

Book Reviews

Cartagenas, Aloysius L. 2012. *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. 279 pages + xiv.

The peculiarity of any social teaching, Catholic, Protestant or otherwise, is that it is an unsteady marriage between the dogmatically permanent beliefs and the perennially changing historical contexts. Any authentic and relevant social teaching needs to mirror a two-fold fidelity: Faithfulness to the universal truths to which the social *teaching* is a reflection, and loyalty to the historical contexts to which the *social teaching* is inextricably embedded. The merit of Cartagenas's book *Unlocking the church's best kept secret* is that it epitomizes the wobbly balancing act that takes cognizance of this two-fold fidelity. There remains the affirmation that a Catholic social teaching maintains a "vital link with the gospel" (63), and yet recognizes that "every social document of the Church has its immediate situational reference" (25). As a teaching that is given birth in tradition and continues in the many transitions that this tradition undergoes (as the dictum *ecclesia semper reformanda* reiterates), the documents comprising the current Catholic social teaching need to be interpreted, communicated and brought into practice in the light of the Gospel promotion and defense of the flourishing of the human person. In the midst of this shifting union of the necessary and the contingent is the human person—who balances on the religious tightrope, trying not to fall either into the irrelevance of dogmatic faith or into the historicism of an agnostic stance regarding the relativity of truth. Beyond the dominant understanding of the social teaching as the "changing application of unchanging principles," Cartagenas reorients the theological discourse toward the human factor by highlighting the primacy of conscience. "While principles, criteria, and norms originate from the church's teaching office, their moral authority and consequent binding force needs to be determined ultimately by the impact they make on the moral conscience and imagination not only of Catholics but of other believers and non-believers as well" (83).

According to Cartagena, what used to be the church's "best kept secret" is a secret no more. In the last decades, there has been a surge of interests in the social teachings brought about by three developments in the universal church. Firstly, there is the shift of attention from papal teaching authority (for example, through encyclicals) to that of other bishops as college or national conference (for example, Synod of Bishop's *Justice in the world* or Consejo Episcopala Latino Americano [CELAM] in Medellin, Columbia). Secondly, there is the recognition that the social teaching is no longer immune from criticism neither is it unchanging, comprehensive and complete. Rather, it is now validated as a moral discourse among many other humanistic and religious discourses in the public sphere. This brings us to the third development, that is, the social teaching needs to engage in collaboration with other disciplines, particularly with the social and natural sciences, not only with theology and philosophy. These developments steer the social teaching "in a period of a transition, one that is fraught with ambiguities, but nonetheless ripe with new possibilities" (5).

It is in view of this period of transition that the author aims to write the book. Despite the ambiguities attendant to the transition, new possibilities need to be realized. The realization of these come when we sufficiently respond to the challenges of "interpretation, communication, and practice" of the social teachings of the church. These three constitute the structural frame of the whole book. The challenge of *interpretation* affirms that the social teaching is a discourse fixed into writing. In this way, the social message locates itself not in the act of hearing, but in the act of (re-)reading. As a written discourse, the social teaching is tradition-constituted and tradition-constitutive. As a text, it becomes subject to a "community of readers and re-readers" hence integrating the text into a "chain of readings" that gives birth to tradition. According to Cartagena, "the repeated reinterpretation of magisterial texts ultimately facilitates the evolution of what can rightly be called a one 'Catholic social tradition'" (38). A tradition that is given birth in a "chain of readings" had to engage in a process of *communication*. The social teaching of the church is a "tradition of communication," addressing the peoples of every age, nation and circumstance in order to uphold human dignity in the light of the gospel. However, this tradition has a "collaborative destiny" (85ff) which is achieved only when it works in partnership with the social and natural sciences, along with the traditional ecclesiastical disciplines (in short when collaboration becomes multidisciplinary). Such "collaborative destiny" is achieved when the social tradition affirms the ethical demand on human conscience, when there is reciprocity between the pope and his colleagues in the Episcopal College, and when there is a genuine recognition of the *sensus fidelium* of the local church bringing to fruition the church's social concern as a mirroring of its Catholic (that is, all-embracing) patrimony. Beyond interpretation and communication, the tradition of social teaching has to be praxis-

