

REVIEWS

THE EIGHT BEATITUDES. By Georges Chevrot. (Scepter; 15s.)

This book is very French in some of the best ways of being French; it is lucid, gay, adventurous, courageous. There is here, too, that capacity of the creatively mortified French (or anyone else?) of being dry and exhilarated at the same time. The author is revolution-conscious as the French are, and evolution-conscious somewhat in the Teilhard de Chardin manner. But how good it all is, raised, as it were, to the spiritual *n*th. Christian thinking is an adventure; one is reminded of one of those young priests, four-fifths up a mountainside, in a kilted cassock, with a knapsack, leading scouts. And, indeed, there is something of the *puer aeternus* in French spirituality—an exhilaration off the cold mountains: holiness is something of a gallant lark, in the beginning—certainly an adventure.

This book is certainly a powerful piece of leadership. Here is no 'sacristy piety' but wisdom-lit hard thinking set in two concrete political contexts, our own and that of our Lord's first audience. The effect is one of great vitality; presenting, then, the drama of the beatitudes, in its first and revolutionary impact on the political messianism of the first audience, and their drama ever since. 'His gospel would be the new wine which would burst the old wine-skins; he was going to uproot so many customs, suppress so many easy ways out, sow so much uneasiness and remorse in consciences, that many people would not only refuse to accept him at all, but they would do their best to make sure that he would not be heard talking any more.'

It needs a severe and sensitive spiritual discipline to write about the beatitudes without getting entangled in stale paradox. It needs a fine balance of attachment and detachment to support the tension between the secular sensible present and our Lord's demands and assurances. But here is no pious escapism, refusing the tension; none of that nominalist temper of the English, pigeonholing truth in more senses than one: but there is that healthy realism of the French, and that Pauline sense of scandal that could be astringent to an unconsciously flabby piety. Chevrot insists on the need and the pain of this. 'But the true drama for the Christian who takes the gospel seriously is that he cannot live in justice, because he exists in a social state which is in contradiction with his ideal of brotherhood and holiness. . . . It is our vocation to suffer this torture, . . . to be shrouded in the shadows of Golgotha and to have only the bitterness of our failures to quench our thirst for justice.'

Mgr Chevrot has, then, a fine sense of the indispensable exorbitant

of the beatitudes, of the necessary fantastic in which the folly of the cross so often appears in practice. He insists on the practice. This Frenchman presses on, indeed, to the intelligibility of these paradoxes, bringing up a refreshingly unusual range of references, scriptural and other, but the effort is always pastoral: he travels light like the curate, because he is travelling far and high, to lead others and informed by compassion.

He would gather up, then, the fragments of the kingdom by the way: he would like, I think, the way Africans in Kenya greet the friendly passer-by, saying, 'Mirembe!' 'Peace!'

MARY JACKSON

ATHLETE OF CHRIST. By Marie McSwigan. (Newman Press, Maryland; \$3.25.)

Saint Nicholas of Flüe, the patron saint of Switzerland, lived from 1417 to 1487. Peasant, soldier, husband and father, he became famous also as a visionary, a peacemaker, and finally a hermit, living in solitude and prayer, and for nineteen years miraculously existing without either food or drink. In this book Marie McSwigan seeks to introduce St Nicholas to her fellow Americans who, she thinks, 'will claim him as a spiritual father and see in him a similarity to their own great leaders'. About three-fifths of this book tells of his life; how, till the age of fifty, he lived the simple life of a farmer in central Switzerland; how he then decided it was God's will that he should leave his wife and ten children for the life of a hermit, and wore down his reluctant wife until she gave the necessary consent; and how finally the stories of his piety and his visions brought so many pilgrims to his hermitage that the government had to institute a pass system to separate the genuinely devout from the curious. He is even credited with having helped to bring about the union of Fribourg and Solothurn to the other eight cantons in 1481, an event which marked the formation of the Swiss Confederacy. The remainder of the book describes his canonization in 1947, and the miraculous cures ascribed to his intervention.

This is an imaginatively-written and readable book, attractively illustrated with photographs of St Nicholas' native country and of various works of art depicting him. (The frontispiece is a particularly impressive wood-carving of the sixteenth century.) Those with an interest in out-of-the-way saints whose cult is rooted in centuries of legend and whose deeds are enshrined in a country's art and history will probably find it pleasant reading.

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