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Julie Hanlon Rubio, *Hope for Common Ground: Mediating the Personal and the Political in a Divided Church*

Moral Traditions series (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2016). xxi + 242 pp. £21.00. ISBN 978-1-62616-306-5 (pbk)

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It is no secret that we live in a time of intense polarization, perhaps especially in the American political context. This situation may be explained in a number of ways. Some will point to increasing economic inequality or socioeconomic and racial ‘sorting’. Others may point to the concurrent rise of ‘identity politics’ and the ‘politics of resentment’. Others will highlight the effects of technology, including the rise of algorithm-driven social media networks, on public discourse. Still others will highlight the way the internet has democratized media and journalism, paving the way for hyper-partisan news outlets and an endless cycle of claims of ‘fake news’. Yet others will point to other factors. Whatever we take to be the primary cause (in reality, each of those likely contributes to the problem), we cannot deny the effects: we live in a time when it is increasingly difficult to cooperate with, and in many cases even to *communicate meaningfully* with, those who differ from us politically, socioeconomically, and culturally. It is enough to make one wonder whether genuine politics, the sort described by Aristotle, Thomas, and the tradition of Catholic Social Teaching (CST), is even possible in our time. Are we left with the bleak choice between Machiavellian *Realpolitik* and the outright rejection of politics, perhaps through a personal or ecclesiological ethic of *nonparticipation*?

In a situation like ours, Julie Hanlon Rubio’s *Hope for Common Ground* is a welcome contribution. Though Rubio, Professor of Christian Ethics at Saint Louis University, Missouri, specifically addresses a Roman Catholic context, her book will be of interest to many who may be struggling to envision a viable public theology for our time.

Rubio begins by noting that Catholics fare little better than the general public when it comes to polarization and ideological partisanship. ‘Though Catholics have long been divided on political issues’, she notes, ‘division has perhaps never been so intense ... in this they mirror society rather than providing an alternative to it’ (p. xv). This is troubling, for Rubio, because such division both ‘weakens the Body of Christ’ and ‘weakens [Catholic] influence in the public sphere’ (p. xv). Despite the challenges, however, Rubio consistently affirms the possibility of Catholics finding common ground for political action that promotes the common good—if, that is, one knows where to look.

Far too often, Rubio claims, Catholics tend to adopt one of two strategies for cultural change: either they focus their energy on personal transformation through evangelism, conversion, and discipleship, or they focus their energy on affecting government policy through advocacy and electoral politics (typically at the national level). While affirming the legitimacy of each approach, Rubio insists that ‘the potential for seeing and developing common ground is particularly strong if we focus on what can be done in the “local” sphere—that is, the space between the personal (i.e., the individual) and the political (i.e., the governmental)’ (p. xviii). In this, Rubio’s book is an apology for the critical importance of CST principles—such as participation, subsidiarity, and the common good—for our time.

Hope for Common Ground is divided into two parts. The first (chapters 1–3) offers ‘Foundations for Common Ground’. Chapter 1 addresses concerns and debates about religious involvement in politics, mapping the territory of theological positions from John Courtney Murray’s optimistic Christian liberalism to the postliberal approach of theologians such as Stanley Hauerwas and William Cavanaugh. Though Rubio affirms that political engagement flows naturally out of Catholic theological convictions, she emphasizes that such engagement must also have chastened expectations of what can be achieved through governmental structures. She begins to make the case here that energy and attention might be better spent considering what might be accomplished through local, community practices (not least because doing so largely mitigates the concerns of liberals [e.g., Rawls] and postliberals [e.g., Hauerwas] alike).

If chapter 1 shifts attention away from the ‘political’, then chapter 2 shifts attention away from the ‘personal’. It does so by reviving the casuist principle of ‘cooperation with evil’, as developed in the Catholic manualist tradition of moral theology. To the degree that one realizes how one is complicit in sinful social structures, Rubio suggests, one will be more ready and willing to ‘act together in the space between the personal and political’ to mitigate such evil. Rather than using the principle of ‘cooperation with evil’ as a tool of political persuasion (e.g., by forbidding support of pro-choice candidates, as the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has done), Rubio presents an argument for embracing a robust notion of social sin as a way of bringing attention to quotidian evils in which many of us are implicated (e.g., white privilege or rampantly exploitative manufacturing conditions). Though she does not make the point as clearly as she could, an analysis of social sin and ‘cooperation’ serves to decenter an overly-individualistic emphasis on personal holiness and evangelism.

In chapter 3, Rubio develops her case for social action in the local sphere. Basing her argument on the principle of subsidiarity and the work of sociologists, such as James Davison Hunter, she argues that it is at the level of mediating institutions—‘associations

such as neighborhoods, schools, community organizing groups, health care centers, businesses, charitable organizations, civic groups, unions, and churches' (p. 57)—that individuals involved in public engagement might reasonably expect to find common ground and achieve effective social change. Rubio concludes that 'social change from below' (p. 74) occurs in the context of mediating institutions 'because most Christians have more power and competence in the local realm and because relationships are so crucial to lasting social change' (p. 76).

