

# Essay Review: A new Catholic social manifesto? The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church

**BRUCE DUNCAN CSsR**

REFLECTING POPE JOHN PAUL II's passionate engagement with the great social issues of our day, *The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* will stand as a key resource for some years. Yet it is not an easy document to assess, since it encompasses such a wide field of topics and issues. Because of the limitations of space, this review will outline the scope of the Compendium, skipping much of the detail about specific areas, and raise some questions and criticisms.

Disturbed that the social teaching of the Church was not well known, John Paul II directed in 1996 that the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace prepare a summary for the Great Jubilee of the Church's views on contemporary social issues. It was first termed a 'catechism', stressing in a quite unprecedented way the importance of this synthesis, but the title was changed to *Compendium*, allowing more room for flexibility in interpretation since the social context was in constant flux. The text was vetted carefully by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith headed by Cardinal Ratzinger, indicating that Benedict XVI is likely to endorse its views strongly. It was a major undertaking and did not appear until late in 2004, with the Vatican edition which runs to 525 pages.

The influence of many great Catholic thinkers is reflected in the text, especially Jacques Maritain, regarded as the decisive political philosopher of Pope Paul VI, along with so many of the new theologians—de Lubac, Chenu, Congar, Häring, Rahner and John Courtney Murray among others, who so shaped the thinking of the Second Vatican Council.

Drafting the *Compendium* was a daunting task. Pope John Paul II alone had made thousands of important statements and speeches on the great social issues of our time, and there were many important statements by various Vatican spokesmen and organisations to incorporate. This vast amount of material needed to be digested and summarised into themes. The *Compendium* also needed a literary structure to knit the elements into a consistent and readable text. This has been done quite successfully at times, though clearly the outcome is the work of different hands and viewpoints.

While various unnamed experts and episcopal conferences were consulted, the *Compendium* does not refer to any of the standard authors, commentaries or academic debates about Catholic social teaching. However, it is not purely a compilation and expansion of official Vatican statements, since the selection of texts and emphases reflect differences of view. Inevitably the document must be to some extent a compromise.

A disappointing aspect of the English translation is that many sections of the *Compendium* fail to use inclusive language. It is difficult to understand why this continues to occur in Vatican documents. Inclusive language is now widely regarded as part of the normal courtesies of discourse. In my view, to use non-inclusive language is needlessly counter-productive, and may result in some people who would otherwise be keenly interested in the *Compendium* refusing to look at it. Perhaps non-English speakers do not realise how significant this issue is in English-speaking countries.

## **The Structure**

The Compendium will be valuable as a standard reference, though as circumstances change, formal Church positions will also adapt. The very title of the Introduction, 'An Integral and Solidary Humanism', reflects Maritain's influence. His philosophy of 'integral humanism' was incorporated into formal Church teaching by Paul VI in his 1967 *Development of Peoples*, and recurs as a motif throughout the Compendium. The book proposes 'an integral and solidary humanism capable of creating a new social, economic and political order, founded on the dignity and freedom of every human person, to be brought about in peace, justice and solidarity' (par. 19).

The text is organised into three sections, the first dealing with the overarching context of God in Christ calling the Church to a social mission to the whole of humanity, based on reverence for the person and support for human rights. The second section largely follows the divisions of Vatican II's *Church in the Modern World* and considers the various areas of social life, beginning with the family, then devoting chapters to: human work; economic life; the political community; international issues; the environment; and peace. The third section summarises why the Church's social doctrine is important, and urges lay people especially to commit themselves to building a 'civilisation of love'.

## **Layers of Authority in the Text**

The Introduction warns that 'the citations of Magisterial texts are taken from documents of differing authority', and hence may be open to debate and constant updating or adaptation. 'The document limits itself to putting forth the fundamental elements of the Church's social doctrine, leaving to Episcopal Conferences the task of making the appropriate applications...' (par. 8).

The Compendium is addressed not just to bishops, priests, religious personnel and lay people, but also to other Christian denominations, members of non-Christian religions, and all people of good will, in the hope that this will guide debate about how to achieve the common good of everyone (par. 12).

