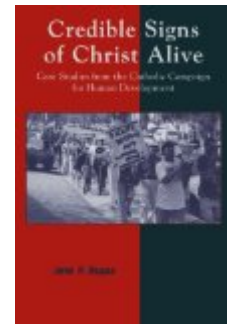


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John P. Hogan. *Credible Signs of Christ Alive*. New York and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003. x + 124 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7425-3166-6; \$20.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7425-3167-3.

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Compassionate Catholicism

In recent years, there has been much talk of public/private partnerships and faith-based initiatives to deal with societal problems. This discussion, which has often spilled over into the political arena, has raised important questions for people of faith. Do they have a duty to be part of the world around them, and if so, is the best path for them to go alone, in concert with their fellow co-religionists, ecumenically, or with the government? Should they try to influence the course of events by reaching out to their neighbors, even those who are not members of their particular church, temple, or mosque? As John P. Hogan lays out in his well executed book, *Credible Signs of Christ Alive*, the answer to these questions is that regardless of denomination, or the particulars of their decisions, Christians have a very important role to play in the world, beyond even the faithful who sit in their pews. For they have been entrusted with establishing and caring for the kingdom of God.

Hogan's book focuses on how Catholic social teaching, with its historic and biblical roots, came to be applied by the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) in the United States. The CCHD has as its mission the creation and sustaining of groups that are designed to make their communities a better place. To achieve that goal, the CCHD has funded community groups across the nation, some of which are Catholic, some are ecumenical, and some have no basis in a religious organization at all. According to Hogan, this approach came about from a realization that the societal problems facing the Church in America today differ from

place to place and are multifaceted, multidimensional, and simply too big for any one institution to battle on its own. Hogan believes that there is much to celebrate in the approach that CCHD has adopted, and sets out to prove this thesis to his readers.

What readers quickly discover is that, while there seems to be problems everywhere, the CCHD has been quite successful at adapting itself to the situations it encounters regardless of whether it is in the inner city or rural America. In large part this has to do with the grassroots, localized nature of the organizations that partner with CCHD. The core of Hogan's book is the case studies, which offer an intriguing glimpse into how, where, and why the CCHD has applied the social teachings of the Catholic Church to the problems of modern America. From helping poultry workers in Maryland, to achieving a living wage in Virginia, to combating crushing poverty and despair in New Jersey, to fighting factory farms in Iowa, to working to keep rents low in Massachusetts, to battling gang violence in Los Angeles, Hogan shows how CCHD has worked in a variety of locales on a variety of problems in places where churches are often the only positive institutions left, and thus, have to act. Readers may be particularly interested in the Massachusetts story, as it involves Senator John Kerry and how the CCHD efforts helped prompt him to finally heed the calls of some of his poorer constituents.

What may strike some readers as interesting is the ecumenical nature of the outreach and work that Hogan

chronicles. Catholic institutions are not always the primary force, or even an integral part of the work that gets accomplished via CCHD funding and organization. Coalition building seems to demonstrate an acknowledgement that the problems are too big for any one group or organization to handle. Hogan shows how concerned people of faith, and perhaps of no faith, work together to combat very difficult problems.

If there is a problem with the book, it revolves around the case studies. Readers will begin to wonder how representative they are. Obviously Hogan wanted to highlight CCHD successes, but readers are given no frame of reference as to how the sample he offers measures up to all the groups CCHD has supported, and there is very little information for the reader to determine how CCHD picks where it will and will not get involved. The framework of decision making that goes into CCHD involvement is missing from the stories Hogan tells. Granted, he wanted to focus more on results than on institutional process, but there is no doubt that having added even a little bureau-

cratic context would have made this good book even better.

This matter aside, the book is easy to read and each section is laid out for the reader. Hogan even includes discussion questions about each case, which can be easily overlooked, or utilized by the reader, depending on what they hope to take away from the book. Hogan includes an appendix on poverty statistics that are eye-opening, and another appendix that deals with quotations and snippets from Catholic social justice advocates, both of which are interesting and thought provoking in their own right.

While it is difficult to tell if the book is intended for a wide audience or only those who are engaged in like-minded work, I highly recommend it to anyone who wants a better understanding of what faith-based initiatives can accomplish. Whether one hopes to emulate the programs, wants to know more about CCHD, or just wants to read a book that is uplifting, *Credible Signs of Christ Alive* is well worth the time.

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