Two recent books by Rupert Ederer raise an old question for those seeking to learn and advance the social teaching of the Church. What approach is best? How might one engage more deeply Catholic social thought, especially as it applies to questions pertaining to the economic sphere?

Over the last decade, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ “Task Force on Catholic Social Teaching and Catholic Education” stated what is obvious to many: “far too many Catholics are not familiar with the basic content of Catholic social teaching.” To remedy this shortcoming, the bishops proposed an approach that simplifies Catholic social thought into seven principles or “themes”: life and dignity of the human person; family, community, and participation; rights and responsibilities; option for the poor and vulnerable; the dignity of work and the rights of workers; solidarity; and care for God’s creation.

An advantage to this theme-based approach is that it fits with the American desire for a simple “seven easy steps” formula. This sort of summary is well suited for a chapter in a textbook or a list that fits neatly on a flyer or bookmark available for people to pick up in the vestibule after mass. When accompanied by social action at the local and global levels, a list of seven principles certainly is better than nothing.

However, it might be objected that reducing Catholic social thought to “key themes” in “seven easy steps” has shortcomings. For example, the “themes” tend to get translated into more familiar categories of contemporary American political discourse, especially for adults whose thinking is shaped by partisan politics or the constricted divisions of cable news networks. When Catholic social thought is pulled out of its natural context, central notions tend to become oversimplified or distorted. To an audience of college students or adults with an education in economics, finance, or politics, the simplicity of seven easy themes might appear lacking in subtlety, context, and profundity.

One solution, advocated by the bishops, is to study the social encyclicals and other teachings of the Vatican. As the bishops put it, “The depth and richness of this tradition can be understood best through a direct reading of these documents.” At the same time, honesty requires us to
acknowledge that many people, even those with expertise in economics or finance, may lack the framework, background, or guidance needed to engage Vatican documents in an intelligent way. Approaching the social encyclicals alone may be too challenging. What should be done?

A very good place to turn is the “Catholic Social Thought Series” and the new titles published by Scarecrow Press (an imprint of the Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group). That series is growing. Two new books by the Catholic economist Rupert Ederer were published recently. These raise a different question: Is it better to aim for an overview of the major social encyclicals from *Rerum novarum* (1891) to the present or to focus in greater detail on the Church’s social teaching as expressed by a single pope? That is the alternative of Ederer’s two books. The answer, it seems to me, is the old Catholic response: both/and.

I encountered Ederer first through his translations of Ketteler and Pesch, those important German Catholic intellectuals whose work stands behind much contemporary Catholic social thought. Although Ederer may not be well known outside his area of focus, his translation of Pesch’s five-volume economic “Summa” is an important and genuine contribution. Ederer, professor emeritus of the State University of New York in Buffalo, received the Society of Catholic Social Scientists’ Pope Pius XI Award in 1997.

The eight central chapters of the expanded and revised edition of *Economics as if God Matters* each focus on one social encyclical, from *Rerum novarum* (1891) to *Caritas in veritate* (2009). An introduction and a concluding chapter serve to frame the social teaching of the Church in a larger context while filling in some of the details behind and between the encyclicals.

Ederer’s given task is to summarize and think through the central social encyclicals in light of “his own reflections and views developed over an academic lifetime” (xviii). The text is written “with a prayer that it will inspire persons to read, or to reread, and to study the encyclicals” (xviii). This is the work of a mature scholar. Having been born in 1923, Dr. Ederer’s life has spanned much of the period in which the modern social encyclicals were promulgated. When Ederer began his doctoral studies in economics at Saint Louis University in the post-war period, modern Catholic social thought was in a very different state than it is today, since most of the modern social encyclicals, including most of those studied in *Economics as if God Matters*, came later.

