

A word on fasting, since the Editor wishes it to be so. Our dietary position is such that we are dependent on the immediate upper-tract stimulation of food taken. The real physiological stimulus, long-lasting, that comes of healthy metabolism, is wanting in the case of most individuals, most communities. In my opinion any but a nominal fast (some small act of self-denial) will defeat its purpose, by lowering too far the substructure of nature on which divine grace builds. It will be a great pity if, on the analogy of continental Europe (where the state of nutrition is, to my observation, much higher than ours), rigorous compulsory fasts are imposed on this country at the present time.



DISCOVERING A SAINT

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THE fact that two great Carmelite saints should both have been called Teresa has inevitably led to a constant comparison between 'the great' and 'the little' saint, according to the various points of view of the critics. Miss Sackville-West compared them, in her study published eight years ago, as eagle and dove, with a strong bias in favour of the 'eagle'. We naturally feel uneasy about such a valuation since they are both canonised saints and are therefore both great in the eyes of the Church. But perhaps there is some justification for such a comparison of value even for the Catholic who fully acknowledges the heroic greatness of both in the order of supernatural virtue.

The appearance at this time of several studies of the one and of the other St Teresa, together with the translated *Letters* of 'Avila' herself, gives us the occasion to weigh Miss Sackville-West's title once again. Miss Kate O'Brien's *Teresa of Avila* which appears in Max Parrish's series of 'Personal Portraits' leaves the, by now, traditional view of St Teresa of Lisieux rather overshadowed by the broad expanse of the wings of this 'eagle'. The contrast be-

tween Miss O'Brien's *Teresa of Avila* and e.g. the much larger, more 'definitive' work on St Teresa of Lisieux by Mgr Laveille (*The Life of the Little Flower*) is remarkable. In the latter we find a painstaking work which leads the reader step by step from cradle to grave (1873-1897), passing in review the far shorter and far less eventful life of 'Lisieux'. From the beginning the author sets out to paint the portrait of a saint. He knows that she is a saint before he takes up his pen; and so the childhood in Lisieux must be the childhood of a saint. Her words from the moment she can speak obtain an immense significance that they never bore at the time of her prattlings. We do snatch an occasional glimpse of the child, delighted for example to be given 'bonbons', and yet all her infant impulses receive a sacred interpretation. Consequently, the girl and the woman begin to fade, and in their place a statue emerges. As so often in hagiography, the story of the play, 'The Miracle', is reversed, and, instead of the statue descending alive from its pedestal, the life becomes a life-sized marble monument.

These same effects are even more apparent when the hagiographer begins to write of 'the essence of the saint's spirit'. It is just this that the Abbé Combes attempts in *St Thérèse and Suffering*, now brought out in English for the first time, and its sub-title runs 'The Spirituality of St Thérèse in its essence'. The book is the second volume of the work which came out in its original French as a single book. The first volume in the English translation was concerned with the human life of the saint, while here we have simply the attempt of a theologian to discover the secret of a particular sort of holiness realised in this one individual. This is already fraught with the danger of abstraction; and the danger is increased by the author's concern about other people's opinions. He is over-anxious to show that his dove is an eagle; he is disturbed because some have thought her the subject of a 'psychic weakness'. Taking the work as a whole, the author no doubt launched forth in the right direction in trying to discover his saint as a real person. And he has the right material here for keeping him down to the concrete. It is suffering, often, that reveals the man.

It was indeed suffering that revealed the man Christ. If we set out to discover the Godhead in the incarnate Word we cannot limit ourselves to the admiration of the most perfect of mankind, in whom all greatness and all genius is to be found. We must

watch the faltering footsteps of the most abject of men in whom there was no comeliness and who staggers weakly to the height of Calvary. Abbé Combes has 'Lisieux's' own words to lead him in his discovery: 'We must suffer even without consolation and courage . . . I see my weakness and that is a great gain' (p. 127); and in another place, 'It is a great consolation to us to think that Jesus, the strong Son of God, experienced all our weaknesses, that he trembled at the sight of the bitter chalice, that chalice which in earlier days he had so ardently desired to drink' (p. 128). But Abbé Combes and the author of the definitive life are both too anxious to insist upon the greatness of the 'little' saint. The Abbé declares that he is dwelling 'at length upon Thérèse's greatness', though with the very right intention of rejecting 'the phrase which has gained currency, "the asceticism of littleness".' (p. 125.) And Mgr Laveille is keen to show that St Teresa of Lisieux's ascetical method was 'altogether original'. It is difficult to keep the account down to a real objective person when these ideals are chased.

