

COMPENDIUM ON CHURCH'S SOCIAL TEACHING PART 29

Rights and duties

By Leela Ramdeen 18.12.05

Part 1, Chapter 3, IV, 'c' and 'd' of the *Compendium on the Social Doctrine of the Church* tells us that "inextricably connected to the topic of rights is the issue of the duties falling to men and women, which is given appropriate emphasis in the interventions of the Magisterium.

"The mutual complementarities between rights and duties – they are indissolubly linked – are recalled several times, above all in the human person who possesses them (*Pacem in Terris*). This bond also has a social dimension: 'in human society to one man's right there corresponds a duty in all other persons: the duty, namely, of acknowledging and respecting the right in question' (*Pacem in Terris*).

"The Magisterium underlines the contradiction inherent in affirming rights without acknowledging corresponding responsibilities. 'Those, therefore, who claim their own rights, yet altogether forget or neglect to carry out their respective duties, are people who build with one hand and destroy with the other' (*Pacem in Terris*).

"The field of human rights has expanded to include the rights of peoples and nations (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*): in fact, 'what is true for the individual is also true for peoples' (John Paul II Sept 4, 1989).

The Magisterium points out that international law 'rests upon the principle of equal respect for States, for each people's right to self-determination and for their free cooperation in view of the higher common good of humanity' (John Paul II Sept 4, 1989).

Peace is founded not only on respect for human rights but also on respect for the rights of peoples, in particular the right to independence (John Paul II Jan 25, 1988).

"The rights of nations are nothing but 'human rights fostered at the specific level of community life' (John Paul II Oct 11, 1995). A nation has a 'fundamental right to existence', to 'its own language and culture, through which a people expresses and promotes...its fundamental spiritual 'sovereignty', to 'shape its life according to its own traditions, excluding, of course, every abuse of basic human right and in particular the oppression of minorities', to 'build its future by providing an appropriate education for the younger generation' (John Paul II Oct 11, 1995).

"The international order requires a balance between *particularity* and *universality*, which all nations are called to bring about, for their primary duty is to live in a posture of peace, respect and solidarity with other nations.

"The solemn proclamation of human rights is contradicted by a painful reality of violations, wars and violence of every kind.

In the first place, genocides and mass deportations, the spreading on a virtual worldwide dimension of ever new forms of slavery such as trafficking in human beings, child soldiers, the exploitation of workers, illegal drug trafficking, prostitution. 'Even in countries with democratic forms of government, these rights are not always fully respected' (*Centesimus Annus*).

"Unfortunately, there is a gap between the 'letter' and the 'spirit' of human rights (*Redemptor Hominis*), which can often be attributed to a merely formal recognition of these rights.

The Church's social doctrine, in consideration of the privilege accorded by the Gospel to the poor, repeats over and over that 'the more fortunate should renounce some of their rights so as to place their goods more generously at the service of others; and that an excessive affirmation of equality 'can give rise to an individualism in which each one claims his own rights without wishing to be answerable for the common good' (*Octogesima Adveniens*).

"The Church, aware that her essentially religious mission includes the defence and promotion of human rights (*Centesimus Annus*), 'holds in high esteem the dynamic approach of today which is everywhere fostering these rights' (*Gaudium et Spes*). The Church profoundly experiences the need to respect justice (John Paul II Feb 17, 1979) and human rights (Code of Canon Law 208 – 223) within her own ranks.

"This pastoral commitment develops in a twofold direction: in the proclamation of the Christian foundations of human rights and in the denunciation of the violations of these rights (*The Church and Human Rights* 1975). In any event, 'proclamation is always more important than denunciation, and the latter cannot ignore the former, which gives it true solidity and the force of higher motivation' (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*).

"For greater effectiveness, this commitment is open to ecumenical cooperation, to dialogue with other religions, to all appropriate contacts with other organisations, governmental and non-governmental, at the national and international levels.

The Church trusts above all in the help of the Lord and his Spirit who, poured forth into human hearts, is the surest guarantee for respecting justice and human rights, and for contributing to peace.

"The promotion of justice and peace and the penetration of all spheres of human society with the light and the leaven of the Gospel have always been the object of the Church's efforts in fulfilment of the Lord's command' (Paul VI *Iustitiam et Pacem* Dec 10, 1976)." Next we move to Chapter 4 to consider the Principles of the Church's Social Doctrine.

During this Advent season, I urge you all to consider the words written above and in particular the following: "the more fortunate should renounce some of their rights so as to place their goods more generously at the service of others". Of course, we should be generous throughout the year, but as we recall the meaning of Christmas, let us be even more generous, see Christ in all those are in need and seek to meet those needs. Your generosity may stir up a generous spirit in others.

God loves a cheerful giver. We can practice generosity by giving money, food, gifts, by being generous with our time - spending time listening to others, sharing our skills abilities, and resources etc.

As the writer Mark Roberts said: "If we offer our whole selves to God in response to his mercies, His Spirit will transform us, thus helping us to be people who do God's will, including His will for charitable giving... We Christians are called to be generous, even as God has been generous with us."