

TOWARDS A POLITICS OF COMMUNION: CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING IN DARK TIMES by Anna Rowlands, *T&T Clark Bloomsbury Publishing*, 2021, pp. xvi + 315, £25.99, pbk

Catholic social thought is often considered to be the Church's best kept secret. Rowlands's text is an effective remedy to this through a clear presentation of the key concepts and content of Catholic Social Teaching (CST), with an intellectual honesty that recognises the historical emergence and development of Catholic social principles and examines where the concepts have become 'worn from overuse and under-definition' and a 'collapse into a kind of sentimentality' (p.11). Developing her argument across eleven chapters Rowlands engages core CST principles of human dignity, common good, subsidiarity, solidarity, and universal destination of goods with a plurality of thought and challenge, in a way that details their significance within Catholic and wider social imagination not just as theory but as necessary practice.

The work's title is more than an echo of Hannah Arendt's book addressed to *Men in Dark Times*, for Rowlands also seeks to articulate something of the 'flickering light' (p.1) of lives lived consciously within the struggle for a public and common good rather than dwell upon the darkness – which is undeniable. Arendt declares that we 'have a right to expect some illumination' (p.1), and Rowlands concentrates on the light that a grounded CST provides. Her success is found in explaining the background and application of Catholic social principles in a way that informs introductory readers while opening a new depth for those who have long been 'falling towards' their fulfilment, to repeat a phrase used throughout the book.

This text is needed in a tradition that lacks a formal reflective capacity. To cite a case in point, students examined on an introductory CST course were asked to roll call the major social encyclicals and teaching documents in reverse chronological order. This is problematic because it presents the social encyclicals alone as historical markers and fails to recognise that these texts are formed in, as well as being transformative of, varied contexts. A social teaching tradition that reads itself through the lens of a document chain, indicated in the Church social document titles with *Quadragesimo anno*, *Octogesima adveniens*, and *Centesimus annus*, but without also critically handling the social practice it inspires fails to live up to the principles it holds as vital. If, as Rowlands posits, CST contains a 'truth that can only be known in and through the sociality of our creaturely life, but which will be fully known in a form of sociality beyond it' (p.4), the CST corpus requires further stretching (in dialogue and practice) beyond its own sociality if it is to become communion.

The word communion is taken into the book's title, and Rowlands signals that in referring to a *Politics of Communion* her concern is not about the reception of the sacrament but, more broadly, the 'language of communion' (p.9) in public life. Sacramental life is implicitly invoked since the

political life of society, understood in its fullest sense as communion, helps ‘open up a space in which to speak of both intimacy and public-ness’ in the relating of ‘bodily humans to their materially created context’ (p.11). Rowlands argues that the CST tradition attempts to articulate something of the struggle for communion in public life, on an individual and collective level, and this involves surmounting a dichotomy between the ‘sheltered life of the household’ and the ‘exposure of the *polis*’ (p.8).

Public life, in this context, does not begin when a person leaves their home (what of the homeless or those in precarious accommodation?) and only once a person enters certain institutional structures. Such a view enables a person to rush home and close the door on ‘public-ness’, whereas a more nuanced position, to borrow from Arendt via Rowlands, sees public life as ‘action, practice and thought that enables persons to appear, to themselves *and* to one another’ (p.3). It is not that the person appears under the spotlight of something called the public sphere but that a ‘public realm’ comes ‘into being in the space between us’ (p.3) and this ‘space between us’ forms the ‘conditions necessary to pursue my deepest desires’ (p.145). Recognising ‘public-ness’ as integral to the personal positions CST in opposition to world views that see private interest unexpectedly bubbling over into a public benefit and opens up room for human flourishing without the dominance of state and market.

Former Prime Minister Tony Blair once remarked that there is a stark contrast between the poetry of political campaigning and the prose of governing in office. Rowlands recognises a similar dynamic in CST where the social principles are often read poetically whereas the urgent task is that they become prosaic: principles that are to be peopled, to be interwoven, however incompletely and however unsuccessfully, into the reality of our daily lives. *Towards a Politics of Communion* is novel in the way the argument moves the poetry into the prosaic. In chapter seven, for instance, Rowlands perceives the Church’s role in the implementation of the common good as ‘rooted in practices of love, seeking to proclaim life as gift and offer the world a Trinitarian vision of a creation fashioned in love, redemption for all, and a Spirit who dwells in the world participating in the redemption of time’ (p.174).

Rowlands, then, muses how such a principle might be embodied in performance. On a practical level, she envisions the Church as a community that ‘engages the reality of the world in dialogue’; as a community resistant to ‘overbearing communitarian or state coercive accounts’; and as a community whose vision ‘begins counter-intuitively not with “doing” or activism but with a form of “not-doing”’ (p.174). The poetical or rhetorical treatment of Catholic social principles is balanced here with healthy doses of pragmatism and historical lessons from experience. For instance, Church teaching documents on political participation that encourage involvement in open and free democratic processes, where present, risk alienating those who do not ‘wish to be highly political’ (p.223). A broader

Church teaching that articulates a politics of communion – of living alongside with others – exists but remains underdeveloped.

For example, the author points to the ‘common life we have missed’ during the pandemic, described as ‘the life of sociality, negotiation, jostling and plurality. The life of more than one household’ (p.223). With an appeal to the ‘life of sociality’, Rowlands shares Simone Weil’s view that people tend to ‘recoil from the other’ (p.299) and that it is by God’s grace that people hold the other in loving attention. Politics, therefore, requires a culture of “‘not-doing’” (p.174) in order that we attend to the ‘space between us’ (p.3) as the location of self and mutual realisation. We might well ‘fall towards’ this politics of communion, yet the call is to do so attentively otherwise ‘others with intentions we cannot guarantee will fill that space’ (p.301).

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IN REASONABLE HOPE: PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTIONS ON ULTIMATE MEANING by Patrick Masterson, *The Catholic University of America Press, Washington, D.C.*, pp. viii + 208, £32.95, pbk

A few decades ago, the question of life’s ultimate meaning was not taken very seriously in academic circles. As Rom Harre writing in 1970 put it, ‘no one of any discretion writes about the Universe, Man, and God’. However, in recent years there has been a dramatic shift. The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* has a recently updated article on the meaning of life, and there one discovers that since the new millennium, thirteen books have been published which focus exclusively on this topic. So it seems that the time is ripe for a book on life’s ultimate meaning that addresses this question in a manner that is sympathetic to the Catholic philosophical tradition. In his new book *A Reasonable Hope*, Patrick Masterson argues that the question of ‘What does it all ultimately mean?’ can be answered most convincingly from a theistic viewpoint. By drawing on what is best in metaphysics, phenomenology and theology, Masterson is able to offer a very thoughtful and compelling account of this most important of questions.

Masterson’s book comes in two halves: the first half is theoretical in nature and introduces some rather abstract philosophical ideas relevant to the question at hand, and the second half, whilst still philosophical in nature addresses the question in much more personal terms. This two-part structure is motivated by the conviction that whilst impersonal theoretical arguments for theism are still essential, many people in our world today are unmoved by these arguments and are better served by theistic