growth of the religious ideas which the new way of life in the deserts demanded, leading to the ideal of pure contemplation, is most persuasively discussed, and against this background we can the better appreciate the peculiar merits and 'the strange kind of originality' of the incomparable rule of St Benedict. Slow to win acceptance, that rule, partly due to the influence of Anglo-Saxon missionaries, finally triumphed as the rule *par excellence* of the

monks of the West. S. G. A. Luff's essay, which surveys in a more restricted manner a good deal of the same material, has some points to make which are complementary to what Professor Chadwick has to say. Especially worth making was the observation that 'of the Sayings of the Fathers those which originate in the more solitary deserts are above all concerned with the theme of fraternal charity, whilst the less edifying stories seem to originate in the cenobia. At Nitria, on the approach of visitors, the brethren poured out like a swarm of bees, for the most part carrying pitchers of water and bread. But it was not the custom at the walled monastery of Isidore, where the visitor was lucky to receive a night's lodging at the gate, and in the morning a blessing, and a dismissal.'

Thus wherever sterility in the Christian virtues has overtaken the monastic life, it has been necessary to return to the primitive sources. It is here that Professor Chadwick's volume has made ample provision for us. With a very just sense of proportion it gives us a particularly generous and painstaking translation of a large section of the *Verba Seniorum*, seven of Cassian's *Conferences* and the complete Rule of St Benedict. We may note that the translation of the Holy Rule follows Dom Justin McCann's interpretation of *scapulare* in chapter 55, though not, it would seem, his contention about the late latin superlative. It also adopts the suggestion that St Benedict's *bibliotheca* in chapter 48 means that each monk is given one book of the Bible for Lent. It would be hard to find a single volume of comparable richness and erudition to put into the hand of anyone who wanted to read for himself the most important sources of primitive western asceticism.

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OUR MASS. By Mgr Chevrot. Translated by J. Holland Smith. (Challoner Publications; 21s.)

THE MASS: CHRISTIANS AROUND THE ALTAR. By the Community of St Séverin. Translated by Margaret Clark. (Geoffrey Chapman; 10s. 6d.)

These two translations from the French make an interesting pair. Both are designed to teach the ordinary layman the place and meaning of the mass in his life. The first was written in the early stages of the liturgical movement in France by a parish priest who realized how difficult it was for the mass as usually celebrated to mean anything at all to the silent spectators who attended it. The second, published in 1954, is a series of sermons preached by a group of priests in a church where there are no silent spectators, but where the congregation avails itself of all that the liturgical revival offers to facilitate its participation. For Mgr Chevrot, as still for us in England, the sight of the faithful