

OBITER

NOTES ON A JOURNEY

PARIS. At the Salle Pleyel, which must be the model of all concert-halls, the pre-view of *Le Sourcier du Ciel*, a new film based on the life of St Jean-Baptiste Vianney (The Curé of Ars). Before it was shown, we were treated to a discussion on 'Sanctity and the Film' between the Dominican Fathers Pichard and Carré, Maurice Cloche (director of *Monsieur Vincent*) and Georges Rollin, who plays the part of the Curé in *Le Sourcier du Ciel*. M. Rollin emphasised the difficulty of 'being a saint' when the actor is constantly at the mercy of the technicians. How, in any case, can he communicate the real life of a man who spent eighteen hours of every day in the confessional?

The film itself is interesting rather than convincing. It is too full, too eager to 'cover' a lifetime. The result is restless, unconcentrated. But, with *Monsieur Vincent* and *Laënnec*, it is impressive evidence of the seriousness of intention which makes French films, even when they fail, worth seeing. *Le Sourcier du Ciel* is not indeed a failure: some of its sequences are beautifully conceived, and the opening minutes are a lovely evocation of the Curé's work as it emerged in a dead little village, the least likely place on earth one would have supposed for sanctity on the most august scale.

In the programme, too, was a documentary on the Pope and Television. This, due to the work of Père Pichard (who has done so much for French television), was exceedingly good, and the Pope's address, with its variety of gesture and economy in editing, made one realise the vast religious possibilities of a new medium.

How should monasteries be decorated? At the Dominican Priory of St Jacques the problem is solved by the display of abstract paintings in the refectory and common-room. The wholly formal patterns, unrepresentational and the source of endless possibilities of speculation, are a relief after Arundel prints and 'nice' pictures. But will they last? Perhaps the idea is that they should change with changing taste. They certainly give a liveliness and joy to large rooms with white walls. Perhaps they are intended to confirm the impression that the Dominicans are *avant-garde* by vocation.

At St Germain l'Auxerrois, a missionary exhibition, using all the latest devices of display and lettering, occupies most of the ambulatory. It in no sense interferes with religious contemplation, and suggests a new way of making the faithful see that foreign missions are their own affair.

At dinner, Dr X, who had spent two years in a German concen-

tration camp, had little sympathy for Czechs and Poles. She had met them in those terrible years. The problem of objective judgment when you have yourself been wounded. Easy to see the fallacies, but pain is never ended by argument.

The generous dispensations obtained from Rome by the French hierarchy are having a considerable effect on ordinary Catholic life. Anyone can receive Holy Communion, having taken liquid refreshment, at a mass celebrated later than 9 a.m., and at any time if they live more than 4 kilometres from a church. The conventual mass at St Jacques is at 12 noon. The celebrant can take coffee at the usual time (few French people eat much at breakfast anyway), do an ordinary morning's work, and then offer mass at mid-day. And there are always lay people who come to communion then.

LOURDES. In the streets, hundreds of Bretons, traditionally dressed: old women, with lace head-dresses encased in celluloid against the rain, their faces lined like the map of their own coasts.

Dr Y was sceptical about a reputed 'cure' yesterday. 'The man was proud of it', he said, 'and that doesn't ring true. He came into the Medical Bureau, preceded by a man carrying his crutches: just like a bishop!' Dr Y asks: 'What is the secret of Lourdes?' There are many answers, and one suspects that the presence of the sick, in their patience and hope and faith, is always part of any answer.

Oddly enough, the commerce of Lourdes matters less than one had expected. It is hideous and abominable, but so are drains and newspapers and automatic machines. One has an infinite advantage in living outside Lourdes, at the convent of the Second Order Dominican nuns; *in pace in idipsum*. The hymns come clear on the air from the Grotto: you can see the torchlight procession from afar: and the Gave runs by, that loveliest of rivers. Our Lady is at hand, and the *Salve Regina* seems never so appropriate as here.

TOULOUSE. The basilica of St Sernin has, outside Rome, the richest of all collections of relics. For a Dominican, the head of St Thomas alone gives this noble church a special importance among all the churches of France. (In any case, its majesty of style, its superb tower and the romanesque reliefs of Christ in glory and the angels are more than enough to make it memorable.) Here, too, is St Dominic's chasuble.

The Church of the Jacobins, first and finest of all Dominican churches, is today part of a lycée. The chapter-room and the chapel of St Antoninus (not he of Florence), with half of the cloister, also remain. It is a sad place. But it is capable of resurrection: has indeed been resurrected in the present-day priory of St Romanus,

in its conscientious Gothic—but more importantly in the work of the Fathers in Toulouse itself.

The double nave of the Jacobins, with its superbly vaulted roof, suggests somehow the boldness of the Dominican assault on the soft lands of the Midi. A motive of credibility it remains; its tower, the model of so many others in this region, rising firmly above the city.

ALBI. It is easy to be converted into an Albigensian: to be convinced, that is, that Albi is the loveliest of all the cathedrals of France. This astonishing fortress of pale red brick, a cliff of a church almost blinding you in the sun of the south; crude, almost; as functional as the Battersea Power Station; it does not prepare you for the interior with its lovely painted roof and elaborate choir screen. And the mural painting of the Last Judgment, little known, is surely as fine a conception as that of the Sistine Chapel. It is three centuries earlier, and by that amount less sophisticated; it has a literal understanding of sin and judgment that is candid and unanswerable. Incredibly, an eighteenth-century archbishop removed the central part, with its 'Christ in Judgment', to pierce the wall for an additional chapel.

The choir of Albi (*entrée payante!*) is lovely, but dead. It is used but once a year, on Good Friday, but it is, one supposes, unique among the Cathedrals of France for its cleanliness and exact conformity to the Catholic tradition of what an altar and its appurtenances should be.

LES PIEUX (Manche). A France very different from the Midi. A little village, hidden away in the Cotentin, its life is more traditional than most. Market-day still sees women coming in from the countryside in the special dress of their village. The crier bangs his drum. And First Communion on Sunday is the biggest event of the year.

A footnote. The material cares of the clergy are such that in this diocese (Coutances) the *Ligue Féminine* sees to it every Saturday that the curé is provided with food for a week. Everywhere in France one hears of the crisis that has overcome the pastoral clergy. There are many other religious crises; much activity; many proposals. The hard fact remains that the basic work of the Church depends on the pastoral clergy; and most of them have not enough to live on. Easy to be impressed, from outside, by the Catholic revival in France. And there can be no doubt of its vitality. But there remains the appalling problem of clerical destitution.

ALDATE.