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Review of Essential Catholic Social Thought

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***Essential Catholic Social Thought*. Bernard V. Brady. Second edition. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017. ISBN 978-1-62698-244-4. Pp. xxii+378. Paperback. \$44 US.**

Bernard V. Brady titles his textbook *Essential Catholic Social Thought* to indicate that his focus extends beyond documents of the Church's magisterium, usually designated "Catholic social teaching" (CST), but his emphasis is on those documents nonetheless. I will comment on this book from my perspective as a teacher for twenty years of a course called "Catholic Social Teaching." My course is addressed to upper-level undergraduates in a Catholic university and specifically to those majoring in international studies (though it is open to others), but I hope these comments will be helpful to anyone who is considering Brady's book for teaching or learning Catholic social thought. Currently I use the full texts or excerpts from the texts of the official documents reprinted in O'Brien and Shannon's *Catholic Social Thought* (2016), supplemented by chapters from Daniel Groody's *Globalization, Spirituality, and Justice* (2015).

Essential Catholic Social Thought comprises eleven chapters. The first two are introductory and, to my mind, cluttered with lists. Chapter one begins with a list of CST documents and follows with the U.S. Bishops' seven themes of Catholic social teaching, supplemented by a different set of principles from the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. It proceeds to survey Ernst Troeltsch's church-sect distinction, different types of moral reasoning, significant contributors to the tradition of Catholic social thought from St. Patrick to the present, and various sources of Catholic social thought, such as liturgy. It concludes with a list of "methodological guidelines" from biblical morality, which recurs as an analytic and comparative framework at the end of the "questions for consideration" after each of the nine document-based chapters. The second chapter considers the themes of personalism and the common good, the see-judge-act method, and three "spheres of responding to . . . the social demands of Christian discipleship"—works of mercy and justice, advocacy, analysis (41)—and proceeds to list organizations that develop and implement Catholic social thought. It concludes with "five basic dimensions of moral reflection" (52). I would not spend much class time on these chapters before moving to the documents, but they contain material that can be introduced along the way as background to subsequent chapters.

Chapters three through eleven focus on official documents, in loosely chronological order. There is, unfortunately, no treatment of the biblical background of CST. Chapter three features *Rerum Novarum* (1891) of Pope Leo XIII, which Brady prefaces with a helpful overview of Thomas Aquinas on justice, law, and mercy. It continues with a brief treatment of *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), by Pope Pius XI, and concludes with Fr. John A. Ryan's *A Living Wage* (1906). Chapter four centers on *Pacem in Terris* (1963), by Pope John XXIII, but ranges widely. Titled "Personalism and Human Rights," it begins with Jacques Maritain, proceeds through the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and the work of John Courtney Murray before arriving at *Pacem in Terris*, and concludes with the Catholic Worker movement. For my purposes, the focus on human rights, though important, is too limiting; it concentrates on Part I of *Pacem in Terris* and pays too little emphasis to the treatments of civic and international order in Parts II to IV, which are essential to the framework of Pope John's approach to "peace on earth."

Chapter five considers the Second Vatican Council, especially Part I of *Gaudium et Spes* (1965). It next treats Vatican II's documents on non-Christian religions and religious freedom and Pope

Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio*, "The Development of Peoples" (1967), which introduced the concept of "integral human development" to CST. Catholic thought on international development was promptly challenged, and ultimately supplemented, by an emphasis on liberation originating in Latin America, and Brady's sixth chapter, one of the most helpful (and heartfelt) in the book, treats liberation theology in both its ecclesial and social contexts. He begins with Paul VI's *Octogesima Adveniens* (1971), with its call to action on the local level, and then backtracks to the 1968 Medellín conference of Latin American Bishops and to the violence and repression in Latin America at the time. After a brief consideration of Gustavo Gutiérrez's *A Theology of Liberation* (1971), he focuses on St. Oscar Romero (1917-80), quoting from his pastoral letters and sermons. The Synod of Bishops' *Justice in the World* (1971), strongly influenced by liberation theology, follows, and the chapter ends with selections from *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975), by Paul VI, on the connection between evangelization and liberation.

