

ST. SERGIUS, BUILDER OF RUSSIA. By Nicolas Zernov.
(S.P.C.K.; 5s.)

It is characteristic of much Russian spirituality that St. Sergius of Radonezh may be considered both as an individual and as a symbol. As an individual, seen in his own time and in his own cultural context he possesses a real if rather limited significance. It is clear that he exercised a very considerable influence on the fourteenth century revival of Russian monasticism. The organization of his monastery of the Holy Trinity brought back a necessary emphasis on the conception of the common life. The prestige of his sanctity greatly aided the reforms of his patron the Metropolitan Alexis, he was adviser to such contemporary princes as Dmitri Donskoi and among his disciples was St. Stephen of Perm.

A translation of his 'Life' is printed in the present volume. It is a fifteenth century redaction of an earlier source. It has precisely the historic value of most medieval hagiography. Yet beneath the crowded, conventional and often unconvincing detail it seems possible to sense a personality. Although we are inevitably informed that his father was a rich and renowned *boyar*, there was much of the peasant about St. Sergius. He was apparently almost illiterate. His habit of mind was practical, perhaps a little prosaic, certainly very literal and direct. To a Western he will seem curiously Western. His devotion to the Trinity links him to much medieval German spirituality. His devotion to Our Lady and his concentration on the Eucharist emphasise the strongest of the common bonds between the Catholic and Orthodox traditions. While as a framework to his life there lay the conception of the *Opus Dei* and of the common service of the choir.

But if the St. Sergius of late medieval Russian monasticism is represented by his 'Life,' the St. Sergius of modern Russian orthodoxy is represented by M. Zernov's introduction. The fourteenth century monk became the traditional Wonder Worker of late medieval Russia, the Wonder Worker changed into a symbol. Gradually St. Sergius has come to stand for the specifically Russian contribution to Christian spirituality.

Partly at least the change resulted from historic accident. His monastery became the Theological Academy in 1814. It was the centre of the new revival associated with the Metropolitan Philaret, Soloviev was a student there, the St. Sergius leaflets took their name from it. But it was not simply accidental; the ikons of Andrei Rublev reflect a spiritual vision characteristically Russian, and Rublev joined the monastery under St. Ser-

gius' successor Abbot Nikon. St. Sergius, however unknowingly, stood by the source of the movement he has come to symbolise. It was a long journey from the wooden shrine at Makovka to the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius; but at least the journey was continuous.

Historically, the Russian contribution to Christian spirituality would seem to be a variant of the Byzantine. But it is a variant that is specifically distinct. Centrally Russian conceptions, *sobornost*, or that sense of the community *obitchina*, seem to stand in the same relation to the cosmic perspective of the Byzantine theologians and their overwhelmingly corporate sense as Russian religious painting to Byzantine iconography. In both cases the pattern remains the same, but quite suddenly there is a rhythm. There are the same motifs, but they are no longer static; the preconception of an immobile world order has vanished. The parallel is perhaps inevitable for the conventions of religious art only become intelligible in terms of the schools of spirituality which find expression in them, and a human approach to spiritual realities may be differentiated by the presuppositions of contrasted cultures. The theology, the mysticism, the art of fourteenth century Byzantium alike presuppose an ancient and secure civilization, curiously patterned, specialised in its perceptions. They were the expression of a belief in an intelligible order and an immobile sovereignty as the inevitable reflections of the Divine Wisdom among men. They were transplanted into the fluctuating and enigmatic life of the small Russian principalities still in the first aftermath of the Tartar dominance. The new Russian religious culture, first clearly apparent in the late fourteenth century school of Novgorod, is the effect of their transplanting.

The new movement would seem to have been only gaining momentum in the last years of St. Sergius's life. It is possible that he was unaffected by it. But it is not unfitting that he should be chosen as its symbol, for his work of monastic reorganisation provided the medium which assured its triumph. While both as a symbol and as an individual he can serve to emphasize the underlying unity of so much medieval Christian spirituality, for as both he is primarily a monk.

GERVASE MATHEW, O.P.

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