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Prophetic and Public: The Social Witness of U.S. Catholicism

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"To be prophetic and public, a countersign to much of the culture, but also a light and leaven to all of it, is the delicate balance to which we are called." Heyer begins her valuable contribution to Georgetown's Moral Traditions Series with this quote from Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, setting the stage for a study designed to identify and examine both the prophetic and public voices in American Catholic social thought. While this task alone would have been sufficient to warrant inclusion in this auspicious series, Heyer then takes her categories beyond abstract theological debates and tests them in the field of concrete praxis by analyzing the way Catholic social thought is applied by three Catholic social advocacy groups. The result is a work that is both pedagogically and academically fruitful.

Heyer begins by surveying some philosophical and sociological perspectives on public theology in the United States. There are few surprises here as Heyer works through the debates about the first amendment, the common good in a pluralistic society, a religious versus a secularized language for public discourse, the postmodern challenge to ahistorical, deductive rationality, and the call to revitalize a "chaste, sober and thin" public debate through the "social capital" of religious communities. This overview serves as a solid foundation for the rest of the book.

In chapter two, Heyer logically follows up the discussion of public theology in the U.S. with a survey of the foundations of Catholic public theology.
Here again, Heyer does a very competent job of outlining and highlighting some of the major strains of Catholic social thought of the last century.

After these helpful introductory chapters, Heyer gets to the heart of her argument where she sets out to more fully elucidate the distinction between a *public* and a *prophetic* approach to a theology of Catholic social engagement by comparing and contrasting two contemporary theologians whose work models these two divergent approaches. Heyer chooses Bryan Hehir to represent the more accommodating *public* model, and Michael Baxter to represent the more parochial, *prophetic* model. Heyer's description of the work of these theologians is both fair and thorough. Ultimately, the purpose of the chapter, and of the book as a whole, is to place these two authors — and these two models of approaching Catholic social thought — into dialogue with one another in order to demonstrate to the reader that, first of all, neither model is entirely sufficient unto itself, and, secondly, that each of these two perspectives has something to gain from constructive dialogue with the other.

Heyer then shifts gears and moves out of the abstract realm of theological ideas into the practical realm of Catholic social advocacy and activism. In chapter four, Heyer describes the ministry and theology of three Catholic organizations: Network, Pax Christi USA, and the USCCB. In chapter five, she examines these organizations in the light of the two models she developed in chapter three. In the end, Heyer comes to a very catholic conclusion. She warns us against the idea that we need to make a false choice between the two strategies that Hehir and Baxter
favor. Rather, she makes a very convincing argument for a hybrid strategy that incorporates the best of each approach and avoids their respective pitfalls.

_Prophetic and Public_ is a valuable resource for those who teach Catholic social thought and could potentially be adopted for use in a more advanced undergraduate course. The book is not aimed at introducing a student to this body of teaching, but is more adept at fine-tuning one's understanding through an examination of the internal debates going on behind the scenes.

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