

BOOK REVIEW

THORSEN, Jakob Egeris, *Charismatic Practice and Catholic Parish Life: The Incipient Pentecostalization of the Church in Guatemala and Latin America*. Global Pentecostal & Charismatic Studies, no. 17. Leiden: Brill, 2015. 242p. Pbk. ISBN: 9789004291652. €57.

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This book is Catholic, theological and anthropological at its best. It reflects excellent theology since the author operates by double contextualization. On the one hand, Jakob Egeris Thorsen renders visible the highly implicit contextual theology that prevails in the religious praxis of the Charismatic groups in a Guatemalan parish; he offers an intimate look into the world of Doña Concha and her fellow believers in a Guatemalan neighbourhood, whom Thorsen knows very well due to private relations. On the other hand, he presents contextualized interpretations of documents and politics of the Catholic hierarchy with regard to the Charismatic movement; he offers a very knowledgeable insight into the changes of worldwide institutional politics towards and with the Charismatic movement including some intriguing remarks about the incipient Latin American Liberational-Charismatic Pope Francis. The span of the book is wide – just as wide as are the relevant relations in the Catholic Church. Thorsen is sufficiently Catholic and sufficiently scholarly to deal with it.

The author seeks to understand better two recent developments in the Catholic Church in Guatemala (always being mindful of the Latin American and the hierarchical contexts as well as of the theological dimensions of his observations): first, the increasing Pentecostalization of religious practices in Catholic communities that blurs both the relation between Catholic and Evangelical groups and the relation between Catholic Charismatics and their Church; second, the contradictions in Catholic praxis that develop between the Liberational and the Charismatic currents of Catholicism as well as the Charismatic paradox of being counter-hierarchical and Rome-endorsing at the same time. The author approaches this betwixt setting from three angles: a historical account of the Charismatic movement; an ethnographic description of Charismatic praxis in a Guatemalan parish; and systematic theological reflections.

Thorsen reminds his readers that he does *not* choose a sociological approach, but employs very basic ethnography. Indeed, to look for sociological tools or theory would be like asking the elm tree for pears (*pedir peras del olmo*). The strength of the book is relating detailed and knowledgeable ethnographic observation of religious praxis with theologies that, as a matter of “religious fact,”

orientate and limit the politics of the official Church. In this sense, Thorsen, a Catholic theologian, exemplifies with this book contextual theology at its best.

An equally thorough and concise introduction places the reader in the context and exposes the logic of the book in the same neatly structured way the author proceeds in the entire publication. Chapter 1 presents an historical account not only of the Charismatic movement but also of its contextual conditions in Guatemala – not without critically reflecting the criteria applied in the statistics that provide sometimes astonishing the numbers (pp. 46ff.). Chapter 2 debates different “Theological Frames.” Foreseeably, the chapter begins with theological orientations on the worldwide Charismatic movement as formulated by theologians and official documents. From a sociological point of view somewhat astonishing, these deliberations will later on serve as observational criteria. Much more surprising are the considerations in the rest of the chapter, especially when it comes to a quite detailed exposition of Cardinal and Pope Ratzinger’s *Communio Ecclesiology*.

However, the reviewer’s first suspicion – this is a dissertation’s tribute to the *raison institutionelle* of the faculty – failed by far when the last chapter disclosed the *raison systematique* of this theological reflection. From the iced peaks of Ratzinger’s theology, in the next two chapters, the author leads us to the warm and somewhat stuffy atmosphere of Charismatic prayer sessions in the people-packed basement of a Guatemalan parish church. In these chapters, Thorsen describes in detail many Charismatic practices and the relations (“soft” and “fully scale”) that the Charismatic groups have within the parish but also towards the wider Guatemalan religious life: the official Catholic Charismatic Renewal, the Bishops, the Catholic Base Communities, and the Evangelical churches. The descriptions are detailed and for a reader, experienced in the field, sometimes a bit lengthy. However, for a person with little or no knowledge of Charismatic praxis in Latin America, they are very worthwhile to read.

While there are also interesting accounts about (socio-) political views of the Charismatics (pp. 116ff., pp. 145ff.), the reviewer misses a sounder interpretation at this point (for example when Thorsen affirms some views of Kevin O’Neill’s quite naive study about the El Shaddai church). The long story of religious conservatism – Evangelical and Catholic – tells clearly that individual conversion does not guarantee honest politics. Among the most corrupt politicians in Brazil, for example, are those of the *bancada evangélica* who do not have problems cooperating with their colleague Mr Bolsonaro, a proto-fascist and a fervent Catholic. However, Thorsen’s book is not about politics but about the Catholic Church. Hence, after expounding in detail the “Charismatic Self-understanding” on the parish level he jumps back to the larger scales of the worldwide Catholic Church. Chapter 5 examines the Latin American Bishop’s Conference in Aparecida, Brazil 2007, with regard to its specific positioning between the older Liberal impulses of the well-known Conference of Medellín, 1968, and the strong Charismatic presence in the Catholic world. Thorsen provides not only a fine interpretation of the Aparecida-documents and other related papers; he also examines the practical follow-up of the conference on the Guatemalan national scale, and then down to the reactions in the Charismatic groups of his focus

parish. For non-Catholic readers this chapter has a nice side-effect: it documents the specific interconnectedness between Church hierarchy and lay people in that world-wide institution; and it shows that since the Second Vatican Council this interconnectedness becomes more and more mutual.

From here, even a sociological reader develops an idea of why, a hundred pages above, Cardinal Ratzinger's *Communio Ecclesiology* was exposed. This theory of the Church is appreciated by Catholic Charismatics since it is highly concomitant with their own view: a platonic or "supernaturalistic" concept of the character of the Church and a strict division between Church and world. Ratzinger's opinion is welcome to strengthen the theologically and politically conservative wing of the Charismatic movement. However, the Catholic Church would not be the Catholic Church if there were no other positions, even present among its hierarchy in Rome. The Liberationist wing of Catholic thought is by no means dead, and with the new Pope – we learn by the final considerations in Thorsen's book – there are many hints to a creative mix between Liberationist and Charismatic praxis. But this is another story.