Book Reviews: Modern Catholic Social Teaching, Commentaries and Interpretations, edited by Kenneth R. Hines, O.F.M., Georgetown University Press

George W. Hunt, S.J.
Modern Catholic Social Teaching, Commentaries and Interpretations.
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This is a truly excellent volume of wide-ranging scholarship that cannot be overrated. Not only is it the ideal text for seminars 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 eras in which greed has been transmogrified 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 disabusement for the reader. This volume embodies and updates George Orwell's observation that "we have now sunk to the depth at which the restoration of the obvious is the first duty of intelligent men."

As the subtitle “Commentaries and Interpretations” indicates, the book is a joint effort by 28 scholars (14 commentaries on key documents and seven essays on historical or philosophical or scriptural developments as preludes for appreciating the documents cited and the evolution of social doctrine). Some of the contributors have decades-old, well-deserved reputations: Lee Seidle Cothill, Charles Curran, John R. Donohue, David Hollenbach, Stephen Pope, John Goloman, John Langran; and their efforts here enhance their reputations. But those less familiar contribute 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 contrivances; 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 symod 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 bridgepodge. Instead, it is the very depth of the book and its orderly consistency that elicits a distinctive readerly pleasure. Part I "Foundations," four essays providing aches 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, Content or Historical Setting, Authorship and Stages of Composition, the Analysis proper, Excursus of Further Reflections, Critical Reflections, 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.