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Social and economic ethics is a rapidly changing field. The systems of thought and ideologies inherited from the 20th century seem to be exhausted and prove incapable of responding to the challenges posed by, among others, artificial intelligence, the transformation of labor and capital, the financialization of the economy, the stagnation of middle-class wages, and the growing ideological polarization of our societies.

The Journal Ethics, Economics and the Common Goods promotes contributions to scientific debates that combine high academic rigor with originality of thought. In the face of the return of ideologies and the rise of moral neopharisaisms in the Anglo-Saxon world, the journal aims to be a space for rational, free, serious and open dialogue. All articles in the journal undergo a process of double anonymous peer review. In addition, it guarantees authors a rapid review of the articles submitted to it. It is an electronic journal that publishes its articles under a creative commons license and is therefore open access.

Research articles, research reports, essays and responses are double-blind refereed. The journal is bi-annual and publishes two issues per year, in July and December. At least one of these two issues is thematic. The journal is pleased to publish articles in French, English and Spanish.

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# BOOK REVIEWS

Nebel, M. (2024) 'Clemens Sedmak, Enacting Catholic Social Tradition. The Deep Practice of Human Dignity', *Journal of Ethics, Economics and Common Goods*, 21(1) p 105-111.

## **Clemens Sedmak, Enacting Catholic Social Tradition. The deep practice of human dignity. Orbis Book, 2022.**

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There are many kinds of books. Most of them are rather dull and banal. This book is not one of them. It strikes me as profoundly original on a subject that tends to be exhaustingly repetitive, namely Catholic Social Teaching<sup>1</sup>.

The title clearly reveals the author's intention. He is interested in the enactment of a tradition, that is, the consistent way in which the Catholic Church has interpreted the social and political challenges of the time in the light of Revelation. The emphasis on enactment is key. The reading of the signs of the times is mostly done by the Magisterium of the Church, which 'sees and judges', but leaves the realm of political action to lay Christians and people of good will. (the legitimate autonomy of the political sphere). However, it leaves open the question of enactment, and more often than not an introduction to the Catholic social tradition elicits two reactions from the audience: The first is "excellent, we totally agree", but is quickly followed by "so what do we do from here? Stating principles or denouncing injustice is not enough to trigger action. Clemens Sedmak is interested in this triggering of action.

The subtitle is a clue to his answer, and the silver lining that links the various chapters of the book. Enactment of the Catholic Social Tradition (CST) is about a constant commitment to deep practices of human dignity. For enactment is born of a spirituality that inspires and makes sense of the world, interiorised as a Regula of reason, judgement and habits, but is at its heart a healing practice that restores human dignity in the wake of a wounded humanity. Hence the title of the final chapter of the book: "Catholic Social Teaching as Regula and Therapy". The wounded dignity is what triggers action; an action that is primarily concerned with healing and restoring the image and likeness of God in the wounded person. This is quite original and opens up interesting new avenues for both teaching and practicing CST. Let's first follow the development of Sedmak's arguments through the book and then turn to these openings created by his approach to the subject.

The introduction addresses the recurring difficulties of enactment that CST faces. Taken seriously, the claims and demands of CST are strenuous. The preferential option for the poor, the strong commitment to justice and solidarity, the universal destination of the goods of creation are potentially revolutionary. All the more so when they invoke my faith in Christ and are taken personally and become embedded in my context and my life. Here the call to action is first a call to conversion, and the universal claim becomes specific: who is the poor

<sup>1</sup> The author focus on Catholic Social Tradition, which includes the different documents of the magisterium since *Rerum Novarum*, but broaden the perspective and includes significant texts and experiences deemed to deepen and express this hermeneutical task of understanding the "signs of the times".



