

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

To the Editor of THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT

Dear Sir,

I have been reading the article on the Divine Office ('The Embracing Prayer', by a Layman), in your last number of THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT, and notice that he there regrets the lack of an English translation of the Roman Breviary. As an Associate of the Society of St Margaret I would like to point out that three years ago the Oxford University Press published an English translation of the revised Roman Breviary for the Society of St Margaret. It contains the Day and Night Office together, in two volumes (Advent to Whitsun: and Trinitytide), and costs 50s. a volume. In view of the growing interest in the Divine Office among the laity, there may be some who would appreciate this. It is obtainable from St Saviour's Priory, Queensbridge Road, E.2; or from St Margaret's Convent, East Grinstead.

Yours faithfully,

KATHARINE WHITAKER



REVIEWS

THE MEANING OF THE MONASTIC LIFE. By Louis Bouyer. (Burns Oates; 21s.)

ST BENEDICT AND HIS MONKS. By Theodore Maynard. (Kenedy; \$3.00.)

These two books on Monastic Life are written by authors who are not themselves monks; perhaps that is why neither can be recommended without reserve. Dr Maynard aims at giving 'the average person a general idea of St Benedict's life and Rule, indicating something of Benedictine history throughout the centuries, not neglecting the influence of the Benedictine spirit on Catholic life today'. This apparently ambitious programme is modified by the modest admission that 'no pretence is made of giving information that is other than fragmentary'. In fact the work might be described as a Benedictine Digest mainly of the books of the late Abbots Butler and Chapman, and one cannot help noticing that Dr Maynard is more often concerned with the discussions of thirty years ago than those of the present time. The first three chapters on St Benedict himself are the best, but the

author's external approach prevents him from attaining to the heart of Benedictine life. The book contains several inaccuracies¹ and not a few irrelevancies, but one must thank Dr Maynard for his great enthusiasm for St Benedict and his Family, and his work will surely lead readers to the more substantial studies listed in his bibliography.

Père Bouyer's book is of a different kind. It is a serious and important study of the theory and practice of monastic spirituality and is, in substance, two retreats preached in Benedictine monasteries. The French edition has been reviewed already in *THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT* (vol. VI, pp. 536-40): hence there is no need to repeat the doctrinal analysis made there. Much of the book is excellent. From the start it emphasizes that a monk is above all a man seeking God. He is 'essentially a man of prayer. Prayer is his proper task. If no common human task . . . should be considered by him as *his* task, it is because prayer is his work. . . . More than his work or his rest, prayer is quite simply the monk's life. . . . He is set apart in the Church precisely for conversation with God.' (pp. 103-1.) Monastic life is a life of prayer, but also a life of renunciation; prayer prevents him from trying to escape the consequences of his renunciation while it leads him positively to union with God. His principal occupation is the Divine Office ('the office is actually the monk's *schola orationis*'); then comes his *lectio divina* ('which should be for the monk what the Exercises are for the Jesuit . . . contemplative prayer for the Carmelite, etc. . . . reading comprises all we put under the heading of mental prayer and much besides'); but he also needs to do plenty of hard work (manual or intellectual), which is the most fundamental ascetic practice; if neglected, the *otium contemplationis* becomes a 'pious slothfulness'.

Side by side with teaching of great value, however, one finds exaggerations and half-truths which could easily lead the unwary reader astray. Described by various reviewers as 'intemperance' or 'fanaticism', these passages unfortunately spoil what might have been a masterly book. Not only are they to be found in specifically monastic passages but in the author's general ideas on mortification and on the married life. With all due respect, one ventures to think that his teaching on the present state of human nature is unsound. He appears to think that nature is so corrupted by sin that it must be attacked indiscriminately — 'natural life is not bad in itself; it is so in its actual exercise. But there is no means of separating one from the other except in the abstract. In the concrete, if one wants to reform the actual exercise of it, it must be

¹ St Bede was not declared a Doctor of the Church in his lifetime, but during the pontificate of Leo XIII. St Boniface was not martyred at Fulda but in Holland. Benedictines take three vows, not five. Saying the whole Psalter every day was not the normal practice of the early Church. The author also exaggerates the centralizing tendencies of St Benedict of Aniane and Cluny while omitting all mention of the Maurists' much more radical centralization.

mortally wounded.' (pp. 149-50.) But if it is 'bad in its actual exercise', how is it that the Church and St Thomas teach that man can know certain truths and accomplish certain good actions by his own unaided powers?² It is sin and its effects, not natural life, which must be mortified. Again, Père Bouyer appears to deny, in company with St Maximus the Confessor, that the married state actually sanctifies those who enter it: he appears to hold that marriage only maintains the *possibility* of the future sanctification of the human race by its prolongation through marriage. Then it will be actually sanctified by Virginité. (pp. 147-8.) Here too there is danger of misunderstanding, if no worse, and the neglect of more recent teaching is surely dangerous.

