

## REVIEWS

[*Note. In view of the special interest to readers of BLACKFRIARS of Fr Ferdinand Valentine's 'portrait' of Fr Vincent McNabb, we print two estimates of the book, by the Very Revd Fr Edward Hughes, O.P., Provincial of St Albert's Province (Chicago), and by the Very Revd Fr Bernard Delany, O.P., former Provincial of the English Province.*]

FATHER VINCENT McNABB. By Ferdinand Valentine, O.P., with a Foreword by the Very Reverend Hilary Carpenter, O.P., Provincial. (Burns and Oates; 21s.)

## I

G. K. Chesterton anticipated the motif of this study of one of the most loved and most criticized Dominicans of the preceding generation. 'I am nervous about writing what I really think of Father Vincent McNabb. . . . I will say firmly that he is . . . great in many ways—mentally and morally and mystically and practically—and that next to nobody nowadays has ever heard of him.' We older Dominicans of the United States remember him with love and admiration. He lived with us for a brief period in 1913 at the Priory of St Vincent Ferrer in New York City. We think that he liked what he observed of American Dominican life.

Chesterton further remarks that nobody who ever met or saw or heard of Father Vincent has ever forgotten him. I confirm that from personal experience, and so I have read Father Valentine's study of the virtues and faults of his fellow friar with absorbing interest. I have called the work a study because it is not a biography; it is an attempt—and a successful one—to give a frank portrayal of Father McNabb's spirituality. In all truth he was an eccentric, even in his lifework of preaching. By temperament he had a bent towards pride of self. He was convinced that he had to be a leader. But even those who say that he missed his mark, even in his preaching, admit that he strove to be first for Christ's sake. All his life he quested humility. In his own appraisal of self he failed to win it. 'I am not humble', he wrote as the shadow of death pressed upon him. Nor did obedience come easily to him. But Father Valentine pleads a good case to prove that he really achieved high humility and obedience; high, because he had to struggle against an inherited arrogance and forcefulness of character.

Some theologians and philosophers have no kind words for the saintliness of Father Vincent. This is understandable. He preached and

sacrificed for ordinary folk. Perhaps 'he never preached a genuine sermon', but he did penetrate through to the hearts of the down-and-outs. Maybe he was 'a showman', as 'mad as a hatter', and a 'pig-headed poseur'. Even so I venerate him with the host of his friends and clients, and am grateful to Father Valentine for the portrait he has sketched from the letters written by Father Vincent to the big and little children whom he consoled during his lifespan.

EDWARD L. HUGHES, O.P.

## II

The life of a man like Fr Vincent McNabb must be the despair of the biographer. To meet the difficulty we are told in the first sentence of this book that it is, strictly speaking, not a biography at all. What is it, then? Is it a public examination of conscience, a psychiatrist's case history, or an anticipation of the general judgment? No. It is an attempt to explain the enigma of Fr Vincent McNabb.

The author begins by quoting the outburst of an old and venerable Prior: 'The man's crazy—as mad as a hatter.' A sensational start this—real journalistic jam which was greedily scooped up by an English newspaper. It was in some ways a pity because the preview of the book given in that first article by the *Catholic Herald* impressed some readers unfavourably and gave them an unfair idea of the book and put them off a very good thing, because Fr Valentine has gathered together an immense amount of valuable material and he has given us a veritable treasury of precious memories of a most unusual personality. And the venerable Prior in question was well known for these sweeping statements, and we all knew the spirit in which they should be taken: he himself would be the last person to want his words to be quoted at the head of the book.

In a recent biography of the poet Thomas Gray, the author, Mr R. W. Ketton-Cremer, writes: 'I have refrained throughout from introducing the terms or the conclusions of psycho-analysis, because I regard it as no part of the biographer's duty to carry speculation beyond the evidence.' Would that Fr Valentine had denied himself his amateur flights into the mysterious regions of modern psychology. How Fr McNabb himself would laugh!

Now, supposing he *did* have a mother fixation, or an inferiority complex or other psycho-physical disorders, what then? Would not all this absolve him, on psychological principles, from the pride, etc., of which he is accused? Fr Valentine is greatly concerned to discover *why* exactly Fr Vincent McNabb was like the Fr Vincent we all knew. Most people will be more interested in the verifiable facts of his life,

*what* he was, *what* he did, *what* he said, *what* he wrote. There is a disproportionate amount of dissection. Fr Valentine has a scrupulous regard for truth; but there is a danger of its becoming scrupulosity in the technically theological sense of a fidgety exaggeration of conscientiousness which may produce a distortion and give the portrait a twist of caricature.

