

COMPENDIUM ON CHURCH'S SOCIAL TEACHING PART 26

The equal dignity of all – including the disabled

By Leela Ramdeen 27.11.05

Today we continue our focus on the *Compendium*: Part 1, Chapter 3, III, C, continuation of b – “The bond uniting freedom with truth and the natural law”, and part of D: “The equal dignity of all people”

St Augustine tells us that the natural law, which is the law of God, cannot be annulled by human sinfulness. “It lays the indispensable moral foundation for building the human community and for establishing the civil law that draws its consequences of a concrete and contingent nature from the principles of the natural law.” (*Catechism*, 1959).

The *Compendium* states: “if the perception of the universality of the moral law is dimmed, people cannot build a true and lasting communion with others, because when a correspondence between truth and good is lacking, ‘whether culpably or not, our acts damage the communion of persons, to the detriment of each.’ (*Veritatis Splendor*).

“Only freedom rooted in a common nature, in fact, can make all men responsible and enable them to justify public morality. Those who proclaim themselves to be the sole measure of realities and of truth cannot live peacefully in society with their fellow men and cooperate with them (*Evangelium Vitae*).

Freedom, says the *Compendium*, “mysteriously tends to betray the openness to truth and human goodness, and too often it prefers evil and being selfishly closed off, raising itself to the status of a divinity that creates good and evil:

‘Although he was made by God in a state of holiness, from the very outset of his history man abused his liberty, at the urging of the Evil One. Man set himself against God and sought to attain his goal apart from God... Often refusing to acknowledge God as his beginning, man has disrupted also his proper relationship to his own ultimate goal as well as his whole relationship toward himself and others and all created things’ (*Gaudium et Spes*).

“Human freedom needs therefore to be liberated. Christ, by the power of his Paschal Mystery, frees man from his disordered love of self (*Catechism*, 1741), which is the source of his contempt for his neighbour and of those relationships marked by domination of others. Christ shows us that freedom attains its fulfilment in the gift of self (*Veritatis Splendor*). By his sacrifice on the cross, Jesus places man once more in communion with God and his neighbour.

D: The equal dignity of all people

“*God shows no partiality*” (Acts 10:34; Rom 2:11; Gal 2:6, Eph 6:9) since all people have the same dignity as creatures made in his image and likeness (*Catechism* 1934). The incarnation of the Son of God shows the equality of all people with regard to dignity: “*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus*” (Gal 3:28; Rom 10:12; 1 Cor 12:13; Col 3:11).

“Since something of the glory of God shines on the face of every person, the dignity of every person before God is the basis of the dignity of man before other men (*Gaudium et Spes*).

Moreover, this is the ultimate foundation of the radical equality and brotherhood among all people, regardless of their race, nation, sex, origin, culture, or class.

“Only the recognition of human dignity can make possible the common and personal growth of everyone (Jas 2:1-9). To stimulate this kind of growth it is necessary in particular to help the least, effectively ensuring conditions of equal opportunity for men and women and guaranteeing an objective equality between the different social classes before the law (*Octogesima Adveniens*).

“Also in relations between peoples and States, conditions of equality and parity are prerequisites for the authentic progress of the international community (*Pacem in Terris*). Despite the steps taken in this direction, it must not forget that there still exist many inequalities and forms of dependence (*Gaudium et Spes*).

“Together with equality in the recognition of the dignity of each person and of every people there must also be an awareness that it will be possible to safeguard and promote human dignity only if this is done as a community, by the whole of humanity. Only through the mutual action of individuals and peoples sincerely concerned for the good of all men and women can a genuine universal brotherhood be attained (*Populorum Progressio*); otherwise, the persistence of conditions of serious disparity and inequality will make us all poorer.

“ ‘Male’ and ‘female’ differentiate two individuals of equal dignity; which does not however reflect a static equality, because the specificity of the female is different from the specificity of the male, and this difference in equality is enriching and indispensable for the harmony of life in society.”

As is stated in *Christifideles Laici*: “The condition that will assure the rightful presence of woman in the Church and in society is a more penetrating and accurate consideration of the anthropological foundation for masculinity and femininity with the intent of clarifying woman’s personal identity in relation to man, that is, a diversity yet mutual complementarity, not only as it concerns roles to be held and functions to be performed, but also, and more deeply, as it concerns her make-up and meaning as a person.”

The *Compendium* makes it clear that “Woman is the complement of man, as man is the complement of woman: man and woman complete each other mutually, not only from a physical and psychological point of view, but also ontologically. It is only because of the duality of ‘male’ and female’ that the ‘human’ being becomes a full reality. It is the ‘unity of the two’ (*Mulieris Dignitatem*, 1988), or in other words a relational ‘uni-duality’, that allows each person to experience the interpersonal and reciprocal relationship as a gift that at the same time is a mission: ‘to this ‘unity of the two’ God has entrusted not only the work of procreation and family life, but the creation of history itself’ (John Paul II, Letter to Women 1995).

“The woman is ‘a helper’ for the man, just as the man is ‘a helper’ for the woman!’ (John Paul II, Sunday Angelus, July 9, 1995): in the encounter of man and woman a unitary conception of the human person is brought about, based not on the logic of self-centredness and self-affirmation, but on that of love and solidarity.”

Since *Disability Awareness Week* commences this Sunday, I specifically wish to highlight what the *Compendium* states in this section (para 148):

“Persons with disabilities are fully human subjects, with rights and duties: ‘in spite of the limitations and sufferings affecting their bodies and faculties, they point up more clearly the dignity and greatness of man’ (*Laborem Exercens*). Since persons with disabilities are subjects

with all their rights, they are to be helped to participate in every dimension of family and social life at every level accessible to them and according to their possibilities.

“The rights of persons with disabilities need to be promoted with effective and appropriate measures: ‘It would be radically unworthy of man, and a denial of our common humanity, to admit to the life of the community, and thus admit to work, only those who are fully functional. To do so would be to practise a serious form of discrimination, that of the strong and healthy against the weak and sick’ (*Laborem Exercens*).

“Great attention must be paid not only to the physical and psychological work conditions, to a just wage, to the possibility of promotion and the elimination of obstacles, but also to the affective and sexual dimensions of persons with disabilities: ‘They too need to love and to be loved, they need tenderness, closeness and intimacy’ (John Paul II, Message for the International Symposium on the Dignity and Rights of the Mentally Disabled Person, Jan 5, 2004), according to their capacities and with respect for the moral order, which is the same for the non-handicapped and the handicapped alike.”