Perhaps it is unfair to compare these longer lives of the saint of Lisieux with the short biographical sketch by an author whose life has been spent in using words with accuracy and effect. For Kate O'Brien sets out to sketch in ninety-six short pages the portrait of a saint. She succeeds not only in giving us a very useful introduction to the study of the saint's autobiographical works which certainly need this key to unlock their treasures, but also in depicting a real woman of genius. Miss O'Brien humbly and justly confines herself to the portrait of the woman, admitting the impossibility of wresting the the secret of saintliness from a saint. 'The great, the illuminated, the chosen ones, even while they are of our flesh and to that extent share our dangers and humiliations, yet so translate those threats, so dazzlingly purify them that they are not to be interpreted by our poor rushlights of surmise' (p. 92). Despite the brevity of her sketch, the author succeeds through her humility. For this is what God surely intended, in his greatest and most transcendent of all lives and at the same time the most abject—that by getting to know the simple humanity of Christ we have an impression of the ineffable Godhead; no one could wrest the secret of divinity from the Son of Man. And what a humanity, too, was that of the woman of Avila! No wonder, to Miss O'Brien, she appeals in her vigour and vitality as a woman, a

very real woman. It is not that the present biographer falls into the snare which caught Miss Sackville-West in taking the saint's self-accusations as indicating the worst womanly sins so that the interest tends to centre on the sinner. No; the present sketch is well-balanced by the humble and the human approach; from these pages the woman appears, and that woman was a saint as well as a sinner.

Now there can be no doubt that the human characters of the two women of the same sainted name were remarkably different: the strong Spanish genius, in many ways the greatest of Renaissance figures, and the gentle bourgeoisie, fruit of a respectability growing weakly from an impoverished race. But the grace of God perfects all types and characters in human nature. The lives of all these gracious people have one plan, which is the life and death of Jesus. That plan is developed in ways that seem to bear no resemblance to one another when compared side by side, but at the same time the plan in each one resembles the central model. He, Christ, is *the* man; but he appears even in his fullness in Peter the fisherman, and Edward the King, in the fierce purity of Pius V and the serene wisdom of Aquinas. He appears, too, in Teresa of Avila and in Teresa of Lisieux. Surely it must be admitted that he appears both as the eagle and as the dove:

And all this serves to introduce us to the beating of the 'eagle's' wings, as depicted in her letters, as she flies day by day from one Spanish city to the next. Professor Allison Peers has in some ways crowned his work of translation by giving us a new rendering of the *Letters* written by the saint at the apex of her life. St Teresa's correspondence has been preserved only from the time of the establishment of her reform; she was then forty-six years of age and had reached a stability in her union with God which was to remain unshaken for the remaining twenty-one years of her intensely active life, the period covered by these letters. In her studied works—if any of the works of such an avalanche of a woman could be called studied—she has by intention attempted to reveal the inner secrets of prayer, the hidden indescribable graces which God grants a person of his choice. Of necessity, then, the full stature of the woman does not stand out with the same clarity as it does in these writings which without forethought describe every sort of daily need and daily activity. As Professor Peers himself observes in his introduction: "These letters show us

aspects of St Teresa which the reading of all her other works will not reveal' (p. 12). And again: 'Even more vividly than in her other works her style reflects her vital personality' (p. 14).

In other words, we are shown in these letters the aspect of a normal human being in the fullness of her life—a normal person because she ate and drank and laughed and wept, walked and was tired and worn out like the rest of us—and yet a woman whose fullness was fuller than we could guess, as Miss O'Brien has suggested. It is not easy to quote examples from the treasury of these letters, because once a start is made it is difficult to desist, so attractive are they in their naturalness; but we must make a few extracts at random to illustrate the point. Do we expect the saint to have other and different reactions from those of the normal and natural man? Well, here she 'reacts' to a family situation: 'His wife and mother-in-law have made a mess of the marriage. I should be glad if I could be free of the whole family, but the mother-in-law has started to get very friendly with me. She asks me questions which I am obliged to answer till they quite wear me out' (pp. 356, 373, Volume II, p. 827). That was written only eighteen months before St Teresa's death, and it reveals the reaction of a saint. At the beginning of the period we find something of the same reaction when she had been visited by friends 'and various people, some of whom have tired me dreadfully' (6 (12) I, p. 46). At this early time (1568), the natural feelings of an author faced with the apparent carelessness of friends who have been entrusted with a MS. stand out clearly. Every letter for weeks after she has finished her *Life* mentions the MS. and begs for care and haste in its delivery to Fr Juan de Avila: 'I cannot understand why your Ladyship did not send my precious MS. to Master Avila at once. For the love of the Lord do not delay, but send it him immediately' (5 (11) I, 41). The typical author appears quite frequently, and many an editor must have read such words as these: 'I have written at length on the condition that your Reverence will do as you promised me and tear up everything that seems to you wrong. . . . Some things in it may be badly explained, and others may be mere repetitions, for I have had so little time that I have been unable to re-read all I have written. I beseech your Reverence to amend it' (3 (8) I, 36).

