

The voice of the Vatican

THE VATICAN PLAYS a leading role in global debates about violence and war, economic development for poorer countries, and the distribution of resources. To make its views better known, in 2004 the Vatican published a compilation of Church statements, many of which oppose key policies of the Bush administration, especially on the war in Iraq, the role of social justice, and the need for greater equity in the world economy.

The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* cannot be conveniently dismissed as the work of trendy lefties in the Church. It is the most considered and comprehensive publication on such a range of issues ever issued on the authority of a pope. Pope John Paul II instructed the Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace to prepare the 525-page document, and it was revised carefully by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

Despite its diplomatic language, this collection of papal and other church statements is a very strong criticism of US unilateralism and its imperial tendencies. The Church favours international co-operation, and insists repeatedly that freedom must be secured on the basis of social justice, equity and respect for human rights.

Significantly, the *Compendium* opposes ethical relativism that reduces moral principle to self-interest or the imposition of force. The Church is renewing its claim to be a key custodian of the just-war tradition, but extends this commentary into the entire realm of social justice in the international economy.

The *Compendium* does not seek to bind Catholics in conscience to accept its views as if they were doctrinal statements central to faith. Although the Church affirms strongly its moral principles, judgments about social, economic and political matters of their nature are less definitive. Such judgments do not depend solely on the authority of the Church, but more on the force of the arguments themselves in changing circumstances. Hence there may be room for debate or changes of position.

However, the Church takes very seriously Christ's words to feed the hungry, care for the sick, the homeless and people in distress, and so considers concern about war, poverty, hunger and injustice as part of its core business. It engages in efforts to improve the human condition, not primarily by invoking superior insight into technical matters but by

engaging in earnest conversation about human needs and encouraging the search for more adequate solutions.

What then does the *Compendium* tell us about the burning issues of war and peacemaking?

Pope John Paul II and Cardinal Ratzinger vigorously contested the moral legitimacy of the invasion of Iraq by the United States, Britain and Australia. They were not alone, of course. The major Catholic bishops' conferences around the world endorsed the Vatican views, and many leaders of other mainstream churches also challenged whether the war was just.

President Bush relied particularly on the political support of right-wing evangelical Christians in the US, and has not

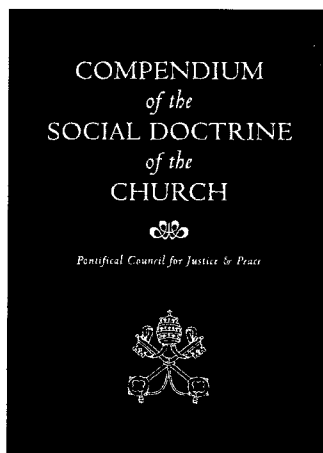
been slow to depict himself in a religious light, as leading a new crusade in defence of Christian values and civilisation against Islamic terrorists. This attempt to co-opt religious language and symbols is not just a cynical manipulation of moral traditions, but has very worrying implications if allowed to pass unchallenged.

With the invasion of Iraq clearly in mind, the *Compendium* states that according to the UN Charter, war is legitimate only 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.' It warns against allowing military might to determine right, declaring that 'international law must ensure that the law of the more powerful does not prevail'.

IN CONTRAST WITH EARLIER traditions that considered righting an injustice legitimate grounds for war, the *Compendium* calls on the international community to 'reject definitively the idea that justice can be sought through recourse to war ... Not only does the Charter of the United Nations ban recourse to force, but it rejects even the threat to use force.'

On the morality of war, there is some unresolved tension in the texts quoted. On one hand, the *Compendium* strongly condemns war: 'It is hardly possible to imagine that in an atomic era, war could be used as an instrument of justice.' War is a 'scourge' and is never an appropriate way to resolve problems that arise between nations because it creates new and more complicated conflicts. 'In the end, war is ... always a defeat for humanity.'

The document quotes John Paul II, that 'violence is evil' and 'destroys what it claims to defend: the dignity, the life, the freedom of human beings'. It commends 'the witness of unarmed prophets, who are often the objects of ridicule'



but who renounce violence to safeguard human rights.