oriented or needs to be reframed in terms of a theory of *practice*. This is not simply a set of technical skills or just any human activity. Rather, practice is “a moral entity whereby its creators are at once the embodiment of standards and virtues” whose actions are oriented to the achievement of goods internal to the practice, and hence not an individual possession, but a genuine common good that contributes to the flourishing of human life (121-22). Cartagenas suggests that praxis is the *terminus a quo* and *terminus ad quem* of the church’s social tradition. Diverging from the commonly held view that there is an “antecedent-consequential” model at work in the social teachings of the church—that is, theory (orthodoxy) is understood as cause, while practice (orthopraxy) is an effect—the author insists that the relation of the two is not a one-way street. “Praxis,” Cartagenas argues, “is not only a goal, but above all else the starting point of theory” (176). This is the core of a reframing of the church’s social teaching into a “praxis-reflective” type of tradition.

By way of conclusion, the author highlights the one Catholic social tradition which “is neither in its twilight nor renaissance” (191), but is in transition which will not open to a new future unless we face the challenge of interpretation, communication, and practice which the author identifies as the pathways for a tradition in transition.

It does not take long for a reader to realize that the work is a fruit of many years of research and reflection (the main ideas in the book have their beginnings in the author’s doctoral dissertation defended at the Theology Faculty of the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven in 1996). Other than the scholarship that the work exemplifies, there are important points one can highlight. Firstly, the work manifests the beautiful and critical collaborative relation between philosophy and theology. Beyond the view that philosophy is an *ancilla theologiae*, the work lays bare the fruitful critical contribution that philosophy can make to theological discourses as a partner in dialogue, viz., Paul Ricoeur (hermeneutic theory of text) for the pathway of interpretation, Jürgen Habermas (critical theory of communicative reason and action) for the pathway of communication, and Alasdair MacIntyre (theory of practice) for the pathway of praxis. Through these critical personae, Cartagenas was able to disclose certain interpretative challenges, communicative deficiencies, and variegated practical incoherences in the church’s social teaching. Secondly, in view of the recently published *Compendium of the social doctrine of the church* (2004), Cartagenas takes issue with the idea that the key to the future of the Catholic social teaching is not in the presentation of its complete and systematic overview through the *Compendium*. He contends that its future “hinges less on an official *Compendium* than on the task of sufficiently responding to [a] host of challenges” (4) namely: Of critically reading the tradition itself, of dialoguing with other humanistic and religious traditions of social practice, and of being sensitive to the issue of multiculturalism, especially in Asia where Christianity is a minority.

Thirdly, like any good manual of moral theology, at the end of each part, the author provides a set of principles (comprising chapters three, six and nine), which not only highlights important insights from the previous discussions but also invites the reader to further reflection and appropriation. Fourthly, the author theologizes from a liberationist viewpoint, critical of the prevailing theological methods, seriously seeking to recuperate the broader meaning of Catholic (that is, all-embracing). Fifthly, the Catholic social tradition needs to relocate itself from state or political society to the domain of civil society in both national and global levels (177-82). Sixthly and perhaps most importantly, mirroring the Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP) II's "preferential option for the poor," the author highlights the "mark of sacramentality." That is to say, Christian social practice must be a "sign and instrument to bring about a real foretaste of the fullness of justice and transformation promised by God" especially for the poor (207). Relevant here is the reappropriation of the poor not as objects of someone's "option for" but as *genuine subjects*. Cartagena defines "morality of means" precisely in such terms: "How authoritative the subjectivity of the poor will be in the conversation that determines the appropriate structures, how their experience of human suffering and exclusion is appreciated as its starting point, and how their transformative praxis is validated as genuinely Christian" (210).

