

The World as It Could Be: Catholic Social Thought for a New Generation

Thomas D. Williams

New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2011 (226 pages)

This book comes with ringing endorsements from across the globe: Robert P. George, Mary Ann Glendon, Newt Gingrich, and George Cardinal Pell, to name a few. This is not surprising. The book is a serious and sophisticated attempt to outline Catholic Social Teaching (CST) and its applications to contemporary social dilemmas.

The book contains twelve chapters. The topics are apt, and the philosophical and theological approach is engaging. The first four chapters, perhaps the most evocative, cover “Unity, Diversity, and the Common Good,” “Dignity and Its Discontents,” “Abortion as a Social Justice Issue,” and “A Presumption Against Violence.”

Williams’ emphasis on a recovery of the common good as an essential aim of both CST and political theory and action is important and opportune, as politicians and those involved in public life are directly responsible for the care and promotion of the common good in contrast to the promotion of their own petty ideological issues. He notes the absolute importance of *reason* and its relationship to *law* as fundamental to a renewed appreciation of the common good. Of particular importance is his insight and insistence on the usurping of reason by *will* in the ideologies of individualism and collectivism. This is an important contribution that will help inform the minds of the next generation of political, social, and economic leaders. The answer to these crass ideologies, Williams suggests, is Thomistic personalism, as articulated by John Paul II, with its emphasis on the relationship between the person and the common good. Again, the insights here are welcome and distinctly helpful.

Williams makes a significant contribution to CST by advancing the idea that John Paul’s encyclical letter, *Evangelium Vitae*, should be included in the Catholic social genre. He focuses his attention on the question of abortion, although not exclusively, in his third chapter. Abortion, he skilfully demonstrates, exhibits six characteristics that distinguish it from other social-ethical (justice) issues. I find his arguments convincing, although he could have paid more attention in his work to the deep residual wounds that are left festering as a result of taking innocent human life. I am thinking, for instance, of the damage done to those who perform abortions and those who submit to them. The wounds leave a deep scar in people and as a result leave social capital severely debilitated. The common good suffers accordingly in a variety of ways.

Chapter 4 introduces the issue of violence, to be distinguished from capital punishment and matters related to the just war theory, which follow in later chapters. The question is asked, “Is there such a thing as rationally chosen violence? Or in terms of Catholic social thought, is violence ever compatible with ‘charity in truth’?” The issue is obviously complex, but I find his argument somewhat “morally awkward.” Williams suggests that along with good acts, bad acts, and indifferent acts, there is a fourth category of human

acts “that should generally be avoided, and never pursued for their own sake, but which may be permitted or even enjoined for other reasons (as a means to other ends). These could be termed,” writes Williams, “justifiable physical evils.” He clearly distinguishes these acts from moral evils and thus tries to avoid proportionalistic moral reasoning. But the awkwardness persists a little later when he tries to analyze the slapping of a child. He says that this “should not be pursued for its own sake but may be pursued for the sake of a greater good (the child’s formation of character). In this case,” Williams argues, “intention becomes paramount and actually justifies an action that in and of itself would be reprehensible.” One sees the difficulty. Still, the chapter has much to commend it.

Williams supports Pope Benedict XVI’s claim that Pope Paul VI’s encyclical letter, *Populorum Progressio* is the “*Rerum Novarum* of the present age.” Chapter 6 and chapter 12 explore this line of thought. Williams argues well that the key to understanding Paul VI’s contribution to development in CST is his notion of integral human development. Benedict XVI clearly pursued this line of thinking in *Caritas in Veritate* as well as adding his own unique contribution by describing charity as the essence of the Church’s action in the social sphere. Williams certainly explains Benedict’s thinking with clarity.

Is Pope Benedict XVI—and Williams—correct in asserting that *Populorum Progressio* is the new *Rerum Novarum*? Certainly, many a commentator and theologian would balk at the assertion. The benefit of CST both prior to and after Paul VI’s pontificate is its *specificity*. The genius of the social encyclical tradition has been its acute analysis of social problems and its recourse to fundamental principles that prove to be invaluable in the practical order. For instance, there is the right to private property (Leo XIII), the principle of subsidiarity (Pius XI), the principle of solidarity (John Paul II), work and rest as personal, social and divine communion (John Paul II), and economic liberty and justice as an expression of human freedom and truth (John Paul II).

Williams has offered both teacher and student a wonderful resource. *The World as It Could Be* is a serious attempt to make Catholic teaching, Catholic learning.

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Business for the Common Good: A Christian Vision for the Marketplace

Kenman L. Wong and Scott B. Rae

Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2011 (288 pages)

In a speech before the American Society of Newspaper Editors, Calvin Coolidge argued that a press that maintained contact with the business currents of the nation was more reliable than a press divorced from business interests. He went on to say, “After all, the chief business of the American people is business. They are profoundly concerned with producing, buying, selling, investing and prospering in the world.” In the United States, businesses account for the bulk of jobs, output of goods and services, and retirement income. To