

**Modern Catholic Social Teaching:  
Commentaries and Interpretations**

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*Modern Catholic Social Teaching* is a valuable collection of commentaries on most of the important ecclesiastical documents on social issues since *Rerum Novarum*, but its value is not solely for the reason that the editors had hoped. While there is certainly a great deal of good historical information, exposition, and analysis in the commentaries, the pieces also offer a useful window into the worldview of its editors that, while not purely homogenous, is at least dominated by a self-proclaimed “progressive” perspective, favoring some form of socialism and liberation theology and strongly critiquing the pontificate of John Paul II.

From its beginnings with Pope Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum*, modern Catholic social teaching (CST) has been marked by a dual thrust: a critique of the vicious effects of unfettered capitalism and a rejection of socialism and totalitarianism as the alternative. At times, the magisterium has emphasized the former; at other times, the latter. Predictably, cheerleaders for capitalism have applauded when the pope has emphasized the right to private property, the importance of the market, and the unacceptability of socialism; cheerleaders for socialism have applauded when criticism of the effects of capitalism and the importance of regulation of the economy by the state have been emphasized. The editors of this volume, including Fr. Kevin Himes, Lisa Sowle Cahill, Fr. Charles Curran, Fr. David Hollenbach, and Thomas Shannon, are among those who would cheer the critique of capitalism before they would cheer the condemnation of socialism.

The volume is divided into three parts: four introductory historical essays, fourteen commentaries on individual documents, and three concluding essays on “Reception and the Future of the Tradition.” Each commentary contains an introduction, outline of the document, context, process of formulation, detailed commentary, excursus, reaction to the document, and notes.

When one undertakes a linear reading of the whole volume, one can see the development, in fits and starts, of the essential components of CST, such as those mentioned by John Coleman: “human dignity, solidarity, subsidiarity, social justice, the option for the poor, the common good, justice as including a robust right to participatory voice” (527). Two other important components become clear as well: the active regulation of the economy by the state and socialization—the important, indeed essential role that intermediary cultural, economic, political and international organizations, play in the mediation between the state and the individual and family and in human flourishing and the healthy development of a just society.

Despite some diversity in the commentaries, the underlying editorial narrative runs like this: CST developed in response to the misery of the workers in the wake of industrialization, but it was hampered by its Eurocentricism and an attachment to archaic

forms, such as guilds, the monarchy, the established Church, and a mother-centered home. Only gradually did the papal magisterium free itself from attachment to these social realities, leading to a more global, Third-World centered doctrine and an openness to socialism under the guidance of the saintly John XXIII and the conflicted (and sometimes self-defeating) Paul VI. The progress made during the Vatican II era has been significantly eroded by the pontificate of Pope John Paul II, especially under the influence of the Augustinian Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger and, in the United States, as subverted and coopted by neoconservatives. This volume is an attempt to restore a focus on the genuine core of the teaching.

Given the dominance of the above narrative in the earlier essays and commentaries, one would expect a decidedly negative evaluation of John Paul II's contributions to CST, but, in fact, the treatment of his documents (with the exception of *Familiaris Consortio*) are balanced and positive, beginning with the comments on John Paul II made by Allan Figueroa Deck in his commentary on Pope Paul VI's *Populorum progressio*. The lack of harsh criticism is partially explained by the editors' preference for economic and political documents over familial and cultural, as well as their wrong-headed decision to exclude *Evangelium Vitae* because they did not want "one papal voice dominat[ing] the presentation of the entire modern tradition" (5). The editors seem to lack an appreciation that the contributions of Pope Pius XI, Pope Pius XII, Paul VI, and John Paul II on matters of life, marriage, family, and culture are in fact essential components of an integral Catholic social doctrine. Or perhaps they marginalize these writings because they dissent from the teachings of *Casti Connubi*, *Humanae Vitae*, *Familiaris Consortio*, and *Evangelium Vitae*.

There are three weaknesses in this volume: the assumption that their editorial perspective is the norm among responsible social ethicists; the animus against Pius XII, John Paul II, and Cardinal Ratzinger (Benedict XVI); and a lack of attention to the tensions in theological anthropology that underlie the various interpretations of CST and the Council.

The editors explicitly assert that their understanding of social ethics is in fact the majority opinion: "The authors in this book are part of the broad spectrum of progressive Catholicism that is committed to ongoing renewal of the Church in the spirit of Vatican II" (6). Although diversity of opinion is discussed, its significance is colored by the authors' advocacy for their agenda.

The *bête noir* of the editors, made explicit by Charles Curran, are neoconservatives: "A vast majority of Catholic social ethicists in the United States, however, reject the neoconservative approach" (482). Although Curran may be right that neoconservatives are a minority voice, he is not right in assuming that the remaining majority simply reflect the editors' "broad" socialist/liberationist perspective. It would seem likely that the real majority is a group of diverse theorists who profess to agree with the Church but who disagree with each other and the progressives.

If the editors of this volume want to enter a serious dialogue with neoconservatives and other theorists about the significance of the preferential option for the poor, the priority of the universal destination of earthly goods, and the importance of active regulation of the economy by the state, they must become more humble about certain components of their narrative, such as: (1) their certainty that some form of socialism is the best answer to the ravages of an unchecked free market; (2) the separation of other social principles from the Church's social teaching on marriage, family, culture, and religion; and (3) an overly negative evaluation of the pontificate of John Paul II.

The two weakest presentations are marred by a barely hidden distain for their subjects. John Langan mentions the accusations that Pius XII did not respond to Nazism because he was anti-Semitic in a manner that implies that there might be something to these scurrilous charges. Lisa Sowle Cahill's reading of John Paul II's *Familiaris Consortio* is hampered by her disagreement with John Paul II's "new" feminism and confusion of marital love with the unitive aspect of the marital act. Rather, both the unitive and the procreative aspects of the marital act are informed and coordinated by the overarching and fruitful love between the spouses.

Finally, the approach one takes to issues of social justice is strongly affected by one's theological anthropology. The anthropology of Henri de Lubac has shaped the thought of the last two popes, as can be seen in Patricia Lamoureux's statement that: "the pope expounds his integral humanist vision and manifests the Christocentric structure of his theological anthropology primarily through themes of the mystery of the redemption of Christ (*Redemptor Hominis*) and the normative significance of mercy (*Dives in Misericordia*)" (392). Many of the things that seem problematic in any other anthropological perspective become much clearer in an anthropology based on the Augustinian/Thomist natural desire for the beatific vision and the "communio" approach to human nature. The apparent confusion about whether and how work for justice is a constitutive demand of the gospel can be resolved in light of the necessity of mercy. In fact, love, in the thinking of John Paul II, is the form of all virtues, including justice. This perspective has become the central feature of the pontificate of Benedict XVI, as can be seen in his first encyclical, *Deus caritas est*.

The intent of the editors of this volume was to provide the social doctrine equivalent of the *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, a "standard reference work for the major documents of Catholic Social Teaching" (1). The problem is that the broad consensus about much of biblical scholarship that informs a significant part of the *JBC* is not present in this analysis and interpretation of CST. The editors succeeded in mimicking the *JBC*'s magisterial perspective while at the same time avoiding genuine balance or neutrality. Still, this volume contains enough careful, balanced material that it would be useful for graduate students, scholars, and anyone who has developed enough critical facility to distinguish the careful analysis from editorial perspective.

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