Again, we find the typical motherly nun revealing herself over and over again. She would love to see her Dominican theologian

Banez, but it would be better for him not to make the effort of coming to see her 'for anyone who works all the year round badly needs relaxation'—besides, if he did come there was a danger of the Father Visitor arriving at the same time; and then the parting shot in the P.S.: 'Do not allow the Prioress [at Salamanca where Banez was] to give up eating meat, and tell her to look after her health' (235 (251) II, p. 581). And to her Fr Gracian: 'I am worried about whether you have thought to put more clothes on, as the weather is getting cold now' (81 (95) I, p. 202). The woman who had her way with bishops and the King of Spain himself was, of course, a typical or perhaps a supreme diplomatist. She knew how to treat the Jesuits: 'It would be no small gain if the Rector at Seville would be good enough to look after you, as he says he will; in fact in many ways it would be a great help. But these [Fathers of the Company] expect to be obeyed, and you must accede to them there, for, although occasionally we may not like what they say, it is so important for us to have their help that we shall do best to conform to their wishes. Think out questions to ask them, for that is what they like' (138 (153) I, p. 353).

The life of grace, which had grown within her to such an immense degree—does this also receive treatment from her pen? Little of course of the autobiographical detail appears here—she had had to write all about that under obedience in her *Life*. But her nuns are forbidden to discuss such things: 'Do not allow the nuns to discuss their life of prayer with one another, nor to have anything to do with such things . . . for if they do, each of them will want to contribute her own piece of foolishness' (41 (10) I, p. 39); and elsewhere St Teresa discourages the sisters from writing about such things. Of course, the facts of graces given her come out almost by accident, as when she confesses her fault of judging others by herself in matters of prayer—God had granted her the experience of his very presence (234 (250) II, p. 578), or when she directs her own brother in the matter—'I have already experienced that kind of prayer . . . etc.'. But this long and very beautiful letter begins by thanking her brother for the arrival of sardines and sweets (163 (178) I, p. 408).

If we turn to the Letters of the modern Teresa the contrast is very striking. Of course, she never left her cloister, she never had to reform an Order or to journey to and fro establishing new convents. She therefore drew on a human, or a womanly ex-

perience which was far more restricted. She writes to ask for favours, like her Renaissance predecessor—to search out and send, for example, some books she had left behind in her old house. She writes, too, to thank people for the ordinary material gifts so necessary for a normal human life: gifts of all kinds sent by friends and relatives; she is worried by the difficulties of her relations in the world; and she always remains very much a member of her own family as she writes often to sisters and aunts and cousins. But not having to deal with all the varied and pressing businesses of Avila and Spain, her letters are concerned far more with what might be called the 'spirituality of the cloister', and to that extent we lose sight of the real and whole person. St Teresa of Lisieux's doctrine, however it may be expressed, is of course pure and springs immediately from the reality of our Lord with her. But when it is isolated and made the subject of devout exhortation and comfort it hides the human qualities which are part and parcel of the saint. She is concerned very vigorously with the missions and goes out in spirit to distant lands with her missionary priests who are encouraged by her letters. Teresa of Avila is herself a kind of missionary and has the sort of experiences they might be expected to have—even to a salamander running up her arm, an event which she could not keep to herself.

In short, Miss O'Brien's approach, so admirably fulfilled by these letters, is the surest way of drawing near to a saint and getting to know him. It is in fact the 'sacramental' way of considering the physical sign in such a way that it reveals the thing signified, sign and signification being inseparably linked and of dual importance. The saint is a man, not just a 'holy soul'; he is also a genius.

Finally, a word about the two volumes of Letters themselves. Professor Peers has here superseded all previous translations of St Teresa's letters. He has in fact provided a more up-to-date edition than exists even in Spanish. He has based his work on the critical edition of P. Silverio de Santa Teresa, but has been able to introduce in their proper chronological order letters which P. Silverio appended to his volumes as later discoveries. It is thus easier to follow the story of St Teresa's life by means of her correspondence. Professor Peers has cut down commentary and explanation to the minimum, packing a great deal into footnotes; but he supplies just sufficient information to render the words of St Teresa to be

fully intelligible. He opens with a very useful Preface and Introduction in which he explains how he has worked and justifies the very vivid colloquial English style he has adopted. These volumes must find their way into every library and also into the hands of all who are interested to discover the real St Teresa of Avila.

Note: The method of comparison in this article may have done some injustice to the various works reviewed. They are therefore listed here:

TERESA OF AVILA, by Kate O'Brien (Max Parrish; 7s. 6d.) is very handsomely produced typographically; and the black-and-white illustrations by Mary O'Neill are suited both to the pages of the book and its subject.

ST THÉRÈSE DE L'ENFANT JESUS, 1873-1897, by Mgr Laveille, translated by M. Fitzsimons, O.M. (Clonmore and Reynolds; 18s.) is a new edition of the standard life of the saint which appeared in English in 1929. It is also very good value—four hundred pages of legible printing.

ST THÉRÈSE AND SUFFERING, by Abbé André Combes (Gill and Son; 12s. 6d.) is the second half of this biography, dealing with an essential aspect of her holiness. There is, however, little indication that it is volume II, and the reader of the second paragraph of the book may be disconcerted by the reference to 'the point to which we have come in our study'.

THE LETTERS OF ST TERESA OF JESUS. Translated and Edited by Professor E. Allison Peers (Burns, Oates; 2 volumes, £3 3s. the set). There is no need to praise the excellence of this production, though it is of course hampered by the post-war lack of good paper.