

## COMPENDIUM ON CHURCH'S SOCIAL TEACHING PART 11

### Nature of the Church's social doctrine

By Leela Ramdeen 14.08.2005

We focus today on Part 1, Chapter 2, II a & b of the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* entitled: The Nature of the Church's Social Doctrine

- a) Knowledge illuminated by faith; and
- b) In friendly dialogue with all branches of knowledge.

We read that the Church's social doctrine was "formed over the course of time, through the numerous interventions of the Magisterium on social issues. The fact that it came about in this manner makes it understandable that certain changes may have taken place with regard to its nature, method and epistemological structure."

*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* clarifies this decisively when it states that the Church's social doctrine "belongs to the field, not of ideology, but of theology and particularly of moral theology"

As the *Compendium* states, it "cannot be defined according to socio-economic parameters. It is not an ideological or pragmatic system intended to define and generate economic, political and social relationships, but is a category unto itself."

According to *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, the Church's social doctrine is "the accurate formulation of the results of a careful reflection on the complex realities of human existence, in society and in the international order, in the light of faith and of the Church's tradition. Its main aim is to interpret these realities, determining their conformity with or divergence from the lines of the Gospel teaching on man and his vocation, a vocation which is at once earthly and transcendent; its aim is thus to guide Christian behaviour."

*Centesimus Annus* stresses, "This teaching... is to be found at the crossroads where Christian life and conscience come into contact with the real world. (It) is seen in the efforts of individuals, families, people involved in cultural and social life, as well as politicians and statesmen to give it a concrete form and application in history."

The Church's social doctrine, says the *Compendium*, finds its essential foundation in biblical revelation and in the tradition of the Church. "From its source, which comes from above, it draws inspiration and light to understand, judge and guide human experience and history. Before anything else and above everything else is God's plan for the created world and, in particular, for the life and destiny of men and women, called to Trinitarian communion.

"Faith, which receives the divine word and puts it into practice, effectively interacts with reason... Social doctrine too, insofar as it is knowledge applied to the circumstantial and historical aspects of praxis, brings "*fides et ratio*" together and is an eloquent expression of that rich relationship.

“Faith and reason represent the two cognitive paths of the Church’s social doctrine: Revelation and human nature. The ‘knowing’ of faith understands and directs the life of men and women according to the light of the historical-salvific mystery, God’s revelation and gift of himself to us in Christ. This understanding of faith includes reason, by means of which – insofar as possible – it unravels and comprehends revealed truth and integrates it with the truth of human nature, found in the divine plan expressed in creation (*Dignitatis Humanae*).

“Being centred on the mystery of Christ, moreover, does not weaken or exclude the role of reason and hence does not deprive the Church’s social doctrine of rationality or, therefore, of universal applicability. Since the mystery of Christ illuminates the mystery of man, it gives fullness of meaning to human dignity and to the ethical requirements which defend it. The Church’s social doctrine is knowledge enlightened by faith, which, as such, is the expression of a greater capacity for knowledge. It explains to all people the truths that it affirms and the duties that it demands; it can be accepted and shared by all.”

The Church’s social doctrine avails itself of contributions from all branches of knowledge, whatever their source, and has an important interdisciplinary dimension. *Centesimus Annus* tells us that, “In order better to incarnate the one truth about man in different and constantly changing social, economic and political contexts, this teaching enters into dialogue with the various disciplines concerned with man. It assimilates what these disciplines have to contribute.”

The social doctrine makes use of the significant contribution of philosophy as well as the descriptive contributions of the human sciences. “...philosophy is a suitable and indispensable instrument for arriving at a correct understanding of the basic concepts of the Church’s social doctrine, concepts such as the person, society, freedom, conscience, ethics, law, justice, the common good, solidarity, subsidiarity, the State.

This understanding is such that it inspires harmonious living in society. It is philosophy...that shows the reasonableness and acceptability of shining the light of the Gospel on society, and that inspires in every mind and conscience openness and assent to the truth.

“A significant contribution to the Church’s social doctrine comes also from human sciences and the social sciences. In view of that particular part of the truth that it may reveal, no branch of knowledge is excluded...This attentive and constant openness to other branches of knowledge makes the Church’s social doctrine reliable, concrete and relevant.”