person who passes by my door? Does my university routinely humiliate some people? Sedmak suggests that CST is better understood as a spirituality rather than a doctrine. “Catholic Social Tradition (...) is a spirituality rather than a doctrine, a *‘Regula’* to be lived rather than a rule to be followed” (Sedmak, 2022, p. vii), for it is “ultimately based on the encounter with Jesus, the Christ, and a personal relationship with God” (Sedmak, 2022, p. xvii). Therefore, “Enacting Catholic Social Tradition (...) is the commitment of following Christ in the social world” (Sedmak, 2022, p. xx) a way of life based on the infinite human dignity of each person. This enactment requires a moment of appropriation of principles so that they can become translated into decisions and, ultimately, into rituals, routines and habits. It must acknowledge conflicts over concrete interpretations and actions, which in turn highlight the need for judgement and the ability to judge. Finally, in the introduction, he underlines the tragic setting of this judgement. In a fallen and wounded humanity, judgments calls are often difficult and less than optimal. Decisions must be made in difficult situations that we do not choose and do not fully understand. Moral clarity and courage are therefore other key components of any enactment of CST.

The first chapter argues that the practice of CST can be framed around the modern concept of human dignity. Sedmak identifies four central aspects of dignity as understood by (Sedmak, 2022, p. 11-13).

- (1) “First human dignity is a concept that orders our relationship with God” (Sedmak, 2022, p. 11). This vertical dimension of dignity addresses the inner and spiritual life of the person, his “transcendent dignity (...) and his innate yearning to ‘be more’” (Sedmak, 2022, p. 12).
- (2) A second, horizontal dimension of human dignity captures its enactment in social and interpersonal relationships. It involves the recognition of the other as another self, whether in marriage or through the institutional mechanism of equality.
- (3) A third ‘expressive’ dimension of human dignity relates to human agency, responsibility and freedom: “Dignity is given space and expression in a person’s life through exercising personal initiative and making up her own mind when she acts” (Sedmak, 2022, p. 13).
- (4) Finally, there is a fourth dimension of dignity, the legal dimension, which addresses the need to translate dignity into rights and conditions.

Hence the book’s claim to understand the Catholic social tradition as the deep practice of human dignity along these four interwoven dimensions: the vertical dimension as source, goal and ultimate criterion; the horizontal dimension of dignity as its social basis; the expressive dimension as its productive moment; while the legal dimension captures the necessary institutionalisation of dignity. Any practice of dignity must therefore articulate these four dimensions, which requires a specific process of discernment.

The second chapter, entitled “The portrayal of principles”, envisions this process of discernment. Principles are by nature abstract and universal. They help to identify ethical challenges and guide moral judgement, but never replace it. Judgement is not universal and abstract, but personal and concrete, based on the richness and complexity of our everyday relationships. Sedmak therefore suggests an analogy between portrait painting and inhabiting the CST principle: “Portraits are not reproductions of an object, but the end result of encounters and conversations between the artist and her ‘portrait partner’. If we emphasize the personal approach to the principles of CST and the irreducible subjective element in judging social realities, we may find reasons to see the technique of portraiture as relevant to the enactment of the Catholic Social Tradition and to the personal inhabitation of the principle of Catholic Social Teaching” (Sedmak, 2022, p. 33). CST has often led to ‘principlism’, i.e. a simplistic deduction of specific moral duties from a set of given ethical principles. Sedmak rightly corrects this view. A principle, in order to become real, must be embedded in me. It has to be personally appropriated. This process is like painting a portrait of a person; a disinterested observer capturing and rendering his impression of her. Principles guide moral judgement when they inform our innermost selves, becoming part of the way we perceive our reality and make sense of facts and events. This is a most welcome and liberating way of understanding CST principles. Sedmak then goes on to paint two principles: the concept of solidarity and the concept of the common good. The shape, shadows, colours and patterns of solidarity are fleshed out through the narratives of concrete cases and people. It reveals the concreteness of universality. Principles do not simplify reality, but guide us through the complexity of our existence. They show and open a path through our daily lives.

