

Catholic Social Teaching: Our Best-Kept Secret (4th ed.)**Edward P. DeBerri and James E. Hug
with Peter Henriot and Michael J. Schultheis**Maryknoll, New York, and Washington, D.C.: Orbis Books and
the Center of Concern, 2003 (238 pages)

Some of the best art forgeries of the nineteenth century were not revealed until the twentieth; only then did it become apparent that the forgers had unconsciously borrowed from styles and motifs of their own century. Similarly, many books proposing to unearth the buried treasure of Catholic social teaching merely “discover” contemporary forms of modern political thought. With the distance of years, *Catholic Social Teaching: Our Best-Kept Secret* will be revealed for what it is—an admittedly good outline of papal and episcopal texts on Catholic social teaching, imbued, however, with the dogmas (even clichés) of late-twentieth-century liberal Catholicism.

I do not wish to minimize the book’s strengths. As with earlier editions, the book provides the major encyclical letters on Catholic social teaching from Pope Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum* (On the Condition of Labor) to Pope John Paul II’s *Centesimus Annus* (On the Hundredth Anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*). I commend the authors for adding *Evangelium Vitae* (Gospel of Life) to the fourth edition; the defense of human life certainly pertains to Catholic social teaching. Less commendable is the inclusion of letters from regional episcopal conferences without making clear that these documents are not magisterial teachings. On the whole, the texts included are worthy of examination and discussion.

Certainly, an outline of the primary texts of Catholic social teaching is useful and needed, but DeBerri and Hug, in their expanded introduction, lay out a view of the history of Roman Catholicism that undermines the very tradition they propose to teach. For them, the Catholic Church has three stages: Let us call them past, present, and future. The Church of the past (that is, everything that happened between the time of Saint Paul and the Second Vatican Council) was fine for its time, but gravely flawed. History was the “mere context for the application of binding principles, which [were] derived from speculative and philosophical reasoning” (16). Social teaching was characterized by “a rigidly interpreted natural-law ethic” shaped by “reason” instead of “love.” Worst of all, “[T]he earlier methodology of Catholic social teaching often led to social idealism. It isolated reason from a relationship of dialogue with experience, commitment, and action” (17).

With the Second Vatican Council, we have the Church of the present. History becomes the “place of ongoing revelation.” The absolutes of natural law “have been replaced by the search for the objectively true,” and “external truths” are now “filtered through personal experiences, observation, memory, and general societal history.” Reason has not been “discarded in the social teachings, but put in its proper place.” It is no longer “isolated” but viewed in relation to “praxis”; consequently, “the starting

point of pastoral and social reflection is people in their struggle, in their needs and in their hopes” (16–17).

This sets the stage for the Church of the future. The authors express their aspiration that the Church will respond to three challenges to strengthen the “effective authority” of its social teaching (39). First, the Church “must respond to the insightful feminist critique that the anthropology upon which its social teaching is based is flawed”; that anthropology “defines women’s ‘nature’ and social roles in discredited, stereotypical Western cultural categories.” Second, “The Church must acknowledge that its social teaching has been dominated by Western European Christian cultural perspectives, values, principles, and social constructs.” Third, “The Church must develop its social teaching in more open, participatory and accountable ways. Its methodologies must become more inclusive, building upon the full range of social, cultural, economic, and political experience and social judgment of the human community.”

For DeBerri and Hug to preserve the continuity of the tradition, they must posit the Church of the present and the future as somehow “recovering” lost truths. For example, “Scripture has become the new touchstone for Catholic social teaching” (16). Hence, the authors contrast “biblical justice” to the contemporary understanding of justice (30). They commend the way that recent Church statements on private property “have retrieved the strong position held in the first centuries of the Church’s life” (27).

Yet, how biblical is it to speak of “the search for the objectively true,” the “objectively human,” and a “dialogue of experience and action”? These are the categories of modern philosophy, not Scripture. Indeed, DeBerri and Hug’s implied rejection of traditional metaphysics in favor of a philosophy that savors historical and cultural consciousness sounds more like a popular appropriation of the work of Karl Rahner, S.J., than anything remotely biblical. The treasures of the primitive Church are decorated with the curlicues of existential theology.

Even worse, the authors’ caricature of the historical Church is so egregious that it borders on calumny. Was it the “social idealism” of the Church that emancipated the slaves of the ancient world and worked for emancipation of slaves in the New? Was it by the inadequate appreciation of “praxis” that the Church invented the hospital, the orphanage, and a multitude of other charitable institutions? Was it by “discredited, Western stereotypes” of women that the Church elevated marriage to a sacrament and protected the choice of women in marriage and religious life? Was it by its inadequate understanding of the “hopes and needs of people” that it saved children from abandonment, abortion, pagan sacrifice, and other vices of the pre-Christian world?

The authors’ understanding of the present-day Church suffers from similar difficulties. DeBerri and Hug assert that the negative reaction to the U.S. bishops’ pastoral letter *The Challenge of Peace* showed that “all too few Catholics know about the Church’s social teaching.” It was not, however, ignorance of Catholic social teaching that led the Vatican to invite American bishops to an unprecedented “consultation” on the document, moderated by Cardinal Ratzinger of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the

Faith, a consultation that raised fundamental problems with the text (“Rome Consultation on Peace and Disarmament: A Vatican Synthesis” in *Origins* 12 [April 7, 1983]: n. 43, 691–95).

DeBerri and Hug also downplay Pope John Paul II’s sustained efforts to correct the errors of “liberation theology.” They remark that “some Vatican offices voiced concerns” over liberation theology (24) but that such statements “can be seen as cautions against some strains of liberation theology—not, it should be noted in honesty, the main streams” (11). This seems hard to reconcile with (to choose one example) the Vatican’s 1985 decision to silence Leonardo Boff, Brazil’s most prominent liberation theologian, and the subsequent revocation of his teaching license.

DeBerri and Hug’s liberal triumphalism must overlook such incidents. They resist raising the possibility that the Vatican under Pope John Paul II criticized the American “Peace Pastoral” and liberation theology precisely because they (the Vatican and pope) are preserving Catholic social teaching from imprudent, even heretical, intrusions.

Pope John Paul II and his successors will, God willing, preserve us from the Church of the future. Its concessions to feminism, multiculturalism, and democratic liberalism would do nothing less than transform the Catholic Church into the World Council of Churches. It would sell out the Catholic patrimony for a bowl of fashionable porridge.

The authors are right to say that Catholic social teaching is a secret to many. DeBerri and Hug’s work does not, however, alleviate this problem. Even though they provide helpful reading lists and decent textual outlines, the historical commentary compromises the whole work. They claim to be revealing the secret treasures of Catholic social teaching, but they have dug up only what they themselves buried.

—Arthur Hippler

Diocese of LaCrosse, Wisconsin

The Common Good and Christian Ethics

David Hollenbach, S.J.

Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2002

(269 pages)

A basic principle of Catholic social teaching states that public authority and all members of civil society ought to work together to establish and maintain the concrete conditions of the common good. The Second Vatican Council, in its Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*), defines the common good as “the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment” (26). The concept has a rich history in Christian social reflection. It receives its most developed articulation in the work of Aquinas but factors notably in the writings of Ignatius of Loyola, Vatican II, and the papal encyclical tradition.