

COMPENDIUM ON CHURCH'S SOCIAL TEACHING PART 18

Milestones along the path

By Leela Ramdeen 02.10.05

Today we focus on the final Part 1 Chapter 2 III: The Church's Social Doctrine in Our Time – Historical Notes b) From *Rerum Novarum* to our own day.

Ninety years after *Rerum Novarum*, Pope John Paul II devoted the Encyclical *Laborem Exercens* (1981) to work, the fundamental good of the human person, the primary element of economic activity and the key to the entire social question.

The *Compendium* states that *Laborem Exercens* “outlines a spirituality and ethic of work in the context of a profound theological and philosophical reflection. Work must not be understood only in the objective and material sense, but one must keep in mind its subjective dimension, insofar as it is always an expression of the person. Besides being a decisive paradigm for social life, work has all the dignity of being a context in which the person's natural and supernatural vocation must find fulfillment.

“With the encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1988), Pope John Paul II commemorates the twentieth anniversary of *Populorum Progressio* and deals once more with the theme of development along two fundamental lines: ‘on the one hand, the dramatic situation of the modern world, under the aspect of the failed development of the Third World, and on the other, the meaning of, conditions and requirements for a development worthy of man’ (Congregation for Catholic Education).

“The encyclical presents differences between progress and development, and insists that ‘true development cannot be limited to the multiplication of goods and service – to what one possesses – but must contribute to the fullness of the ‘being’ of man. In this way the moral nature of real development is meant to be shown clearly’ ((Congregation for Catholic Education).

“Pope John Paul II, alluding to the motto of the pontificate of Pope Pius XII, ‘*opus iustitiae pax*’ (peace is the fruit of justice), comments: ‘Today, one could say, with the same exactness and the same power of biblical inspiration (Is 32:17; Jas 3:18), *opus solidaritatis pax* (peace is the fruit of solidarity)’ (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*).

“On the hundredth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, Pope John Paul II promulgates his third social encyclical, *Centesimus Annus* (1991), whence emerges the doctrinal continuity of a hundred years of the Church's social Magisterium.

Taking up anew one of the fundamental principles of the Christian view of social and political organisation, which had been the central theme of the previous encyclical, the Pope writes: ‘What we nowadays call the principle of solidarity...is frequently stated by Pope Leo XIII, who uses the term ‘friendship’...Pope Pius XI refers to it with the equally meaningful term ‘social charity’ Pope Paul VI, expanding the concept to cover the many modern aspects of the social question, speaks of a ‘civilisation of love’” (*Centesimus Annus*)

As the *Compendium* states: “Pope John Paul II demonstrates how the Church’s social teaching moves along the axis of reciprocity between God and man: recognising God in every person and every person in God is the condition of authentic human development. The articulate and in-depth analysis of the ‘new things’, and particularly of the great breakthrough of 1989 with the collapse of the Soviet system, shows appreciation for democracy and the free economy, in the context of an indispensable solidarity.”

The documents, says the *Compendium*, referred to above “constitute the milestones of the path travelled by the Church’s social doctrine from the time of Pope Leo XIII to our own day.

This brief summary would become much longer if we considered all the interventions motivated, other than by a specific theme, by ‘the pastoral concern to present to the entire Christian community and to all men of good will the fundamental principles, universal criteria and guidelines suitable for suggesting basic choices and coherent practice for every concrete situation (Congregation for Catholic Education).

“In the formulation and teaching of this social doctrine, the Church as been, and continues to be, prompted not by theoretical motivation but by pastoral concerns. She is spurred on by the repercussions that social upheavals have on people, on multitudes of men and women, on human dignity itself, in contexts where ‘man painstakingly searches for a better world without working with equal zeal for the betterment of his own spirit’ (*Gaudium et Spes*).

“for these reasons, this social doctrine has arisen and developed an ‘updated doctrinal ‘corpus’...(that) builds up gradually, as the Church, in the fullness of the word revealed by Christ Jesus and with the assistance of the Holy Spirit (Jn 4:16; 16:13-15), reads events as they unfold in the courts of history”. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2422).

Next week we will focus on Chapter Three, The Human Person and Human Rights. I would like you to pray for the success of an international conference on the topic “Women, Development and Peace” which takes place October 28 – 29, at the Vatican. I will be attending the conference at the invitation of Cardinal Renato Raffaele Martino, President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace.