

Clemens Sedmak. *A Church of the Poor: Pope Francis and the Transformation of Orthodoxy*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016. 218 pp. \$32.00. ISBN: 9781626982062.

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In this book, Clemens Sedmak draws out the implications that Pope Francis’s vision of the Church as a Church of the Poor has for the “epistemic praxis of the church” (xv). The book “sets out to show that a Church of the Poor will also be characterized by a particular way of knowing, learning, and understanding, and these epistemic practices have consequences for the understanding of what it means to be orthodox” (xxi). If, as Aquinas held, the object of faith is both simple, that is, God, and complex, that is, creedal propositions (ST, II-II.1.2), and if, as Avery Dulles suggested, the propositional model of revelation had been emphasized in neo-scholastic theology prior to Vatican II, Sedmak in this book attempts to elucidate the epistemic praxis of the church if the simplicity of the object of faith is given its rightful share of attention. This more balanced approach to the object of faith correlates with a church that is more aware of its poverty in relation to God.

The book develops its thesis in five chapters, followed by an epilogue. The first four chapters elaborate the implications that a heightened awareness of the simplicity of the object of faith has for the Church, in Pope Francis’s vision. The first chapter, “The Joy of the Gospel: A Call to Respond to Love,” focuses on Pope Francis’s apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii gaudium*, and the effect that joy of the gospel has on our epistemic praxis. The second chapter, “The Gospel of Joy: Orthodoxy as Discipleship,” focuses on the gospel accounts of the joy and (the epistemic) transformation that encounters with Jesus bring. This gospel joy and its epistemic transformation should make disciples of Jesus open to further transformation and wary of establishing an orthodoxy that limits the transformation that the gospel brings. Chapter 3, “Poverty and the Wound of Knowledge,” links gospel joy with “the gift of tears.” The encounter with Jesus brings joy as well as a deepened awareness of one’s vulnerability and dependence, which also enables a person to be a person of compassion, a person who is not indifferent to the plight of the poor. In Chapter 4, “A Church of the Poor,” having linked poverty of spirit and the joy of the gospel, Sedmak now raises an important question concerning the epistemic practices of a church that is poor. “A Church of the Poor will rethink concepts and realities of privilege. Could it mean the challenge of forgoing the privilege of infallibility and of taking epistemic risks?” (133). Furthermore, in a Church of the Poor, the epistemic goods of the Church (true judgments, true cognizance) will be properly redistributed (134).

In addition to advancing the book’s thesis, each of these four chapters contains insightful and instructive discussions of such topics as *Evangelii gaudium* (ch.1), the gospel accounts of encounter with Jesus (ch.2), the experience of poverty (ch.3), and the church’s grappling over its history with the issue of poverty (ch.4). Each chapter is well organized and well written. It might be helpful to observe here, before turning to chapter 5, that in Christian faith there is not only a tension between the simplicity and complexity of its object, as Aquinas notes, but there is also a tension between the unsurpassable mystery of God’s revelation given in Christ and the eschatological, definitive nature of God’s revelation in Christ. A ministry, generally associated with the ministry of the magisterium, devoted to preserving the apostolic faith is a ministry that is based on an important dimension of Christian faith,

namely its eschatological, definitive nature. Chapter 5, “Orthodoxy in a New Key: Faith in Practice,” can be read as making the case that the epistemic practices discussed in the previous four chapters will enable those whose ministry it is to preserve the apostolic faith to do so in a way that safeguards the sense of the unsurpassable mystery of God’s revelation in Christ.

This book belongs in libraries of theological institutions preparing men and women for ministry. I personally have benefitted from reading it.