

## COMPENDIUM ON CHURCH'S SOCIAL TEACHING PART 8

### **The Church's mission and social doctrine**

**By Leela Ramdeen 24.07.2005**

This article focuses on Part 1, Chapter 2 of the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church:

- a) The Church, God's dwelling place with men and women; and
- b) Enriching and permeating society with the Gospel.

*Gaudium et Spes* tells us that the Church, "sharing in mankind's joys and hopes, in its anxieties and sadness, stands with every man and woman of every place and time, to bring them the good news of the Kingdom of God, which in Jesus Christ has come and continues to be present among them".

In the midst of mankind and in the world, the Church is "the sacrament of God's love and, therefore, of the most splendid hope which inspires and sustains every authentic undertaking for and commitment to human liberation and advancement".

A wonderful image is painted of the Church as being present among us as God's tent of meeting, "God's dwelling place among men" (Rev 21:3), so that "man is not alone, lost or frightened in his task of making the world more human; thus men and women find support in the redeeming love of Christ".

*Gaudium et Spes* also tells us that "the Church, as minister of salvation, is not in the abstract nor in a merely spiritual dimension, but in the context of the history of the world in which man lives". It is in the Church that mankind is met by God's love and by the "vocation to cooperate in the divine plan".

We are reminded in the Compendium that "unique and unrepeatable in his individuality, every person is a being who is open to relationships with others in society". It is through the network of relationships that "link individuals, families and intermediate groups by encounter, communication and exchange, that we ensure a higher quality of living".

We read in *Gaudium et Spes* that "the common good that people seek and attain in the formation of social communities is the guarantee of their personal, familial and associative good". These are the reasons for which society "originates and takes shape, with its array of structures, that is to say its political, economic, juridical and cultural constructs".

The Church addresses her social doctrine to man, "as he is involved in a complex network of relationships within modern societies" (*Centesimus Annus*). As an "expert in humanity" (*Populorum Progressio*), the Church is able "to understand man in his vocation and aspirations, in his limits and misgivings, in his rights and duties, and to

speak a word of life that reverberates in the historical and social circumstances of human existence”.

With her social teaching, the Church seeks “to proclaim the Gospel and make it present in the complex network of social relations”. It is not simply a matter of reaching out to man in society but of “enriching and permeating society itself with the Gospel” (*Gaudium et Spes*). If the Church is to tend to the needs of man she must also involve society in her “missionary and salvific work”.

We read that the way people live together in society often determines the quality of life and, therefore, the conditions under which men and women understand themselves and make decisions concerning themselves and their vocation. For this reason, “the Church is not indifferent to what is decided, brought about or experienced in society; she is attentive to the moral quality – that is, the authentically human and humanising aspects – of social life.

“Society – and with it, politics, the economy, labour, law, culture – is not simply a secular and worldly reality, and therefore outside or foreign to the message and economy of salvation. Society in fact, with all that is accomplished within it, concerns man. Society is made up of men and women, who are ‘the primary and fundamental way for the Church’” (*Redemptor Hominis*).

I believe that for too long we have been living as Catholics without a clear understanding of the importance of the social doctrine of the Church. We read in the Compendium that by means of her social doctrine, “the Church takes on the task of proclaiming what the Lord has entrusted to her. She makes the message of the freedom and redemption wrought by Christ, the Gospel of the Kingdom, present in human history.”

Our Catechism, 2419, tells us that in proclaiming the Gospel, the Church “bears witness to man, in the name of Christ, to his dignity and his vocation to the communion of persons. She teaches him the demands of justice and peace in conformity with divine wisdom”. The social doctrine has the effectiveness of “truth and grace that comes from the Spirit of God, who penetrates hearts, predisposing them to thoughts and designs of love, justice, freedom and peace.

“Evangelising the social sector, then, means infusing into the human heart the power of meaning and freedom found in the Gospel, in order to promote a society befitting mankind because it befits Christ: it means building a city of man that is more human because it is in greater conformity with the Kingdom of God.”

With her social doctrine, “not only does the Church not stray from her mission but she is rigorously faithful to it”. The whole man – “not a detached soul or a being closed within his own individuality, but a person and a society of persons – is involved in the salvific economy of the Gospel.

“As bearer of the Gospel’s message of Incarnation and Redemption, the Church can follow no other path: with her social doctrine and the effective action that springs from it, not only does she not hide her face or tone down her mission, but she is faithful to Christ

and shows herself to men and women as ‘the universal sacrament of salvation’ (*Lumen Gentium*). This is especially true in times such as the present, marked by increasing interdependence and globalisation of social issues”.