

BOOK REVIEWS

THE STORY OF A RUSSIAN PILGRIM. Translated from the French by Dom Theodore Baily, O.S.B. (Burns Oates and Washbourne; pp. 146; 5/-.)

It has ever been difficult for mystics to express the religious experience of their contemplative life in the terms of ordinary human language. This *Story of a Russian Pilgrim*, as told to his Father in God about the middle of last century, is particularly valuable, being the narrative of a simple, unlearned man, who, having set himself one definite object, devoted his whole life to its attainment. The story is in fact a study of inward, mental prayer. Its author was a Russian peasant who has remained anonymous, one of those 'stranniki'—wanderers, whom one met, and perhaps still meets tramping along the roads of Russia from shrine to shrine, in all weathers, winter and summer alike, clad in a worn and shabby dark coat, a pack of coarse unbleached home-spun linen on his back, its long ends crossed over his breast.

Impressed by the Apostle's words 'Pray without ceasing' (Thess. V, 17) the pilgrim set out in quest of spiritual enlightenment, and encountered a holy hermit, a *Staretz* (old man). These *startzi* are a curious phenomena peculiar to the East. Dostoyevsky gives a beautiful type of such a *staretz* in his 'Brothers Karamasovs.' Not necessarily monks even, they were spiritual directors who wielded such authority based on their holiness, as no official representative of the Church could ever aspire to. They took possession of a soul and fashioned and moulded it at their will, the disciple surrendering himself entirely to the guidance of his director.

This pilgrim begs the hermit to teach him prayer, and with the old man's help gradually ascends from the simplest vocal prayer to the deep joys of 'sweet interior prayer.' This is how he describes what happened to him :

'After a certain time I realised, as it were, that my prayer had passed from my lips to my heart, that is to say, that my heart at each beat seemed to repeat of itself the words of the prayer 'Lord Jesus Christ' and so on. I ceased to pronounce with my lips : I had but to listen to what my heart said. It seemed to me that my eyes probed its very depths and I remembered the words of the old man, who had described to me this state of bliss. I then felt in my heart as it were a soft pain, and in my soul so great a love for Jesus Christ that it

seemed to me that, could I but see him, I should fall down at his feet, embrace them and kiss them a thousand times, and that I would thank him, weeping, for having given me the grace of such a consolation—to me, his unworthy and sinful creature. Then I felt in my heart and my breast a life-giving warmth.'

But, warned by his *staretz*, he knew the dangers awaiting the contemplative, and to test his experience he had recourse to that guide of Eastern mystics—the *Philokalia*, or *Love of Virtue* containing mystical writings by twenty-five Fathers.

Prayer gave him a new conception of the world. The following words exhale a sweet fragrance :

'When I prayed in the deep recollection of my spirit, everything about me seemed to be delightful and marvellous: the trees, the grass, the birds, the earth, the air and the light all seemed to say that they had been created for man, that all showed God's love for man, that all prayed to God and gave him honour and praise and adoration. It was then that I understood the words of the *Love of Virtue*: "the comprehension of the language of creation," and I realised that I could talk with all creatures and make myself understood.'

Again and again he warns against pitfalls awaiting the mystic—vanity and pride, distraction during prayer though it may be due even to edifying thoughts, apparitions . . . Do we not detect in this an echo of the teaching of St. Teresa and St. John of the Cross? Yet in his foreword the Benedictine translator rightly points out how the Russian mystic comes at times dangerously near the false doctrine of the 'Uncreated Light' which preoccupied Greek theologians of the decadent era.

Despite its artless simplicity the writer manifests a talent for keen observation: the characters though drawn in a few words are vivid and true to life. The pilgrim's religion is one of true Christian tolerance and charity.

We feel deeply indebted to Dom Theodore Baily for this little book which gives a glimpse into the Russia that deserved the name of 'Holy Russia,' and can only hope it will find many readers. Though a translation of a translation (French) it is excellent, and only here and there would a Russian find a word to change. The *vignettes* and frontispiece add to the book's attractiveness.

G.B.

THE NEW TESTAMENT WITNESS TO OUR BLESSED LADY. By Fr. Vincent McNabb, O.P. (Sheed & Ward; 3/6).

There is much that is excellent in the seventy or eighty pages of this little book. This is only what the name of the