Chapter One on 'God's plan of love for humanity' opens beautifully with a reflection on how in all religious traditions the intuition of Mystery reveals an aspect of God's face to people. The Mystery calls us to act responsibly with others, as is universally recognised in the Golden Rule (par. 20). This promise of a life of grace is not just for Christians, 'but also for all people of good will in whose hearts grace is active invisibly' (par. 41).

The Compendium here refreshingly talks of the 'Mystery', or the 'Transcendent One', rather than simply God. The reason presumably is to set a context for recognising that all our ideas and talk of God fall short of the reality, since our understanding rests on analogy, and makes use of metaphor and symbol in the struggle to articulate the meaning of belief.

The Compendium highlights the social implications of the Ten Commandments, especially 'the right of the poor' to sustenance and justice. This was embodied in the practice of the sabbatical and jubilee years to redistribute land, free indentured labour and remit debts. It was not just to remind Israel of its founding principle, but to be continually invoked to eliminate discrimination and economic inequalities (pars. 23-24).

The Gospels interpret Christ as the full revelation of the Father's inner being, but in St Luke especially, expressed in terms of the Jewish jubilee, bringing freedom to the poor, oppressed, the blind and those in prison (par. 28). The salvation Jesus talks about is not just a private or transcendent reality, but includes social and public life. 'In man's inner dimension are rooted... the commitment to justice and solidarity, to the building up of a social, economic and political life that corresponds to God's plan' (par. 40).

The Church's social doctrine of human liberation is intimately involved in its mission. '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.' (par. 62). 'Nothing that concerns the community of men and women—situations and problems regarding justice, freedom, development, relations between peoples, peace—is foreign to evangelization...' (par. 66). 'The Church's social doctrine 'is itself a valid instrument of evangelization' [John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 54.]... This is not a marginal interest or activity, or one that is tacked on to the Church's mission, rather it is at the very heart of the Church's ministry of service...' (par. 67).

### **Church Authority and Historical Accuracy**

The Compendium states: 'Insofar as it is part of the Church's moral teaching, the Church's social doctrine has the same dignity and authority as her moral teaching. It is authentic magisterium, which obligates the faithful to adhere to it. The doctrinal weight of the different teachings and the assent required are determined by the nature of the particular teachings, by their level of independence from contingent and variable elements, and by the frequency with which they are invoked.' (par. 80). However, 'the Church does not attempt to structure or organize society, but to appeal to, guide and form consciences.' (par. 81).

'This social doctrine also entails a duty to denounce' injustice and violence, especially to defend the rights 'of the poor, the least and the weak', and promote the cause of social justice (par. 81). The Church works for a society 'that anticipates in history, in a preparatory and prefigurative manner, the 'new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells'.' (par. 82). This task of social transformation belongs not primarily to priests and religious personnel, but to lay people 'by reason of the secular conditions of their state of life, and of the secular nature of their vocation' (par. 83).

### **Historical Failures?**

By way of criticism, I should point out that the text does not explicitly discuss the failures and blunders in the Church's historical engagement with social issues. Instead, it asserts that 'the Church's social doctrine is a constant teaching that 'remains identical in its fundamental inspiration, in its 'principles of reflection', in its 'criteria of judgment', in its basic 'directives for action'...' (par. 85).

Its section on the development of the modern social teaching (pars. 87-104) gives a brief overview of a gradually unfolding and basically coherent corpus of teaching, with no sense of the conflicts and debates within those developments, and at times the failures and mistakes. It would be more honest if the Compendium frankly acknowledged that the Church has made serious mistakes in the past, especially in recent centuries in its opposition to Enlightenment philosophies developing traditions of human rights and liberty of conscience, as well as of religious freedom.

After all, the Second Vatican Council reversed many earlier Church views, such as the doctrine of the confessional State, the condemnation of the principle of religious liberty etc., and redeveloped Catholic social teaching precisely using human rights theories it had too sweepingly rejected. The irony that Catholic social teaching now revolves around the human rights of the person is profound.

