

COMPENDIUM ON CHURCH'S SOCIAL TEACHING PART 28

Value and specification of human rights

By Leela Ramdeen 11.12.05

Let us consider an important part of the *Compendium on the Social Doctrine of the Church*, that is, Human Rights. (Part 1, Chapter 3, IV).

Dignitatis Humanae tells us: “The movement towards the identification and proclamation of human rights is one of the most significant attempts to respond effectively to the inescapable demands of human dignity.”

Gaudium et Spes stresses that “The Church sees in these rights the extraordinary opportunity that our modern times offer, through the affirmation of these rights, for more effectively recognising human dignity and universally promoting it as a characteristic inscribed by God the Creator in his creature.”

“The Church’s Magisterium”, states the *Compendium*, “has not failed to note the positive value of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations on 10 December 1948, which Pope John Paul II defined as ‘a true milestone on the path of humanity’s moral progress’.

“In fact, the roots of human rights are to be found in the dignity that belongs to each human being (*Gaudium et Spes*). This dignity, inherent in human life and equal in every person, is perceived and understood first of all by reason.

The natural foundation of rights appears all the more solid when, in light of the supernatural, it is considered that human dignity, after having been given by God and having been profoundly wounded by sin, was taken on and redeemed by Jesus Christ in his incarnation, death and resurrection. (*Pacem in Terris*).

“The ultimate source of human rights is not found in the mere will of human beings (*Pacem in Terris*), in the reality of the State, in public powers, but in man himself and in God his Creator. These rights are ‘universal, inviolable, inalienable’ (*Pacem in Terris*). Universal because they are present in all human beings, without exception of time, place or subject.

“*Inviolable* insofar as ‘they are inherent in the human person and in human dignity’ (John Paul II, Message for the 1999 World Day of Peace) and because ‘it would be vain to proclaim rights, if at the same time everything were not done to ensure the duty of respecting them by all people, everywhere, and for all people’ (Paul VI, Message to the International Conference on Human Rights, Teheran, 1968).

Inalienable insofar as ‘no one can legitimately deprive another person, whoever they may be, of these rights, since this would do violence to their nature’ (John Paul II, Message for the 1999 World Day of Peace).

“Human rights are to be defended not only individually but also as a whole: protecting them only partially would imply a kind of failure to recognize them. They correspond to the demands of human dignity and entail, in the first place, the fulfillment of the essential needs of the person in the material and spiritual spheres.

‘These rights apply to every stage of life and to every political, social, economic and cultural situation. Together they form a single whole, directed unambiguously towards the promotion of every aspect of the good of both the person and society...The integral promotion of every category of human rights is the true guarantee of full respect for each individual right’ (John Paul II, Message for the 1999 World Day of Peace).

“Universality and indivisibility are distinctive characteristics of human rights: they are ‘two guiding principles which at the same time demand that human rights be rooted in each culture and that their juridical profile be strengthened so as to ensure that they are fully observed (John Paul II, Message for the 1999 World Day of Peace).

“The teachings of Pope John XXIII (*Pacem in Terris*), the Second Vatican Council (*Gaudium et Spes*), and Pope Paul VI (Address to the General Assembly of the UN, 1965) have given abundant indication of the concept of human rights as articulated by the Magisterium.

Pope John Paul II has drawn up a list of them in the Encyclical *Centesimus Annus*: ‘the right to life, an integral part of which is the right of the child to develop in the mother’s womb from the moment of conception; the right to live in a united family and in a moral environment conducive to the growth of the child’s personality; the right to develop one’s intelligence and freedom in seeking and knowing the truth; the right to share in the work which makes wise use of the earth’s material resources, and to derive from that work the means to support oneself and one’s dependents; and the right freely to establish a family, to have and to rear children through the responsible exercise of one’s sexuality.

“In a certain sense, the source and synthesis of these rights is religious freedom, understood as the right to live in the truth of one’s faith and in conformity with one’s transcendent dignity as a person’.

“The first right presented in this list is the right to life, from conception to its natural end (*Evangelium Vitae*), which is the condition for the exercise of all other rights and, in particular, implies the illicitness of every form of procured abortion and of euthanasia (*Gaudium et Spes*).

“Emphasis is given to the paramount value of the right to religious freedom: ‘all men are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and of any human power, in such wise that no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others, within due limits (*Dignitatis Humanae*).

The respect of this right is an indicative sign of ‘man’s authentic progress in any regime, in any society, system or milieu’ (*Redemptor Hominis*).”