

Topic 18: The Social Doctrine of the Church

The good news of salvation requires that the Church be present in the world. The Gospel is a proclamation of the transformation of the world according to God's plan. The Church's social doctrine is part of social moral theology, which derives from a Christian conception of the human being and political life. The Church's social morality teaches the primacy of spiritual and moral goods over material goods.

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1. Origin of the Social Doctrine of the Church

Christ, our Saviour, “desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim 2:4). The Church continues Christ’s proclamation of the Gospel in the world, the good news of salvation. “The Church, sharing in mankind's joys and hopes, in its anxieties and sadness, stands with every man and woman of every place and time, to bring them the good news of the Kingdom of God, which in Jesus Christ has come and continues to be present among them.”^[1] —

The good news of salvation requires the presence of the Church in the world. The Church offers the sacraments, the preaching of the

Word of God, and numerous teachings that refer to social realities because of their anthropological and ethical repercussions. “The way people live together in society often determines the quality of life and therefore the conditions in which every man and woman understand themselves and make decisions concerning themselves and their vocation. For this reason, the Church is not indifferent to what is decided, brought about or experienced in society; she is attentive to the moral quality — that is, the authentically human and humanizing aspects — of social life.”^[2]

The proclamation of the salvation brought by Christ does not lead to disengagement from the world and society, as if in order to be authentically Christian we had to leave aside the common good.

“Charity is not something abstract. It entails a real, complete, self-giving to

the service of God and all men . . .
You cannot have charity without justice, solidarity, family and social responsibility, a spirit of poverty, joy, chastity, friendship” (Saint Josemaría, *Conversations*, 62).

The Gospel is indeed a proclamation of the transformation of the world according to God’s plan. Therefore politics, economics, work and culture are not indifferent fields for the Christian faith, since they have an important influence on the life of the Church’s faithful. For example, an economic organisation which does not allow time for the care of children or which does not provide the necessary financial means to support a family can be a serious obstacle to the development of one’s own vocation in marriage. If the pastors of the Church refer to these issues, it is not because they wish to propose technical solutions, but because they are concerned about

the impact they have on the lives of the faithful. It is worth remembering that “Christ, to be sure, gave His Church no proper mission in the political, economic or social order. The purpose which He set before her is a religious one. But out of this religious mission itself comes a function, a light and an energy which can serve to structure and consolidate the human community according to the divine law.”^[3] —

The Church’s social doctrine is part of social moral theology, which derives from a Christian conception of the human being and political life. The principles, criteria of judgment and directives of social doctrine are very broad and allow for great pluralism: there are no single solutions to economic or political dilemmas. Nor do the teachings of the Church propose social solutions by considering personal ethical dilemmas.

The Church's social morality has always existed, because the Church has always been interested in the society in which it lives: "By means of her social doctrine, the Church takes on the task of proclaiming what the Lord has entrusted to her. She makes the message of the freedom and redemption wrought by Christ, the Gospel of the Kingdom, present in human history. In proclaiming the Gospel, the Church bears witness to man, in the name of Christ, to his dignity and his vocation to the communion of persons. She teaches him the demands of justice and peace in conformity with divine wisdom."^[4] In the first centuries, this interest was expressed, on the one hand, in encouraging good works, especially works of mercy, and, on the other hand, in denouncing injustices, especially those whose solution was not in the hands of those who suffered them.

2. Principles of the Social Doctrine of the Church

In general terms, the Church's social morality teaches that there is a primacy of spiritual and moral goods over material goods. The Church is concerned with the integral good of mankind, which also includes material well-being, but her mission is spiritual. Hence the Magisterium's concern is not with the instruments for organising human society, which are usually political or economic, but with the promotion of a social morality consistent with the Gospel. It is up to ordinary Christians in their work and position in society to seek ways of achieving this common good. But the Magisterium guides the faithful by offering them principles of action and usually leaves the technical choice of means to the responsibility of those who direct the various fields of social work.

