



Andrew M. Yuengert, *Catholic Social Teaching in Practice: Exploring Practical Wisdom and the Virtues Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), xvii + 334, ISBN 978-1009261470. £85

There is a phrase often heard in Catholic Christian circles that Catholic Social Teaching (CST) is ‘the Church’s best kept secret’. Indeed, there is even a book by that name by Edward P. DeBerri and James E. Hug (*Catholic Social Teaching: Our Best Kept Secret*, Orbis, 2003). The implication is that if only the Catholic faithful realised the treasure at the heart of their faith which is the Church’s teaching on how society should be ordered to reflect Jesus’ command that we love each other, they could mine into this wisdom and use the treasures they uncover in working to conform our society in all its social, economic, and environmental diversity to the will of God. Andrew M. Yuengert’s book makes a very valuable contribution to this subject by exploring CST through a Thomistic and neo-Aristotelian perspective which emphasises the importance of practical wisdom and the virtues.

Chapter 1 of Yuengert’s book provides a valuable summary of CST’s development and key principles, which will be useful for both the reader unfamiliar with CST, and a welcome refresher for those who know a little. The author poses important questions regarding the mechanism by which CST can be translated into concrete action. And it is here in Chapter 1 that the author raises the subject of practical wisdom (PW), a term he favours over the more classical *prudentia* or ‘prudence’ (as it is named in CST) lamenting the way it is overlooked given its (according to Yuengert) vital role in the whole CST enterprise. Although the author explores PW at length in Chapter II, he does usefully summarise its meaning here in traditional terms: ‘The lay faithful should act according to the dictates of prudence [practical wisdom], the virtue that makes it possible to discern the true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means for achieving it’ (*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 2004, para. 547). It is at this early stage that the author airs his concerns: ‘We cannot’, he writes, ‘take the presence of this virtue in the laity for granted’ (p. 6); ‘the academic literature [...] often neglects the virtues that realize the principles in practice’ (p. 8); and a situation has been arrived at whereby ‘the exercise of practical wisdom is important but *separable* from the development of principle and the motivation to act’ (p. 10). This separability is reinforced, according to Yuengert, by trends in both the



social sciences (dialogue partners for CST) which favour abstract analysis of ‘the economy’ or ‘political system’ without reference to virtue, and by a disciplinary gap between the virtues at the heart of fundamental moral theology and Catholic social ethics. Though CST does try to bridge these divides ‘by promoting a personalist social theory that urges respect among policymakers for the operations of first-person virtues at the individual and community levels’ (p. 14), it struggles to achieve this.

Chapter 2 discusses the virtues, and particularly PW, in both the Thomistic tradition and in neo-Aristotelian philosophy where they play an important role. For the author, PW is of paramount importance for ‘a life well led’ (p. 40). It ‘connects reason and motivation’ (p. 40), and even though its scope is broad, ‘it deliberates and acts in a narrow, concrete arena – in particular circumstances here and now’ (p. 40). For Yuengert then, it is concerning that Church documents rarely give PW its rightful place, tending instead to ‘consign the analysis of practical wisdom and the principles of CST to separate theological disciplines: practical wisdom to moral theology and CST to social ethics’ (p. 31). For the author, this is unfortunate as PW is then sidelined. Yuengert’s central argument, by contrast, is that PW should appear more explicitly in all explorations of CST and that if this could be achieved, we could ‘gain a deeper understanding of CST’s principles, perceive more clearly the challenges of the Church’s dialogue with social science, and harness CST more energetically toward practical social reform’ (p. 32). The author then explores the modern alternative to PW, namely ‘technical reason’, which he believes would be favoured by those who find PW ‘fuzzy’ and ‘imperfect’ (p. 45) as a method for decision-making. Society favours technical methods since they lead to material success, but far from ignoring them, PW ‘places technique in proper context as a valuable tool whose abstract insights ought to inform (but not replace) practical wisdom’ (p. 48). For the author, it is the challenge of ‘contingency’ that is at the heart of the difference between PW and technique: ‘If there were no contingency, there would be no need for practical wisdom [because] technical models of decision-making would be sufficient’ (p. 50).

Chapter 3 gives an account of the role of the virtues and of PW in a variety of the Church’s CST documents, but the author observes that they are not accorded the central importance they deserve. This is because of the implicit rather than explicit role they play, and because of a lack of consistency in translation. He believes that we can more fully understand

CST when PW is explicit, but, he writes, ‘practical wisdom is implicit in CST in the sense that CST invokes it, but leaves its full exposition to another discipline – to moral theology’ (pp. 66–67). The problem with their implicit, rather than explicit, expression is that ‘that which is implicit is often overlooked’ (p. 74). He raises a further complexity, namely the use of language in the CST documents where terms are translated or defined imprecisely. For example, PW is referred to as ‘prudence’ in CST documents which is confusing since ‘prudence’ can be understood ‘as scheming self-interest, moral compromise, or cowardly caution that distort the classical meaning of the virtue’ (p. 69). To add further confusion, in one of the key documents of CST (the social encyclical of Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*), ‘*prudencia*’ in its various forms is not translated as prudence, or prudent, or prudently, but rather as ‘wise, wisely, and wisest’ (p. 92).

