

SEARCHINGS, by Bishop B. C. Butler, edited by Valentine Rice. *Geoffrey Chapman*, London, 1975. 272 pp. £5.

This book is made up of occasional essays from the bishop's writings between 1927, when he was not yet a Roman Catholic, and 1966, when he was about to become a bishop. All save the first were written when he was a monk of Downside. There is also a most informative biographical introduction by Professor Rice.

It is interesting that editor and publisher should present the volume so determinedly as coming from *Bishop Butler*. Unconsciously maybe, we seem to be invited to recognise the monastic episcopal successor to Ullathorne and Hedley, those two dominating and outstanding figures among the English bishops (the judgement is Philip Hughes's).

That is a daunting suggestion. Mgr Hughes described Hedley as 'this great English monk who so glorified the Hierarchy of this country'; this was because he was firm in his monastic commitment and 'rooted in theological principles really and fully understood and not in . . . the appearance of things', so that there was no trace of fanaticism about him but an 'unhurried, instructed judgement, and the calm, courageous confidence it produces'.

So perhaps the suggestion is not strange after all. Here is a monk-bishop, a theologian, a biblical scholar, one who graduated from the theological school of Oxford University. All four influences are to be found in the book. In *A Time to Speak*, Bishop Butler wrote that, until the Council, he 'had lived for years with the uncomfortable sense that I was on the distant left fringe of Catholicism' (p. 149). Soon after he became a Catholic he was told that Newman was not a safe guide, and his Abbot (Chapman) told him that von Hugel was a 'bad Catholic'; so he found himself, as he

thought, 'both a believing Catholic and estranged from the main current of Catholic opinion' (p. 139).

Most of the book under review was written while the author felt himself under a constant threat. The last four essays were written after the Council had given him 'the recovery of hope'. The book should be read in the context of its writing.

After Dom Christopher was elected Abbot of Downside in 1946, he embarked on a systematic study of modern continental theology. So it was that he was better equipped than any other English-speaking member of Vatican II to understand what the Council was all about. He had long been a serious student of the Bible, familiar with Anglican commentaries as well as Catholic ones. He had never lived in the intellectual backwater that he suspected was neo-scholasticism. For him the Christian Church consists of men and women of flesh and blood; 'it is as historical, as concrete, as the human nature of Christ was historical'. It is not a pious aspiration or a heavenly reality; it is an historical society.

Like our own Henry St John (the only English Dominican mentioned in *A Time to Speak*) the bishop cannot be understood without an awareness of the gradual evolution of his thinking in response to the 'shewings' of divine grace; some of this will be unfamiliar to a home-bred Catholic but it helped the abbot to be one of the principal figures of Vatican II. In this book, with its significant title, we can see how the decisions of the Council emerged largely through those who had lived in darkness and in needful hope. They searched, and at last finding was given to them.

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