On the other hand, the *Compendium* is not pacifist. 'A war of aggression is intrinsically immoral', and states have the duty of defence, 'even using the force of arms'. Quoting the *Catechism*, it adduces the standard 'strict conditions' for licit use of force: an aggressor is inflicting great and lasting damage; all other means of averting war have proved ineffective; there must be serious prospects of success; and the outcome must not produce an even worse result than not fighting. Yet, incomprehensibly, the *Compendium* repeats a phrase from the *Catechism* that was used by prominent Catholic apologists for the invasion of Iraq to argue that the moral decision for war belonged to governments: 'The evaluation of these conditions for moral legitimacy belongs to the prudential judgment of those who have responsibility for the common good.' These apologists used this sentence to claim that decisions of government overruled the moral views of the churches against the legitimacy of the invasion. As Cardinal Ratzinger later indicated, the misleading sentence should be withdrawn from the *Catechism*.

The *Compendium* recognises that defence forces 'make an authentic contribution to peace', and especially those serving on humanitarian or peace-keeping missions promoted by the United Nations. This duty of humanitarian intervention even overrides the principle of national sovereignty. To enforce the provisions of international law and punish human rights abuses, the Church strongly supports the International Criminal Court.

The Church also calls for a 'general, balanced and controlled disarmament' and banning all weapons of mass destruction, including ending nuclear testing. The document supports the ban on child soldiers and anti-personnel mines, and urges stricter controls over the production and sale of small arms and light weapons.

In addition, 'Every member of the armed forces is morally obliged to resist orders that call for perpetuating crimes against the law of nations and the universal principles of this law.' Nor can violations of human rights be justified by claiming obedience to superior orders. The document also supports the right of conscientious objectors to military

service in principle, or to a particular war, but adds they 'must be open to accepting alternative forms of service'. Further, the *Compendium* recognises the right of resistance to unjust authorities, even to the point of violent resistance in extreme cases, although it prefers passive resistance as being more conformable to moral principle.

THE SANCTIONS AGAINST IRAQ, which took a huge death toll on civilians—perhaps 500,000 or more were children—pose an immense moral question for our Western nations, and possibly amount to a great crime against humanity. The Vatican repeatedly opposed such draconian sanctions, but the Western powers today wish the whole issue to disappear. In contrast to the intense scrutiny over the UN administration of the sanctions regime, there has been almost total silence in our media about the morality of the sanctions themselves and responsibility for the catastrophic death toll.

The *Compendium* declares that sanctions must 'never be used as a means for the direct punishment of an entire population: it is not licit that entire populations, and above all their most vulnerable members, be made to suffer because of such sanctions ... An economic embargo must be of limited duration and cannot be justified when the resulting effects are indiscriminate'.

Terrorism too is to be condemned as 'one of the most brutal forms of violence', sowing 'hatred, death, and an urge for revenge and reprisal.' But the *Compendium* insists that the causes of terrorism must not be overlooked. 'The fight against terrorism presupposes the moral duty to help create those conditions that will prevent it from arising or developing.'

The *Compendium* declares it 'a profanation and a blasphemy to declare oneself a terrorist in God's name', and spurns 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'.

One cannot help lamenting the failures of the US government and military to live up to their finest ideals as the *Compendium* continues: 'The struggle against terrorists must be carried out

with respect for human rights and for the principles of a state ruled by law.' 'It is essential that the use of force, even when necessary, be accompanied by a courageous and lucid analysis of the reasons behind terrorist attacks', since terrorists are more easily recruited when rights have long been trampled.

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The document also quotes Pope John Paul II as saying that nothing can justify torture. Far from simply endorsing a US-led war against terrorism, the *Compendium* puts the issues of war and violence in the context of economic justice, social equity and international development, including the plight of the poorest countries struggling under impossible debts.

Pope John Paul II stated on World Day of Peace, 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"'. Indeed, 'another name for peace is development', as Pope Benedict XVI has since indicated with his support for the United Nations and its Millennium Development Goals. ■

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