

ALL THINGS NEW by Anne Biezanek. *Peter Smith, 7s 6d.*

Doctor Biezanek's career has aroused violent feelings both for and against her. She seems to have the power to show people up, and most of them don't come out of the inspection with any great credit.

The reason for this is to be found in this book, the greater part of which is Anne Biezanek's own story. The record is intensely subjective but entirely honest, and the position in which she now finds herself, of acting according to her conscience in defiance of the hitherto accepted teaching of the Church is the inevitable end of what went before. It is an appalling and shaming story and one which should hurt the conscience of every Catholic, because at every stage of this tragic succession of events the things that went wrong did so because Catholics had learnt to put their own mental comfort above the demands of love.

The first chapter of the book gives the reasons for Dr. Biezanek's struggle with the clergy and bishops of the Church, and it shows clearly enough that, whatever may be the actual facts of the case, those who are charged to feed and care for Christ's flocks have appeared to her as almost uniformly callous, legalistic and lacking in honesty, let alone charity. It is quite impossible to judge from this account what really happened, it is enough that this is how it appeared. The rest of the chapter consists of extracts from letters from men and women, Catholic and non-Catholic. Anyone who is tempted to think that the problem of birth-control can be settled by exhorting people to have faith and obey had better read these letters. Agonised, angry, bitter, unbalanced, hopeful or hopeless, they show the depth of humiliation and despair to which this problem can force people. From now on, no Catholic, cleric or lay, should be permitted to give an opinion on the subject until he has read these letters. This is not a problem that concerns a few weak and unfaithful Christians. On the contrary, it is those who care about their faith who suffer – the others have an easy way out. And there are not thousands but millions of people involved.

Several chapters give the story of the author's life. A highly strung, emotional girl, she was converted to Catholicism at the age of nineteen. Her dedication to her new faith was whole-hearted, and her devotion to Poland, roused by an acute compassion for the tragedy that had overtaken that country, was bound up with her religion. She married a Pole, one who had been a qualified lawyer in his own country and whose qualifications were not recognized here so that he could do only menial work. It is not hard to guess that the husband's justifiable sense of grievance reinforced the tendency of an over-emotional though highly intelligent woman to feel persecuted.

The next part of the story is horribly *not* unique. One baby after another. Health failing under the strain of the necessity of keeping the exacting job of Registrar in a Mental Hospital, and bringing up a family. The obviously approaching crisis drove her to seek advice from a priest, who told her to choose a spiritual director. The one who 'took her on' exacted total, blind submission (Dr Biezanek apparently thinks this is of the essence of the Catholic idea of 'direction'). He told her to keep her job (which is emotionally extremely wearing) and never to 'refuse' her husband, while of course doing nothing to prevent conception. The result, foreseeably, was a fifth child (not counting a miscarriage) and a total breakdown of health. The job had to be given up, and the home that went with it. The family was homeless and penniless. Her (Quaker) parents took them in. No Catholic, priest or layman, least of all the 'director' seemed to think it any concern of theirs. 'If it were the inflexible will of God that my marriage should be cemented by the sacrificial love that my director was demanding of me, then was it not the same director's business to see that the Church, for which he claimed to speak, came to my aid in the matter of helping with such matters as domestic help, and even further with finance, when our own home and the income I was contributing were lost by my incapacitation through child-bearing?'

The question is the key to the importance of the whole book. The subsequent agonising steps by which Dr Biezanek found herself forced in conscience eventually to reject the current teaching of the Church on contraception and then to open a clinic to help those similarly tormented merely reinforce the significance of this basic question. All the way through there was a sense of being abandoned by those who should have helped. The total absence of concern or compassion from other Catholics may be exaggerated, but that is not the point. If there were some who cared they never succeeded in showing it. If the priests and others who knew about the case (and as time went on few did not) were absolutely convinced that Anne Biezanek was morally wrong that does not excuse them from the obligations of charity. On the contrary, it makes it all the more important, yet it is precisely charity that was so glaringly absent. There were plenty of people to bind heavy burdens, and none who were prepared to lighten the burden by so much as a finger's support. It seems hardly necessary to quote the description appropriate to this attitude to human problems.

To say that Dr Biezanek's theology is curious is an understatement. She has a very personal apocalyptic vision that raises one's suspicions and her ideas about the mission of the Blessed Virgin are odd to say the least. (But at least she found a friend in the Mother of God when others were conspicuous by their absence.)

But the final chapters that expound Dr Biezanek's curious interpretation of history and dogma, her over-simplified approach to the moral

issues involved in contraception, her lack of a sense of proportion (to have kept one would be little short of miraculous) should not be allowed to prejudice readers. This is a sad, mad book, but it is a very important one. It forces, or should force, all Catholics to face up to the existence of a crisis in the history of the Church. This is not, as most people seem to think, primarily a crisis in moral theology, it is not first of all a matter of the meaning of natural law. It is first of all a crisis of charity. It is not in the least far fetched to compare the mental and spiritual, and often enough even physical, condition of many women tormented by the fear of another pregnancy with that of the man who 'fell among thieves'. Two people, concerned for the proper observance of law and religion, passed by on the other side. They were sorry, but of course 'it was probably his own fault anyway'. It was left to a stranger to help, and it still is. I do not see how the Church can absolve itself from sins against the second 'great commandment' in this matter. If the renewal of the Church goes deeper than liturgical frills (and they will remain frills, however elegant, if it does not) then it must go down to this level. If we continue to build churches and not homes, adorn altars and let children go naked, bow down before God created in our own image and turn away from Christ in his brethren, then all that has been said in Rome will prove to have been, what so many openly say it is, nothing but hot-air – and that not even hot enough for the cold and lonely to warm their hands at.

Rosemary Haughton

CHRISTIAN RESPONSIBILITY by Rosemary Haughton. *Sheed and Ward (Stagbooks)*, 10s. 6d.

To get the full flavour of this small, but very important, paperback, one should perhaps first read Mrs Haughton's essay 'Freedom and the Individual' in *Objections to Roman Catholicism*. *Christian Responsibility* works out applications of Mrs Haughton's central theme, that the primacy of conscience (even erroneous conscience) must be re-asserted and Catholics must

exercise their God-given intellects and assume personal responsibility for the way they live their lives.

It is a book particularly for women, dealing as it does with freedom of conscience in relation to the upbringing of children, the way we teach them about love and sex, the use of make-up and clothes and labour-saving household equipment,