

COMPENDIUM ON CHURCH'S SOCIAL TEACHING PART 24

The many aspects of the human person

By Leela Ramdeen 13.11.05

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 (B) Opening to transcendence and uniqueness of the person (a) Open to transcendence & (b) Respect for human dignity.

The *Compendium* tells us that “openness to transcendence belongs to the human person: man is open to the infinite and to all created beings. He is open above all to the infinite – God – because with his intellect and will he raises himself above all the created order and above himself, he becomes independent from creatures, is free in relation to created things and tends towards total truth and the absolute good.

“He is open also to others, to the men and women of the world, because only insofar as he understands himself in reference to a ‘thou’ can he say ‘I’. He comes out of himself, from the self-centred preservation of his own life, to enter into a relationship of dialogue and communion with others.

The human person is open to the fullness of being, to the unlimited horizon of being. He has in himself the ability to transcend the individual particular objects that he knows, thanks effectively to his openness to unlimited being.

“In a certain sense the human soul is – because of its cognitive dimension – all things: ‘all immaterial things enjoy a certain infiniteness, insofar as they embrace everything, or because it is a question of the essence of a spiritual reality that functions as a model and likeness of everything, as it is the case with God, or because it has a likeness to everything or is ‘in act’ like the Angels or ‘in potential’ like souls’ (St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*)

“Man exists as a unique and unrepeatable being, he exists as an ‘I’ capable of self-understanding, self-possession and self-determination. The human person is an intelligent and conscious being, capable of reflecting on himself and therefore of being aware of himself and his actions.

However, it is not intellect, consciousness and freedom that define the person, rather it is the person who is the basis of the acts of intellect, consciousness and freedom. These acts can even be absent, for even without them man does not cease to be a person.

“The human person must always be understood in his unrepeatable and inviolable uniqueness. In fact, man exists above all as a subjective entity, as a centre of consciousness and freedom, whose unique life experiences, comparable to those of no one else, underlie the inadmissibility of any attempt to reduce his status by forcing him into preconceived categories or power systems, whether ideological or otherwise.

“This entails above all the requirement not only of simple respect on the part of others, especially political and social institutions and their leaders with regard to every man and woman on the earth, but even more, this means that the primary commitment of each person towards others, and particularly of these same institutions, must be for the promotion and integral development of the person.

“A just society can become a reality only when it is based on the respect of the transcendent dignity of the human person. The person represents the ultimate end of society, by which it is ordered to the person: ‘Hence, the social order and its development must invariably work to the benefit of the human person, since the order of things is to be subordinate to the order of persons, and not the other way around’ (*Gaudium et Spes*).

“Respect for human dignity can in no way be separated from obedience to this principle. It is necessary to ‘consider every neighbour without exception as another self, taking into account first of all his life and the means necessary for living it with dignity’ (*Gaudium et Spes*). Every political, economic, social, scientific and cultural programme must be inspired by the awareness of the primacy of each human being over society’ (*Catechism*, 2235).

“In no case, therefore, is the human person to be manipulated for ends that are foreign to his own development, which can find complete fulfillment only in God and his plan of salvation: in fact, man in his interiority transcends the universe and is the only creature willed by God for itself. (*Catechism*, 27, 356 and 358).

For this reason neither his life nor the development of his thought, nor his good, nor those who are part of his personal and social activities can be subjected to unjust restrictions in the exercise of their rights and freedom.

“The person cannot be a means for carrying out economic, social or political projects imposed by some authority, even in the name of an alleged progress of the civil community as a whole or of other persons, either in the present or the future.

It is therefore necessary that public authorities keep careful watch so that restrictions placed on freedom or any onus placed on personal activity will never become harmful to personal dignity, thus guaranteeing the effective practicability of human rights.

“All this, once more, is based on the vision of man as a person, that is to say, as an active and responsible subject of his own growth process, together with the community to which he belongs.

Authentic social changes are effective and lasting only to the extent that they are based on resolute changes in personal conduct. An authentic moralisation of social life will never be possible unless it starts with people and has people as its point of reference: indeed, ‘living a moral life bears witness to the dignity of the person’ (*Catechism*, 1706).

“It is obviously the task of people to develop those moral attitudes that are fundamental

for any society that truly wishes to be human (justice, honesty, truthfulness, etc.), and which in no way can simply be expected of others or delegated to institutions.

It is the task of everyone, and in a special way of those who hold various forms of political, judicial or professional responsibility with regard to others, to be the watchful conscience of society and the first to bear witness to civil social conditions that are worthy of human beings.”