

COMPENDIUM ON CHURCH'S SOCIAL TEACHING PART 27

The social nature of human beings

By Leela Ramdeen 04.12.05

Today we continue our focus on the *Compendium*: Part 1, Chapter 3, III, E: *The social nature of human beings*. Our world today is characterised, to some extent, by selfish individualism. *Inter alia*, this section highlights the dangers of such behaviour which could lead to the domination of our neighbour.

“The human person is essentially a social being (*Catechism*, 1879) because God, who created humanity, willed it so (*Pacem in Terris*). Human nature, in fact, reveals itself as a nature of a being who responds to his own needs. This is based on a relational subjectivity, that is, in the manner of a free and responsible being who recognises the necessity of integrating himself in cooperation with his fellow human beings, and who is capable of communion with them on the level of knowledge and love.”

Our *Catechism* (1880) tells us, “A society is a group of persons bound together organically by a principle of unity that goes beyond each one of them. As an assembly that is at once visible and spiritual, a society endures through time: it gathers up the past and prepares for the future.”

“It is therefore necessary”, states the *Compendium*, “to stress that community life is a natural characteristic that distinguishes man from the rest of earthly creatures. Social activity carries in itself a particular sign of man and of humanity that of a person at work within a community of persons: this is the sign that determines man’s interior traits and in a sense constitutes his very nature.

“This relational characteristic takes on, in the light of faith, a more profound and enduring meaning. Made in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26), and made visible in the universe in order to live in society (Gen 2:20,23) and exercise dominion over the earth (Gen 1:26,28-30), the human person is for this reason called from the very beginning to life in society: ‘God did not create man as a ‘solitary being’ but wished him to be a ‘social being’. Social life therefore is not exterior to man: he can only grow and realise his vocation in relation with others’ (*Libertatis Conscientia*).

“The social nature of human beings does not automatically lead to communion among persons, to the gift of self. Because of pride and selfishness, man discovers in himself the seeds of asocial behaviour, impulses leading him to close himself within his own individuality and to dominate his neighbour (*Gaudium et Spes*).

“Every society worthy of the name can be sure that it stands in the truth when all of its members, thanks to their ability to know what is good, are able to pursue it for themselves and for others. It is out of love for one’s own good and for that of others that people come together in stable groups with the purpose of attaining a common good. The different human societies also must establish among themselves relationships of solidarity, communication and cooperation, in the service of man and the common good. (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*).

“The social nature of human beings is not uniform but is expressed in many different ways. In fact, the common good depends on a healthy social pluralism. The different components of society are called to build a unified and harmonious whole, within which it is possible for each element to preserve and develop its own characteristics and autonomy.

“Some components – such as the family, the civil community and the religious community - respond more immediately to the intimate nature of man, while others come about more on a voluntary basis.

‘To promote the participation of the greatest number in the life of a society, the creation of voluntary associations and institutions must be encouraged ‘on both national and international levels, which relate to economic and social goals, to cultural and recreational activities, to sport, to various professions, and to political affairs.’

“This ‘socialisation’ also expresses the natural tendency for the sake of attaining objectives that exceed individual capacities. It develops the qualities of the person, especially the sense of initiative and responsibility, and helps guarantee his rights. (*Catechism*, 1882).

Over the next two weeks we will focus on the final section of Chapter 3: *Human rights*. We will then consider the content of Chapter 4: *Principles of the Church’s Social Doctrine*. Our understanding of what our faith teaches us can truly transform us. During this Advent season, let us be mindful of the real meaning of Christmas.

Advent marks something momentous: God’s coming into our midst. Mother Teresa once noted that the first person to welcome Christ was John the Baptist, who leaped for joy on recognising him, though they were both still in their mothers’ wombs. We are often so dulled by superficial distractions that we are incapable of hearing any voice within us, let alone listening to it.

Too often we fail to make any real connection to the vital spirit that radiated from the manger. Let us remember also that within the manger lies the cross – and the hope of redemption and resurrection.

Advent, therefore, is not merely a commemorative event or an anniversary, but a yearly opportunity for us to consider the future, second Advent - the promised coming of God’s kingdom on earth.