

Reviews

AUGUSTINE THE BISHOP, by F. Van der Meer; Sheed and Ward, £4 10s.

Not long before Augustine was one day seized and unwillingly ordained priest, he wrote to one of his most intimate friends on what he considered the form of life required for the pursuit of perfection. 'To be divinised in leisure' (*in otio deificari*—*Ep.* 10. 2) is how he summed it up; speaking for myself, he wrote, 'I cannot taste and love that pure goodness (of God) without a certain restful ease' (*quaedam secura cessatio*—*ibid.*). He was living, at this time, as a member of a small community of cultivated friends dedicated to a kind of refined and intellectualized religious life. Within a few years he was enlisted in the service of the see of Hippo to assist its aged bishop and soon after succeeded the bishop in his office. It was a considerable change. The bishop's life had little in common with that of the monk, except that as bishop Augustine continued to live in a kind of monastic community with his clergy. He was caught up in a ceaseless round of preaching, administration, travelling and in the manifold incidental duties of an eminent public figure. He frequently bewailed the *sarcina episcopatus*, the burden of the episcopate; even as a newly ordained priest commissioned to preach on behalf of his aged bishop he had to ask for leave of absence to immerse himself in the study of the scriptures in order to prepare himself for the task, and in old age he had to arrange for a kind of coadjutor to assist him in order to give him some freedom for reflection and writing. And yet Augustine the saint is not the brilliant young thinker, the man of letters typical of the decadent culture of late antiquity. The mind behind the early philosophical writings is infinitely deepened and broadened by contact with his flock. From his ordination on, his whole life was spent in the service of his own church of Hippo or of the wider church of Africa, of which he quickly became the leading figure. All his talents, all the resources of his wide learning were thenceforth devoted to the service of the Church, his whole intellectual life was poured into pastoral channels. In this concentration of purpose he overcame the sterility of the rhetorical culture of his day and gave it not only a new lease of life, but also a new fertility in the service of the Christian faith.

Fr Van der Meer's book only deals with Augustine's thoughts incidentally. What he sets out to do—and his success is astonishing—is to paint a picture of the bishop's life in the context of the life of his flock. With his wide knowledge of Augustine's works, and of contemporary Roman Africa, he presents a many-sided and fascinating image of Augustine the bishop. In this immensely rich book there is little, apart from minor matters, that fails to convince. The only important respect in which Fr Van der Meer's account seems to me unsatisfactory is the result of a rather superficial assessment of Donatism. In his somewhat flat and markedly unsympathetic account of this 'heresy' he appears not

to appreciate its deep historical roots (significantly there is no reference in the book to Dr Frend's study of the movement), and consequently oversimplifies the complexities of Augustine's relations to an important strand in the skein of African society. This apart, Fr Van der Meer has succeeded in getting inside the skins not only of the bishop, but also of his flock. His book is a major contribution to religious and to social history, a work not only of immense learning, but also of a fine historical imagination.

The publishers deserve the gratitude of English readers for placing the book at their disposal, and for doing so at a very reasonable price. Apart from poor photographic illustrations and a worse map, the book is beautifully produced. The sixty-odd pages of notes are—wisely, for once—placed at the end of the volume; but their use is made almost impossible by the adoption of a system of abbreviations which it is not extravagant to call lunatic.

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THE TRADITION OF EASTERN ORTHODOXY, by M.-J. Le Guillou, O.P.
Faith and Fact Books; Burns and Oates, 8s. 6d.

The title of the original French version, *L'Esprit de l'orthodoxie grecque et russe*, gives a clearer indication of the scope of this study. Père Le Guillou has confined it to the Byzantine rite and the Greek and Russian Churches in particular, and he has reduced the historical content to a minimum, in order to place the Eastern Orthodox Church in the contemporary ecumenical picture, within the compass of a small book.

In the first part he sets out to show that the whole spiritual life of the Orthodox Church is bound up with the great theological themes of the patristic age. The treatment is inevitably rather general and fragmentary but the point is important: too often in recent years books about the Orthodox Church have concentrated on the more peripheral and esoteric aspects of Orthodox spirituality.

There is a very useful chapter on the estrangement between East and West, and the final chapter on the renewal of Orthodox consciousness and its implications for closer relations with the Catholic Church contains much helpful information and many interesting perceptions. The author, who is a member of the Dominican *Centre Istina* in Paris, has first hand knowledge of the Russian emigration there and has also spent some time in Athens. He writes with sympathy and affection for the Orthodox, while retaining the detached viewpoint of a scholar. By avoiding the historical approach, however, he has made his task much more difficult. The problems and weaknesses he discerns in Orthodoxy—such as an over-emphasis on nationalism—are so closely linked with the historical vicissitudes and aspirations of the people that to present them in isolation is misleading, and the lack of historical context deprives the book of any coherent perspective.