

PAPINI CONFESSES CHRIST

By Alice Rohe

THE appearance of a life of Christ as a literary aftermath of the war is not an extraordinary phenomenon. Nor is the fact that this violent protestation of faith comes from Giovanni Papini the seven days' wonder so many would make of it. For in considering the book we have to consider first the man. Few instances of personality projection have been more marked, outside the field of autobiography, than this first important life of Christ to appear since Renan's "The Life of Jesus".

The real power of the book lies in the impression of actual participation in the events. Not only does Papini succeed in suggesting that one is reading the narration of an eye witness. His work becomes the emotional visualization of a devoted and intransigent disciple, embittered by a world which has rejected Christ and which refuses to see the faith as he himself sees it. It is an interesting study in conversion; but, as is often the case with converts, there is much intolerance of those not similarly converted.

An understanding of the book pre-

supposes a knowledge of Papini's early enmity toward Christianity, his unrestrained denial of orthodox religion which brought him even the term "anti-Christ". Considering the abandon with which this Italian genius threw himself into his earlier literary expressions, it is not strange that a vagrant suspicion arises now as to the stability of his present vehement protestation of faith. Papini, remember, is only forty-two.

For those who know little of the disillusion of this tormented soul groping for truth and freedom, the despair over wasted sacrifices which drenched him at the end of the war, his turning toward a faith he once denied loses part of its significance. Papini found peace and truth in Christ, and he is impatient that all others do likewise.

The book of 408 pages is based entirely upon the Gospels. He explains that his is no scientific work, advancing new discoveries. Yet the impassioned style of narration is that of a discoverer eager to reveal his findings for guidance of others. The work is written in scenes rather than in chapters, and not once does the aggressive vigor of the style waver. It is picturesque to the point where colorful word paintings visualize events with heart stirring reality.

In no part of the book does Papini surpass the opening descriptions of the Nativity:

Jesus was born in a stable, a real stable, not the bright, airy portico which Christian painters have created for the Son of David, as if ashamed that their God should have lain down in poverty and dirt. . . . The filthiest place in the world was the first room of the only PURE MAN ever born of woman.

The parable of the prodigal son is one of the finest bits in the book,

giving, against a glowing background of description, the surging thoughts of Papini on fatherhood, on duty, and on life.

Again: "Jesus, like all great souls, loved the country." And throughout the book flashes of simplicity give to the Florentine's effort at relating Christ's teachings to human needs, a unique place in literature. This "Life" is really an expansion of the Gospels, editorialized, philosophized by one of the vital literary forces in Italy today.

Papini is blessed in having his beloved work given to America by Dorothy Canfield Fisher. The rare fortune of being translated by a distinguished writer of finest literary intuitions, who has a perfect knowledge of romance languages, does not often befall a foreign author.

Life of Christ. By Giovanni Papini. Freely translated by Dorothy Canfield Fisher. Harecourt, Brace and Co.