Several patterns emerge through the course of Ederer’s chapters. While the themes and principles noted above are emphasized, Ederer’s study helps us recognize the manner in which the social teaching of the
Church developed organically in light of concrete social conditions and unfolding issues. Throughout Ederer’s book, reflection on the modern economy and issues of authentic human development are tied in various ways to history and social context. The great strength of *Economics as if God Matters* is the opportunity to reflect with a mature scholar on the major modern social encyclicals while seeing the world through the eyes of one who has thought deeply for a long time about modern papal social teaching and economics.

If I had one criticism, it would be that *Gaudium et spes* might have merited a more detailed treatment. The Second Vatican Council’s important statement on social questions is treated (albeit somewhat briefly) in Ederer’s final chapter, but because I consider *Gaudium et spes* to be one of the most significant summaries of modern Catholic social thought, I would have liked more focus on that important text. Of course, *Gaudium et spes* is not an encyclical, so it doesn’t quite fit into the structure and plan of Ederer’s focus on social encyclicals.

A subtle insight emerges as the book unfolds: despite the emphasis on the social encyclicals, modern Catholic social teaching has been articulated through a wide range of pronouncements and documents other than encyclicals. Indeed, Ederer concludes *Economics as if God Matters* emphasizing the need for concrete realization of the Church’s social teaching, and he makes this point by quoting an address delivered by Pius XII in St. Peter’s Square in 1952. By concluding *Economics as if God Matters* with an address of Pius XII, Ederer reminds us of the importance of papal statements other than social encyclicals. In many instances, the specific circumstances of time and place come into greater focus through papal Christmas messages, homilies, or speeches to groups and organizations. Ederer treats these in detail in his other book, *Pope Pius XII on the Economic Order*.

Ederer begins his book on Pius XII with a chapter titled, “An Age of Great Popes.” Ederer responds briefly but succinctly to the ongoing vilification of Pius XII and the “cowardly silence” thesis. The 1963 play by Rolf Hochhuth, *Der Stellvertreter*, advanced a now well-known caricature of Pius XII. As Ederer puts it, “There is implicit in this bit of unhistorical nonsense the naive notion that if Pius XII had spoken up righteously and loudly, Adolf Hitler would have discontinued his activities and run for cover” (5). Ederer references the work of Marchione and Rychlak; both have discredited the cowardly silence thesis. Ederer urges us to look past every such “belated egregious distortion of history” to focus instead on the teachings of Pius XII “dealing specifically with the economic order” (6). Ederer does so in detail.
Pope Pius XII on the Economic Order was a genuine education for me. Pius XII promulgated forty-one encyclicals during his pontificate (1939–1958). None was a “social encyclical.” Perhaps for that reason, I had not paid as much attention to his contribution to modern Catholic social teaching. Ederer shows in this book the organic development of the tradition, connecting themes that are much better known (to me at least) from Quadragesimo anno and Rerum novarum to the sorts of social issues that arose in the postwar economy. Ederer divides his study into eleven chapters. He treats the encyclicals of Pius XII, the Christmas messages, and a range of issues including the economic order, the world of work, agriculture, population, the middle class, and finance. Ederer provides helpful summaries of the social teaching of Pius XII on many specific topics. In many cases, the issues seem entirely relevant more than sixty years later: the responsible entrepreneur, accident prevention in industry, ideals for business, women and work, and many other topics. One of the most delightful aspects of reading this book is the sense that modern Catholic social teaching is a deeply rooted tradition, and that issues discussed at the Second Vatican Council and afterward were very much being discussed prior to the Council.

Ederer exudes a contagious fascination for his topic. He does little to place Vatican social teaching in conversation with other traditions or with mainstream economics, of which he is mostly dismissive. Instead, through both of these books, we hear the voice of an unabashed cheerleader. Ederer wants his reader to recognize that we are living in an age of great popes, and that what the modern popes have said about economics merits deeper study and reflection.

Returning to the original question, what is the best way to approach Catholic social teaching? Which is the better: an intensive but accessible reflection on the major social encyclicals of the last 120 years or a focused study of the concrete social teaching of a single modern pope? Rupert Ederer’s new books provide an opportunity for readers to do both and decide for themselves.

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