

## COMPENDIUM ON CHURCH'S SOCIAL TEACHING PART 25

### **The freedom of the human person**

By Leela Ramdeen 20.11.05

As we continue our focus on the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, we consider Part 1, Chapter 3, III, C: The freedom of the human person: (a) - The value and limits of freedom; and part of (b) - The bond uniting freedom with truth and the natural law.

We are reminded of the words in our *Catechism* (1706) that “Man can turn to good only in freedom, which God has given to him as one of the highest signs of his image.” For, as is stated in *Gaudium et Spes*, “God has willed that man remain under the control of his own decisions, so that he can seek his Creator spontaneously, and come freely to utter and blissful perfection through loyalty to Him. Hence man’s dignity demands that he act according to a knowing and free choice that is personally motivated and prompted from within, neither under blind internal impulse nor by mere external pressure.”

Both *Gaudium et Spes* (1966) and *Veritatis Splendor* (1993) stress that the human person “rightly appreciates freedom and strives for it passionately: rightly does he desire and must form and guide, by his own free initiative, his personal and social life, accepting personal responsibility for it.”

In fact, as our *Catechism* states (1733) “freedom not only allows man suitably to modify the state of things outside of himself, but it also determines the growth of his being as a person through choices consistent with the true good.” In this way, as Gregory of Nyssa states, “man generates himself, he is father of his own being.” And as is stated in *Centesimus Annus*, in this way man “constructs the social order”.

“Freedom is not contrary to man’s dependence as a creature on God” (*Catechism*, 1706). Revelation teaches that the power to decide good and evil does not belong to man but to God alone (Gen 2:16-17)”. *Veritatis Splendor* tells us “Man is certainly free, inasmuch as he can understand and accept God’s commands. And he possesses an extremely far-reaching freedom, since he can eat ‘of every tree of the garden’. But his freedom is not unlimited: it must halt before the ‘tree of the knowledge of good and evil’, for it is called to accept the moral law given by God. In fact, human freedom finds its authentic and complete fulfilment precisely in the acceptance of that law.”

The *Compendium* reminds us that “the proper exercise of personal freedom requires specific conditions of an economic, social, juridic, political and cultural order that are too often disregarded or violated. Such situations of blindness and injustice injure the moral life and involve the strong as well as the weak in the temptation to sin against charity. By deviating from the moral law man violates his own freedom, becomes imprisoned within himself, disrupts neighbourly fellowship and rebels against divine truth’ (*Catechism*, 1740)”.

Removing injustices promotes human freedom and dignity: nonetheless, as the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith tells us in *Libertatis Conscientia*, “the first thing to be done is to appeal to the spiritual and moral capacities of the individual and to the permanent need for inner conversion, if one is to achieve the economic and social changes that will truly be at the service of man.”

“In the exercise of their freedom, men and women perform morally good acts that are constructive for the person and for society when they are obedient to truth, that is, when they do not presume to be the creators and absolute masters of truth or of ethical norms (*Catechism*, 1749-1756).

“Freedom in fact does not have ‘its absolute and unconditional origin...in itself, but in the life within which it is situated and which represents for it, at one and the same time, both a limitation and a possibility. Human freedom belongs to us as creatures; it is a freedom which is given as a gift, one to be received like a seed and to be cultivated responsibly. When the contrary is the case, freedom dies, destroying man and society’ (*Veritatis Splendor*).”

We are told “The truth concerning good and evil is recognised in a practical and concrete manner by the judgment of conscience, which leads to the acceptance of responsibility for the good accomplished and the evil committed.” And, as is stated in *Veritatis Splendor*, “Consequently in the practical judgment of conscience, which imposes on the person the obligation to perform a given act, the link between freedom and truth is made manifest.

“Precisely for this reason conscience expresses itself in acts of ‘judgement’ which reflect the truth about the good, and not in arbitrary ‘decisions’. The maturity and responsibility of these judgements – and, when all is said and done, of the individual who is their subject – are not measured by the liberation of the conscience from objective truth, in favour of an alleged autonomy in personal decisions, but, on the contrary, by an insistent search for truth and by allowing oneself to be guided by that truth in one’s actions. The exercise of freedom implies a reference to a natural moral law, of a universal character, that precedes and unites all rights and duties.”

The natural law, says St Thomas Aquinas, “is nothing other than the light of intellect infused within us by God. Thanks to this, we know what must be done and what must be avoided. This light or this law has been given by God to creation. It consists in the participation in his eternal law, which is identified with God himself.”

Our *Catechism* (1955 – 1958) tells us “this law is called ‘natural’ because the reason that promulgates it is proper to human nature. It is universal; it extends to all people insofar as it is established by reason. In its principal precepts, the divine and natural law is presented in the Decalogue and indicates the primary and essential norms regulating moral life.

“Its central focus is the act of aspiring and submitting to God, the source and judge of everything that is good, and also the act of seeing others as equal to oneself. The natural law expresses the dignity of the person and lays the foundations of the person’s fundamental duties.

In the diversity of cultures, the natural law unites peoples, enjoining common principles. Although its application may require adaptations to the many different conditions of life according to place, time and circumstances, it remains immutable ‘under the flux of ideas and customs and supports their progress...Even when it is rejected in its very principles, it cannot be destroyed or removed from the heart of man. It always rises again in the life of individuals and societies.’”

However, the *Compendium* states “its precepts are not clearly and immediately perceived by everyone. Religious and moral truths can be known ‘by everyone with facility, with firm certainty and without the admixture of error’ (*Humani Generis*) only with the help of Grace and Revelation. The natural law offers a foundation prepared by God for the revealed law and Grace, in full harmony with the work of the Spirit (*Catechism*, 1960).