

REVIEWS

THE INTERIOR LIFE OF ST THOMAS AQUINAS. By Dr Martin Grabmann, translated by Nicholas Ashenbrenner, O.P. (The Bruce Publishing Company, Milwaukee; \$2.75.)

Anyone acquainted with the late Mgr Grabmann's reputation both as a student and a lover of St Thomas will be interested in the appearance of an English translation of his short study of the interior life of the saint. These lectures were published originally in 1923, but the present translation is made from the third edition revised in 1949.

The broad outlines of Mgr Grabmann's study are extremely impressive. Some readers will find that the style leans a little too much to the side of the panegyric, but it is only the style, and, beneath these habiliments, which fix the writing in its place and period, there is a sureness of touch and a rightness of judgment which have a lasting quality. Only those who are continually absorbed in the study of St Thomas, not through the eyes of the commentators or the manualists, but in his own treatises, will realise how very distinctive is the impression of his personality which gradually imposes itself. The customary lay-out of his writing, bound as it is by the most stereotyped of academic conventions, the impersonal magisterial exposition, the monotonous recurrence of stock examples, seems at first sight a singularly unpromising approach to the intimate life of a real man. Yet if we compare it with that of other masters in the same *métier*, the difference is at once apparent. It is upon our estimate of what exactly that difference is that any modern sketch of the soul of the saint must be constructed. For the detail, there is virtually no other evidence. St Thomas left us no autobiographical passages. Even opuscula written by request, open with remarks which, although in the first person, scarcely go beyond the common courtesy of the letter. In solid history his life is little more than a pattern of dates and disputations. Yet his unique contribution to the spirit of the Church abides, and it stands as a very individual achievement. If anyone wishes to know his character and life more precisely, they must look for it in his writings, for, to adapt a phrase of St Gregory when faced with the similar case of St Benedict, 'the holy man cannot have taught otherwise than as he lived'.

This, at least, is the principle on which Mgr Grabmann has built up his lectures. They fall into three parts: first, a brief summary of the depositions of the witnesses at the canonisation, then that evidence considered in the light of the wisdom, charity and peace reflected in his works, and finally, the pattern and source of St Thomas's sanctity discovered in the Incarnate Son.

The canonisation depositions are remarkable for their directness, brevity and unanimity. The man, even while living, was plainly something of an enigma. His sanctity was unquestioned, a certain sweetness of character (*'homo dulcis'*), yet his spirituality was far from that romping, fraternising kind of Christianity which, owing to his defence of the role of the body, has sometimes more recently paraded under his banner. 'Dishes could be placed before him and removed without his taking notice. When the brethren brought him to the garden for recreation he would suddenly go off alone, wholly abstracted from his surroundings.' (Bartholomew of Capua.) Nothing so vividly reminds us of the world in which St Thomas was nurtured as sentences like these.

It may be suggested that it is especially the depositions which provide, by implication, some explanation of the indifferent effect of St Thomas's labours on subsequent spirituality; for his influence is, we feel bound to say, a good deal less marked than is sometimes maintained. Grabmann criticises Abbot Butler for saying this very thing. But while we agree with his objection to the grounds upon which the Abbot reached this view, we cannot find his vindication of the contrary fact very convincing. St Thomas had his feet firmly in two worlds, the past and the future. The all-too-brief testimonies of the witnesses must be set in a position almost of equality with the voluminous works if the full force of the point is to emerge. They do, after all, represent what people saw with their own eyes. As Grabmann himself says, they paint the picture of a man first and foremost a religious, used to the common table and the common life with its monastic observances. 'They tell us about his ardent desire to live until the end of his days in the quiet of the cloister, simply and solely for his God, sacred science and the religious calling.' Yet it was this man who perceived the importance for the future of a learning coming from non-Christian sources, which was finding its way into Europe through the curiosity of men who were far from conservative, and seemed, indeed, to be hovering on the outer edge of orthodoxy. At a distance of seven centuries it is so easy to lose this perspective. Many of St Thomas's most gifted readers belong predominantly either to the mental world which he largely created, or to that other which he never left behind. In either category, they miss the fullness of his wisdom and of his peace.

For, in truth, it is this note of peace in St Thomas's character which sets the seal on the maturity of the divine gifts in his soul. It is a consideration which provides Mgr Grabmann with his finest chapter. The chapter on his wisdom is, in our view, somewhat marred by the idea and conveys that St Thomas's wisdom was a particularly ingenious combination of complex elements. This is rather his wisdom as it appears.

In itself it was surely a gathering of his richly-endowed personality to the one source of diversity and multiplicity. The sign of this was the peace which flowed from him. Grabmann hits upon the happy phrase, '*Veritas et pax osculatae sunt*'; the monk and the schoolman met. Speculation as it must be, more could perhaps have been made of the development of this union. It does not consist simply in the fact that although no one was more continuously engaged in argument, no one was less argumentative than St Thomas, that the wide circles in which the slick of tongue delight to walk, led him always to the still centre. It is, above all, the most just symbol of his particular quality of soul. For that soul was uncontaminated by the things of this world, yet it was never an enclosed garden. It was more like an open plain stretching down to a limitless sea; complete receptivity. However it may seem from outside, there is about this a very special heroism. We do not know what price had to be paid for that intellectual synthesis that has dazzled later generations or for that more hidden one, no less remarkable though less remarked, that kept a man of the future so much a man of the past. We only know that he prayed often before the crucifix, for he often had difficulties. Perhaps those who, remembering how widely his mind had ranged, ponder the strange coincidence that the boy who grew up at Monte Cassino should die in the peace of the Cistercian cloister at Fossa Nuova, are in the best position to understand what a very full circle his life had come.

Of the present translation of Mgr Grabmann it only remains to say that it is very readable, though the book is produced with a hideous dust jacket showing an athletic St Thomas in a Dominican habit without a scapular. The frontispiece is also distinctly unworthy. The one notable fault in the text is the startling information that the biographer of St Anselm was Eadem.

A.S.

THE ASCENT TO TRUTH. By Thomas Merton. (Hollis and Carter; 18s.)

Before any reviewer opens the fire of his criticism on Thomas Merton's latest book, it is chastening for him to reflect how few there are who are writing for the public that he evidently attracts. It is a public sometimes on the fringe of the Church, sometimes having no obvious affinities with it, and perhaps predominantly American. The climate of its thought is so alien to an Englishman, born and bred in a very different culture, that he is somewhat at a loss to explain why that public buys the volumes that stream from Gethsemani nearly as fast as the newspapers. It scarcely seems credible that a net so widely cast will not draw in a good many fish, but with the ocean between a sound judgment and the evidence, one can only agree to speak at all if it is understood that what is said must necessarily be out of context.