

REVIEW

MAURIZIO ORMAS, *La questione sociale da Papa Leone a Francesco. Le encicliche sociali che hanno disegnato un nuovo umanesimo*, Collana Prospettive 13, Lateran University Press, Città del Vaticano 2017, pp. 279.

In his very informative and extensive overview on the principal documents of the more than 120-year-old history of the Social Doctrine of the Church, Maurizio Ormas follows implicitly a very strong continuative hermeneutics. From the very beginnings of Catholic social thought in the mid 19th Century (Pius IX with his *Syllabus errorum*), through the first social encyclical of Leo XIII *Rerum novarum* up to the manifold *magisterium* of John Paul II and the last two encyclicals of Benedict XVI and Francis, Ormas sees a continuous evolving of the Church's position in social topics. And if, of course, Pius IX and Leo XIII did not appreciate democracy and the modern liberal state, but then due to John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council this was possible, our author individuates the reason less in paradigmatic changes of the doctrine itself. On the contrary he tries to show that the initial confrontation to liberalism was the reaction to a "continental" comprehension of what liberalism is, while the shift realized by the Second Vatican Council can be seen as the result of the orientation of the Church's authority to another way of thinking liberalism, which is the Anglo-Saxon one (43; cf. 31). Therefore, it is not by chance that the whole

book is introduced by a chapter on *The age of liberalisms* (19-36). Referring to Hayek, the Anglo-Saxon liberalism is appreciated as a defence of individual freedom, while the continental tradition is characterized by an "anti-clerical and anti-Catholic vena" (20). Only some liberal Catholic thinkers of the 19th Century such as Bastiat, Tocqueville and Rosmini are seen as exceptions of this general division of liberal schools (28).

This introductory chapter, which certainly leaves plenty of questions unresolved, is preceded by an Introduction (13-16) and a Preface by Flavio Felice (7-12). Of the whole overview on the social encyclicals, which are always introduced by a short biographical sketch of the Popes and a summary of their pontificates, only a few significant moments can be evidenced. Generally, we deal with a really good summary of the encyclicals and their main topics, which is really not an easy job. Here, the pedagogic experiences and capacity of Maurizio Ormas find their genuine and congenial expression. In the chapters on John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis (chapters 10-12, 145-262), the explanations become particularly detailed and specific. With particular emphasis, the important encyclicals *Laborem exercens* (1981) and *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (1987) are remembered, and indeed both documents often do not influence the present-day Christian social conscience as they should. In the first one, the strong notion of private property, affirmed as a "natural right" in *Rerum no-*

varum, is deepened and understood as the “right common to all to use the goods of the whole of creation” (154). Further, one notices the distinction of “direct employer”, which concretely hires the workers, and the “indirect employer”, which indicates the “one or other facet of the labour relationship, thus conditioning the conduct of the direct employer when the latter determines in concrete terms the actual work contract and labour relations” (155). This distinction strengthens the awareness of the manifold dependences and relationships in which an employer is enwoven. If the encyclical focuses on the reality of work in its inclusive dimensions, it already thematises the relationships to the “immigrated worker” (157). In the second one, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, we read about the global dimension of the social doctrine of the Church, because it deals with the same problem of the “development of peoples” which was the topic of *Populorum progressio* twenty years before (130-137). Here John Paul II denounces the lesions of human rights all over the world, and puts the central focus on the entrepreneurs as the very promoters of worldwide development (159). The various liberal doctrines in economics of that period had not yet contemplated this central importance of entrepreneurs: only O’Driscoll and Rizzo, in their *Economy of time and ignorance* (1985) had opened such a perspective. Another very innovative aspect of this encyclical is the concept of “structures of sin”, with which John Paul II indicates that every sin or lesion of the dignity of people is never a mere single act, but causes further social consequences, for they become perpetuated by social structures and determine future behaving of others (161-162). The Pope then gives a really good definition of *solidarity* which is the real core topic of this encyclical: “a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good” (162). Lastly,

the Pope gives here an epistemological definition of the social doctrine of Church as a branch of moral theology and defines the important principle – which became central in the pontificate of Francis – “option or love of preference for the poor” (163).

It is further an interesting option to insert the social-ethically relevant topics of the encyclical *Evangelium vitae* of John Paul II in the treatment of “classical” documents (181-202), also because the discourse gradually loses its social-critical method, opting for a much more theological reflection on human life as it is the competence of the “social doctrine” which usually maintains a more rationally arguing character. Regarding the encyclical *Caritas in veritate* (209-225), Ormas strengthens the fact that, for the first time in the history of this discipline, the theory of a “stratified” (“poliarchico”) organization of the globalized world emerges (222). Furthermore, the risk and an equal judgement on the challenge of technique acquires a new importance in the social reflections of the Popes (222-223), also because it is anew treated by *Laudato si’* of Francis, in reference to the claim for a more human ecology (232-262). In this way, this perspective towards a new humanism is at the same time an excellent summary of the general message of the social doctrine of the Church (255). Ormas himself tries, in the conclusions (263-270), to highlight the five points he believes are the main topics of all these documents: (1) the dignity of the human person, his liberty and responsibility, (2) the dimension of the family, (3) the dignity of the worker, (4) the duty of all Christians to participate to social and political life, (5) the moral responsibility of governors and individuals with public charges and power.

I do not want to discuss this summary (for example, employers and economic issues are not mentioned), but rather put five questions which I asked myself reading

this book: (1) I would not agree to resume the dynamic evolution of the confrontation of the encyclicals with liberalism by the too easy formula “rejection of continental liberalism and acceptance of Anglo-Saxon liberalism”. Rather, I’d read the relationship between the Social Doctrine of the Church and “liberalism” in a more problematic way. (2) Can we be sure that the “idea of democracy” was always so clearly promoted by the social doctrine of the Church as it is affirmed in occasion of the encyclical *Rerum novarum* (56)? (3) Is it ultimately true that the definition of the principle of subsidiarity in *Quadragesimo anno* was intended to “safeguard the freedom of the citizen” (79)? Indeed, on the first encyclicals which did not assert so clearly the modern individual liberties, some more critical perspective would not have been a disturbance. (4) Does Pope Benedict XVI really “conform to the philosopher Jürgen Habermas” when he claims in *Caritas in veritate* that God should have “a place in the public realm” (210)? For Habermas religions in their plurality, not God, and thus together with the atheist options, should be recognized as a positive reality in the secular state. (5) Especially

with regard to the pontificate of Francis, the question about the objective relevance of a papal statement on economic and technological matters emerges, e.g. on the “logic of technocratic dominance which leads to the destruction of nature” (243) and on the acceptance of decline (254). Therefore, some clarifying comments would have been very helpful. Certainly, these questions are the clear and positive sign that the reading of this book has been really stimulating, and that it requires further discussion.

To conclude, certainly the very less but a bit confusing typing errors (“Hayech” instead of “Hayek”, 19 and 21; “Shuman” instead of “Schuman”, 111) do not diminish the merit of this book, that delivers a good introduction and an overview in documents which embrace more than one and a half centuries. It does not offer, though, any substantial indications for further readings beyond the standard books (cf. the bibliography, 271-275). Therefore it remains an introduction “in itself”, without bridges, but, nonetheless, a good and pleasant one.

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