

REVIEWS

LA REVOLUTION INAPERCUE, ST VINCENT DE PAUL, LE SAVANT. Par André Ménébrea. (Daubin, Paris, 1949; n.p.)

The title of this book is calculated to arouse one's interest and curiosity. What is the revolution that has passed unheeded, and why should St Vincent be called a savant? The author aims at answering these two questions. He declares that for the last three hundred years a revolution in the social life of the Western World has been going on unperceived and that it was St Vincent who first set this revolution in motion. Up to this time little had been done for the organised relief of the poor, the sick, prisoners, the mentally afflicted and, in general, for the neglected and dispossessed. The State, in particular, had been scandalously negligent in this respect.

St Vincent, clearly realising the duty of every Christian man and woman to remedy as far as in them lay, the corporeal and spiritual wants of their neighbour, persuaded many of his contemporaries in every walk of life to recognise this obligation and, what is far more important, to carry it out. In this way he set an example and initiated a movement which in the course of time and owing to the pressure of public opinion, has forced modern states to carry into effect measures for the relief of poverty and illness, and to provide all those other social services to which we have grown accustomed. Why then, he asks, is so little interest taken in the man who set this revolution in motion? He replies that our neglect is due in the first place to the saint himself. If he had been only less modest, less discreet, if he had only called attention to 'my doctrine', 'my ideas', 'my method', 'my principles', we should not have failed to pay him the attention we never refuse to those prose-writers, poets, philosophers and politicians who never grow weary of exhibiting their virtues and, in some cases, even their sins and vices. In the second place, the Church has canonised him and so we think we have paid our debt to him. We are face to face with a supernatural fact that lies beyond the pale of examination and that should suffice. M. Ménébrea, however, will have none of this. He wants to put before us the life and teaching of the man who became a saint.

The book is divided into two equal parts. In the first he provides the reader with a biography of St Vincent in a series of short, vivid chapters that do not put too great a strain on one's capacity for prolonged attention. He always keeps 'the common reader' in view. These chapters are grouped under five headings: the twilight of the old order; the dawn of a new world; the imprescriptible rights of life; the relation between men and things; and the conflicts between charity and politics. He concludes this part of his book with an essay on the theme that it is men who are worth while who do the things that are worth while.

The second part consists of selections from the saint's letters and addresses to the members of his Congregation—priests and lay-

brothers—to St Louise de Marillac and her Daughters and to the Ladies of Charity. To these he has added some letters of St Louise and St Vincent's disciples, all of which go to show, as the author remarks, 'the extent to which the saint has penetrated the soul of his followers with his own spirit'. The extracts vary in length from a few lines to three or four pages and enables us to decide in what respect M. Menebrea looks upon the saint as a savant. He does not, of course, regard him as 'a distinguished scientist', but as 'a man of learning deeply versed in the knowledge of the human heart and endowed with the gift of persuading his correspondents and hearers to advance in the love of God and of their neighbour. 'The secret of St Vincent's style', he remarks, 'which is so simple, so vibrant, and which imitates that of no other writer, is that he never treats of any other subject than the problems of life. He studies them in their entire extent, in all their mysterious complexities, he does not isolate or separate the soul from the body, and he passes on without any transition from those most lowly and most humiliating necessities which are of such a nature that he was the first to devote attention to them, to the most sublime thoughts and ideas, in accordance with the desire of our human nature.' Is there a more learned style of writing, one that embraces the totality of Truth, one more certain to ensue than that which follows the drama of human existence? And if eloquence is the gift that renders us master of the mind and heart of those who hear us, who was more eloquent than he?

This book, then, should serve as a useful introduction to those who know little of the life and doctrine of St Vincent and of his spirit in which he entered upon and carried to a successful conclusion those great corporeal and spiritual works of mercy that have earned him the glorious title of 'Apostle of Charity'.

JOSEPH LEONARD, C.M.

SHE WHO LIVED HER NAME. By Marie René-Bazin. (Mercier Press; 12s. 6d.)

'The realisation of a thought of love from the Heart of Jesus' was how the Curé d'Ars described the Society of the Helpers of the Holy Souls (p. 76), founded in 1856 to 'labour through works of mercy for the deliverance of the Holy Souls' (p. 78); and since the Foundress urged her daughters to 'share in all manner of good' (p. 166) it is not surprising that the Saint's prophecy that it would spread rapidly through the Church was quickly fulfilled.

God's instrument in the work was Eugénie Smet, born at Loos near Lille on 25th March 1825. From her youth, longing to do something great for God, she prayed: 'Take me, O God, for I do not know how to give myself' (p. 25). At the age of 12 the two great passions of her life, Providence and Purgatory, had already become inseparably united in her thoughts; 'O Providence, You have given me everything! I ask one thing only: to be your Provi-