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Review of Counsels of Imperfection: Thinking Through Catholic Social Teaching

Maria Power

Las Casas Institute for Social Justice, University of Oxford

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***Counsels of Imperfection: Thinking Through Catholic Social Teaching.* Edward Hadas. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2021, paper, \$34.95, ISBN: 9780813233314**

Maria Power
Senior Research Fellow in Human Dignity
Las Casas Institute for Social Justice, Blackfriars Hall, University of Oxford

I must admit that when I heard that yet another book was going to be published on the topic of Catholic Social Teaching, I felt dismay. My bookcase is filled with well-thumbed monographs on the topic and in the past year alone, I've reviewed two rather hefty tomes on the subject, neither of which really conveyed what lies at the heart of the Catholic Church's teachings on social justice: joy and love. Fortunately, this book has proven my reaction to be wrong: we do need another book on Catholic Social Teaching, specifically we need *this* book on Catholic Social Teaching.

This book is written by someone with a deep love for the Catholic Church, and joy in its traditions, and who understands the role that the laity need to play in advancing Catholic Social Teaching. As the title of the book so elegantly suggests, Catholic Social Teaching is constantly evolving and a set of teachings that we, as Catholics, need to engage with as an essential element of our faith. The approach taken by Hadas is not simple: 'trying to show Catholics how the teaching looks to outsiders and to show outsiders how the teaching looks to Catholics' (p. 6). In other words, it seems that this book is trying to be all things to all readers. As a Catholic academic researching and writing on Christian ethics in context, I read the purpose of the book differently. Instead of it being a 'guide to Catholic Social Teaching' for outsiders and insiders alike, I concluded that it was a very good exploration of the history of this element of the Catholic Church's teaching which showed how the Church negotiates (or reacts against) the fast-changing nature of society, and how it deals with the problem of sin that besets humanity. By demonstrating that the Catholic Church, contrary to popular belief, does indeed evolve, and by confronting the role of sin in creating the social structures that destroy people's lives, Hadas contributes something new to the debate. A debate which is often poisoned by the toxicity of the Catholic culture wars. And while the persona presented by Hadas in this book is that of a traditionalist, his tone suggests a deep appreciation for the work of what could be described as more radical Catholics in challenging the Church to engage with social justice more fully and indeed to change its mind.

I do not agree (for that read strongly disagree) with some of his arguments, especially regarding the role of women in society and the nature of the vocation to singleness (St Paul after all was a single man). I do, nonetheless, recognise and appreciate the attempt to place Catholic Social Teaching within a wider context than the social justice paradigm which often results in its dismissal by those Catholics of a more conservative persuasion. The final two chapters therefore provide a starting point in his exploration of these topics, rather than the mature and nuanced thinking displayed in chapters 1 to 8.

So, to return to my original point: why do we need *this* book on Catholic Social Teaching? The following reasons spring to mind: First, Hadas's background as a journalist means that he knows how to write persuasive yet enjoyable prose. The importance of this cannot be underestimated, especially in a book that has the potential to serve as an introduction to the topic.

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Second, his engagement with scripture provides the context for Catholic Social Teaching that is so often missing in other books on the topic. Finally, Hadas successfully steers a path between the two wings of Catholicism who are currently engaged in a culture war with one another, and succeeds in demonstrating the importance of the Church's social teaching for the entire Church. In the current climate of vigorous disagreement within the Church, this is a rarity. Hadas is to be commended for his skill in achieving this. *Counsels of Imperfection* therefore is a book that will have a long shelf life. It is one which, with caveats about chapters 9 and 10 attached, I will be recommending enthusiastically to anyone who asks me for a good book introducing them to Catholic Social Teaching.