

Faith in Action

Modern Catholic Social Teaching

Commentaries and Interpretations

Kenneth Himes, O.F.M., editor

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This volume, exquisitely edited by Kenneth Himes, O.F.M., is a superb contribution to Catholic social ethics and will undoubtedly serve as a basic text, providing a synthetic statement of the last century of the Catholic social tradition. While its primary audience is the Catholic community, it provides a comprehensive and scholarly introduction and reference for anyone interested in the content, development and influence of Catholic social teaching as found in papal and conciliar texts.

The value of *Modern Catholic Social Teaching* is rooted in its structure, its substantive analysis and in the scholarly stature of the authors Himes has assembled. The work begins with foundational essays, moves to detailed commentaries on magisterial texts from Leo XIII through John Paul II and concludes with an assessment of the reception of this tradition in the United States, along with an essay on the future of the tradition.

The foundational essays provide a detailed introduction to the commentaries on the individual documents. The essays cover biblical, theological, ethical and historical themes, and they give the reader a clear sense of the elements of the Catholic social tradition. In doing so, they necessarily tell different stories. The biblical survey by John R. Donahue, S.J., lays stress on the recent use of biblical resources in the encyclical tradition. Stephen J. Pope skillfully engages the long and complex history of the natural law tradition within and beyond Catholic scholarship and teaching.

The 14 commentaries are held together by a common analytical structure. Each writer tries to set the specific document under review in its secular and ecclesial context and then provides both close analysis of the text as well as evaluation of its significance. Themes that are addressed in the foundational essays surface again in the commentaries.

The essays by Charles Curran and Todd Whitmore invoke the category of reception to assess the impact of social teaching in the United States. Both essays provide a synthetic historical narrative of the U.S. bishops' social teaching (Curran on social-economic issues, Whitmore on war and peace) along with a snapshot of contemporary debates among U.S. scholars on these topics. John Coleman, S.J., brings the volume to a close with a wide-ranging historical-analytical perspective on the continuing vitality of Catholic social thought and the challenges it faces.

In this limited space it is not possible to engage or do full justice to the 14 commentaries on the magisterial texts. I can only highlight basic themes that run through the last century of social teaching and continue to influence contemporary scholarship. Not all of the essays in this volume deal explicitly with the following themes, but they touch on most of them.

Categories and Discourse. Any survey of Catholic social teaching yields the conclusion that the dominant discourse and analytical categories have been drawn from the philosophical tradition of natural law. Several essays highlight the internal complexity and pluralism of that tradition itself, but the broad generalization about its predominance is consensually acknowledged. Equally significant, however, is the recognition that beginning with the Second Vatican Council the social tradition incorporated a more explicitly biblical-theological mode of discourse. Pope John Paul II's social teaching moves across both modes of discourse, depending on his topic and audience. In the United States these two sources have shaped a continuing discussion of the potential and role of each style of social teaching. The pluralism of American culture requires the ability to address multiple audiences in an accessible style of analysis across issues as different as stem cell research and nuclear nonproliferation. At the same time, the emergence of vigorously religious voices in the public debate opens the door to more explicitly theological arguments in our

seemingly secular but still religiously grounded nation.

The Role of Vatican II. The council clearly made specific contributions to the social tradition in its teaching on religious freedom, war and peace and marriage and the family. Its role in all these questions is reflected in many of the commentaries. But the dominant impact of Vatican II was the ecclesiological foundation it has provided for social ministry. Both Richard Gaillardetz's foundational essay and the commentary by David Hollenbach, S.J., on *Gaudium et Spes* highlight this critically important development in the social tradition.

The significance of the conciliar move is twofold: it solidly established the social ministry of the church at the core of its essentially religious ministry, and it provided a distinctly positive posture from which the church should engage the world. Both of these contributions require further development—and they lead to another theme in this volume, the role of the local church as a source of social teaching.

The Impact of John Paul II. This is a topic that many authors engage, but it requires further assessment than this already complex volume was able to expand upon. From his deep involvement with *Dignitatis Humanae* and *Gaudium et Spes* at Vatican II to his powerful secular impact through word and deed, the late pope was not simply one more contributor to a long tradition. His teaching on human rights, on the market economy and globalization and on war and peace in many ways will frame the future debate and development of the social tradition. Such development will inevitably be needed. *Modern Catholic Social Teaching* will help many to enter the discussion. It has no peer.

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