

REVIEWS

IN TELLE ÉTAIT SOEUR KATREI (Cahiers du Sud, Paris, 1954: fr. 650) the series 'Documents spirituels' has added a translation of this little tract, often alluded to but seldom read, and of twenty short discourses also attributed to Eckhart, well able to hold its own with the markedly exotic 'Documents' already published in the collection. This modern French version, delicate, sensitive, very readable, is by the late Mme Mayrisch Saint-Hubert. There is only space here to discuss *Sister Katrei*. Even those readers well versed in the more eccentric products of medieval German and Dutch piety will find it a strange work, both in form and in content. As the translator points out in her brief and learned if at times controversial preface, the tract in the form in which it has survived is manifestly corrupted; and it seems to be the conflation of probably three originally distinct compositions: a 'spiritual' exposition of the miraculous feeding of the multitude with five loaves and two fishes, a resumé for the benefit of penitents of such topics as the seven deadly sins and the seven gifts of the Holy Ghost, and, thirdly, what purports to be a spiritual biography of Sister Katrei. This is not the place to discuss the question whether the tract is by Eckhart at all, but whereas the exposition of the miraculous feeding and the catechetical material may well be merely notes from his discourses later expanded by pious auditors, the real stuff of the tract, the series of colloquies between Katrei and her confessor, is of very different nature, and if Eckhart did not write it, he and only he can have inspired it. Its intention is partly moral and didactic, and in this it resembles other popular stories which circulated among the Friends of God, especially *The Tale of the Pious Beguine*. Katrei comes to her confessor for advice, but it is he who presently learns from her. He counsels her to moderation, but she tells him that it is he who holds her back from God; and when later, after following her own path, she comes to him again, he does not know this illumined and exalted being, and she tells him 'That is because you have never known yourself'. Partly, too, we today must value this tract, as *The Pious Beguine* is valued, for the picture which it incidentally gives us of the life of the Beguines: their wanderings and their pious works, their persecutions and their afflictions. But the chief worth of *Sister Katrei* is the series of commentaries, formed in terms which simple folk could understand, of some of Eckhart's doctrine: and the fact that the doctrine in this tract so closely corresponds to certain of the propositions which were condemned as heretical in the bull, *In agro dominico*, points to the probability that the tract was composed before 1329, in the period when Eckhart was seeking to defend his doctrine and to clear his name. The most startling example of how the tract is inspired by such doctrine is where Katrei comes to

her confessor and says: 'Sir, rejoice with me, I have become God', and he, with what we may think a commendable composure, replies: 'God be praised for it. Now depart from the crowd and return to your solitude: and if you become God again, I shall rejoice again with you.' But we must read this in connection with what follows, with the exposition of the 'five deaths which men must die', which tells us in so many words that man cannot come to the Father except by the Son, and that any kind of 'deification' which he achieves is wrought by grace and not by nature. Or, again, we may take the later passage in which Katrei, worn out by her life of denial and affliction, seeks the confessor's guidance and is told that she should live at ease, denying her body nothing, caring only for herself: we expect Katrei to show indignation or bewilderment, but instead she tranquilly answers that she knows this counsel to be good, but that she knows her own way of life to be for her still better. If we take the confessor's words as teaching Manichæan dualism, we shall be wrong: and Katrei, who knows that there is nothing more in his words than a statement that all her voluntary works of mortification are in themselves no better than natural man's self-indulgence, shows us that we are wrong. *Sister Katrei* cannot fail today to give to the uninitiated as great scandal as such teachings gave six hundred years ago to those who believed, as Tauler was later to say, that when Eckhart spoke of the things of eternity he was telling them of this present life; but all who are concerned to know, not only what Eckhart said (and what his detractors then and some of his later admirers have said that he said) but what he meant by his saying, will find this little work of great help.

ERIC COLLEDGE

THE PRAYERS OF FATHER VINCENT McNABB, O.P. Edited with a Foreword by Fr Donald Proudman, O.P. (Blackfriars Publications; 6s. 6d.)

Most of the prayers in this little collection were spontaneous outpourings during retreats and sermons, and taken down by a reporter: they are to be found scattered among Fr Vincent's books. But besides these extempore utterances he composed many prayers of set purpose and put them down in writing. Only a fraction of these appear in this book, and something much more substantial could have been made if they had all been gathered together. The noble prayer on pages 49-50 is not Fr Vincent's. It was quoted by him in *The Path of Prayer* and he tells how it was discovered among the papers of the young Prince Imperial, the Empress Eugenie's son, who was killed in action in Zululand.

The writing of prayers is a rare and difficult art. Many of Fr Vincent's friends and admirers will be glad to have these written and spoken prayers which breathe the spirit of a man of prayer and are full of the poetry of a lovely character.

B.D.