



Catholic social teaching often mentions the importance of the human person, or concepts such as common good, but without going into details about what they mean. After explaining the elements of foundation behind the social doctrine of the Church, the Compendium of social doctrine of the Church, recently published, dedicates a couple of chapters to the human person and a series of principles.

"The Church sees in men and women, in every person, the living image of God," says number 105. Christ, through his incarnation, has united himself to humanity, continues the text, giving us "an incomparable and inalienable dignity."

This is relevant to society, observes the Compendium, because the protagonist of social life is always the human person. In fact, the whole body of social teaching offered by the Church "develops from the principle that affirms the inviolable dignity of the human person" (number 107).

The Book of Genesis speaks of the human person who is created in the image of God. The human creature is placed in the center and the top of all creation, and receives from God the breath of life. There is, therefore, in every person an intrinsic relationship with God, which, although forgotten or ignored, can never be eliminated (numbers 108-9). Genesis also tells how man and woman were created together, proving that the human person is not a solitary creature, but has a social nature.

The biblical narrative also tells how sin has affected human nature and is "at the root of personal and social divisions" (number 116). Sin, the separation of God, also brings with it a separation of other people and the world around us. There are

also sins that constitute direct aggression against our neighbors, especially those that affect issues of justice, the right to life and the freedom to believe in God.

But together with the omnipresent reality of sin, we must not forget "the universality of salvation in Jesus Christ," recalls the Compendium (number 120). Moreover, the redemption obtained by Christ allows everyone to share the nature of God.

The Compendium also warns against some mistakes in the idea of a human person. We should avoid reductionist conceptions that present individuals or as absolutely autonomous or as mere cells within a larger organism. Another mistake is to lose sight of the unity between body and soul, a ruling that can lead to spiritualism that despises the body or to a materialism that ignores the spirit (numbers 125-9).

A Just Society

Going to the consequences of the vision of the Church of the human person, the Compendium establishes that there can only be a just society «when it is based on respect for the transcendent dignity of the human person» (number 132). The text also insists on the importance of freedom. The authorities should be careful with the restrictions they put to freedom (number 133) and our human dignity demands that we act "according to a conscious and free choice" (number 135).

This freedom is not, however, unlimited, since only God can determine what is good or bad. Moreover, freedom should be exercised by an awareness guided by the natural moral law (numbers 136-43).

Other consequences are:

--The equal dignity of all people, whether between men and women, or persons with disabilities (numbers 144-48).

--The social nature of all human beings that means that we grow and realize our

vocation in relation to others (numbers 149-51).

--The existence of human rights, based on the dignity of the person (numbers 152-55).

"True Heart"

After considering the human person, the compendium then goes on to consider other basic principles that "constitute the true heart of Catholic Social teaching" (number 160). The first of these is the common good.

The common good is much more than just the simple sum of individual goods in society. It is the total of the conditions that allow people to achieve their fullness more fully and easily (number 164). These conditions vary according to specific historical conditions, but include elements such as commitment to peace, a fair legal system, and the provision of essential services.

The state has a responsibility to safeguard the common good, but individuals are also responsible for helping it develop, according to each one's chances. The state is also responsible for reconciling the particular assets of groups and individuals with the general common good. This is a delicate task, observes the compendium, and in a democratic system the authorities must be careful when interpreting the common good not only according to the wishes of the majority, but also respecting the good of minorities.

Share the goods

The next principle is that of the universal destiny of goods (numbers 171-84). God has destined the land and his goods to the benefit of all. This means that each person should have access to the level of well-being needed for their full development.

This principle, explains the Compendium, has to be implemented according to different social and cultural contexts and does not mean that everything is available to all. The right of use of land assets is necessary to exercise in a fair and orderly manner, according to a specific legal order. This principle also does not exclude the right to private property. However, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that the property is only a means, not an end in itself.

What is important to remember is that: «The principle of the universal destiny of goods is an invitation to develop an economic vision inspired by moral values that allow people not to lose sight of the origin or purpose of these goods, so that they achieve a world of justice and solidarity, in which the creation of wealth can have a positive function ' (number 174).

The Compendium also insists on the principle of the preferential option for the poor, to be exercised through Christian charity and to be inspired by the poverty of Jesus and his attention to the poor.

Organizing Society

Another principle underlying social doctrine is subsidiarity. Civil society is made up of many groups and the state should not only recognize its role and respect its freedom of action, but also offer the help it may need to carry out its functions.

Each person, family and group has something original to offer to the community, observes the Compendium (number 187) and a denial of this role limits, or even destroys, the spirit of freedom and initiative.

The principle of subsidiarity is therefore opposed to "certain forms of centralization, bureaucratization, and welfare assistance and the unjustified and excessive presence of the state in public mechanisms".

An implication of subsidiarity is another principle of participation. It is important for all to cooperate in social, cultural and political life (number 189). Participation, says the compendium, is one of the pillars of the democratic system.

Another principle related to social life is solidarity. In modern times, there has been a greater awareness of the interdependence between individuals and peoples. Solidarity is both a principle of social life and a moral virtue (number 193). Through the exercise of solidarity each person makes a commitment to carry out the common good and serve others.

Solidarity, therefore, means the will to give us for the good of our neighbors. This, however, is not just philanthropic concern. Our neighbor says number 196, is not only someone with rights "but becomes the living image of God the Father, redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ and put under the permanent action of the Holy Spirit."