

Book Reviews

ECCLESIOLOGY IN CONTEXT. Johannes A. Van Der Ven. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Williams B. Eerdmans Publications, 1996. pp. xv + 568. \$ 29.

In more recent times, the concept of contextualization has become a dominant feature in the exploration of theology. The context in which faith is concretely and historically articulated and structured cannot be bypassed in our attempt to build up a relevant and meaningful theology. This is the reason why today theology has been addressing itself to the life contexts of the people, to the socio-economic and political situations prevailing in society. This orientation stems from the conviction that theology cannot be simply an intellectual solipsism or academic acrobatics in the religious arena.

The expression (contextualization) has very quickly gained popularity in Ecclesiology for the simple reason that the Church is considered to be a community of the disciples of Jesus which is called upon to live in communion and fellowship and to build up the Kingdom of God in a concrete life situation in accordance with the signs of the times. Obvious as it may be, the Church, in this approach, is placed in the context of the society in order to contribute to the liberation of humanity and society through its evangelical praxis. The book under review is the fruit of a brilliant attempt and relentless effort of Johannes A. Van Der Ven to evolve such a contextual theology of the Church proceeding from the context of modernization, a social process which has been strongly influencing the Western countries of the Northern hemisphere. To be more specific, this book makes a profound reflection on how the Church can respond to the various

crucial challenges the Western countries are confronting such as secularization and individualization. Despite the fact that the attention is primarily focused on the context of the Western society, it has not failed to pay heed to, "the knowledge of the originality, creativity, and persuasiveness of the ecclesiologies that are being developed in the countries of the Southern hemisphere, in particular the ecclesiology of liberation" (p. xi).

One of the noteworthy features of this book is that it has rightly placed praxis before theology, and thereby set a proper methodological orientation for the whole book. To be more specific, it has laid emphasis on the praxis of the Church rather than indulging merely in the theoretical and conceptual discussion and the nature and essence of the Church which are also in a way shaped and moulded by praxis. This praxis, as the author points out, can be described as the practice in which a transformatory orientation is predominantly active. This is to say that the transformation of every Christian community and the whole society in accordance with the values of the Gospel for which Jesus bore witness till the end of his life should be the ultimate goal of praxis.

Concerning the structure of the book, we can say that it comprises six parts, each forming a coherent part of the whole. The first two parts deserve our special attention, as they clarify the context of the whole study, namely they place the Church within the context of the Western society, which is determined by the fundamental process of modernization. The concomitant effect of modernization is all the more felt in the West in the form of secularization, individualization, religious indifference and anticlericalism. From this context the general as well as the core functions of the Church are determined. The general function, according to the author, is religious communication and the core functions are identity, integration, policy and management of the Church. The III, IV, V and VI parts form the central part of the book, as they deal with the four core functions of the Church. The first function refers to the religious identity of the Church, highlighting the two theological codes, namely People of God and Jesus Movement. The second core function of integration is dealt

with within the context of individualization proceeding from the code "Body of Christ". The third core function concerns the policy of the Church, its programmes and projects and its organizational structure. Its permanent renewal has to be developed from the theological code "building of the Spirit". The fourth and last core function of management deals with the administrative infrastructure which has to be developed from the theological code "Church of the poor".

Needless to say, this book is indeed valuable for its original ideas, pertinent analysis and enlightened perspectives. Though it is written keeping in mind the challenges and problems confronted by the Church in the West, it is also replete with a lot of theological insights and pastoral strategies which could certainly be useful for developing contextual ecclesiologies in other continents too. I have no hesitation in agreeing with Prof. Richard R. Osmer's pertinent comment that this book is, "destined to become a standard work in courses on practical theology, religious education, pastoral care, and congregational studies" (quoted on the back cover page).

S. Devaraj

Church the Sacrament of Christ: Patristic Vision and Modern Theology. George Kaitholil. Bandra, Mumbai: St. Paul's, 1997. pp. 144. Rs. 50.

The book under review recounts to the readers the beginning and progress of the Church and Sacraments in the early centuries. George Kaitholil, who has also authored several other books, has ventured on this work with his own impressive style, delving into the Christian roots. The book consists of 11 chapters altogether. The last chapter gives a brief sketch of the selected early Church fathers. The rest of the book can be classified into two units of which the former deals with the Patristic vision of the Church and the latter the development of the sacrament of theology.

G. Kaitholil appreciates both the Latin and Greek fathers for their definite stance even though they are polemical, fanatical and sometimes violent in their exposition. Various visions of the Church

have been taken up with special reference to the contribution of the Church fathers and the author bundles together everything with a single focal point as 'the vision' of the Church.

The writer elaborately unfolds the available records, testimonies, primary and secondary sources so as to elucidate the "mystery" of revelation that had an apocalyptic vision. It is all the more fascinating to get to know the apologetic vision of the Church - how the early fathers defended the whole Christendom from all accusations levelled against it. He brings out adequately the apologetics of several fathers which gave the Christians the knowledge and courage to stand against their critics. To the question why the innocent Christians were persecuted, the celebrated Justin gives the answer (36) and evidently convinces the persecuted Christians. The author also portrays the clear view of the pre-Christian Gnostic sects which propagated doctrines that repudiated the fundamental Christian faith and how they were referred to and tackled by the renowned Church fathers.