Chapters seven and eight feature the thought of Pope John Paul II. The first of these covers *Laborem Exercens* (1981) and *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987), on human work and global solidarity respectively. It concludes with a selection from *Strangers No Longer, Together on the Journey of Hope* (2003), the U.S. and Mexican Bishops' pastoral letter on migration, helpful for any class on CST in the present political climate. Chapter eight begins with *Centesimus Annus* (1991), concentrating on its treatment of capitalism, and then jumps to racism, a topic not mentioned in *Centesimus Annus*. Though the shift is abrupt, I welcome the inclusion of a section on racism, which receives too little treatment in courses and textbooks on CST because it is not the subject of any major church document. Brady helps fill the gap with quotations from lesser church documents, supplemented by the insights of theologians, especially Bryan Massingale. Brady concludes the chapter by returning to John Paul II, on capital punishment, and discussing the consistent ethic of life of Cardinal Joseph Bernardin.

Chapter nine, on war and peace, would be a very valuable addition to my course. Peacemaking or peacebuilding is absent from the bishops' list of themes of CST and likewise from the list in Groody's book (2015, 108-120). O'Brien and Shannon have dropped the bishops' *The Challenge of Peace* (1983) from the current edition of their anthology. Brady covers the traditional just-war theory and, briefly, Christian pacifism, but he rightly focuses on the emerging theme of peacebuilding, making good use of a manual from Caritas Internationalis. He concludes with some quotations from Pope Francis on peacebuilding and what Francis calls "people-building."

This is the second edition of Brady's book. The major changes from the first edition (2008) are in the last two chapters. Chapter ten, "A Catholic Environmental Ethic," centers on Pope Francis's *Laudato Si'* (2015). Chapter eleven, titled "Misericordia," referring to both divine and human mercy, intends to emphasize the affective rather than intellectual side of the Catholic response to social injustice and human suffering. It begins with John Paul II's *Dives in Misericordia* (1980) and continues with Pope Benedict XVI's *Deus Caritas Est* (2005) and *Caritas in Veritate* (2009), concluding with a section from Francis's *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013) on the special place of the poor. I see Brady's point, but the chapter seems to lack focus. I think I'd have preferred a chapter on the modern global economy, with an emphasis on *Caritas in Veritate*. (Another—very welcome—change in the new edition is that the type font of the abridged church documents is considerably more readable.)

No document (except very short ones, such as the “Assisi Decalogue for Peace”) is included in this book in full, nor are substantial verbatim excerpts offered. Instead the documents are “edited and abridged,” often drastically. *Caritas in Veritate*, for instance, shrinks from sixty-one pages in O’Brien and Shannon to eleven here. The “abridgements” are sometimes more like paraphrases in the service of brevity and clarity. Most references to previous documents are omitted (and quotations from such documents are usually not identified as quotations). Material considered dated is mostly excised. In general the abridgements do not distort the main thrust of the texts, but nuances are lost. There is, for instance, considerable difference between Pope Francis’s description of the “dominant technocratic paradigm” as involving “a subject, who, using logical and rational procedures, progressively approaches and gains control over an external object” (*Laudato Si’* no. 106), and Brady’s “the concept of rational people controlling and manipulating things and nature” (318). We are all, unremarkably, rational people (in the relevant sense), whereas “rational procedures” joins Francis to the contemporary philosophical critique of “instrumental reason.” The parts of *Laudato Si’* that connect Francis’s teaching to that of his predecessors, to episcopal conferences, and to representatives of other faiths are dropped, thus losing some important historical, ecclesiological, and ecumenical implications. Most of Francis’s descriptions of environmental destruction are likewise excluded, perhaps because they are seen as overly time-bound. Sometimes arguments in the documents are reduced to their conclusions, and at other times themes I would want to stress are shrunk almost to disappearance. For instance, Benedict XVI’s argument for a zone of gratuitousness in economic life, beyond the “logic of the market” and the “logic of the state,” gets only a sentence.

Would I use this text? The breadth of coverage and especially the inclusion of sections on Thomas Aquinas, Latin American thought, migration, racism, and peacebuilding make it an appealing choice. I would never use it for graduate students, though, since they need the training in textual interpretation and the historical and theological depth that must come from engagement with the original texts. What about undergraduates, then, who are often brought only with difficulty to read more than what is in the teacher’s study guides and PowerPoints? Brady’s abridgements and simplifications might work as an avenue for them to become acquainted with the texts. But they might frustrate the better students—and probably all of my students would soon become annoyed as I haul out my O’Brien and Shannon and begin, “Now let’s see what the text really says.”

References

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