

COMPENDIUM ON CHURCH'S SOCIAL TEACHING PART 21

Sin and salvation

By Leela Ramdeen 23.10.05

We focus today on Part One of the *Compendium*, Chapter 3 entitled: The Human Person and Human Rights – Section II (b) The tragedy of sin. It is significant that as we mark the end of the Year of the Eucharist, we are shifting our focus from human beings as creatures made in the image of God to the section in the *Compendium* entitled: “The tragedy of sin”.

We read that “this marvellous vision of man’s creation by God is inseparable from the tragic appearance of original sin. With a clear affirmation the Apostle Paul sums up the account of man’s fall contained in the first pages of the Bible: ‘*Sin came into the world through one man and death through sin*’ (Rom 5:12). Man, against God’s prohibition, allows himself to be seduced by the serpent and stretches out his hand to the tree of life, falling prey to death.

“By this gesture, man tries to break through his limits as a creature, challenging God, his sole Lord and the source of his life. It is a sin of disobedience (Rom 5:19) that separates man from God (*Catechism*, 1850).

From revelation we know that Adam, the first man, transgresses God’s commandment and loses the holiness and justice in which he was made, holiness and justice which were received not only for himself but for all of humanity:

“By yielding to the tempter, Adam and Eve committed a personal sin, but this sin affected the human nature that they would then transmit in a fallen state. It is a sin which will be transmitted by propagation to all mankind, that is, by the transmission of a human nature deprived of original holiness and justice’ (*Catechism* 404).

“As the root of personal and social divisions, which in differing degrees offend the value and dignity of the human person, there is a wound which is present in man’s inmost self. ‘In the light of faith we call it sin: beginning with original sin, which all of us bear from birth as an inheritance from our first parents, to the sin which each one of us commits when we abuse our own freedom’ (*Catechism*, 1849).

“The consequences of sin, insofar as it is an act of separation from God, are alienation, that is, the separation of man not only from God but also from himself, from other men and from the world around him. ‘Man’s rupture with God leads tragically to divisions between brothers. In the description of the ‘first sin’, the rupture with Yahweh simultaneously breaks the bond of friendship that had united the human family.

“Thus the subsequent pages of Genesis show us the man and the woman as it were pointing an accusing finger at each other (Gen 3:12). Later we have brother hating brother and finally taking his brother’s life (Gen 4:2-16).

According to the Babel story, the result of sin is the shattering of the human family, already begun with the first sin and now reaching its most extreme form on the social level.’ (*Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*). Reflecting on the mystery of sin, we cannot fail to take into consideration this tragic connection between cause and effect.

“The mystery of sin is composed of a twofold wound, which the sinner opens in his own side and

in the relationship with his neighbour.

That is why we can speak of personal and social sin. Every sin is personal under a certain aspect; under another, every sin is social, insofar as and because it also has social consequences. In its true sense, sin is always an act of the person, because it is the free act of an individual person and not properly speaking of a group or community.

“The character of social sin can unquestionably be ascribed to every sin, taking into account the fact that ‘by virtue of human solidarity which is as mysterious and intangible as it is real and concrete, each individual’s sin in some way affects others’ (*Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*).

“The text of this Apostolic Exhortation, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, explains moreover that there is a law of descent, which is a kind of communion of sin, in which a soul that lowers itself through sin drags down with it the Church and, in some way, the entire world; to this law there corresponds a law of ascent, the profound and magnificent mystery of the communion of saints, thanks to which every soul that rises above itself also raises the world.

“It is not, however, legitimate or acceptable to understand social sin in a way that, more or less consciously, leads to a weakening or the virtual cancellation of the personal component by admitting only social guilt and responsibility. At the bottom of every situation of sin there is always the individual who sins.”

Next week we will move on to consider social sin; the universality of sin and the universality of salvation. The doctrine of the universality of sin, says the *Compendium*, “must not be separated from the consciousness of the universality of salvation in Jesus Christ...Christian realism sees the abysses of sin, but in the light of the hope, greater than any evil, given by Jesus Christ’s act of redemption, in which sin and death are destroyed (Rom 5:18-21; 1 Cor 15:56-57): In him God reconciled man to himself” *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*.