Chapter 4 engages with the practical role of PW and the virtues in the daily life of the believer who operates at both the ‘macro’ and the ‘micro’ levels of the Church’s life. The author writes: ‘the believer works on a *micro* level: among friends, colleagues, and family [...] at the same time, the believer works on a *macro* level: supporting and participating in the Church’s corporate evangelisation’ (p. 102). CST links the two through ‘personalism in which practical wisdom and the virtues are more explicit’, (p. 106). For Yuengert, this is vital to avoid a situation whereby ‘the concept of human dignity loses its connection to true freedom and its communal context’ (p. 106). In terms of the ‘macro’ level, Yuengert critiques modern social science models and methods for their tendency to see society as a collection of ‘abstract reified structures (markets, norms, and social imaginaries)’ (p. 104), which have their place of course, but which can lead to a distorted view of the nature of society and which therefore ‘need the corrective of CST’s personalism’ (p. 105).

Chapter 5 concerns the manner in which lay people are formed in the knowledge and practice of CST, which is less of an intellectual and more of a practical pursuit perfected in community and ‘in the company of others who are striving to become practically wise in a shared project’ (p. 142). The communal locations in which formation in CST take place include the family, Catholic schools, and other lay associations, though individually, ‘each person is called to apostolate’ (p. 147). The formation of the faithful in the principles of CST involves much more than the teaching of principles. As the author points out, the documents of CST emphasise that

formation of the laity in the principles of CST has as its end not mere knowledge, but ‘knowledge integrated with commitment and practical ability, inspired by charity towards action’ (p. 152).

The author is an economist, and in Chapters 6 and 7, he moves to that familiar ground where he explores the relationship between CST and the social sciences. The author writes of the ‘mismatch’ between CST and economics rooted in ‘what CST wants from economics and, on the other hand, what economists think CST needs and what economists are willing to provide’ (p. 181). Yuengert does however seek to imagine dialogue between the two, though the fundamental mutual suspicion arises from differences that are fundamental, namely that contemporary debate between the disciplines rejects PW, and that, with specific reference to economics, ‘CST views economics as a valued but junior partner in the Church’s “mission of truth” [and] for its part, economics recognises no account of reality or morality that might unify and reconcile the insights of economics with those of the other social sciences’ (p. 215). The author asks himself: ‘How can we take advantage of the real insights of economics and at the same time exercise appropriate scepticism of conclusions based on its incomplete account of human agency and the virtues?’ (p. 220). The author proposes a range of ‘rules’ of engagement, including the suggestion that economists ‘be aware of their blind spots [...] that proposed policies must leave ample room for, and embody a respect for, the virtues’ (p. 252).

Chapter 8 focuses on the political disagreements that continue between bishops and the laity of the Church with regard to CST. The Second Vatican Council supported a vision whereby the laity develop expertise in secular fields and to ‘see that the divine law is inscribed in the life of the earthly city’ (p. 253). However, the Church has a teaching authority which it exercises at both the practical level where concrete action is proposed, and also at the abstract level. Therefore, ‘an inescapable ecclesiological tension’ can arise (p. 256). For Yuengert, these disagreements can have their origins in how the problem is characterised and the way the ends are discerned, the ways in which those ends are pursued, and in the execution of the action itself. As in the case of the dialogue between CST and economics, the author seeks a place of dialogue in the disagreements that can arise between bishops and the laity which is to be found ‘somewhere between unquestioning acceptance and casual dismissal’ (p. 283). Careful examination of conscience is required by all, and for the bishop, engaging



the laity in discussion ‘can foster the sort of dialogue regularly called for in CST’ (p. 291).

The final chapter restates the book’s whole purpose, namely, to provide ‘a prudential audit of CST’ (p. 297). The key insights are summarised and the reader is reminded that despite the detailed analysis of the role of the virtues, the book is written with the everyday person in mind who has decisions to make. Yuengert writes: ‘When one makes a decision, it makes sense to analyse its specifics: the goals one is pursuing, the alternative options, what we know about the consequences of alternative courses of action, and the risks’ (p. 299).

This book by Andrew Yuengert will most likely be of great interest to anyone who is seeking to apply a more critical eye to the way in which social, political, and cultural questions of our time are discussed and debated. While a degree of familiarity with the ‘virtues’ and their role in bringing about social reform would be helpful, the author does provide a theological and philosophical ‘refresher course’ which will be welcomed by the ‘lay reader’. For Catholic Christians specifically, the book provides both a useful summary of the development of CST, and a reminder of the rich contribution the Church continues to make to the socio-political order. Nor does the author seek to hide his specifically Catholic denominational credentials, reminding the Catholic reader that ‘a great strength of the church is her comprehensive vision of the good [...] a supreme gift, preserved through the centuries in many circumstances, amid many trials’ (p. 177). The book also represents a challenge to Catholic Christians who are reminded that ‘the process of gaining practical wisdom is more like apprenticeship than classroom learning’ (pp. 301–302). Catholics are reminded too of the need to be open to the world and to wherever truth may be found, echoing the words of the late Pope Benedict XVI: ‘Open to the truth, from whichever branch of knowledge it comes, the Church’s social doctrine receives it, assembles into a unity the fragments in which it is often found, and mediates it within the constantly changing life-patterns of the society of peoples and nations’ (*Caritas in Veritate* 2009, para. 9).

There are stylistic and structural features of the book too which will be appreciated by the reader. For example, the ending of chapters with useful summaries of what has been said and what is to come in the following chapter means readers can keep track of the discussion. All in all, this book is well worth both the time needed to digest the many important insights it



Reviews

offers, and the openness needed to accept the challenge of rediscovering the virtue of PW as essential for living the moral life.

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