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BOOK REVIEW

*Hope for Common Ground:
Mediating the Personal and the
Political in a Divided Church,*
by Julie Hanlon Rubio

GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2016 264 PAGES

Reviewed by William A. McCormick, S.J.

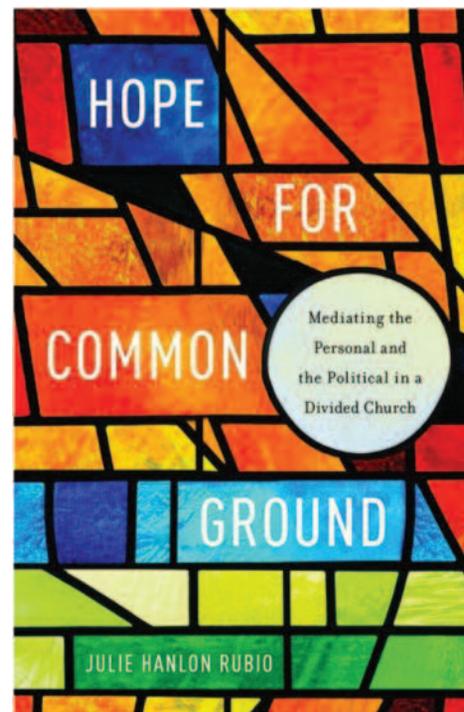
There has been no shortage of complaints about the need for civil dialogue in 21st-century U.S. culture, but precious few concrete recommendations for how to bring it about. With *Hope for Common Ground*, Julie Hanlon Rubio has given us such a guide.

Rubio's argument is simple: Christians should shift their efforts for social and political change toward the "middle space" between politics and ethics. While many Christian churches have come to see the importance of advocating for structural and systemic justice, such sweeping reform is often not possible in our politically polarized times. Rubio argues that Christians can be more effective at finding common ground in the "middle space" – the rich associational life of schools, parishes, neighborhoods, and towns. Rubio elaborates upon and extends these claims through four examples: the family, poverty reduction, abortion, and end-of-life care.

The book's strengths are many. Both of the back cover

blurbs call the book "balanced," and balance is indeed a great quality of the work. Rubio's arguments are remarkably judicious and even-handed throughout, and she applies the "supposition of charity" effectively to engage with and take the best from all kinds of scholars, from Stanley Hauerwas to Charles Curran. Rubio's valuable emphasis on meso-level phenomena is itself a great example of her balance. Modern political and ethical theory are typically caught between the individual and the collective, but Rubio's work is neither a conservative flight from culture nor a liberal embrace of the omniscient state.

Perhaps at root this balance reflects the deep theology of hope that undergirds the work: Rubio is not driven by fear, but is rather realistic about obstacles and difficulties and aware of the power of sin. She is also not animated by unrealistic optimism but deeply committed to Christian hope. This practical embodiment of hope may be Rubio's greatest gift to the reader.



Rubio must also be credited for articulating expertly important tensions and trade-offs any publicly engaged theology must negotiate. In a number of places in her book, for instance, she tackles the relationship between being effective in the world and being faithful to one's religious beliefs. Without denying the deep tensions between those two mandates, she finds ways to show how they can and ought to be in harmony. Similarly, her discussion of cooperation with evil dovetails nicely with her treatment on social sin: while conservatives need to learn to accept some measure of material cooperation with evil, many liberals will need to see that the roots of social sin are indeed personal.

No book can address every issue or anticipate every question, and so the following remarks

BOOK REVIEW

ought not be taken as criticisms of Rubio's project. First, while Rubio calls into question simplistic assumptions about the role of political advocacy, she never specifies the relationship that her "middle space" bears toward politics and the individual. What is that relationship? Although one might think that she has a "wedding cake" metaphor in mind – three discrete layers on top of each other – one could further specify and complicate her model by asking how the three levels in fact interact. I was left wondering, for instance, if Rubio thinks the cultivation of common ground in the middle space would promote civic virtues at the personal level that would rebound to the benefit of our politics, and perhaps promote initiatives that would lead to politically viable structural reforms.

Second, and in a related vein, Rubio's concern for the "middle space" lends itself to a discussion of subsidiarity, a principle of

Catholic social thought that tends to be associated with the right more than the left. Rubio tends to approach subsidiarity from a pragmatic point of view, i.e., the political and the individual have failed. But she thereby at times sells short the principled reason to embrace mid-level associational life, and perhaps also thereby passes up an opportunity to regain a "common ground" approach to subsidiarity that challenges devolutionist models of subsidiarity and left-wing solidarity.

Third, Rubio raises the question of the nature of the common ground in a practically helpful way, and her project could be pushed further in that direction. While Rubio avoids overly theoretical formulations, her procedure naturally lends itself to thought on what practically the common ground looks like. Her chapter on abortion, for instance, attempts to find common ground between the "pro-choice" and

"pro-life" camps. But the "common ground" in this case cannot be the mean between two irreconcilable policy positions. She acknowledges this and urges us to look at the purposes and goals behind those polarized positions, helping us to find ways to locally achieve those goals. But how do the actors involved begin to reconceive their priorities in terms of those meso-level goals? How can common ground be cultivated at that level in a way that overcomes decades of memories, pain, and frustrated desires from national-level advocacy?

Hope for Common Ground will be of great interest to anyone interested in the spiritual and political dimensions of our times, and we need it now more than ever.

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The urban nature of Saint Louis University's campus is apparent between classes when the Grand Avenue crosswalk becomes crowded with student traffic.

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