

# Book Review

**Aloysius Lopez Cartagenas, *Unlocking the Church's Best Kept Secret: Principles for the Interpretation, Communication, and Praxis of Catholic Social Teaching*** (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2012), 279 pp.

The publication of *Catholic Social Teaching: Our Best Kept Secret* by Peter J. Henriot in 1985 began a thirty-year period of publications, which have attempted to communicate and share what is known as Church Social Teaching (CST). A plethora of texts have been published which build on this theme of the “Catholic Church’s best-kept secret,” with the intent of making this secret known to both Catholics and non-Catholics alike, based on the belief that Catholic Social Teaching has something to say to the contemporary world. Aloysius Lopez Cartagenas provides a unique and challenging contribution that addresses a gap in the literature on CST.

While numerous works have dealt with identifying and illustrating the principles of CST, the history and relationship among various encyclicals and other documents, and the relationship of these texts to the tradition, or defining the tradition, very little has been written describing the type of discourse CST comprises and how it relates both to other disciplinary discourses and to specific social contexts. Cartagenas is particularly concerned with the publication of *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, which seemingly glosses over the particular concerns of local communities and the insights gleaned by their local church leadership and by members engaged in social transformation, and thereby limits critical reflection upon the discursive characteristics of CST.

Cartagenas provides an insightful and trenchant analysis, helpful—to both the lay reader and the specialist—for interpreting the meaning of CST, communicating it effectively, and developing a fuller practice of CST within communities and the world. He divides his work into three parts of three chapters each. The first three chapters concern CST as a tradition of interpretation. The second set of three chapters concerns CST as a tradition of communication, while the third set considers CST as a tradition of praxis. Each chapter ends with a useful summary of principles gleaned from the discussion. These principles serve as a guide for interpreting, communicating, and engaging with CST in the world through transformative action.

The work begins by developing an application of Paul Ricoeur's theory of interpretation to explain how the community of readers and writers can come to an agreement on the meaning of the various documents of church social teaching. Cartagenas argues that since the church's social teaching is communicated via written texts, they are best understood as containing features proper to literary texts. Interpreting these texts will involve a process that reflects the relationship between the reader and the text itself. The result is a discourse that is both "tradition-constituted" and "tradition-constitutive," a discourse that is continually developed and interpreted in an ever-expanding circle of reading. This expanding interpretation requires principles to guide critical interpretation of the CST documents and allows for arbitration towards agreement among conflicting and divergent interpretations.

After establishing the process for critically interpreting CST texts, Cartagenas employs Jürgen Habermas's critical theory of communicative reason and action as the basis for evaluating whether the social teaching is "communicative" enough. He explains that by "communicative," he "means the type of rationality inherent in a discourse whose coherence is based on understanding, is geared towards agreement or consensus, and is obliged to motivate commitment and action" (55). Cartagenas argues that the social teaching of the church is oriented towards developing a common commitment to social transformation, but is limited by its approach to

developing and determining its social teaching. There is a need to move beyond the unnecessary opposition between doctrine (typically interpreted as a closed and unchanging system of principles) and teaching (often seen as taking an inductive, developmental approach) by recognizing that neither understanding fully captures the two terms. Cartagenas argues that the rigid distinction between the two terms is more ideological than reflective of the use of each term in Church documents, allowing for a more fluid interpretation and understanding of CST. This more fluid interpretation leads Cartagenas to argue for a rebalancing of the predominant position given to the papal magisterium vis-à-vis the episcopal college. This imbalance is further exacerbated when one considers the relative absence of true reciprocity and mutuality when the popes have engaged with other disciplines, cultures, and spiritual traditions. The principles offered in this section are a guide for advancing and developing further the communicative potential of CST.

Cartagenas completes his analysis by having the principles and texts of CST dialogue with Alasdair MacIntyre's definition of practice. He does this in order to evaluate (1) the coherence of CST's social practice with its social teaching, (2) the possibility for new carriers of the social teaching to emerge, (3) the structure of socio-pastoral agency within the church, and (4) the social location from which the church presumes to speak and its relevance for being an effective social actor at both national and transnational levels. He reveals inconsistencies and incompatibility amongst the Church's various models for society and approaches to social praxis that result in an approach to praxis incommensurate with the social realities and contexts to which the church would like to respond. The Church has tended to overemphasize its engagement with state-level organization, and has thus missed out on further engagement with civil society and models of society that take seriously the civil societies at the national and global levels.

The critique in this final section reflects one of Cartagenas's primary concerns with Church social teaching: How can Church engagement with civil society (as distinguished from the engagement of the Church with the

state and political society) open up new pathways for developing and reflecting on CST? He argues for transforming the tradition of social teaching towards a praxis-reflective approach to ethical reflection which will allow for an expansion of engagement and service on the part of the church. This shift will also help in transforming the Church's own methodological self-understanding in relation to the world. The principles he offers at the conclusion of this section help shift the emphasis of the Church's social teaching from a normative theory of society towards a normativity drawn from the faith-praxis of subjects, especially the poor and marginalized, and those who journey with them in striving to create a better world.

Cartagenas charts a critical and challenging path for the community of believers to exercise their faith within their particular yet complex social realities while also learning from the rich yet limited communicative tradition of Church Social Teaching. He proposes principles that will guide a progressive path that will unleash the potential inherent but underdeveloped within the tradition of the Church's social teaching. There will be some contention concerning whether the argument he offers and the principles he puts forth are consistent enough with the tradition of CST, especially from those insistent about a clear power-center from which all teaching—the particular formulation of which demands adherence from all believers—must emanate. However, since what is at stake is the future of humanity, then taking up a challenging course is not simply a reasonable possibility, but an absolute necessity, if the Church is to be faithful to its mission.

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