The Magisterium's proclamation of faith regarding social concerns passes through various stages. First, the Church's social doctrine does not limit itself to offering an understanding of social realities: culture, politics, economy, education, etc. It also leads to shaping them in accord with the truth of God and of his creation, which human beings care for and of which they are the protagonists. Secondly, these theoretical teachings and their practical consequences have given rise to moral principles of permanent value for the foundation of society: "The principles of the social doctrine, in their entirety, constitute that primary articulation of the truth of society by which every conscience is challenged and invited to interact with every other conscience in truth, in responsibility shared fully with all people and also regarding all people."^[5] — These principles are the

dignity of the person, the common good, solidarity and subsidiarity.

a) Dignity of the person

The principle that refers to the dignity of the person is central to the Church's social doctrine. It means knowing and respecting that the person is open to God, since with his intelligence and will he attains a freedom that sets him above all other creatures. On the other hand, the human person cannot be used as a means to achieve social ends, e.g. by abusing workers or deceiving citizens. Moreover, it stresses that each person is unique and unrepeatable, so that it is not possible to suppress certain persons or their fundamental rights in order to pursue social ends, however urgent they may seem. This principle is further developed in the other three principles, which in a way specify it.

b) The common good

The common good is “the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfilment.”^[6] Hence the common good is not defined as a set of material things to be shared out among the members of society, but rather as conditions which allow for personal development, and which no one can appropriate exclusively.

They are conditions which are achieved with the collaboration of all men and women and from which all benefit. Different images could be used to better understand the common good, but often it has been viewed as a great orchestra. In an orchestra the perfection of each musician contributes to the quality of the music produced by the whole orchestra, but at the same time the professional nature of the orchestra

leads each musician to give his or her best. The common good are conditions that naturally lead each individual to improve and at the same time allow each one's talent to bear fruit for the benefit of all. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1907-1909) teaches that the common good involves three essential elements: respect for the fundamental rights of the human person (life, liberty, private property, etc.), social well-being and the possibilities for development (access to food, clothing, health, work, education and culture, etc.) and peace, which is the result of a just social order. Pope Benedict XVI defines it this way: "Besides the good of the individual, there is a good that is linked to living in society: the common good. It is the good of 'all of us,' made up of individuals, families and intermediate groups who together constitute society. It is a good that is sought not for its own

sake, but for the people who belong to the social community and who can only really and effectively pursue their good within it. To desire the common good and strive towards it is a requirement of justice and charity” (*Caritas in Veritate*, 7).

Although the common good does not refer to material things, the Church also teaches that the goods of the earth were created by God for the benefit of all. “Here we return once more to the first principle of the whole ethical and social order, namely, the principle of the common use of goods.”^[7] The universal destination of goods is achieved most effectively when private property is respected, because what belongs to everyone belongs to no one and ends up being neglected. Moreover, when a person cannot own his own property, he loses interest in his activity and ends up abandoning his work, generating many forms of

poverty. In any case, private property is not an absolute, because it should be used with the responsibility we all have for the well-being of others (solidarity), and because on some exceptional occasions the common good may require that those in need be granted the use of one's own property: a humanitarian crisis, a war, etc. And in these cases the poor and the most vulnerable cannot wait. But outside such exceptional circumstances, the most effective and humane way to achieve the universal destination of goods is respect for private property.

c) Subsidiarity

The Church, in defining the principle of subsidiarity, stresses that “a community of a higher order should not interfere in the internal life of a community of a lower order, depriving the latter of its functions. But it should support it in case of

need and help to coordinate its activity with the activities of the rest of society, always with a view to the common good.”^[8]

The principle of subsidiarity requires the Christian faithful to assert their rights and fulfil their obligations so that social institutions can fulfil their intended role. This takes specific form, among other things, in the need for the Church’s faithful to participate in public life. For without such participation it would be very difficult to make evident the human, and often Christian, reasons for which social institutions were created, at least in the West.

