

congruo, are not meritorious *de condigno*; that God's mercy is always regulated by his wisdom and justice? Not if you are a practical man.

As a practical man, you would try to make the best of a bad job. If nothing better can be obtained, you would advise her to pray that God helps her, either by himself changing the situation or by giving her the strength to change it herself; you would advise her to continue to keep the other commandments, to stay in the Church, to maintain her hope. And if, on leaving, she should say: 'Bless me, Father', you would give her your blessing.

Though this is not all Fr Vann says, it is according to his deep intention.

CATHOLICS AND PHILOSOPHY

A Spode House Conference

LAST September Spode House sponsored yet another of the Catholic gatherings for which it is rapidly gaining a reputation. This time it was the philosophers who met. As Fr Columba Ryan remarked, in introducing the conference, the philosophers had an advantage over the artists, writers and musicians who had held weekends already: they could not only discuss their calling, but practise it at the same time. And practise it they did. During the weekend there were two lectures, two symposia and three open discussions; and in addition the debate could be heard continuing in every available moment, at the tea-tables and floating across the park during the afternoons.

The conference was called as a first move towards meeting what is a grave danger at the moment for the Church: the growing gap between the language of the traditional philosophy in the Church and that of contemporary thinkers. It was intended to provide an opportunity for discussion between philosophers of both kinds, so that they might learn a little of each other's languages; and in this it was extraordinarily successful. The weekend started, one might say, in the shadow of the controversy that had for weeks been filling the correspondence columns of *The Tablet*. The opposite sides in that monumental discussion might be expected to be at each other's throats from the beginning. And indeed at the begin-

ning it seemed that this would continue. But it is a measure of the success of the conference that the philosophers quickly shed their official 'isms' as they got down to the business of arguing particular questions. One noticed that the discussions became increasingly moderate both in tone and expression as the conference went on; and this was not simply the mellowing effect of having to share a common life for a few days, but was a sign that ways of making genuine philosophical contact were being discovered and created. There gradually emerged from the meetings a realization of profound accord behind all the differences of doctrine and approach. In particular it showed itself in heartfelt agreement about the moral seriousness of the study of philosophy and about the responsibilities of the philosopher. And in this connection it was noteworthy that the problem of natural ethics gradually thrust itself forward during the weekend until finally it was decided to give it a discussion to itself.

The symposium on 'Are there substances?' which was hoped to provide a focus for every possible type of difference of opinion was less successful than the other meetings. Dr Hawkins' and Mr Dummett's decisions to limit themselves to analysis of the Aristotelian doctrine destroyed all hope of a head-on collision; and their differences of method proved too great even to allow of a meeting. The gap between traditional certainty and modern tentativeness was never more apparent. But Mr Dickie's stimulating paper on the value-tones of metaphysical thought, discussed in terms of kinds of statement, and Mr Geach's brilliant account of 'Form and Existence', drawing inspiration from both Frege and St Thomas, showed us ways in which these differences could be reconciled.

In some ways the highlight of the conference was the last night's impromptu discussion on 'Difficulties and Problems of a Natural Ethics'. It owed much to the delicate and forbearing chairmanship of Mr Cameron. During the first half of the discussion there was a slow but firm movement towards a formulation of the problem with which all present were in their different ways concerned. Are all the statements which give us information about things factual statements, or are there some which bear within themselves the seeds of normative statements? What in fact can be meant by 'natural law'? After the interval it was possible to concentrate almost entirely and very fruitfully upon this point. At

least one participant was impressed with the fitting climax this discussion made to the conference, for one of the chief themes throughout had been the moral import of a Catholic's philosophy, both for himself and for those he has to teach.

It was unanimously agreed by those present that the conference had begun something that must not be let die, and a committee was elected (consisting of Dom Illtyd Trethowan, O.S.B., Fr Columba Ryan, O.P., Mr Dickie, Mr Dummett and Mr Geach) to arrange for a similar conference next year.

REVIEWS

OF LEARNED IGNORANCE. By Nicolas Cusanus. Translated by Fr Germain Heron, O.F.M., PH.D., with an introduction by Dr D. J. B. Hawkins, D.D., PH.D. (Rare Masterpieces of Philosophy and Science: Routledge and Kegan Paul; 23s.)

Nicholas of Cusa has for some time been closely studied and taken seriously as a philosopher in Germany, but in this country he has not yet attracted the attention he deserves. He is one of the greatest figures of that intensely attractive false dawn of Christian humanism in the early Renaissance, so full of possibilities which Catholic Europe perhaps now can never realize. He is an amateur philosopher, rather in the sense in which the Fathers of the Church were amateur theologians; his philosophical speculations are the by-product of a life spent in work for Church reform and Church unity, which he ended as Cardinal and Bishop of Brixen. Like the Fathers, too, and the great medieval Doctors, he does not separate philosophy and theology; and he goes further than they do, and sometimes altogether too far, in attempting to philosophize the mysteries of the Faith, the Trinity and the Incarnation, rather in the manner of Solovyov, whose mind, though not his system, in many ways resembled that of Nicholas. The Neo-Pythagorean tendency in Nicholas, his habit of appealing to transcendental significances in numbers and geometrical figures to establish his points, which is characteristic of the Platonic tradition (though by no means essential to Platonism) is not likely to be attractive either to contemporary mathematicians or the un-mathematically minded. But those who have the patience to get beyond the oddity of his language and the unsatisfactoriness of some of his arguments will find some very profound theological and philosophical insights to reward