The author's intransigence sometimes leads him into unrealistic antitheses. It is untrue to say that 'if we refuse to give Christ all, he will give us nothing'; on the contrary, of his bounty he grants us grace even when we have failed in generosity, and it is only through repetitions of these graces that we will be enabled to give him all. Again: 'for the monk there is no middle course between sacrilege and sanctity'. Yet a monastery is not composed of saints or perfect people but of those who are being made into saints. The vast majority of them are imperfect, but not surely guilty of sacrilege (p. 129), of habitual interior disobedience or tepidity.

P. Bouyer praises sleeping on the ground, the deprivation of sleep and the elimination not only of excessive, but also of all good meals, as examples of fervent monastic asceticism, but he seems to forget that St Benedict turned his back on these practices by providing a bed for each monk, about eight hours each night to sleep in it, and one or two full meals a day composed of two cooked dishes, dessert, a pound of bread and a hemina of wine. This is a particular case of the author's general tendency to see the pre-Benedictine monasticism as the only authentic tradition and to neglect altogether the evidence from the lives and writings of the Benedictine saints. A modern monk has plenty to learn from SS. Bede, Odo, Anselm and Ailred, to name only a few; and it may be doubted whether the Benedictine ideal can be adequately stated without them, for by their lives they provide the best of commentaries on St Benedict's Rule. Some of their most endearing features were their humanity, their gentleness and their consideration for human infirmities: a writer who neglects them seems to lay himself open to the charge of describing an *ersatz* Benedictine ideal.

For hundreds of years now in the West becoming a monk has meant joining a community and being sanctified in and through this community, yet P. Bouyer almost entirely neglects this aspect of monastic life. It is untrue to say that 'for St Benedict the coenobium is the school

² Cf. Denzinger 1808 and 1532; *Summa Theol.* 1a-2ae, 109, 142.

of solitude *and nothing more*' (p. 134); on the contrary it is a cell of the Church, a supernatural family where the abbot holds a similar place to that of the bishop in the early Church. In it the monks' fervour is known by their patience and fraternal charity, by their obedience and sincere affection for the abbot who holds the place of Christ. Their preferring nothing to Christ is not only realized in solitary prayer but also by a practical recognition of him in the guests, in the poor, in the sick, in all the brethren, in the precepts of legitimate authority. All this is so fundamental that one wonders how the author could write: 'the monastery, *if it is a society*, is a society of solitaries'. (*ib.*) In fact the monastery is a City of God whose citizens seek him not in juxtaposition or isolation but with and in each other, known and loved in Christ.

These criticisms of this book must not blind the reader to its real value, yet the tendencies mentioned seem to prevent it from reaching the outstanding quality it might have attained. The absence of St Thomas' theology on the Religious State, the virtues and gifts, and Perfection and of the Benedictine examples of holiness may make the book fail in its purpose. Much of what P. Bouyer has said needed to be said; did not Ullathorne a century ago warn us that Benedictine life can easily become too comfortable? It would be a pity if readers neglected what is good in the book because of its less sound elements; these prevent one from recommending it to young religious—it is essentially a book for the well-trained and discerning reader which provides an interesting example of the advantages and disadvantages of the 'New Theology'.

HUGH FARMER, O.S.B.

A NEW CREATION. TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE. By August Brunner, S.J. Translated by Ruth Bethell. (Burns and Oates; 16s.)

This is evidently the work of a mind both deeply meditative and also concerned in a practical way with the direction of souls. The author is a Jesuit and the editor of the German Catholic weekly, *Stimmen der Zeit*. His aim has been to expound briefly the nature of Christian life in general, and then to show, again briefly but in a fundamental way, how this may flower into the three-fold religious ideal of poverty, chastity and obedience. He writes indeed for Catholics in general, but with a special regard to those who live under the three vows of religion. He writes too as a theologian with a turn for metaphysics and a discreet appreciation of contemporary existentialism and phenomenology. His manner is rather dryly rational, his style even and a bit monotonous. Most readers will find that a few pages at a time is as much as they can manage. Yet the book is well worth the effort it demands; it is not in