

EDITORIAL

CERTAIN words concerned with what has come to be called 'Spiritual Theology' have lost any real or persistent meaning. This difficulty of terminology may be general today, but it would seem to be most acutely felt in the realms of the theology of Christian life with which this review is concerned. Before using the words 'mystic' or 'contemplation' or even 'prayer', one needs to define precisely what one means by the words. Even so, after the first paragraph, the reader is likely to revert to his own particular use of the word and so risks great misunderstanding. The trained clergy are no more prepared to accept these words in a uniform sense than the average Christian. To preach to the clergy on 'contemplation' often produces an immediate reaction of rejection. The active parish priest feels that he is being told to lay on one side work that it is his plain duty to perform in order to occupy long stretches of the day on his knees. Or the young curate recognises a special section of the spiritual exercises on the contemplation of certain aspects of our Lord's life, a section which he feels no longer applies to himself. To speak of 'mystical graces' in a sermon conjures up weird images in the minds of the listeners; they see ecstasies carried lightly like leaves to the church's rafters or rather gruesome wounds in hands and feet oozing with blood. 'The mysteries', if they are educated, speak to them of Grecian women in flowing white robes gathered round waist and breast by golden thongs, of small braziers and little square altars; if they are the average congregation they may think generally of a vague mass of details concerning God which they know to be mysterious and practically unintelligible.

It is one of the purposes of a review like *THE LIFE* to form a consistent and intelligible terminology that will help people to deepen their perception of God's activity in their lives. But to be successful it would need to be written by all the experts of the day who would have agreed beforehand to the use of the terms; it would need to be ten times larger than its present size; and it would need to be read by several million subscribers every month.

Such an ambition being quite hopeless, it still remains possible to play a small part in putting forward the true teaching of the Church regarding Christian life with a consistent and uniform vocabulary.

For this reason, for example, two articles appear in the present issue on aspects of Mother Julian of Norwich. She was an 'English mystic'; and under that label she has often been relegated to the sphere of interesting and strange phenomena. As a true 'mystic' however she is a member of the society of her own day, not an interesting exception. She lived, prayed and dictated her 'Revelations' at a time when Europe was peopled with men and women like her, the spiritual leaders who were trying to rescue the Christian life of their day from its decadence and apathy. Or perhaps it would be truer to say that the Holy Spirit at that time was using a group of people scattered over Europe to recall the generality to the fullness of life in union with Christ. Mother Julian was thus being used in England as St Catherine was being used in Italy. She was a true member of her own generation. As a true 'mystic' she was also manifesting realities that were based on sound theology; the common teaching of the Church was manifested directly and concretely in her life and experience of Christ living in her. The true mystic does not profess a life or doctrine that differs from that of the true Church, so that he or she will be found ultimately to be in conformity with the Church's great teachers such as St Thomas Aquinas. The two articles, therefore, should serve to secure a truer conception of 'mysticism' as well as making their own points.

The justification for using the word 'mystical' in such phrases as 'the mystical body' is that the word stands primarily for a full union with God in Christ, a union that does not inevitably beget strange and embarrassing experiences on behaviour. That other great English mystical work *The Cloud of Unknowing* has plenty to say about those who think that strange behaviour is part of the mystic's privilege, the rolling of the eyes and the ecstatic posture. But the Church as the body of Christ on earth only tolerates these tricks. She is 'mystical' because she is herself the mystery, Christ on earth, in the fullness of his grace.