

BOOK REVIEW

Francesco Compagnoni OP and Helen Alford OP, eds, *Preaching Justice: Dominican Contributions to Social Ethics in the Twentieth Century*. Dublin: Dominican Publications, 2007. 512 pp. ISBN 958-1-905604-07-4 (pbk), €30.00/\$45.00.

Social justice has been a major theme of Dominican reflection and action throughout the past century. The nineteen essays in this volume celebrate men who have involved themselves in the lives of Belgian miners and Brazilian peasants, who have taken up the cause of Eastern European refugees and black South Africans, who have spoken out against injustice in Spain or in Croatia. They have fought for peace, for trades unions and for land reform. They have founded farms and universities, directed radio programmes and irrigation projects. They have reflected upon fundamental principles such as the nature of the common good or social sin, and practical questions such as euthanasia, nuclear weapons or the proper function of art. They include two who lost their lives for their work, and another who narrowly escaped arrest after the attempted assassination of Hitler. The essays are arranged in four sections, the first three chronological, focusing on individuals through three periods of the century, and the last covering groups in different countries. A short biography introduces each of the characters discussed. This volume concentrates on (and is largely written by) Dominican men; a companion volume on Dominican women is planned. Nearly all are priests and religious, although the English province contributes a couple of distinguished lay conferes.

The reader of these essays will constantly be reminded of the dramatic political events of the twentieth century and their often tragic consequences: of the two great wars and the Russian Revolution; of Fascist dictatorships, Communist oppression, apartheid; of the harsh lives of ordinary workers and the desperation of refugees; of profound inequalities within individual countries and across the globe. It was through direct engagement with the people who suffered through these events that individual Dominicans forged their most penetrating ideas and their most effective practical projects.

In his Introduction, Gustavo Gutierrez, who joined the Dominicans in recent years, traces the stimuli for Catholic Social Thought still earlier: to the Industrial Revolution, to the modern realization of our capacity to change the world, and to the Enlightenment emphasis on the importance of individual and political liberty. These provide the background for *Rerum Novarum*. Now, for the first time, Christian thinkers were making serious attempts to understand in detail the structural causes of injustice; in other words, as Gutierrez emphasizes, they were exploring

the relations between economics and ethics. For much of the twentieth century their focus was the nation and their method scholastic. Gutierrez welcomes the opening up of Catholic thinking from John XXIII onwards to include the causes of poverty and international issues, and to draw more directly on Scripture. At the same time he notes the way in which the struggle for justice has been gradually integrated into the proclamation of the Gospel. Gutierrez gives full credit to John Paul II for his contribution to these developments; given the sometimes troubled relations between liberation theologians and the Vatican, that in itself exemplifies the kind of balanced and open-minded engagement to which this book pays tribute.

The intellectual figure who dominates the volume is, as one might expect, St Thomas Aquinas, whose writings formed the minds of all the Dominicans discussed, and who also provided the principles for many elements of the social encyclicals. More surprising, perhaps, is the extent of the influence of Karl Marx: he appears as a debating partner in very many of these essays, always approached critically though to different degrees, and often as the direct subject of a doctoral thesis.

Following Aquinas, most of these thinkers tread a path, familiar from papal social teaching, between communism and liberal capitalism. They return repeatedly to the themes of the common good and of natural and civil law; they stress the social purpose of private property and the consequent limitations upon the right to its use; they insist on valuing both individual and society, focusing in particular on the notion of personhood. Against Marx, they not only reject atheism, but emphasize the overriding importance of our supernatural end; for the most part they also eschew the rhetoric of class struggle and violent revolution. On the other hand, they appreciate the ethical and practical goal of Marx's writings, share his concern with the poor as a class, and inherit (if critically) his analysis of the role of the economy in social change. One of the interests of this book is to see these same themes played out in dramatically contrasting political circumstances; the extent to which the Thomist tradition maintained its balance under the oppression of right-wing dictatorships and state communism alike is impressive.

The pioneers in this story were men engaged in practical action, which directly stimulated their reflection. Georges Rutten (1875–1952), for example, wrote his doctoral thesis on the Belgian miners, and had to fight for permission from his superiors to go down the mines to meet them. The idea that managers need to know their workers personally in order to be able to cooperate with them became a guiding principle of his promotion of Christian workers' organizations. Rutten also served as a member of the Belgian Senate for a quarter of a century. Louis Lebret (1897–1966) was a sailor before he joined the order, and his social concern was activated by encountering the poverty among fishermen in his native Brittany. This led eventually to the creation of *Economie et Humanisme*, a research centre aimed at humanizing social and economic relationships. Lebret was also one of the first to grasp the importance of global concern for the "Third World" and for a sane model of development, which nourished genuine needs rather than simply economic "growth." Dominique Pire (1910–1969), another Belgian, dedi-

cated his apostolate above all to practical projects for building peace: with European refugees after the Second World War, and eventually all over the world. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1958.

In different ways, the English-speaking countries presented here stand a little apart from the concerns of the mainstream. In England, marked heavily by the Industrial Revolution but relatively untouched by the worst of the political upheavals of the century, Thomism was tinged by romanticism, in Vincent McNabb's distributivism, in Eric Gill's rejection of "the Machine Age," and perhaps too in Herbert McCabe's rather anachronistic sympathy with Marxist revolutionary ideas: *Law, Love and Language* was published in 1968, more than twenty years after McCabe's fellow-Dominican Dominik Barač had been executed in Croatia at the age of thirty-three for writing a Thomist critique of communist ideology. In the United States, where direct political presentation was not at issue, a concern for justice led Benedict Ashley and Kevin O'Rourke towards pioneering work in bioethics. In South Africa, the unique political situation brought Albert Nolan and Bernard Connor to reflect on the question of social sin. Here, Connor's careful analysis of the relationship between individuals, groups and structures, and of the role of ideas and imagination in shaping our actions, seemed to me more helpful than Nolan's insistence on a polarization between "the sinners" and "those sinned against."

The balance of the book is perhaps surprisingly European, with nothing on Asia or Africa (except for white-ruled South Africa), and a single chapter on Brazil to represent South America. It is interesting to wonder how different this might be for a similar volume written for the twenty-first century, and what themes might replace the focus on post-Marxist economic and political thought. Relations with Islam? Secularism and relativism? Bioethical and ecological questions? At the same time, current events suggest that fundamental questions about war and peace, and about the proper purpose and functioning of the economy, need plenty of further exploration.

Only readers with a particular *pietas* towards the Order of Preachers are likely to read this volume from cover to cover; however, it will be a valuable point of reference for anyone interested in Catholic Social Thought. The Dominicans here represent the range of engagement, theoretical and practical, of the Church as a whole, with a particular balance and clarity, perhaps, that flows from their common formation by St Thomas.

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