The second part of the book illustrates the viability of her approach by way of analyzing a series of cases, namely, marriage promotion (chapter 4), poverty reduction (chapter 5), abortion prevention (chapter 6), and end-of-life care (chapter 7). Space precludes a detailed review of each chapter, so the remainder of this review will only deal with the first and the last, on marriage and end-of-life care. Giving an account of these will allow for a brief evaluation of Rubio's approach.

Rubio notes that while both progressives and conservatives understand themselves to be pro-family, they differ wildly on what being 'pro-family' entails. While conservatives have typically focused on resisting same-sex marriage and promoting traditional gender roles, progressives have focused on 'expanding access to marriage for those who desire it, decreasing the stigmas associated with divorce and cohabitation, and advocating government support for families in need' (p. 86). So long as energy is focused on contentious issues like these, people on both sides are likely to remain frustrated. Better to look for common ground. Fortunately, Rubio finds common ground 'in a shared belief in the enduring relevance of marriage, in acknowledgment of the need to prepare men and women for the challenges of married life and parenting, in recognition of the duty to help more families find financial security, and in an obligation to help couples avoid divorce if possible or find support if they do part' (p. 87). As a result, Rubio encourages Catholics to focus efforts on, for example, church-based 'marriage and relationship education' programs 'targeted to low- and middle-income communities' (p. 97), as well as job-training programs, promotion of just wages, and marriage and divorce support groups.

Similarly, tackling the pervasive medical and cultural shortcomings in end-of-life care requires refocusing efforts away from questions of public policy (e.g., euthanasia and physician aid-in-dying). Rubio notes that our Western 'cultural ethos', which prizes autonomy above most other moral values, 'pushes in two directions—"do everything to make me well" or "let me die on my own terms"' (p. 195). In some contrast, she says, the Christian tradition emphasizes its teachings on 'caregiving, suffering, and solidarity' (p. 196). Furthermore, Rubio argues, Christian theology properly views human dignity as inclusive of finitude and dependency, rather than as antithetical to them. In this, it seems, the church has a critical and prophetic word to offer to the broader culture. Rubio's suggestion, then, is that the church should focus on building an 'alternative context' (p. 211) at the level of local communal practices. This may include church-based elder-care, which, according to Rubio, implicitly critiques the rhetoric of the 'Death with Dignity' movement. It may also include adult education classes on the *ars moriendi* and the Catholic vision of a 'good death', or on the tradition's teachings about 'ordinary' and 'extraordinary' care, and programs that facilitate discussions about aging and end-of-life care.

There are a number of admirable aspects to Rubio's treatment. Her approach cuts across obvious ideological and political lines. It demonstrates, for example, how one can be 'pro-family' and 'pro-marriage', not in spite of liberal economic policies, but precisely *through* them. Similarly, rather than trading on well-worn liberal/communitarian dichotomies, Rubio emphasizes the importance of individual agency for *all* who face decisions about end-of-life care. 'One need not be an unrepentant individualist to fear dementia and physical incapacity or to want not to burden friends and family with caring duties that can sometimes last for years' (p. 212). Furthermore, Rubio's approach is eminently *practical*. By exemplifying what it looks like to affirm the (partial and limited) truths of both sides, by refocusing on *whatever* might represent the middle-ground of consensus, and by urging Catholics to invest their energy and resources *there*, she provides a way forward—if not toward ultimate agreement, at least toward *some* collective action that might contribute to the common good. And she manages to do all this in a self-consciously *theological* idiom, further emphasizing the point that Catholics (and others) need not check their religious convictions at the door of the naked public square.

There are, however, limitations to the approach. For example, Rubio is constantly seeking 'a language that can allow speech across common fault lines and orient people for common work' (p. 88), and she is confident that she can do so because she believes 'we agree on more than we think we do' (p. 88). In her desire to let a thousand flowers bloom, however, she sometimes fails to acknowledge real tensions that persist. For example, most will find her advocacy of pre-marital counseling and marriage education fairly unobjectionable. In implementing such programs, however, one will have to answer any number of questions that involve taking a position in contentious cultural debates, including questions of both inclusion (who gets to participate?) and substance (what vision of marriage and family will be taught to them?). One may answer that it is entirely possible to provide a helpful program that garners widespread support largely by avoiding contentious issues and focusing on what is helpful for everyone (e.g., effective inter-personal communication). But if this relatively denuded version of church marriage education is what counts as the best possible solution, it leaves the present reader somewhat uninspired.

A further problem that merits greater consideration than it is given in the book is the current status and future prospects of the very mediating institutions Rubio finds so necessary. CST has long supported a vision of social action and cooperative relationships in the middle-ground between the state and the family, but, at least in contemporary America, such institutions have been in steady decline for decades. We are increasingly, as Robert Putnam suggested, 'bowling alone'. If Rubio wants people to focus on mediating institutions (a laudable goal), she may need to address the underlying reasons for this decline (e.g., globalization, information technology, social sorting, urbanization and suburbanization, the changing nature of employment, and increasing mobility).

Such critiques notwithstanding, I commend Rubio's book to anyone (academic or lay) who finds herself despairing of the possibility of meaningful social action. *Hope for Common Ground* serves as a useful reminder that Christians have reason to engage in public life confident of the ever-present (if somewhat elusive) possibility of enhancing the common good together.