
This is an important book, both in its own right and for the constructive ecclesiological project it heralds and initiates. A work of deeply researched, appropriately restrained and maturely honed ecclesial passion, it is as important for the virtues and commitments it advocates and exemplifies as for the substantive analysis it pursues. That said, it is an emotionally demanding book, particularly so for those who harbour hopes for significant further ecclesial renewal within Roman Catholicism in the spirit of Vatican II, for the tale it tells is one of sober realism.

With particular but not exclusive focus on the United States context, Brad Hinze, Professor of Theology at Fordham University and formerly of Marquette, provides here a detailed analytical history of the various experiments that have been conducted in introducing dialogical practices into every level of Roman Catholic decision making since the Second Vatican Council (1963-65). With cool forensic skill he lays bare the current anatomy of the Roman ecclesial body of Christ.

Following a short Preface, the book begins with a scene-setting Introduction touching on such matters as the ‘shift to a dialogical understanding of the church’ in the Vatican II documents and the related development of Trinitarian ecclesiology, Hinze’s own assumed understanding of the concept of dialogue, and the working methodological commitments that are in play in the work. Following this are chapters devoted in turn to the ways in which practices of dialogue can be seen to have functioned at parochial, diocesan and national levels (in Chapter Three, the U.S. Bishops’ sponsored national consultation process of the early 1970s, culminating in the ill-fated Call to Action assembly of 1976; in Chapter Four, the innovative and ambitious consultative process that lay behind the development and articulation of high-profile pastoral letters of the U.S. Episcopal Conference during the 1980’s; in Chapter Five, the still continuing work of the Catholic Common Ground Initiative of Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago in the 1990s) and at the international level (in Chapter Seven, the Synod of Bishops; in Chapter Eight, ecumenical dialogues; in Chapter Nine, inter-religious dialogue). In addition, situated between the chapters focussing on national and international initiatives, Chapter Six is given over to a fascinating case-study account of the significant learning in the ways of dialogical decision making that has taken place in
women’s religious congregations during this period, with specific attention to the Adrian Dominicans.

Taken together, these nine chapters – each impressively informed by the relevant primary and secondary sources that provide the necessary narratival data for the analysis – comprise an invaluable resource, a compendium of thoroughly researched information on key movements and developments in modern Catholicism. In this regard, the detailed footnotes are very welcome. That said, searching for full details of sources would have been made significantly easier with the inclusion also of a comprehensive bibliography of all works cited and consulted. Compounding this, there is a tendency on occasion to cite from sources without providing precise details (for one example, see p. 63).

However, for all its concern to conduct a comprehensive survey of the relevant material, we are dealing here with something more than a narratival survey alone. As alluded to above, Hinze explicitly views this work as a prolegomenon to a subsequent constructive systematic articulation of a dialogical ecclesiology informed by close analysis of diverse theoretical accounts and critiques of dialogical communication. These interests, as made explicit in the Introduction, are at work throughout each of the specific explorations conducted here. His methodology, he tells us, is a hybrid of hermeneutical commitment to situating and interpreting texts in context, of phenomenological commitment to asking after the intentionality that lies behind events and of post-modern cultural anthropological commitment to exposing and examining the differentials of power and access in communicative contexts. As such, the motivating concern behind this volume is not simply to chart the various endeavours in dialogical decision making within contemporary and near-recent Roman Catholicism, but to identify and to analyse, as the sub-title indicates, the very real obstacles and frustrations that have arisen during this period, in service both of asking after constructive lessons for the future and of identifying areas requiring further work.

Recurrent throughout the volume is the question as to whether the canonical limitation of the role of dialogical structures and procedures to the consultative rather than legislative level – thus preserving the executive role of hierarchy in Roman Catholic practice – need necessarily be understood in an entirely non-deliberative manner. Sure, the integrity and prophetic orientation of true ecclesial discernment requires that it be something other than just the replay of factional, oppositional politics and majority voting; something informed by a self-critical ethic and associated embedded virtues of collective discernment of the truth of things. But that, so the argument recurs, need not reduce to execu-