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Modern Catholic Social Teaching, Commentaries and Interpretations.

Edited by Kenneth R. Himes, O.F.M.

Georgetown University Press, 464 pp., \$39.95

By George W. Hunt, S.J.

This is a truly excellent volume of wide-ranging scholarship that cannot be over-praised. Not only is it the ideal text for seminaries and graduate seminars in theology and/or ethics departments (and a genuine bargain at \$40), but the experience of reading through it is spiritually uplifting as well, simultaneously evoking emotions of thanksgiving and enlightenment. Living as we are in an ideologically crass era in which greed has been transmuted into a noble virtue and individualism into an ethical premise, to encounter the vigorous, rich and counter-cultural tradition of Catholic social teachings acts as a disenchantment for the reader. This volume embodies and updates George Orwell's observation that "we have now sunk to the depth at which the restatement of the obvious is the first duty of intelligent men."

As the subtitle "Commentaries and Interpretations" indicates, the book is a joint effort by 20 scholars (14 commentaries on key documents and seven essays on historical or philosophical or scriptural developments as primers for appreciating the documents cited and the evolution of social doctrine). Some of the contributors have decades-old, well-deserved reputations: Lisa Sowle Cahill, Charles Curran, John R. Donahue, David Hollenbach, Stephen Pope,

John Coleman, John Langan; and their efforts here enhance their reputations. But those less familiar contributors more than prove their equals. In short, this is all-star line-up, but unlike the actual play in most all-star efforts, there are no warmed-over, going-through-the motions entries; each is at the top of his/her game.

No doubt the book's key editor, Kenneth R. Himes, is the one deserving of praise for this happy result, being both the motor and the engineer of the project. Himes contributes one commentary (a fine one on the 1971 Roman synod statement "Justice in the World"), but his introduction is a mini-masterpiece of clarity and precision, a model for aspiring editors everywhere. In other hands, a task as diverse and ambitious as this would end up a hodgepodge. Instead, it is the very design of the book and its orderly consistency that elicits a distinctive readerly pleasure. Part I ("Foundations", four essays providing anchors for understanding the intellectual underpinnings for the documents) and Part III

("Reception and the Future of Tradition", three essays on subsequent interpretations and neglected emphases) bracket nicely the commentaries of Part II.

But it is in Part II, the commentaries section, where the editor's hand is most manifest and most appreciated. Each follows the same format: Introduction, Document Outline, Context or Historical Setting, Authorship and stages of Composition, the Analysis proper, Excursus or Further Reflections, Critical Reactions, Extensive Bibliography. The effort to conform to such a format must have been a chore for the individual contributors initially, but the outcome proves a boon for the reader. Each commentary carries its own educative weight, including a sense of intellectual completeness, while subsequent entries reinforce for the reader a deepened awareness of what a marvelous treasure the Catholic Church has accumulated in little more than a century.

This outstanding volume is an indispensable map for uncovering and recovering that treasure. ■

Rev. George W. Hunt, S.J., former editor-in chief of America magazine, is director of the Archbishop Hughes Institute on Religion and Culture, Fordham University.