It is interesting to note the evolution of the theological reflections on the role of the bishops and the regulations about the episcopal ordinations. Cyprian, a reputed theologian known for his maturity of thought, underlines specifically the sanctifying functions of the bishop and the special significance of the Eucharist. Viewing the political and historical vision of the Church after the persecution, the author writes that Christianity and the Roman Empire were collaborating with each other and this closeness occasioned the regeneration and the steady growth of the Christian community and the sacraments. Liturgical languages, reinterpretation of rites, general ideas of cult have been certainly influenced by the Greco-Roman context. Church is the communion of Christians and one who participates in that communion, embraces ultimately Christ himself.

Papal absolutism is still controversial and debatable. We have the bad precedence of the absolute authority vested in the Pope that played a havoc with the unity of the Church in the Middle Ages. Kaitholil clearly says, "Local Ordinary could be given full freedom to exercise his power. Responsible collegiality of the bishops, however fosters the unity of the Church at large." Finally, he underlines the

essential points that the Church is the sacrament of Christ, the mystery of salvation is revealed and celebrated in the Church and that only if a person imbibes the spirit of Jesus who is himself the Sacrament can he partake of the mystery of salvation.

The unbiased and honest attempt of the author in driving home the significance of the Patristic vision coupled with the sacramental theology is commendable. The work is comprehensive, well integrated and records with clarity the hardships, struggles gone through by the Church fathers. The author has verily gone through a wide range of materials to offer a better account to the readers. He truly deserves our appreciation. All the same he seems to fail to take into account the rude realities of life in the social, cultural and political arenas and propose the sacraments as a dynamic force for the transformation of the society. Anybody with a quest for the patristic vision of the church and sacraments can read this book with much profit.

A. Diraviam

John Paul II: The Encyclicals in Everyday Language. Ed. Joseph G. Donders. Maryknoll, New York : Orbis Books, 1996. pp.x + 324. \$16.

Encyclicals are the pastoral letters of the Supreme Pastor to the Universal Church. They carry the authentic, official teachings of the Church to its members. Quite often whenever a crisis or a serious problem of any nature - moral, doctrinal, social or theological - emerges in some form or the other the Pope as head of the Church writes the encyclicals to make the position of the Church clear and to steer it along the course set by its founder, the Lord Jesus. The present Pope John Paul II has released several such pastoral letters. Some of them have been put together to make this book.

It is not necessary to delve into the content of each of the encyclicals since that will serve no purpose here. For all these encyclicals had been separately published as and when they had been written and hence could have reached the hands of the readers earlier.

Here we shall focus our attention on the nature of this edited volume comprising the important twelve encyclicals.

The book opens with John Paul II's first encyclical, namely **Redeemer of Humankind** (*Redemptoris Hominis*). The other encyclicals listed in the book are: **The Mercy of God** (*Dives in Misericordia*), **On Human Work** (*Laborem Exercens*), **The Apostles of the Slavs** (*Slavorum Apostoli*), **Lord and Giver of Life** (*Dominum et Vivificantem*) **The Mother of the Redeemer** (*Redemptoris Mater*), **On Social Concern** (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*), **The Mission of the Redeemer** (*Redemptoris Missio*), **The Hundredth Year : "New Things" One Hundred Years Later** (*Centessimus Annus*), **The Splendor of Truth** (*Veritatis Splendor*), **The Gospel of Life** (*Evangelium Vitae*), **That They May be One** (*Ut Unum Sint*).

The editor deserves special appreciation for the clarity, the flow of easy language and the condensed manner in which he has brought out this volume. Taking the format first, this edition is designed for the ordinary lay readers. So he has taken every effort to avoid any confusion regarding the chapter, divisions, sub-titles etc. The title of each encyclical in English with its equivalent in Latin helps the reader remember the names of the encyclicals in an easy manner. The number of the chapters of each encyclical with their titles and sub-titles are clearly mentioned. Though a somewhat abridged edition, the numbers of the paragraphs are also meticulously marked making it very easy for the reader reach the original text for any further reference or deeper study.

Coming to the content of the book, we must know that many of John Paul II's encyclicals are rich in ideas and sometimes difficult to follow without some simplified form. Fr. Donders does valuable service in rendering these difficult texts more accessible to a wide circle of readers. Furthermore, he gives a brief introduction to each encyclical which provides succinctly the historical background of the particular encyclical and its central theme. This method, of course, disposes the mind of the reader to open the book with some ease and interest.

Another special feature of this book could be the inclusion of three important social encyclicals of John Paul II. They are : **On**

Human Work, On Social Concern and The Hundredth Year : "New Things" One Hundred Years Later. These encyclicals speak volumes about the Church's concern for the social problems encountered not only by the Catholics but also by all peoples. Such encyclicals rendered in easy English and simple form are of immense help to the lay readers in understanding the interest and involvement of the Church also in the social affairs of the people thus leading them in establishing a society of love and brotherhood, freedom and justice which are the marks of the Kingdom of God.

In fine, as the editor himself admits "this book contains unofficial versions of John Paul II's encyclicals." He also directs the reader to the official texts for any detailed discussion and in-depth study. This little drawback, however, does not detract from the real merit of the book which lies in its faithful adherence to the message of the encyclicals. It is an asset to have all the twelve valuable encyclicals in one volume. It comes in handy for easy reference and study. It is certainly a good source book for personal study and group discussions in schools and colleges.

T. Victor