

TO HEAVEN THROUGH A WINDOW: *A Life of St Gerard Majella*. By John Carr, C.S.S.R. (Sands; 12s. 6d.)

THE apparent unreality of sanctity is perhaps today the greatest obstacle to a sympathetic understanding of the saints. It finds its source in the idea that holiness is concerned exclusively with those things which fall into the category 'ecclesiastical' or 'spiritual', and that digging potatoes, or a liking for cats, or the study of history, or cycling, walking or stamp-collecting, and all such things have nothing to do with man's perfection in the sight of God. They are like the straw or wood shavings which must be included in the parcel to protect the fragile vase; when the parcel is unpacked (presumably at the last judgement) they will be put aside and burnt. On this count the saints would be men who never looked at the stars for joy, only worked because they had to live, and certainly indulged in no hobbies. Too frequently people imagine that is how saints are made.

Even traditionalist Catholics sometimes ask themselves whether St Gerard's importance for those who come after him does not lie rather in his miracles than in his imitability. He is more like a star than a signpost. We think of him as of a craftsman who achieved the finest results with the crudest tools, the miracles supplementing human workmanship. Father Carr makes no pretentious claims, but he does in fact correct this error. Gerard of Muro is a star for us to admire, true enough, but despite his extreme sinlessness and his prodigious power of miracle he was more normal than we imagine. 'Anyone who fancies that sanctity knocks the character out of a man will get a rude shock'. That was the secret of Gerard: he was himself every moment of his life. He was born in an unsophisticated world where to be oneself was the usual thing, and in that sense he gave grace an unusually good opportunity, so to say. Therefore it is no more surprising to read of early indications of holiness in such a life than it is to read of 'a Mozart scribbling harmonies with his baby fingers and of the future victor of Marengo and Austerlitz marshalling his tin soldiers'. Such things are straws in the wind; the danger lies in thinking them trade winds, for 'it is easy when reading Gerard's life, crowded as it is with mystical and miraculous phenomena, to picture him as being in an almost unbroken ecstasy or working unremitting wonders. Numerous as these undoubtedly were, they were after all but isolated incidents in days filled with commonplace but more important things done with supreme excellence because done to the last iota absolutely and solely for God'. He was a craftsman who earned his living like any other man: he was a late vocation who started to be a saint by being a tailor; his life in the monastery was a life of daily work: he was a man who knew human love—in so far as it can ever be separated from divine—and above all he suffered. He was consumptive and suffered like any other, consumptive in 1750. The difference was that he was vividly aware of his suffering as of everything else in his life. It is this vivid understanding and love in a life of such commonplace simplicity which seems the greatest miracle

of all. Miracles there were in plenty, but miracles are not short cuts; they are manifestations of God: 'Great saints are God's resounding counterblasts to great sinners'.

In a large volume Father Carr elaborates these things. While he affirms strongly that 'They who are not prepared to meet the miraculous in the life of Gerard Majella have no business reading this book', he does everything possible to assure the sceptic by his historical thoroughness and honesty. The only drawback to such an exhaustive method is indigestibility: great profusion of facts with authoritative sources tempts us to focus on the trees and not the wood. One might perhaps suggest that this book provides a source for a more stimulating and less bulky work on a saint whose enthusiasm could mean so much to the twentieth century.

The style like the format is on the whole workmanlike, but there are one or two regrettable slacknesses: 'Father Giovenale . . . got a holy and happy thought' (p. 134); 'The students lost no time in organising the holy outing' (p. 271). Such things, like the occasional over-use of the cumulative device, are only Homeric nods, but they are none the less unhappy.

Finally one would welcome an even greater insistence on that which was basic in the life of the saint. It is nothing peripheral like a list of resolutions, but something more central, something that lies at the heart of his holiness, something we can find expressed in his often-repeated 'non è niente'. It is more than detachment, it is more than balance: we should call it supernatural common-sense; whatever name we give it it springs from a faithful nurturing of the gifts of the Holy Ghost and is a kind of composite Fruit—a Joy-Peace-Patience. It is the secret of Gerard's vivid flaming love of reality: his attraction lies in the fact that like many of us he had nothing, materially speaking, to stimulate him, yet his enthusiasm thrived. For him the daily miracle of his own existence was more wonderful than any miraculous increase of food or drink: Chesterton's *Orthodoxy* reads as a penetrating commentary on such a saint. Such vision is the true message of the mystics and can never be too deeply underlined by any hagiographer, because that is the first and the last gift the saints leave us.

GERARD MEATH, O.P.

**MONTHLY RECOLLECTION.** By Rev. Father Victor, C.P. Translated from the French by Rev. Father Edmund, C.P. (Gill & Son; 1s.) This little book is conspicuous for its simplicity, and may be useful to many religious sisters. There is perhaps a lack of dogmatic stress, and too much self-examination. It does not appear useful as a hand-book for general spiritual reading or meditation, but rather for occasional use at days of recollection.

In writing for the many surely it is an exaggeration to say: 'Let the subject of your meditation be, by preference, the Passion of our Lord and the Sorrows of the blessed Virgin' (p. 28). We may here recall the words of St Thomas when speaking of meditation as a stimulant to