

COMPENDIUM ON CHURCH'S SOCIAL TEACHING PART 1

Understanding the Church's Social Teaching

By Leela Ramdeen 05.06.2005

"The teaching and spreading of her social doctrine are part of the Church's evangelizing mission" (John Paul 11, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 41)

Last year the "Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church" was published by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace after wide consultation. It went out of print very quickly. I was fortunate to obtain a copy when I was in Rome last year. In this series of articles I hope to share with you some of the key issues raised in the document.

The late Pope John Paul 11 had requested that this document be drawn up "to give a concise but complete overview of the Church's social teaching." He hoped that the document, which sheds light on all aspects of our lives, will "help humanity in its active quest for the common good."

The contents should not be new to us. Cardinal Sodano, Secretary of State at the Vatican, rightly states in the preface, that throughout the course of the Church's history, and particularly in the last 100 years, "the Church has never failed, in the words of Pope Leo X111, to speak "the words that are hers" with regard to questions concerning life in society."

He says that the Compendium presents the foundations of Catholic social doctrine "to the faithful and to all people of good will as food for human and spiritual growth, for individuals and communities alike." Its content will facilitate the formation of the laity and help them in their daily mission "so that the holiness of their lives and the strength of their witness will contribute to human progress."

The document also shows the value of Catholic social doctrine as an instrument of evangelization "because it places the human person and society in relationship with the light of the Gospel. The principles of the Church's social doctrine, which are based on the natural law, are then seen to be confirmed and strengthened, in the faith of the Church, by the Gospel of Christ." (Cardinal Sodano)

In the document Cardinal Martino, President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, reminds us of the challenges of transforming social realities: "The proclamation of Jesus Christ, the "Good News" of salvation, love, justice and peace, is not readily received in today's world, devastated as it is by wars, poverty and injustices. For this very reason the men and women of our day have greater need than ever of the Gospel: of the faith that saves, of the hope that enlightens, of the charity that loves."

It is hoped that an understanding of the social doctrine of our Church will enlighten us and enable us to interpret today's reality and seek appropriate paths of action. The Church offers its social doctrine and this document to ALL people of our time: "The new law of love embraces the entire human family and knows no limits, since the proclamation of the salvation wrought by Christ extends 'to the ends of the earth'" (Acts 1:8) The text is proposed as an incentive for dialogue with all who "sincerely desire the good of humankind."

This document is seen as a pastoral priority. It includes the most relevant theological, philosophical, moral, cultural and pastoral considerations of our social doctrine as they relate to social questions. It limits itself to putting forth the fundamental elements of the Church's social doctrine, leaving to Episcopal Conferences the task of applying these within their respective local contexts.

One of the activities which CCSJ uses in its education programme is the Pastoral Circle - See, Judge, Act. The Church's social teaching suggests a systematic approach for finding solutions to problems, so that discernment, judgment and decisions will correspond to reality. The Church's social teaching outlined in this document can assist us in analysing situations objectively, in clarifying them in the light of the Gospel, in drawing principles for reflection, criteria for judgement and guidelines for action.

We are reminded that social justice principles are interrelated and shed light on one another mutually. However, these principles must be interpreted in accordance with the signs of the times. ". it must not be forgotten that the passing of time and the changing of social circumstances will require a constant updating of the reflections on the various issues raised in the document in order to interpret the new signs of the times."

If we are to play our part in shaping a new humanity based on Christian morals and social values, then we must pursue the quest for truth by understanding and acting on the Church's social doctrine that will give direction and fullness to our lives.

The above quotations are taken from pages 1-5 of the document. In my next article I will focus on Chapter One of the document: "God's Plan Of Love for Humanity." It is important that we locate the social doctrine of our Church within the wider context of God's love for us and the reason why we must love one another.