John Paul II in his Jubilee apologies led the Church in confessing many of the failures by its adherents in the past, but stopped short of acknowledging that some official Church teaching was itself at fault. Failure to acknowledge this transparently disturbs many people who know their history, and results in needless distrust with the Church and its social teaching.

In my view, it would have helped to include in the Compendium a more accurate appraisal of earlier Church positions, recognising the difficulties and that Church leaders can only act as they see fit at the time. The Church's social teaching does not drop directly out of heaven but develops gradually as the result of reason and experience in attempting to respond to human need over centuries. At times in the past the Church has been slow to develop its social thinking, or even reactionary. We need to be honest about this, not least of all because it tells us important things about the limitations and possibilities of failure by the Church in this area.

## **Human Rights**

Chapter Three outlines the Church's understanding of the dignity of the human person as fundamental to the construction of a just society. 'The Church, aware that her essentially religious mission includes the defence and promotion of human rights, 'holds in high esteem the dynamic approach of today which is everywhere fostering these rights'' (par. 159).

Chapter Four, 'Principles of the Church's Social Doctrine', locates the heart of Church teaching in the principles of the common good, the universal destination of goods, and the principles of subsidiarity, participation and solidarity (par. 166). However, its treatment of 'social justice' is surprisingly sketchy and undeveloped for such a key principle (par. 201).

As a means to ensure personal autonomy and freedom, private property is allowed as a means to the end of common use. 'The Church's social doctrine requires that ownership of goods be equally [presumably this would be better translated 'equitably'] accessible to all, so that all may become, at least in some measure, owners...' (par. 176). For 'Christian tradition has never recognized the right to private property as absolute and untouchable.' (par. 177).

Further, the Compendium highlights the 'preferential option for the poor' (par. 182) but recognises that it is not possible to eliminate poverty entirely from the world. Until Christ returns, 'the poor remain entrusted to us and it is this responsibility upon which we shall be judged at the end of time' (par. 183).

## **Role of the State**

The document warns against over-extending the scope of the welfare State, resulting in a loss of personal responsibility (par. 187). It recognises that the State must step in 'to supply certain functions', but intervention 'must not continue any longer than is absolutely necessary, since justification for such intervention is found only in the exceptional nature of the situation' (par. 188).

However, it somewhat inconsistently strongly supports maintaining a family wage that allows for savings to acquire property as a guarantee of personal freedom. If necessary, it calls for various forms of social provision, such as 'family subsidies and other contributions for dependent family members, and also remuneration for the domestic work done in the home by one of the parents' (par. 250). It even adds that there should be 'economic compensation' for housekeeping and family care (par. 251).

Nevertheless, this discussion underestimates the necessary role of the State in providing a secure and equitable environment for business, and ensuring the redistribution of resources to offer a reasonable equality of opportunity for all citizens. Its view of the welfare State is highly abstract, and does not recognise the great variety of forms welfare States take in western democracies.

The State must favour the free exercise of economic activity but also 'establish limits for the autonomy of the parties in order to defend those who are weaker.' Putting it succinctly, State intervention in the economy must be 'commensurate with society's real needs' (par. 351). However the difficulties arise from questions about who decides, how, and on what basis?

## **Human Work**

The Chapter on human work reflects the Church's deep involvement with the rights of workers in the existing capitalist economy, and its historic debate with forms of socialism and communism. It recalls the prophetic value of Pope Leo XIII's 'heartfelt defence of the inalienable dignity of workers' (par. 268). But it also incorporates John Paul II's distinctive emphasis on the subjectivity of work, 'the self-realization of the person', so that 'work is for man and not man for work.' (par. 272).

The Compendium denies that unions are only 'a mouthpiece for a class struggle which inevitably governs social life', and insists that 'Properly speaking, unions are promoters of the struggle for social justice, for the rights of workers' (par. 306). They also have the task 'of educating the social consciences of workers' so that they play a full and responsible role in society. The Church also recognises the right to strike when conducted by peaceful means and 'when it cannot be avoided, or at least when it is necessary to obtain a proportionate benefit' (par. 304).