However, like all works, the book does encounter certain limitations. Firstly, the book presents principles for the interpretation, communication and praxis of Catholic social teaching but it does not venture into a systematic exposition of the social teaching of the church itself (something to which the *Compendium* may come in handy). Because it does not intend to replace the reading of the documents of the Catholic social tradition (as it should!), a reader may well benefit more from this book if he or she has read or at least has general knowledge of the encyclicals and other documents that constitute the Catholic social teaching. Secondly, although the author underscores the growing significance of the teaching authority of the college of bishops alongside that of the pope, other than a single reference (211), the book seems to have turned a blind eye to crucial social documents of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC). Since 1970, FABC has been publishing social documents of significance that addressed a host of social concerns especially in the uniquely Asian context. This appears to be a major deficiency in the light of the author's own insistence on "the pre-eminence of contexts" in the critical reflection of social praxis (186). Regardless of these limitations, the book remains a must-read for any Catholic scholar or person engaged in social action who aims to have a critical knowledge of the Catholic social tradition. In reading this book, each page becomes a promising journey of understanding what it means "to act justly, love tenderly and walk humbly with God" (Micah 6:8). The Philippine church is blessed to have a native theologian who knows how to take a critical distance and authentic assent

to the faith, and who seriously advances PCP II's preferential option for the poor. In his words: "The time has come, I believe, for the social magisterium to sit down with the current social carriers of the Catholic social tradition (that is, the poor) and, through the process of common reflection and discernment, explore together for new and much better ways of becoming not just a church for the poor, but above all, a church *of* the poor" (214-15).

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Alunan, Merlie M. 2012. *Pagdakop sa bulalakaw ug uban pang mga balak.* Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press. 154 pages.

Sa gamay pa ko, kanunay ko makakitag bulalakaw nga kalit lang mosutoy gikan sa kawanangan padulong ambot asa sa kalibotan. Diha pa mi nagpuyo sa Quezon Boulevard, sa may Salmonan banda. Katunggan pa ang maong lugar kaniadto, daghang bakhaw ug waterlili, gurami ug puyo, hasta tangkig. Sa gabii kalingawan namong mga bata nga magdulag biros, tigso, ug tubig-tubig. Tingali tungod kay kanunay ko naa sa gawas sa balay sa gabii mao nga kanunay sab ko makakitag bulalakaw. Apan naa koy mahinumdoman nga usa ka dako ug siga kaayo nga bulalakaw nga mihiwa sa kangitngit ibabaw sa Isla sa Samal. Nakahinumdom ko niini kay morag duol kaayo ang bulalakaw ug dugay napalong ang iyang pagdilaab. Nakahinumdom ko nga mihunong sa pagdula ug gitutokan ang paglupad niini hangtod nga nahanaw.

Sulod sa dugayng panahon, wala koy mahinumdoman nga nakakita kog bulalakaw. Basin naa, pero walay midulot sa akong panumdoman. Busa *memorable* kaayo alang nako dihang nakakita na sab kog bulalakaw nga sama kadako ug kahayag sa nakita nako sa Boulevard. Didto pa gyod ni nahitabo sa Cambodia mga napulo ka tuig na ang milabay. Kauban nako ang mga amigong Pinoy nga naglingkod sa balkonahe sa usa ka *hotel* dihang mibutho ang bulalakaw. Dugay napalong ang siga niini. Napatunganga gyod ko sa kalipay tungod sa kaanindot niini.

Ang kinaulahiing bulalakaw nga akong nakita nahitabo sa Cebu dihang gitigayon ang *Taboan Writers Festival* niadtong Pebrero 2010. Nag-inom-inom ming mga manunulat sa balkonahe sa usa ka *hotel* dihang nakita namo ang bulalakaw nga misutoy og tidlom sa kalibotan. Hinuon dili ni sama kadako o kahayag sa akong nakita sa Boulevard ug Cambodia. Pero, nalipay lang gihapon