There are many gaps that need filling up for a complete account of the great man; for instance, his crusade for social justice (which was the breath of his soul) is somewhat summarily dismissed. And the account of his last days and death is lamentably incomplete and inadequate.

Having said all this, we must praise the book as a magnificent collection of 'McNabbiana'. Most moving is the story of his early years told by his brother Patrick—still happily surviving. These sincere recollections written by an elder brother in his old age provide a precious tribute to the younger McNabb and are valuable evidence of the continuity of personality and the permanence of character.

We see the self-assertive, aggressive, strong-willed, argumentative youth. At the same time we are astounded by the boy's frank, determined piety, his precocious spirit of prayer and self-sacrifice, his almost angelic innocence going hand in hand with a certain intellectual pugnacity and all those qualities in young Joe McNabb which were later to flower in the highly characterised Fr Vincent whom we all knew so well. From all the available documents he seems to have been the same from his earliest years till his dying day.

The book gives us those delightful autobiographical fragments faithfully collected with Boswellian devotion by Miss Dorothy Finlayson. There are reminiscences from those who knew him; his own characteristic letters to his mother and his brother (his beloved Laurence), to Chesterton, Belloc, etc., etc. It is truly a massive collection of primary value enabling those who love the great man and venerate his memory to read the true meaning of his amazing life.

Fr Vincent was a challenge to the modern world, which, as he himself used to say, was suffering from a displaced centre of gravity. There was something of the genius of the true poet in his whole outlook and method. All his energies and gifts he devoted to trying to present God and the rights of God to a generation which denied God or thought him irrelevant. 'Your standard should not be Babylon, Paris, New York, London, Cape Town or Johannesburg; but Bethlehem, Nazareth, Capharnaum, Calvary'—that was the message.

Mgr Knox, when preaching in Westminster Cathedral at the Requiem of Hilaire Belloc, used the word 'prophet' in connection with Fr Vincent McNabb. Fr Ferdinand Valentine seems to be uneasy about applying the word to Fr Vincent; but of course Mgr Knox did

not mean anything like the stature of Moses, who was taken up into the holy mountain, or Isaias, whose lips were touched with the burning coal: he was speaking of the prophetic or preacher's office in the sense explained by St Paul and St Thomas as a purveyor of the truth. The prophet is one who explains what is latent in divine truth. It is the truth that persuades and converts.

Fr McNabb himself has written: 'There is a subtle fallacy in the saying, "It is not what we preach or do, but what we *are* that saves souls." The truth in this difficult matter is not to be expressed by such a superstition of humility. The thing should be stated accurately if stated at all, lest in our efforts to safeguard the fervent we should mislead the wicked or lukewarm. The truth is that we save souls neither by what we do nor by what we are, but by what God does and by what God enables us to do.'

And so it is that the whole story of such a life as Fr Vincent's is known neither to Fr Vincent nor to you or me, but only to God.

BERNARD DELANY, O.P.

ST AUGUSTINE: TREATISES ON MARRIAGE AND OTHER SUBJECTS.  
(Fathers of the Church Inc.)

A COMPANION TO THE STUDY OF ST AUGUSTINE. Edited by R. W. Battenhouse. (O.U.P. Inc., New York: London, G. Cumberlege; 32s. 6d.)

'Fathers of the Church Inc.' continue to bring out their useful and painstaking, but somewhat pedestrian, translations. Augustine's treatises on marriage should be useful to priests faced with the work of explaining Catholic marriage doctrine, for as one of the contributors to the other volume reviewed here remarks, 'If one wants to know why the Roman Catholic Church holds that the chief end of marriage is procreation, that divorce and birth-control are inadmissible, and that continence is the ideal of sexual self-discipline, the reasons are all given by the Bishop of Hippo in his discussion of marriage'.

*A Companion to the Study of St Augustine* is an excellently planned and executed volume. It is a pity it should be marred by too many misprints and some erroneous references in the notes, and that a contributor should lapse at times into careless writing (p. 157), or make a misleading half-true statement ('the clergy often married', p. 66), or show that he has misread a text (p. 309); the old and quite unfounded bogey of double predestination also turns up again (p. 361).

But apart from these odd slips all the contributors bring to their learning a very fair judgment, one not always perhaps so shrewdly aware of Augustine's mind as could be wished, yet instances of this quality are not lacking here and there. Most of them feel called upon to