

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Joseph M. Palacios, *The Catholic Social Imagination: Activism and the Just Society in Mexico and the United States*. Morality and Society Series. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007, 320 pp. \$US 25.00 paper (978-0-226-64501-8), \$US 65.00 hardcover (978-0-226-64500-1)

What is social justice? How is it defined by the Roman Catholic Church? How is “Faith in Action” put into practice by Roman Catholics in Mexico and the United States? How do Catholics “Do Justice”? These are the major questions that Joseph M. Palacios asks in his ethnographic study of lay people who are Roman Catholic activists in Guadalajara, Mexico and Oakland, California in the United States. Using a social constructionist approach, Palacios draws upon social movements theories such as framing, resource mobilization, and political opportunity to explain the broad spectrum of social activism that has developed since the 1999 Jubilee Anniversary Year of the Roman Catholic Church. Palacios compares the internal/external constraints and the uneasy and sometimes hostile relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and the state in Mexico to the relatively more amicable political, social and historical development of the Roman Catholic Church in the United States. He argues that the nature of the social justice activism that has emerged in these two distinct socio-political cultures has been shaped by the life experiences of lay Catholics living in each country .

Palacios develops an elaborate model that suggests that there are four different categories of social activists in both countries: ecclesiastical, Christian inspired, social ministry, and faith based activists. The ultramontane polices of the Mexican Catholic theological tradition emphasize the spiritual and educational development of its members. Generally Mexican social activists have followed what Palacios calls the *ecclesiastical* approach to “doing social justice.” This approach encourages social actors to engage in acts of charity, but they are discouraged from questioning the fundamental basis of social injustices in Mexico. Social actors are permitted to play a limited role in Mexican civil society, but if they deviate from the Church’s teachings they are marginalized by Church authorities. Social activists who do actively contest the state are categorized by Palacios as *Christian inspired* activists who often find

alternative ways to carry out social justice actions outside the realm of the Catholic Church.

In the United States Palacios paints a much rosier picture of the life of a Catholic social activist. He argues that because the U.S. has had a long history of an independent laity which is accustomed to living and working in a pluralistic society, American Catholics have worked effectively under the umbrella of what Palacios calls the *social ministry* of the Catholic Church. In this integrative and institutionally grounded perspective, social activists carry out acts of charity organized in tandem with lobbying for the social and economic welfare of under privileged persons living in the United States. Palacios points out that there is a great range in social activism in the United States which is largely dependent on the vision of the parish Priest and the spiritual and social leaders of the social laity, who are usually involved in the ritualistic and organizational aspects of the spiritual community.

The final group of social activists, which Palacios describes as *faith based* activists, are most often associated with liberal and progressive tendencies in American society. While conservative Catholics regard social justice activities as acts of charity which are a moral and social duty, faith activists are more likely to be critical of the state, and promote the idea of distributive justice and the dignity of work. Though these social activists work within the framework of Catholic doctrine they are able to negotiate and navigate their way through political barriers and to seize opportunities that will enable the poor and disadvantaged. In summary, Palacios concludes that ecclesiastical social activists are the least social but are devout conservative Catholics; Christian inspired activists are devout Christians that may chose to work outside the Catholic Church; social ministry activists are the most professional in carrying out acts of social justice; and faith based Catholics are the most socially active and are often involved in mobilizing citizens to generate social change.

Palacios's detailed analysis and insights about the Catholic imagination in action are stimulating and thoughtful. What is particularly striking about his conclusions is that, not only is there great variation within the social justice practices of Catholic laity in Mexico and the United States, but understanding social justice actions by activists from other religious, social and cultural groups, and deciding what is "social justice" and "how should it be carried out?" is a political conundrum that individuals, groups, societies and nations have been grappling with for thousands of years. In this informative and well written comparative study, Palacios has tackled one of the most controversial issues in the world today. The four fold typology that he has developed is a useful

pedagogical tool that may be used by educators, religious and political leaders and social activists who are interested in social justice issues.

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