

## BOOK REVIEWS

**SAINT BENEDICT AND THE SIXTH CENTURY.** By Dom John Chapman. (London: Sheed & Ward, 1929; 10/6 net.)

In this erudite and ingenious book Abbot Chapman gives us, not a new life of Saint Benedict, but a new view about his life. Whereas previous writers about the saint have supposed, despite Saint Gregory's charming picture of his wonder-working career, that Saint Benedict enjoyed no very wide fame in his life-time and that his real fame came afterwards with the slow progress of his Rule to a marvellous supremacy, Abbot Chapman maintains that he was a commanding figure even during his life, and that his Rule was from the beginning a document of papal, if not of imperial, authority. To establish this thesis the author has cast his net widely in sixth century literature. Beginning with St. Gregory's *Dialogues*, he enters a vigorous protest against the criticism which would dismiss St. Gregory's narratives as mere legends; they are not legends, but the depositions of witnesses. It is true that they may be 'lies or inaccurate or exaggerated' (p. 5) and Abbot Chapman himself explains away some of them (pp. 4, 6, 17, 199); but there is no doubt that St. Gregory's account is true in the main, and it gives us the picture of a thaumaturgus who must have made an immense impression on the people of his own day. We turn from the *Dialogues* to the Rule and we find it written by a Master, in a style and with a character that compel us to give it the widest possible scope. We then scrutinise contemporary literature and find traces of the influence of the Rule from the very earliest days of its publication. Abbot Chapman finds these traces in the laws of Justinian, in the Rule of Caesarius (which previous scholars had put before St. Benedict's), in the writings of Cassiodorus (once regarded as the founder of a different type of monachism), and (negatively and by contrast) in Ferrandus and Ferreolus. It is true that in no instance is there a direct citation, nor is St. Benedict ever mentioned by these authors; but the similarities of diction and thought are such as to convince Abbot Chapman that all were familiar with the Rule, and their very manner of using it—vaguely, allusively, without troubling to make any reference or acknowledgment—shows that they took it for granted and regarded it as the monastic Rule *par excellence*. So their very silence in its regard is evidential. On the other hand, Ferreolus and Ferrandus tes-

tify to the Rule's vogue and authority by advocating practices which are a tacit criticism of its prescriptions. In fine, this whole mass of evidence and the Rule's intrinsic quality compel us to regard it as from the beginning an ecumenical document, written not for Monte Cassino alone, nor for any group of monasteries attached to that house, but for Italy in general, or even for the whole of Latin monachism. It is even probable, suggests the author, that it was written at the instigation of Pope Hormisdas. And this Rule, so conceived and so sponsored, was launched into the world as the *Regula Monasteriorum*, and was accepted as *the* Rule for Monks. St. Benedict, therefore did not, as is commonly supposed, build bigger than he knew; he had really designed the Rule for the supremacy which it subsequently achieved.

We like this thesis and we have enjoyed reading the Abbot's vigorous and racy argument; but we have some obstinate doubts. The author begins his book with the sentence: 'It is a very strange fact that St. Benedict is not mentioned in any contemporary document that has come down to us.' It is surely the strangest of facts, if his thesis is true. And when the saint is mentioned, by St. Gregory, some fifty years after his death, he is hardly presented to us as a great monastic legislator. St. Gregory dismisses the Rule in one short sentence and has nothing to say about its important rôle. We have thought also that the traces of the Rule which Abbot Chapman has found in contemporary literature are not all of a conclusive character. When it is argued that the disciplinary section of the Rule proves its purpose as a reforming document, we wonder could not as much be argued for the Rule of St. Columbanus. Nor is it clear, if St. Benedict's Rule had such authority, why other abbots continued to write other Rules.

The final chapter is perhaps the most arresting of all, because it claims to throw new light, after these many centuries, upon the Benedictine vows. The three Benedictine vows are *stabilitas, conversio morum, obedientia*. By the second vow, *conversion of manners*, according to the traditional interpretation, the monk has been understood to promise constant effort towards perfection. But Abbot Butler pointed out some time ago that St. Benedict wrote *conversatio morum* and not *conversio*, and argued that he meant just the practice of the monastic life. Abbot Chapman goes into the point with the greatest care and arrives at very much the same conclusion. He would, however, express his own conception of St. Benedict's meaning in the quaint phrase: '*monasticity of behaviour.*'

## *Blackfriars*

We select these criticisms out of many that occurred to us as we read these erudite pages. The book is a challenge to the scholars who have occupied themselves with St. Benedict and his Rule, and we look forward with the greatest interest to the debate which must ensue.

J.M.

THE DOMINICANS. By Father John-Baptist Reeves, O.P. (Sheed & Ward; 2/6.)

If Father John-Baptist Reeves has any advantage over the other writers in this series it is because he has the easier task of dealing with an Order which has remained always consistent with itself, faithful to the aims of its founder, and conspicuous for a very remarkable unity. It is an orderly Order; its history has been orderly, uncomplicated by disruptions, revivals and reforms; and Father Reeves writes of it in orderly fashion. This orderliness was the legacy left by St. Dominic himself who, like a wise architect, built upon foundations that would endure: he assured permanence by giving his friars not an iron rule, but a masterly constitution which placed in the hands of the brethren the power of regulating the affairs of the Order and of establishing and changing its laws. The elective system which exists in the Dominican Order is frequently quoted as proof of its democratic character. Fr. Reeves is careful to point out that St. Dominic was by instinct and reason more disposed to prefer monarchy to any other form of government. 'If a democrat is a man who thinks in terms of his own rights and other men's duties, the name ought never to be given to St. Dominic.' But if a democrat is one who loves the liberty of the sons of God, and yet worships authority and obedience; who allows the ruled to choose their ruler, and yet places safeguards against unchecked absolutism and all forms of tyranny and gives the same subjects the right to revise their choice and unseat and even punish their former ruler, then surely St. Dominic is the ideal democrat whose preference for monarchy will be shared by the truly democratic.

St. Dominic was the first founder to establish a religious Order in which authority, under the supreme command of a single ruler, is exercised through a graduated hierarchy. Every religious Order since his time has in the main followed his general plan. He built his constitution on lines parallel with the hierarchical system he found existing in the Church. His conservatism, as Fr. Reeves points out, is indistinguishable from the Apostolicity and Catholicity of the papacy. His pro-