In line with a long tradition the Compendium supports workers participating 'in ownership, management and profits' of the industries in which they work (par. 281). It mentions the need to find new ways to ensure the right to participate in industries and firms (par. 281). And since unemployment can become 'a real social disaster', 'Full employment' therefore remains a mandatory objective for every economic system' (par. 288).

The 'presence of women in the workplace must also be guaranteed', especially by professional formation (par. 295). As for child labour, it 'constitutes a kind of violence'. In some countries, this is increasing, and amounts to 'veritable slavery' (par. 296).

### **Economic and Political Life**

Chapter Seven on 'Economic Life' recognises the advantages of the free market but 'points out the need for it to be firmly rooted in its ethical objectives...Faced with the concrete 'risks of an 'idolatry' of the market', the Church's social doctrine underlines its limits' (par. 349).

A number of issues lurk unresolved in Chapter 8 on the political community. Firstly, it states that the purpose of political authority is to promote the common good, understood as the full growth and wellbeing of the human person, and to discover the moral order 'God has imprinted in all his creatures' (par. 384). But one might ask, is this the role of government, or of society more generally? Is not the role of government to focus on the civic good that is achievable within specific circumstances, without trying to enforce all the details of the moral law?

Second, while endorsing democracy, the document rejects 'ethical relativism, which maintains that there are no objective or universal criteria for establishing the foundations of a correct hierarchy of values' (par. 407). One would not disagree with this statement. But instead of falling into a negative mode, how can we encourage a more positive conversation about the objectivity of moral norms? There is much in contemporary thinking that rejects ethical relativism: concern for human rights, mass movements against poverty and hunger, concern for the environment and future generations. Where is the conversation with economic philosophers, for instance, working for a more substantial base for a renewed, more humane economics?

Third, the Compendium states that it does not belong to the Church 'to enter into questions of the merit of political programmes, except as concerns their religious or moral implications' (par. 424). This does not take us very far, since moral issues pervade the political landscape. There are no general rules for the effective resolution of conflicts between moral dimensions and political decisions, except through attempts at courteous, honest and informed debate.

The document continues: 'It is a grave duty of conscience not to co-operate, not even formally [does it mean 'materially', rather than 'formally'?], in practices which, although permitted by civil legislation, are contrary to the Law of God' (par. 399). These are complex issues for people to work through appropriately, but the treatment here is much too cryptic.

The Compendium recognises the right of resistance to unjust authorities, even to the point of violent resistance in extreme cases, though it prefers passive resistance as more conformable to moral principle (par. 401). It also calls for the just treatment of criminal prisoners, strongly affirms the prohibition against torture, and considers the need to use the death penalty very rare today, if non-existent in practice (par. 403-4005).

A very strange sentence enters the text at this stage, presumably introduced by a different hand: 'Religious freedom is not a moral licence to adhere to error, nor as [sic] an implicit right to error' (par 421). What does this enigmatic sentence mean? It has echoes of the old 'error has no rights' theory rejected by the Second Vatican Council which declared that people have rights to make moral decisions, even though they may err.

### **International Relations and Poverty**

Chapter Nine on 'The International Community' implies a strong critique of recent US foreign policy and calls on the international community to 'reject definitively the idea that justice can be sought through recourse to war' (par. 438). It argues that international law must ensure that 'the law of the more powerful does not prevail' (439).

Surprisingly, the Compendium devotes only a few pages expressly to international economic development, though there are scattered references elsewhere. 'It may seem that underdevelopment is impossible to eliminate...difficulties must nonetheless be met with strong and resolute determination, because development is not only an aspiration but a right that, like every right, implies a duty' (par. 446). It again calls for 'an equitable distribution of goods' on a world scale (par. 448).

It repeats John Paul II's clarion statement in 2000: 'At the beginning of the New Millennium, the poverty of billions of men and women is 'the one issue that most challenges our human and Christian consciences'...The poor should be seen 'not as a problem, but as people who can become the principal builders of a new and more human future for every-one" (par. 449).

