

## THE PRIEST

RECENT controversy about the 'priest workers' in France has had a fruitful result at least in this: that the nature of the Christian priesthood has come under the spotlight of the human mind. Layfolk and clergy, theologians and the devout, the enemies of the Church and the most law-abiding worshippers of authority have all scrutinised the essence of that Order established by our Lord. This follows the pattern of every crisis in the Church; it leads to a fuller and deeper understanding of the mysteries within the Body of Christ. At the time of such crises there is of course much smoke and visibility is poor; many foolish, many emotionally tense things are said and written which contribute little to the grasp the Christian will have of the reality. It is only when the clouds have blown away and peace once again rules among the theologians and the laity that the benefits of the crisis become apparent.

But while the theories and explanations, the distinctions and analyses, are raging round men's minds and flying off their tongues the fact of the life of Christ remains constant, yet ever growing. There have been since Bethlehem Christian families meeting the impact of their times with the strength of a divine love which perfected the bonds between parents and children, while at the present day articles, pamphlets and books are for ever being published in an effort to describe the nature of that fact, the essence of the Christian family. So too the priesthood of Christ, now the subject of all this flurry of discussion, has existed since the Last Supper, an instrument of life and nourishment in the Body of Christ. It may therefore be timely to point to the fact today, the fact of Christian priests who work as instruments in God's hands to maintain the life of the modern Church. While we wait for the clouds of controversy to disperse, we may preserve our sense of proportion and of direction by clinging on to reality. There have always been men, consecrated to the service of God, ready to take literally our Lord's word about plucking out an eye if it causes real offence, and we find this sort of priest still lives

in men like the Italian missionary described in the present issue of *THE LIFE*. There have always been men, too, like Dom Paul Nevill who could balance the hard work of the pedagogue with the 'divine work' of the monastic life, men who remained actively priests whether at the altar or following the exacting call of some occupation in the service of their fellow human beings.

The consideration of such examples of the real mystery of the life of Christ on earth does not shield from our sight other examples of the priest who has followed Judas in betraying his Master. This other facet of the fact of the real and existing priesthood of Christ only serves to make us comprehend that the fact is a mystery, that Christ lives in weak and frail humanity. There may be priests who, far from cutting out their tongues, would be found willing to break the seal for a price. There may be priests whose position of authority has corrupted their characters so that they develop a power complex which brooks no criticism and seems prepared to lead the flock to the butcher's yard rather than to the pasture. Yet in the midst even of such corruption of the good the eyes of faith can discern the real figure of Christ dispensing the treasures of his Passion and Resurrection.

We can leave others for a while to discuss whether the priesthood is compatible with the conveyor belt while we stay to relish the mystery of the presence of Christ on earth in the spirit of the heroic missionary or the undemonstrative hard-working schoolmaster, or in the character of those ordained who are as yet neither heroic nor hard-working. The mystery is here for us to grasp in mind and heart.