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Book Review: Catholic Social Learning, Educating the Faith That Does Justice, Roger Bergman

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Catholic Social Learning, Educating the Faith That Does Justice, Roger Bergman

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By C. Michael Bryce

Professor Roger Bergman has written a provocative book seeking to rouse the reader from a first-world slumber. He recommends a pedagogical roadmap for an education that does justice. The book recounts his 30-plus years in Catholic higher education and his commitment to justice, along with teaching various service-learning courses at Creighton University and witnessing the reflective learning of his students. From this core experience, Bergman asks how students can be best transformed into solidarity with persons in need. He asks: “How is the commitment to the difficult work of social justice provoked in the first place?” “How is the commitment sustained over a lifetime?”

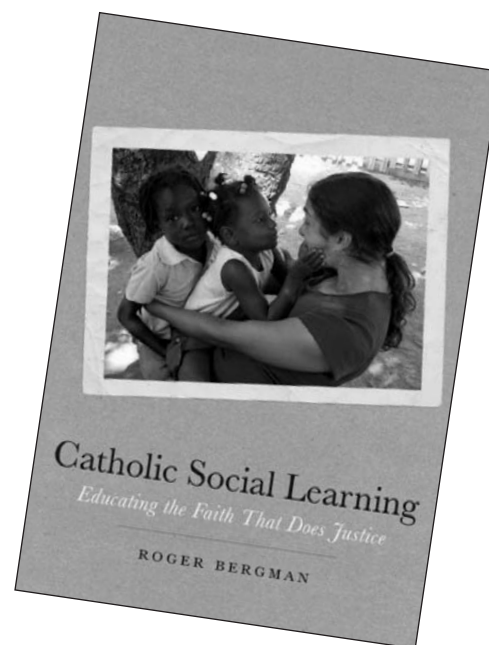
Bergman responds to his first question by identifying Gabriel Marcel’s simple but essential observation that personal encounters are the key. Then he weaves in two Catholic social teaching (CST) documents, the Encyclical of Pope Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, and the 1971 Rome synod of bishops document, *Justice in the World*.

Bergman highlights other CST documents but remains concerned that CST remains the church’s “best kept secret” and endeavors to solve

this by identifying an active education that does justice through service-learning. St. Ignatius of Loyola recognized that assisting others is accomplished through “action in the world,” and saw that “love ought to show itself more in deeds than in words.”

To fulfill this *telos*, the Jesuits developed an educational plan to go out into the world, even globally. Unlike other colleagues/professors at the University of Paris, the early Jesuits went down into the courtyard and the street to assist their students. *Cura Personalis* meant that each student was individually recognized and treated with respect. This example encouraged students to care for individual persons whom they encountered later along the way.

More recently, the idea of individual concern for others has been amplified in “Men for Others,” by Fr. Pedro Arrupe, S.J., the Superior General of the Jesuits in 1975. Fr. Arrupe stresses the need for Jesuit-trained men and women to be men and women for others. This is not an option, but a definite spiritual mandate in line with the Gospel in Matthew 25:36-41. Fr. Arrupe’s successor, Fr. Peter Hans Kolvenbach, identifies the importance of contacts over concepts, of students being in the gritty world in order to learn social justice experientially. Bergman also examines Ignatian history and education, including the more recent



documents: “Characteristics of a Jesuit Education (1986)” and the “Ignatian Pedagogy, A Practical Approach (1993).” and sets forth the wonderful tableau of Ignatian learning as the foundation for justice.

The course shifts course

After the analysis of Ignatian pedagogy, the book could have continued sequentially into an analysis of the theology, legacy and experience related to the Gospel of St. Matthew 25: 35-41. In which Jesus identifies himself with those who suffer. The Gospel passage spells out the virtues expected by Jesus of man (sheep) and the consequences for man

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(goats) if these virtues are not fulfilled. It is a starkly clear statement of what virtue is and what is required in light of the consequences. It is also an excellent moral foundation for an education in faith that does justice.

But the book takes a different route. Professor Alasdair MacIntyre, the renowned moral ethicist, is nominated as a “guide” to enlighten the reader about how Catholic social teaching and Ignatian pedagogy can create counter-cultural communities, leading to solidarity with the needy, and he highlights MacIntyre’s writings on Aristotle, suggesting that Aristotle is the “grandfather of service learning,” in view of his theory on distributive justice. As Aristotle offers a rationale for emulating “wise persons” Bergman stresses his own high regard for a personal role model, Archbishop Oscar Romero.

He claims the three-part peda-

gogical scheme of “see-judge-act,” derived from the social pastoral writings of Joe Holland and Fr. Peter Henriot, S.J., dates back to encyclicals of the 1700’s, and is evidence of a long-standing social analysis within the church. Cardinal John Henry Newman is separately seen as a creator and exemplar of social learning education for justice, comparable to St. Ignatius of Loyola in a continuum.

He evaluates transformative learning, including the importance of a disorienting event or emotion that subsequently transforms the student into solidarity with persons in need. The emotion can be anger, despair, rage, regrets, rejection, abandonment or shame, however Bergman seizes upon shame as the central emotion for transformation to solidarity in service learning because it is briefly referenced in the Spiritual Exercises and also in reflections found in students’ journals.

Overall, the route the book takes to find an education that does justice is an interesting one and is conducted with intellectual rigor. Professor Bergman utilizes Ignatian pedagogy effectively, but seems to look elsewhere for a moral grounding of service learning. A number of intriguing questions arise, but still the path taken by the book seems narrow, and ideas and theories that appeal to the author don’t always connect with MacIntyre and Cardinal Newman. It is also difficult to accept Bergman’s identification of the emotion of shame as the central event or emotion in Catholic transformative service learning or clinical education. Compassion, empathy, inspiration, love and a desire to actually assist others are more transformative experientially, in both the short and long run.

The book could have moved earlier into a more extensive discus-

sion of the biblical moral basis for service learning. This includes the Mosaic Law, where a call to assist the more vulnerable and ensure justice can be found in Isaiah 1:17 and Jeremiah 22:3. And, in Micha 6:8, the Lord requires us to do justice, to love with kindness and to walk humbly with God. Likewise, Proverbs 31:9 calls for the defense of the poor and needy.

More familiar to us may be the requirements of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 30-37); Lazarus and the Rich Man (Luke 16: 13-41); and the parable of the Rich Fool (Luke 12: 13-21). In each case the failure to do justice or assist others is an eternally fatal flaw (or fatal lack of virtue).

Back on course

The 4th century homilies of St. Basil reiterate the importance of the Mosaic Law and also highlight the centrality of Matthew 25: 36-41. St. Basil emphasizes that Jesus really meant what he said in the Gospel passage and expected action by us to fulfill those words. Because of this, St. Basil established a community where poor and sick persons could receive food, shelter and medical treatment. This community was an example of a more humane social order in difficult circumstances, not just a temporary measure to provide charity. In experiencing this need, St. Basil responded to the strong call to do something about it. This strong call is what successfully involves students in service or clinical learning and also encourages them to a lifetime of service. Professor Bergman repeats a similar call to meeting the difficult task of social justice and continuing his lifelong commitment through teaching, learning, writing and serving—a call heard and answered by Jesuits and their students for over 450 years. ■



Creighton University students participate in Habitat for Humanity build.