However, painting principles is not enough to capture the new, emerging moral and social concerns that people face. The complexity of life is always greater than principles and often requires a further step, a kind of deliberation that Sedmak describes in chapter three as “raw thinking”. Raw thinking is “an experimental process”, “a raw deliberation that does not yet seek the protection of polishing claims” (Sedmak, 2022, p. 73). It asks questions, imagines possibilities, suggests arguments, plays with thought experiments. We must dare to think anew in order to face new situations that are different from previous experiences. In fact, Catholic social tradition can be described as a hermeneutical process of the ‘*rerum novarum*’, of the moral challenges faced by our time. The incompleteness and tentativeness of the answers provided by ‘raw thinking’ help to initiate a discernment by offering different lines of thought. But ‘raw thinking’ also involves the process of selection which is at the heart of discernment; the branching out of options, the identification of the more meaningful and coherent answers among the many initially explored. From ‘raw thinking’ Sedmak moves to ‘disciplined raw thinking’, a ‘guarded and guided’ structured process of discernment (Sedmak, 2022, p. 84, 85). Much of the Catholic social tradition comes from such disciplined practice. Sedmak gives two examples of such raw thinking. The first concerns the replacement of mandatory taxation by voluntary donations (Sedmak, 2022, p. 90); the second concerns the determinants of a just wage in different national contexts (Sedmak, 2022, p. 97).

Both examples show the handling of novelty by processing arguments, identifying nodal issues, mobilising texts and principles in order to propose some criteria for discernment and action.

‘Painting principles’ and ‘Raw thinking’, however important, are only preconditions for the enactment of CST. Chapter IV, “Experimenting with Truth”, returns to Sedmak’s core concern that “the enactment of the Catholic Social Tradition cannot be left to understanding; it has to be translated into habits of action, patterns of thought and modes of perception” (Sedmak, 2022, p. 126). It must become embedded in a person’s life. This, says Sedmak, is a question of truth: “(...) the truth of particular ways of life, particular habits” (Sedmak, 2022, p. 116). And he immediately explains: “As the social dimension of faith, Catholic Social is social spirituality, a way of life that needs to be practiced – lived out – more in the habits that we acquire and that are ingrained in us than in any propositions we may care to discuss. It is exactly this notion of ‘having habits’ and how we acquire and develop them that interest us here; habits are what enable us to perceive the Catholic Social Tradition as ‘Regula’, a rule of life” (Sedmak, 2022, p. 116-117). All the central claims of Sedmak’s book are present in this quote: CST as spirituality; enactment as habits of truth, the appeal to the monastic notion of a regula that frames a life into a certain shared meaning and purpose. Let’s retake the sequence. The moral imperative of obedience to truth implies a search for truth and therefore various experiments with truth in action, that is, with habits. Catholic social tradition isn’t just a theory or a body of texts, but a way of life, a specific way of inhabiting the world. Without enactment, it misses the truth to which it aspires: a life according to the Christian faith; it fails to become specific and therefore to be embedded in our daily lives. This is why Sedmak insists that CST must be seen and understood as a spirituality and a practice, much more than a doctrine. Hence the insistence on habits: how conscious choices become ingrained in a person through repetition (saving the hard work of choosing again and again); how repeated actions slowly shape our innermost morality and spirituality; how normal, everyday life becomes a lifeform, giving a person reliability, predictability and security; how the security of habits provides room for freedom and fruitfulness. This ‘thick’ understanding of habits is illustrated by monastic life. A regula, with its orderly sequences of prayer and work, creates precisely a common life of habits<sup>2</sup>. Catholic social teaching (not tradition, note the inflection) can be compared to a regula, which is what chapter five will develop.

