

Catholic Social Thought, the Market and Public Policy

Philip M. Booth and André Azevedo Alves (Editors)

London: St. Mary's University Press, 2024 (302 pages)

If one wants to put out into deep waters for a catch (Luke 5:4), this is one of the few recent books that brings practical clarity to how Catholic Social Teaching (CST) applies to current issues of economics and government. *Catholic Social Thought, the Market, and Public Policy* is fundamentally a pro-market analysis that counters some popular misconceptions about Church teachings. The editors have engaged noted authors with dual expertise in economics and public policy to address vexing problems like globalization. In most cases, the authors succeed in translating CST's more general principles into practical guidance.

The editors, Booth and Alves, note that economic decisions in public policy have a moral dimension that requires solid judgment. One may argue that two millennia of Christian insight, built upon a foundation of Greek philosophy and the Jewish faith, provide answers to ultimate truths for problems that materialism cannot reliably solve. While a system of principles cannot wholly prepare one to make decisions in specific circumstances of economics and policy, it can help aim the arrow of decision-making toward the right target.

Thomas Aquinas's philosophy lays the foundation for discussion throughout the book. Two prominent principles in CST that are discussed are human dignity and justice. Human dignity is the idea that every person is unique and made with free will in God's image. Justice is to render to others what they are due. Another theme of Aquinas is that private property promotes the common good, but the desire for possessions should be moderate. A central theme in the development of CST regarding the economy is that of work. As John Paul II said in *Laborem Exercens*, work is a call directed to meet one's material needs, but it has "an ethical value of its own" to perfect the person themselves.

Professor Martin Schlag's chapter on the role of virtuous business in economic life is both deeply philosophical and highly practical. He incisively distills three significant contributions in the tradition of Thomistic logic. First, faith mediates philosophy's systematic approach and orders general principles for given circumstances. Second, social science provides the data needed to wisely address specific issues. Schlag brilliantly pulls together the book's key themes and magisterial social documents under four headings: human dignity, common good, solidarity, and subsidiarity. Human dignity concerns the freedom to make one's own decisions and flourish by developing one's native abilities and talents. Common good involves the sacrifice of certain freedoms in the service of others in one's community. Solidarity, a social principle rather than a personal virtue, involves actively sharing social burdens. Subsidiarity places decision-making as close to the issue as possible, such as exercising

charity within one's community rather than automatically surrendering it to the government. Each of these principles is morally desirable, yet they can conflict and require balance. Schlag notes that three intermediate concepts tie together a thread running through encyclicals regarding the economy: the economy has a moral order, the objective of business is human flourishing, and, while persons act in their own interest, the common good takes priority.

In an excellent chapter on cronyism, the author vigorously criticizes the administrative state and corporations that seek regulatory advantage to undermine competitors. While CST addresses the dangers of corporatism, it does not adequately address cronyism, which can extend to NGOs and organizations such as the World Economic Forum (WEF). Richards highlights how organized collaboration between government and oligopolies may begin with good intentions, such as the United States' desire to expand home ownership, but can end in abject failure, as seen in the 2008 global financial crisis. He rightly warns that the Vatican risks becoming entangled with tech monopolies by appearing to provide these firms with moral cover in areas where Vatican officials' scientific knowledge is limited. Richards argues that while the Church can rightly speak to broad moral issues, it should apply the principle of subsidiarity to itself, especially when there is a risk of supporting quasi-monopolies that might erect barriers against competitors.

A chapter on finance notes that CST supports the need for money as a means of assessing the shifting value of fundamental goods people need and as a way for entrepreneurs to expand opportunities. Private property is a fundamental right in CST and serves the purpose of properly allocating resources. According to CST, surplus ought to be used to help those in true need. A chapter on globalization points out that while it has helped counteract mercantilism and reduce the cost of goods, global elites often intervene to shape laws that benefit the powerful, leaving many behind.

A chapter on the environment focuses mainly on Pope Francis' *Laudato si'*, the first encyclical focused solely on the environment. While its content on climate change has been criticized, it is important to remember that its approach is philosophical, differing little in that respect from earlier encyclicals. Catholics can legitimately take different positions on science, and policy positions on stewardship often highlight the positive impact of private ownership over the tragedy of the commons.

A chapter on taxation identifies the corrosive impact of thinking that differences in wealth are a form of injustice to be corrected by redistribution through heavy taxation, which disincentivizes charity. Adam Smith argued for solidarity and for taxes that are clear and not wasteful. A chapter on debt is also a welcome examination of a major public policy threat through the lens of CST. Default or hyperinflation are two options for dealing with federal debt that harm future generations and violate distributive justice. While economic growth could solve the issue, many outlays are growing out of control, as is choking regulation.

Finally, a chapter on education points out that religious schools are an extension of the family, serving the purpose of training young people in virtue and preparing them for a productive adult life. The author cleverly notes that the term “common good” is often hijacked by politicians, and public education frequently undermines parental prerogatives. The chapter on UK healthcare serves as a warning to those in the United States advocating for a one-size-fits-all healthcare bureaucracy.

There are many positives to this book. One of the things I most appreciated is its treatment of the principle of subsidiarity. The authors provide insightful examples of where government has overstepped its proper authority or where the public has mistakenly surrendered control over decisions that should remain close to them. At the end of the book, the editors provide a brief and helpful chapter and annex of important CST documents. Educators will find that this work is well-suited for classroom discussions. It would also be a handy reference for those who work in government or think tanks. For those seeking a related book, CST issues are broadly treated in the 2012 text *Free Markets and the Culture of Common Good*. Bradley and Brugger also published a more comprehensive 2019 volume on social issues and CST.

There are a few minor instances where I disagree with an author’s logic. For example, the introduction acknowledges extraordinary progress in reducing the rate of absolute poverty and environmental degradation, yet states, “There is nothing wrong with the use of hyperbole to encourage the faithful” (15). However, Augustine noted that when Christians, especially ecclesiastics, speak inaccurately on material truths, it leads nonbelievers to scorn the faith. The renowned economist in the chapter on migration acknowledges that CST does not endorse an unbounded right to migrate. I agree that migration displaces native poor while benefiting capital, but I disagree when he says (74) that these cultural impacts have less relevance in the United States. Wealthy elites are spared the problems of migration and often show indifference to impacted communities. The sequence of chapters generally flows well, though it might have been more logical to place the chapter on patristic roots near the beginning. Additionally, short author bios and a topical index would have been helpful.

Catholic Social Teaching provides logical answers for economic and policy issues that secular humanism cannot. This book will help readers discern truth and is worth every penny. Like Aquinas’s prayer before study, it helps remove darkness from the intellect. One might say the Barque of Peter, it is like Noah’s Ark: sometimes noisy, crowded, and stinking, but a good place to be in a storm. Catholic Social Teaching helps steer the ship when the waves are crashing.

—William J. Mea
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