

## *Building the Free Society: Democracy, Capitalism, and Catholic Social Teaching*

George Weigel and Robert Royal, eds.

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A colleague of mine, when asked the cause of his recent return to the practice of Judaism, answered (in all seriousness) "the fall of communism." Great events spark a reevaluation of worldviews, and of moral judgments based upon those worldviews. The recent fall of European communism was just such an event; in its wake, many social thinkers are taking another look at their judgments about the political and economic orders. This book is a thought-provoking rereading and reevaluation of modern Catholic Social Teaching (CST) in light of these recent events.

The book is a collection of essays on 11 documents spanning 100 years of CST, from proponents of democratic capitalism. The theme of the collection is CST's awakening to the virtues of democratic capitalism. One hundred years ago, the Catholic Church rejected socialism and simultaneously declared itself deeply suspicious of liberal society. Throughout the twentieth century, CST has enunciated the principles of a humane society (solidarity, subsidiarity, freedom of religion, freedom of enterprise) amid its continuing suspicion of liberal institutions, which (according to the authors) best embody those principles. More recently, and particularly in light of the 1991 encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, CST appears to have cautiously embraced what John Paul II calls the "free economy." The criticisms of market capitalism are now less forceful, and focus more on materialism than on capitalist exploitation.

The authors are as a group delighted by the turn CST has taken. They clearly hope and expect that CST's cautious embrace will develop into a love affair with free market capitalism. To further this agenda, they interpret much of the history of CST in light of *Centesimus Annus* and the fall of

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communism. Indeed, some of the authors were so eager to write about *Centesimus Annus* that they wrote relatively little about the document assigned to them. The articles may be divided into two camps: those about encyclicals other than *Centesimus Annus* and those about *Centesimus Annus*.

The articles in the first group are more interesting than the second. The first article, by William Murphy, is about *Rerum Novarum* (issued by Leo XIII in 1891) and the nineteenth century roots of CST. *Rerum Novarum*, even after 100 years, is the most engaging and thought-provoking of the papal encyclicals (*Laborem Exercens* and *Centesimus Annus* run a close second and third). The standards for Christian social action set by *Rerum Novarum* have endured for 100 years—John Paul II bases *Centesimus Annus* on a rereading of Leo XIII's work.

Murphy begins by tracing formal Catholic teaching on modern social issues to the middle of the 19th century, to the writings of Bishop von Ketteler of Mainz. Ketteler responded to the social unrest of 1848 with reflections on social order that both attacked the prevailing ideologies of the day and evaluated the economy in the light of the Gospel. The pastoral engagement of Ketteler (and others) set the stage for further involvement by the Church in social and economic controversies.

*Rerum Novarum* was Leo XIII's response to growth of Catholic labor unions, and the attraction of many of the faithful to socialism. In it he rejects the abolition of private property, which would harm the worker and leave him at the mercy of the modern state. Leo wrote that it was lawful to join a union, but embedded his endorsement in a lengthy discussion of the rights and responsibilities of both workers and owners of capital. He rejected the notion of inherent class conflict as contrary to the gospel. In this Leo XIII began the Church's traditional teaching that social conflict "... can be resolved only in a peace built on the foundation of justice" (p. 25).

In the next essay, on *Quadragesimo Anno*, Thomas Kohler describes its two

major themes, subsidiarity and solidarism (or corporatism). Subsidiarity defines "...the properly delimited role of major institutions like the state, and emphasizes the importance of intermediate (or subsidiary) groups and associations in the social order" (p. 32). Subsidiarity has been the first line of the Catholic defense of the individual from the state ever since. Solidarism (not to be confused with "solidarity") was an attempt to find a "third way" between socialism and liberalism, and suggested "... the establishment of free, voluntary, and self-governing organizations composed of all the members and professions and occupations represented in an economy" (p. 37). The concept of solidarism has not survived the test of time, and controversy surrounding it led to its "quiet and seemly death" and disappearance from later CST.

George Weigel, in his essay on *Pacem in Terris*, uses the encyclical to carefully spell out the necessity and the limits of what he calls "Christian realism." *Pacem in Terris*, written by John XXIII, and issued on the heels of the Cuban missile crisis, appealed for an end to the arms race, but more importantly asserted that "'human rights,' properly understood, were not benefices granted by government. On the contrary, the legitimacy of government was determined in part by a government's recognition that it was accountable to norms that transcended (and stood in judgment on) its own sovereign will" (p. 71).

*Pacem in Terris's* Christian defense of human rights, and call for international bodies to monitor and protect them, was criticized by Christian realists, who saw little hope of building an international moral and political consensus for human rights. Such a realism is a component of prudence, but taken too far can lead to "a prematurely foreshortened view of the possible." "The possible" was the human rights revolution of the 70s, which undermined the legitimacy of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes worldwide. According to Weigel, "*Pacem in Terris* should also be remembered as a document that correctly anticipated the crack-up of the Marxist-

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Leninist project, and precisely along the fault-lines through which the 1989 earthquake traveled" (p. 81). Weigel does not surrender his own realism, however, raising doubts at the end of the article about the possibility of an international authority on human rights.

*Gaudium et Spes* (the pastoral constitution of the church, issued by Vatican II), *Dignitatis Humanae*, and *Octagesima Adveniens* receive plaudits from their respective reviewers (Mary Eberstat, Kenneth Grasso, and James Finn) for bold clarity. *Gaudium et Spes*, in spelling out the Church's ministry of truth to the modern world's moral confusion, *Dignitatis Humanae*, in rethinking church-state relations in light of totalitarianism and the American experiment in democracy, and *Octagesima Adveniens*, in outlining the proper uses (and potential abuses) of political power, present clear general principles by which Christians can evaluate the social and political order, and act within them. All three writers quibble with the details of the encyclicals' analyses, but acknowledge and emphasize the power of the general principles.

The six articles listed above, plus the thoughtful review of *Centesimus Annus* by George Weigel, are worth the price of the book. The other four essays are disappointing. Each spends more time celebrating *Centesimus Annus* than looking for enduring insight in its topic encyclical. For example, in his review of *Mater et Magistra* (an encyclical of John XXIII), Robert Sirico refers to the writings of John Paul II a dozen times in 17 pages. His theme appears to be that John Paul II has cor-

rected what John XXIII began wrongly. This is, of course, a defensible thesis; John XXIII, and Paul VI and John Paul II after him, put more faith in the modern state as a solver of social problems than either Sirico or I can countenance. Nevertheless, I would like to see the contributions of John XXIII (in calling for more widespread ownership of private property, for example) emphasized. The same could be said for the essays on *Populorum Progressio*, and most disappointingly, *Laborem Exercens* and *Solicitudo Rei Socialis*. The authors never quite get to the encyclicals themselves.

This collection has something for everyone—some history (especially of the early encyclicals), some exposition of papal documents, and lots of intelligent reflection on the Christian perspective on democracy and free markets. The reader who is looking for an introduction to CST should be aware, however, that this collection is further to the right than CST has yet traveled. CST may never embrace free markets as fully as the authors would like.

For the Christian economist who wants to explore the riches of CST, the documents themselves are the only appropriate starting point. Every Christian economist should read *Rerum Novarum*, *Laborem Exercens*, and *Centesimus Annus*, at least (the Daughters of St. Paul sell each for about a dollar—the best deal in bookdom). They are highly readable and thought-provoking. After reading some of the encyclicals, you will be better equipped to judge (and appreciate, I trust) the reflections of this collection of essays. ■