The document laments the protectionism and trade discrimination against developing countries that hinder development, along with deteriorating terms of trade, resulting in a widening gap between rich and poor countries (par. 364); 'freedom of trade is fair only when it is in accord with the demands of justice' (par. 366). It considers that financial deregulation has had very negative consequences for many developing countries (par. 369).

The Compendium also condemns unjust financial systems in extremely strong terms: 'Those whose usurious and avaricious dealings lead to the hunger and death of their brethren in the human family indirectly commit homicide, which is imputable to them' [from the Catechism, 2269] (par. 341). 'Solidarity too must become globalized' (par. 321).

### **Environment**

An innovation is the chapter, 'Safeguarding the environment'. The Vatican had been slow to incorporate concern for the environment in its social teaching, but the Compendium embraces it heartily (par. 455). It notes that 'ill-considered' and excessive exploitation of the earth's resources has resulted in a growing awareness of risk; 'it sometimes seems that the balance between man and the environment has reached a critical point' (par. 461). It warns that when the scientific data are contradictory, 'It may then be appropriate to base evaluations on the 'precautionary principle'... managing the situation of uncertainty' (par. 469).

### **Peace**

'The Promotion of Peace' (Chapter Eleven) is one of the strongest sections of this book, and is of special significance given the war in Iraq and the threat from terrorism. The Compendium strongly condemns war (par. 497), but is not pacifist. 'A war of aggression is intrinsically immoral', and states have the duty of defence 'even using the force of arms'.

However the Compendium has failed to correct the misleading statement in the Catechism that 'The evaluation of these conditions for moral legitimacy [for war] belongs to the prudential judgment of those who have responsibility for the common good.' Cardinal Ratzinger indicated that this may need changing.

The Compendium reflects the strong opposition by the Vatican to the invasion by the US, Britain and Australia of Iraq. It notes that according to the UN Charter, war is only legitimate in self-defence or when authorised by the Security Council to maintain peace. 'Therefore, engaging in a preventive war without clear proof that an attack is imminent cannot fail to raise serious moral and juridical questions' (par. 501).

Legitimate defence also extends to protecting the innocent against aggression, on the grounds of international humanitarian law, particularly against systemic violence against civilians, such as ethnic cleansing (par. 504). Refugees have special claims to protection (par. 505).

Further implying Vatican opposition to the cruel sanctions against Iraq, the Compendium insists they must 'never be used as a means for the direct punishment of an entire population' (par. 507).

The Compendium condemns as 'a profanation and a blasphemy to declare oneself a terrorist in God's name.' It also condemns the idea that those who die in terrorist attacks are 'martyrs'. 'No religion may tolerate terrorism and much less preach it. Rather, religions must work together to remove the causes of terrorism and promote friendship among peoples' (par. 515).

### **Social Teaching Neglected**

The Compendium laments that the Church's social teaching 'is neither taught nor known sufficiently' (par. 528). Hence it insists that 'The Church's social doctrine must be the basis of an intense and constant work of formation, especially of the lay faithful (par. 531). It also insists that priests and seminarians 'must develop a thorough knowledge of the Church's teaching' and take 'a keen interest in the social issues of their day' (par. 533).

### **Conclusion**

The 166-page index is very extensive, nearly a third of the whole book (it must be a record), but one wonders why so many headings have been listed. For instance, p. 366 includes headings on 'Awareness', 'Beginnings' and 'Benefits' but they add nothing significant for researchers. Perhaps the index has been computer-generated. There has been no attempt to arrange sub-headings within major categories. Instead there is a reference to every time the word is used, though with a line indicating its context. There is a useful 25-page index of all references to Scriptural or Church sources used.

The Compendium will provide a useful resource for libraries and scholars, though it is unavoidably cryptic at times, and even leaves important questions unresolved. It reflects an important *pris de position* at this stage of debates in Rome and the wider Church. It does not possess the power or authority of the Vatican Council's *The Church in the Modern World*, even though it does reflect it to some extent, and summarises later developments. It should be used in the context of the standard commentaries and the wider literature—but stay tuned for further developments.