

REVIEWS

THE WATER AND THE FIRE. By Gerald Vann, O.P. (Collins; 12s. 6d.)

With *The Water and the Fire* Fr Vann reaches his fifteenth book. It is an achievement, simply in terms of hard labour, which can too easily be overlooked, for the writing of books can scarcely ever, for an English priest in our time, be other than an extra occupation for the moments when ordinary work can be put aside. And Fr Vann as teacher and preacher has devoted himself so singly to his immediate work that the fruit of his 'leisure' must seem the more remarkable. The point is of importance, for his books are immensely enriched by the fact of his experience. He brings to his chosen themes a large and empirical sympathy: the structure of his theology is enclosed in the living fabric of a real engagement in the problems he discusses. That is not to say that priestly anecdotes are used to supplement the deficiencies of theology. On the contrary, his masterly ordering of the classic themes of spirituality is unique in the English writing of our time. Here all is authoritative and serene, grounded in a wise and discriminating use of Scripture and the preferred doctrine of Aquinas. But it is at every point enlightened by an adult and contemporary awareness of what needs to be said *now*, and of the way in which a perennial truth may be brought to bear on a sad and sundered generation.

In his new book, Fr Vann turns to the miseries of our time—and redeems them, not through censorious moralising or cheap-jack apologetic tricks, but through a patient analysis, through a sensitive recall to the deep and cardinal needs of man. The loss of roots, the sense of desolation in a doomed society: against this Fr Vann assembles in all its power the strong pattern of human life at one with God and Nature. Here he finds much in the psychology of Jung that can, at its own level, restore the broken harmony of man. But Fr Vann, however sensitive he is to the intellectual climate of his time (and the extent of his quotations shows how widely he has searched for all that may support his argument), is never other than the minister of a Christian reconciliation in all its unequivocal simplicity. The place of woman, the taxing problems of married life, the dilemmas that face the Christian at every turn: these are resolved in the strong light of charity, for 'we cannot be neutral'. And it is Fr Vann's special achievement, never more apparent than in his latest work, that he confronts neutrality with the positive life of Christ, expressed anew in a language that has meaning for those he serves. For serve them he does, and at this point of his life as a writer they should be glad to acknowledge their debt.

I.E.