d) Solidarity

Solidarity is a term that refers to a concept from Roman law. When a group of people who were not related wished to begin an enterprise, they could establish a

contract “*in solidum*.” Through this legal figure, each of the contracting parties was obliged to pay, in case of need, the totality of the debt incurred by the whole group. Thus the law guaranteed that whoever lent the money could recover it from a specific person or family. Solidarity refers to this way of understanding one’s own responsibility for the whole group, seen now as civil society. Hence its definition as “a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say, to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all truly responsible for all.”^[9]

Thanks to faith, the Christian has a higher motivation to live solidarity, because he or she knows that we are all children of the same Father and tries to follow the example of Christ’s compassion for all men and women.

An important manifestation of solidarity is fulfilling one’s duties and

obligations. For example, an entrepreneur's primary task of solidarity is to create jobs where people can honestly and responsibly earn a living and support their families. In addition, those who, like entrepreneurs, have a greater capacity to contribute to the common good, may undertake other projects of social assistance. But it is important to remember that solidarity is not simply "welfare" assistance. Rather it must strive to ensure authentic human development, which takes place above all when each person is allowed to deploy his or her talents in the service of others. This is why the Church teaches that "business activity is essentially a noble vocation, directed to producing wealth and improving our world."^[10] —

Solidarity is not the same as justice. Justice calls for respecting and giving to others what is "theirs," while

solidarity leads to giving to others something that is ours, moved by the interest we have in the good of others, which is as important as our own. “Charity goes beyond justice, because to love is to give, to offer what is ‘mine’ to the other; but it never lacks justice, which prompts us to give the other what is ‘his,’ what is due to him by reason of his being or his acting” (*Caritas in Veritate*, 6).

3. Ways of influencing society

The first way in which society can be influenced with the help of the Church’s social doctrine is to disseminate these teachings. For a thematic study, the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* is of special importance. “The immediate task of directly ordering temporal realities in the light of the doctrinal principles enunciated by the Magisterium corresponds specifically to the laity, who work immersed in

all the circumstances and structures of secular life. But, at the same time, they must act with the necessary personal autonomy in making concrete decisions in their social, family, political and cultural life” (Saint Josemaría, *Conversations*, 11).

A second aspect is to underline the ways in which these teachings can be applied in practice. In striving to apply the Church’s social doctrine in the ordinary course of social activities, entrepreneurs play a key role. For example, the creation of jobs and their fair remuneration is one of the greatest social goods that can be generated. In any case, work well done and the provision of quality goods and services are already a very effective way of contributing to the common good of society. “Work, all work, bears witness to the dignity of man, to his dominion over creation. It is an

opportunity to develop one's personality. It is a bond of union with others, the way to support one's family, a means of aiding in the improvement of the society in which we live and in the progress of all humanity” (Saint Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 47).

A third way of influencing society is in a more markedly professional or academic way. Often it will be necessary to confront new problems that have not arisen in the past. Faithful who are experts in the different social fields (economics, politics, media, education, etc.) will need to propose ways to solve them that heed the Church's social teaching. The documents included in the social magisterium are wide-ranging, and offer room for a great pluralism not only of opinions, but also of technical options for embarking on the path of development. While always

respecting the various opinions, the key thing is to encourage people to “do more for others,” without using their own jobs or responsibilities as an excuse for shirking this challenge.

Basic bibliography

Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*.

[1] *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 60.

[2] *Ibid*, 62.

[3] Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, 42.

[4] *Compendium of Social Doctrine*, 63.

[5] *Compendium of Social Doctrine*, 163.

[6] Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, 26.

[7] Saint John Paul II, *Laborem Excercens*, 19; *Compendium of Social Doctrine*, 171-184.

[8] Saint John Paul II, *Centessimus Annus*, 48; cf. Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno*, 80.

[9] Saint John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 38.

[10] Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, 123.