

Anna Rowlands, *Towards a Politics of Communion: Catholic Social Teaching in Dark Times*

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Towards a Politics of Communion sets a new standard for scholarship on Catholic social teaching. In it, British theologian Anna Rowlands aims to offer ‘an orientation to the tradition, a detailed account of some of its core principles and an account of how these principles relate to, or illuminate, some of the key social challenges today’ (p. 11). She does so by bringing the social canon of the magisterium into conversation with its theological antecedents and expositors and with local and global histories that form the backdrop of its development. The result is a guide to Catholic social teaching that is expansively researched and refreshingly current (chapters include examples from Pope Francis’ pandemic catechesis and *Fratelli tutti*, among other recent sources). But perhaps its greatest achievement is its depth, which gives way to a surprising novelty. As I read, I felt as though I was encountering this ostensibly familiar tradition for the first time.

After a chapter tracing the development of modern Catholic social teaching since *Rerum novarum* (1891), Rowlands focuses three chapters on the notion of human dignity, first as a theological and philosophical concept within the Catholic tradition and subsequently in its relationship to contemporary questions of migration and social and structural sin. The next triad of chapters offers a sophisticated philosophical, theological, historical and magisterial unpacking of the contested notion of the common good. Chapter 8, ‘The Body Politic: Political Community in the Social Encyclicals’, which traces modern Catholicism’s relationship to liberal democratic thought, could easily stand on its own. Deeply clarifying chapters on the principles of subsidiarity, solidarity (a highlight of the book) and the universal destination of goods round out the core of the work. Rowlands concludes the book with a reflection on the parable of the Good Samaritan, with help from Ivan Illich, Karl Barth, Martin Luther King, Jr., Simone Weil and Pope Francis. ‘What Christianity renders is not a new general code, or a better set of rules’, she contends, ‘but rather the revelation of an action in time that we are called to become a living part of ... [W]e are offered a different language of freedom: a communion established through receptivity, participation and reciprocal exchange’ (p. 298).

Towards a Politics of Communion is distinctive in a number of ways. Rowlands frames the work as a response to Hannah Arendt’s pessimism about the possibility that Christian (and specifically Catholic) social and political thought could meaningfully shape public life in a pluralistic context. Taking to heart Arendt’s critique – particularly the risk of centring a virtue as nebulous as love as the basis for shared political life – Rowlands pursues the foundations of a meaningful social Catholicism. This framing discloses one of the book’s primary strengths, which is its orientation toward probing exploration rather than heavy-handed argumentation. Not only does this approach offer readers a capacious understanding of Catholic social teaching, it also models an

approach to theological inquiry that is at once generous to its sources, critical in its analysis and nuanced in its conclusions.

Another strength of the work is that, rather than forcing a hermeneutic of continuity, Rowlands presents Catholic social teaching not as a unitary thread but as a varied tapestry marked by historical shifts, competing interests, and unfinished thoughts. The result is fine-grained, sensitively calibrated analysis. The chapter on forced migration offers one of many examples. Despite the prevalence of reflection on the dignity of migrants, Rowlands concludes, the tradition presently lacks a ‘framework of thinking about migrants as not merely a threat, burden or dependent suffering victims but as interdependent moral agents with citizens, all seeking particular kinds of goods’ (p. 91). Rowlands approaches other pillars of the lexicon of Catholic social teaching – human dignity, the common good, subsidiarity, and the universal destination of goods – with similar nuance. Each of these terms, she demonstrates, suffers at once from overuse and underdevelopment. In this sense, the book both chastens and illuminates. It is a testament to its quality that I came away somehow more attuned to Catholic social teaching’s instability and yet more convinced than ever of its potential to shape meaningful public interventions in a fractured world.

Some may take issue with Rowlands’ use of communion as the *telos* of political life within Catholic social teaching. I myself have written critically about magisterial and theological attempts to ameliorate racial, social and political division through often-benign, quixotic rhetorics of communion and unity in diversity. Rowlands acknowledges the ‘not unproblematic’ (p. 9) nature of communion but embraces its vision of deep relationality as a heuristic for describing the horizon of the Christian life. In this, she also recalls Arendt who, she notes, observed in Christianity’s commitment to a companionship-based vision of the common good the limits of its political usefulness. For Rowlands, then, communion is not an ideologically inflected ecclesiological watchword but an imperfect way of signifying the collective political and social commitments of the Christian life. No word in the book’s title does more work than ‘towards’, which Rowlands invokes to denote the fragmentary and aspirational but sincere vision of the common good – a vision, she writes, that we ‘fail towards’.

The ‘dark times’ in the book’s subtitle do not refer specifically to the ongoing global pandemic nor to any one of the other myriad crises that mark the present. It is rather a nod to Arendt’s 1968 work *Men in Dark Times*, with which Rowlands foregrounds the book’s introduction. Where, Arendt (and Rowlands) wonders, might we seek resources that illuminate the conditions of the present and, in so doing, form the basis of a meaningful public realm? In venturing a response to this provocative question, *Towards a Politics of Communion* sets a new standard for scholarship on Catholic social teaching. It is an invaluable resource for scholars and ideal for inclusion on graduate-level syllabi. At a moment in which the relevance of Catholic social teaching could hardly be more apparent, *Towards a Politics of Communion* solidifies Rowlands as one of its most trustworthy and sophisticated guides.

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