

COMPENDIUM ON CHURCH'S SOCIAL TEACHING PART 23

The many aspects of the human person

By Leela Ramdeen 06.11.05

We focus today on Part One of the *Compendium*, Chapter 3 entitled: The Human Person and Human Rights – Section III – The many aspects of the human person (A) The unity of the person. The Church's social doctrine dwells "on the principal and indispensable dimensions of the human person. Thus it is able to grasp the most significant facets of the mystery and dignity of human beings. In the past there has been no lack of various reductionist conceptions of the human person, many of which are still dramatically present on the stage of modern history.

"These are ideological in character or are simply the result of widespread forms of custom or thought concerning mankind, human life and human destiny. The common denominator among these is the attempt to make the image of man unclear by emphasizing only one of his characteristics at the expense of all the others (*Octogesima Adveniens*).

"The human person may never be thought of only as an absolute individual being, built up by himself and on himself, as if his characteristic traits depended on no one else but himself. Nor can the person be thought of as a mere cell of an organism that is inclined at most to grant it recognition in its functional role within the overall system.

"Reductionist conceptions of the full truth of men and women have already been the object of the Church's social concern many times, and she has not failed to raise her voice against these, as against other drastically reductive perspectives, taking care to proclaim instead that 'individuals do not feel themselves isolated units, like grains of sand, but united by the very force of their nature and by their internal destiny, into an organic, harmonious mutual relationship' (*Summi Pontificatus*, Pius XII).

"She has affirmed instead that man cannot be understood 'simply as an element, a molecule within the social organism' (*Centesimus Annus*), and is therefore attentive that the affirmation of the primacy of the person is not seen as corresponding to an individualistic or mass vision.

"Christian faith, while inviting that whatever is good and worthy of man should be sought out wherever it may be found (1Thess 5:21), 'is above and is sometimes opposed to the ideologies, in that it recognises God, who is transcendent and the Creator, and who, through all the levels of creation, calls on man as endowed with responsibility and freedom' (*Octogesima Adveniens*).

"The Church's social doctrine strives to indicate the different dimensions of the mystery of man, who must be approached 'in the full truth of his existence, of his personal being and also of his community and social being (*Redemptor Hominis*), with special attention so that the value of the human person may be readily perceived.

"Man was created by God in unity of body and soul. 'The spiritual and immortal soul is the principle of unity of the human being, whereby it exists as a whole ... as a person. These definitions not only point out that the body, which has been promised the resurrection, will also share in glory. They also remind us that reason and free will are linked with all the bodily and sense faculties.

The person, including the body, is completely entrusted to himself, and it is in the unity of body

and soul that the person is the subject of his own moral acts' (*Veritatis Splendor*)

“Through his corporeality man unites in himself elements of the material world; these ‘reach their summit through him, and through him raise their voice in free praise of the Creator’ (Catechism, 364). This dimension makes it possible for man to be part of the material world, but not as in a prison or in exile. It is not proper to despise bodily life’ rather ‘man...is obliged to regard his body as good and honourable since God has created it and will raise it up on the last day’ (*Gaudium et Spes*).

“Because of this bodily dimension, however, following the wound of sin, man experiences the rebellion of his body and the perverse inclinations of his heart; he must always keep careful watch over these lest he become enslaved to them and become a victim of a purely earthly vision of life. Through his spirituality man moves beyond the realm of mere things and plunges into the innermost structure of reality.

“When he enters into his own heart, that is, when he reflects on his destiny, he discovers that he is superior to the material world because of his unique dignity as one who converses with God, under whose gaze he makes decisions about his life. In his inner life he recognizes that the person has ‘a spiritual and immortal soul’ and he knows that the person is not merely ‘a speck of nature or a nameless constituent of the city of man’ (*Gaudium et Spes*).

“Therefore, man has two different characteristics: he is a material being, linked to this world by his body, and he is a spiritual being, open to transcendence and to the discovery of ‘more penetrating truths’, thanks to his intellect, by which ‘he shares in the light of the divine mind’ (*Gaudium et Spes*).

“The Church affirms: ‘The unity of soul and body is so profound that one has to consider the soul to be the ‘form’ of the body i.e. it is because of its spiritual soul that the body made of matter becomes a living, human body; spirit and matter, in man, are not two natures united, but rather their union forms a single nature’ (*Catechism*, 365).

Neither the spiritualism that despises the reality of the body nor the materialism that considers the spirit a mere manifestation of the material do justice to the complex nature, to the totality or to the unity of the human being.”