

assent alone, to which alone he is entitled?.

Yet many mistakes of the earlier translator, S. J. Fales, have been corrected. The book should be in every Catholic institution, in the hands of every student of the twelfth century. The many letters hitherto difficult of access, now brought together, new arrangement and historical notes, make the book useful even to those who would read only the original.

JOHN MORSON, O.C.R.

SAINT BERNARD ET LA BIBLE. By P. Dumontier. (Desclée de Brouweri n.p.)

The Scriptures crave to be read and understood in the spirit in which they were made. From such reading affection is drawn and prayer is shaped; a prayer which does not hinder our reading but purifies the mind and restores it to a better understanding of what we read. If we seek God in our reading, all we read works together to us for God and is subdued to the service of Christ. In this way Saint Bernard made the Bible his own: it held an outstanding place in every part of his thought and work. P. Dumontier here sets in detail Saint Bernard's method in the use of Holy Scripture. For him the Bible was God's impatient call to love, a revelation from the heart of God to the heart of man. In showing how Saint Bernard made use of the help of the Fathers, the author makes a very fine analysis of texts. He does not seek to hide the imperfection of Saint Bernard's interpretation: it is compared with that of the Fathers and other writers of the twelfth century, and throughout the book much light is cast on the other Cistercian writers, such as William of Saint-Therry, Saint Aelred, and Guerric. The chapter on Saint Bernard's biblical style is a masterpiece. The biblical character of his spirituality is dealt with in the last chapter. This book is a very welcome addition to the literature on Saint Bernard, and it cannot be ignored by those who desire a better understanding of the great Cistercian.

A.W.

THE SIGN OF JONAS. By Thomas Merton. (Hollis and Carter; 18s.)

Thomas Merton is almost certainly the only Catholic writer on the spiritual life in the world today whose books have been read by more than a million readers. This fact is both significant and impressive. The readers, be it said, are of widely differing intellectual capacity, yet they share an enthusiasm for Fr Merton's talents in autobiographical writing, for his descriptions of Cistercian life, and in a lesser degree for his exposition of the classical doctrine of Catholic spirituality. His chief assets as a writer lie in a strongly marked individuality of style, and a certain transparent sincerity. His autobiographical work clearly has the wider appeal and is more successful than his expositions of doctrine, which though they are

written with eloquence and clarity break no new ground, are not always theologically adequate, and commonly by-pass the more acute problems inherent in our modern situation.

Fr Merton has written a great deal—perhaps almost too much—during his fifteen or so years of Catholic life, and there are times when one wonders whether superiors have not driven a willing horse too fast and too far. However this may be, the present book shows a manifest growth in spiritual experience, if only because it contains an occasional quiet admission of past erroneous judgments (the world is not so wholly bad as he thought it), and because it does not conceal the tension in him between the individualistic artist and the self-effacing religious. In the main this record of his five years in the Cistercian Abbey of Gethsemane rings true.

Orderly minds may find the book difficult reading, because it has no central theme or argument, since it is the record of the small quiet events which go to make up the life of a Cistercian monk. The casual *catena* of thoughts and feelings, the sublime, the trivial, the humorous, the beautiful follow each other in uncertain sequence. Meditation is followed by details of manual labour; the weather and the landscape are sandwiched between comments on the liturgy, because monastic life is like that: in its diversity and contrast the tension of life is eased and sanity is saved.

Fr Merton has his critics: it would be hard to achieve such popularity as a writer without raising a little envy here and a little doubt there. He has written much he tells us at the orders of his religious superiors, but it is only fair to say that he is not the first writer on the spiritual life to do so. Incidentally, his journal bears a certain resemblance to the famous *Histoire d'une Ame* of Ste Thérèse of Lisieux in its candour and simplicity. He confesses that he has found the external compulsion to write very painful at times, but again numerous professional writers have regarded their craft as something of a servitude and in this Fr Merton is in good company.

Other critics have complained that he preaches a form of religious escapism, that he has got the relation of the 'world' and religion in wrong perspective. The answer, I think, is that it would be a miracle if he had not done so; but after all the distortion is neither so great nor so important as to invalidate the substantial excellence of his work. If the Spirit really breathes where he will, and if the thomist doctrine that contemplation is in the 'normal' way of growth of grace in the soul is even a probable truth, then Fr Merton in his witness to the facts of Cistercian life and to traditional doctrine before so wide a public is doing a work at which it would be hard to cavil. This remains true without prejudice to the larger and more difficult work of qualifying development on the thomist doctrines which still remains to be done. That a Cistercian monk may not feel called upon to take a hand in such an enterprise is in no way surprising. More-

over, as change is the law of life, there is every reason to believe that certain judgments made by Fr Merton, which to a very mature theological mind may seem somewhat naïve, will in time, with him, adjust themselves to the complex realities of human life.

If Fr Merton succeeds in doing all this while at the same time retaining his hold over his large and diverse circle of readers, he may well prove to have been the most widely influential spiritual writer of the day. Meantime, *The Sign of Jonas* is worthy of everyone's attention in some degree, and the final chapter we commend to all as a small masterpiece of descriptive writing and meditative soliloquy.

R. VELARDE

VAUX OF HARROWDEN. A Recusant Family. By Godfrey Anstruther, o.p.
(R. H. Johns, Newport, Mon.; 25s.)

If anyone should ask what interest a family history has for readers of *THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT*, the best answer would be: 'Read this book and see for yourself'. But as an encouragement to do so, some outline of the reasons for that interest may be attempted.

To begin with, though it is indeed family history, it is also something more. It is more even than a closely documented account of the passion and death of the Catholic faith in an average English midland county. It can be read and appreciated as both of these things, but it can be understood at a deeper level to be a microcosm of a part of England's story, the story of the life of the spirit, of the still undecided battle for her soul. Now Englishmen are practical and pragmatic people, more swayed by ideas if these are embodied in living people than by theories that remain abstract. Hence we feel better able to approach a problem with sympathy and understanding when we can envisage it in human terms. This is true of the Reformation, when men were divided by a conflict of ideas, principally by two opposed concepts of what kind of Church God had founded. These concepts, however, were not at war in a void. Their actions and reactions have been abstracted by historians from the lives lived at various levels, international, national, family and personal, by multitudes of different people. The actual events, choices and changes which confronted actual people are the real stuff of history, and make points of contact with ourselves who likewise know what it is to struggle in daily life with problems half-understood and situations not of our making. History comes alive when it becomes personal, and that is why biographies and historical novels are so popular.

What the insight of a Benson or a Prescott achieves in bringing seemingly forgotten issues to life by depicting them in a historical novel peopled with convincingly imagined characters, Fr Anstruther achieves by exercising similar imaginative insight upon real men and women whose lives and