The final chapter concludes with this double and very enticing claim: Catholic Social Teaching is best understood as a Regula and as a Therapy. “Catholic Social Teaching as an expression of the social dimension of the Christian faith is also an articulation of the order and rules of our coexistence. Obviously, a society is not a monastery. But we can entertain the thought that the Catholic social imagination (...) has adopted some key aspects of a monastic rule for the macro level of politics. Catholic Social Teaching expresses rules for a form of life, that is rules for ‘good living’, and can in this sense be likened to the idea of a regula.” (Sedmak, 2022, p. 159). To put Catholic social teaching into practice is to make this “form

<sup>2</sup> “The basic tenets of monastic life and its traditions can be seen as an interweaving of rules and life in such a way as to see the pattern of life woven into the words of the rules and the words of the rules giving tangible expression to the way of life they describe. (...) For monks, this living together is not about wearing the same clothes and living in the same place, it is about habitus; appropriating a way of life so that it becomes second nature, a habit. In other words, a monk is a human being living life consciously.” 159.

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of life" (Sedmak, 2022, p. 159) personal. This means, crucially, a personal conversion. A conversion in which the form of the *regula* becomes mine, shaping the way I see and address my present situation. As an example of such a conversion, Sedmak draws on Mgr Romero and the way in which Catholic Social Teaching brought about a radical change in the way he saw and addressed the reality of El Salvador. The therapeutic moment of Catholic Social Teaching comes when we understand that the new vision brought about by conversion reveals 'social pathologies'. The whole of Catholic social teaching can then be seen as addressing the 'social wounds' of our time and urging their healing. Pope Francis' image of the Church as a 'field hospital' is here given new depth by Sedmak. Much more than a tool to judge and condemn, Catholic Social Teaching is an instrument to help us heal our time.

As an overall assessment of Sedmak's book, I must underline it as a very enticing book worth much more than its short 200 pages. It presents a novel and original way to understand and address CST.

I do, however, have one concern about the book and one wish or suggestion. Let's start with the concern. It is about the normative primacy and priority given to human dignity in this book. Understand me well: I think human dignity is important, and I recognise the concept as a modern cornerstone of CST. But over the past decade I have become increasingly concerned that it is overshadowing and simplifying the complexity of the normative framework of CST. Historically, dignity is a newcomer to this tradition, with no single previous concept capable of capturing it. It builds on elements of anthropology, soteriology and eschatology. Dignity replaces these many elements supposedly capturing all the previous elements. I doubt it can. If dignity is to be adopted as the all-encompassing concept of CST, then along the dimensions of dignity I would also carefully distinguish between the different kinds of normativity associated with each of the four dimensions described by Sedmak (final, causal, instrumental, etc.). I fear, in particular, that the adoption of dignity as a core value of CST will result in a loss of the dialectical tension with the kingdom of God that has traditionally characterised it as a prophetic tradition. Secondly, there is a curious tension between the promotion of a deep practice of dignity and the dramatic ineffectiveness of a human-rights based approach to development. The international consensus on human dignity and human rights does not seem able to inspire and trigger meaningful development policies that bring about real change. Such an approach posits human dignity and human rights, looks for abuses or violations, and stresses the need to address these abuses and violations. But it gives little indication of the reasons why violations and abuses occur, nor an understanding of the social processes needed to overcome them. In other words, invoking dignity certainly helps to identify and denounce abuse. But it does not really help to prevent, explain or resolve them. So is dignity the best way to start thinking about the enactment of CST?

As for the wish, it comes from my Mexican reading of the book. Each chapter is illustrated with examples, in line with the book's main claim to highlight the enactment of CST. Most of the examples are welcome and interesting, but also somewhat anticlimatic. Some of these

examples strike me as presenting rather the dull moral challenges of the rich world (sugar diet, recycling dilemma, gender identity, taxation). The book could have been based on a more diverse set of examples and on more daring moral challenges, especially addressing the plight of the developing world: examples from El Salvador and the violence of the Maras; the land grab by international companies of indigenous lands in the Peruvian Amazon; the persistent pattern of structural poverty in Africa or Latin America.

None of this, however, limits the originality and powerful reframing that Sedmak proposes. Let's reiterate them in this final paragraph: CST is best understood as a spirituality and a way of life embedded in deep practices; the enactment of CST can be described as a regula and a therapy. Both suggestions open up a way of thinking, teaching and doing CST in a new way. It did for me.

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