

**The new *Compendium of Social Doctrine*:  
what does it offer our welfare services?**

**Bruce Duncan**

The new Vatican *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* highlights the urgency for people to contribute more decisively to the task of social transformation. This comprehensive treatment covers many areas of social concern, but this article focuses on issues around social welfare provision.

Concerned that few people seemed to realise how central to the work of the Church was its involvement with social issues, including in health, welfare, education and social services, Pope John Paul II directed that a type of catechism of Church social teaching be prepared.

It took longer than expected and was only published in late 2004 under the title, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. Its 525 pages are not an easy read as it summarises difficult and sometimes contentious debates. But its massive 166-page index makes it a valuable resource for quickly identifying official Church views on various issues.

The book is not called a catechism, since much of the material in its pages relies on judgments about social and political matters that do not necessarily involve one's faith. It wants to leave room for informed debate about how the principles of social justice should be applied in different circumstances.

The very title, *Compendium*, accurately reflects the fact that the book gathers many of the most significant statements made by recent popes and Vatican officials over more than a century (since Leo XIII's 1891 landmark social encyclical *Rerum Novarum*) and synthesises them into various themes. Chapters are devoted to family life, human work, economic life, the political community, international issues, the environment and to peace.

Given the astonishing volume of material to be summarised, especially of Pope John Paul II and Vatican agencies, writing the *Compendium* was a demanding task given to the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. The text clearly indicates where the citations are from, but knits them together into a continuous literary structure.

**Vetted by Ratzinger's Congregation**

This draft was reviewed thoroughly by Cardinal Ratzinger's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, so the final product indicates the social views that Pope Benedict XVI is likely to pursue.

The *Compendium* warns, however, that it contains Church statements that vary in their authoritative weight, and hence readers must judge this accordingly. Yet while allowing room for change and development in its social teaching, the Church commends the text seriously to people's consciences, insisting that the underlying principles and criteria of judgement are part of its formal doctrinal teaching, not optional extras.

The *Compendium* strongly affirms everyone contributing to social wellbeing in whatever way, stressing that this is living out the Gospel in practice. Indeed '*The Church's social doctrine is an integral part of her evangelizing ministry*'. 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). ‘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).

However, ‘the Church does not attempt to structure or organize society, but to appeal to, guide and form consciences.’ Still, the Church must be prepared to denounce injustice and violence, and defend human rights, especially those of the poor, the least and the weak (par. 81).

### **Social transformation and lay people**

The task of social transformation to prefigure the ‘new heavens and the new earth’ of God’s promise belongs primarily to lay people in the secular conditions of their lives (par. 82-83).

The social teaching begins with the dignity of the human person, made in the image of God. Various social principles flow out of this:

- the need to ensure that every person has the resources to live a decent life (solidarity),
- the organisation of society to provide the conditions for a just social order through the equitable distribution of goods and services (the common good);
- the right to property, in which private ownership is justified in terms of its contribution to the good of all;
- the widespread dispersion of power and responsibility through society (subsidiarity),
- so that people can exercise their right to participate appropriately in decision-making that concerns them.

Some may be surprised to read in the *Compendium*: ‘*The Church’s social doctrine requires that ownership of goods be equally accessible to all*, so that all may become, at least in some measure, owners...’ (par. 176). This is part of the Church’s long-standing emphasis on the widest possible distribution of ownership in society, though the above quotation should presumably be translated as ‘equitable distribution’ rather than ‘equally distributed’, since an absolute equality of wealth, as demanded by extreme forms of socialism, has never been part of the Church’s teaching.

### **Against the welfare State?**

In the context of current debates over the future of the welfare State, what has the *Compendium* to offer? Some of the US neo-conservatives, such as Michael Novak, have argued that Catholic social teaching requires a minimal role for the State and demands a scaling back of the welfare State. They quote Pope John Paul II’s criticisms of the ‘Social Assistance State’ in his 1991 encyclical, *Centesimus Annus*, in support of their views.

Indeed, the *Compendium*, too, states that the principle of subsidiarity ‘is opposed to certain forms of centralization, bureaucratization, and welfare assistance and to the unjustified and excessive presence of the State in public mechanisms.’ As Pope John Paul said in *Centesimus Annus*: “‘By intervening directly and depriving society of its responsibility, the Social Assistance State leads to a loss of human energies and an inordinate increase of public agencies, which are dominated more by bureaucratic ways of thinking than by concern for serving their clients, and which are accompanied by an enormous increase in spending.’”

The *Compendium* calls for the development of intermediate organisations, and ‘bringing about bureaucratic and administrative decentralization; striking a balance between the public and private spheres, with the resulting recognition of the *social* function of the private sphere...’ (par. 187).

The *Compendium* recognises that the State must step in ‘*to supply certain functions*’, as when it must stimulate the economy or rectify serious imbalances or injustices. But this 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.’ Nevertheless, the demands of the common good are the decisive criteria for judging the applicability of subsidiarity (par. 188).

As stated in this passage, this view of the role of the State is quite abstract. The *Compendium* can be understood as criticising the size and scope of the welfare State as it has developed in some European countries, far beyond what we have known in Australia. But the *Compendium* does not acknowledge the great variety of arrangements in welfare States, or the extent to which western democratic governments are deeply enmeshed in the operation of their economies.

At least in this section, the text seriously underestimates the customary role of the State in securing an equitable environment for business, providing services in health care, education and welfare, as well as physical infrastructure, regulatory and legal regimes, and ensuring the redistribution of resources to offer a reasonable equality of opportunity for all citizens.

Yet later on the *Compendium* does recognise the need for the intervention of the welfare State in many ways. It strongly supports a family wage high enough to acquire some property and economic security. And 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 goes so far as to call for ‘economic compensation’ for housekeeping and family care (par. 251).

It also requires State intervention to reduce unemployment, ‘a real social disaster’, especially for younger generations. “‘*Full employment*’ therefore remains a mandatory objective for every economic system oriented towards justice and the common good.’ (par. 288). ‘The duty of the State does not consist so much in directly guaranteeing the right to work of every citizen, making the whole of economic life very rigid and restricting individual free initiative, as much as in the duty to “sustain business activities by creating conditions which will ensure job opportunities, by stimulating those activities where they are lacking or by supporting them in moments of crisis.”’ (par. 291).

The ‘*presence of women in the workplace must also be guaranteed*’, especially by professional formation. (par. 295). The document rejects child labour as ‘*a kind of violence*’ amounting in some countries to ‘*veritable slavery*’. (par. 296). Concerning international migration, the *Compendium* notes that ‘Immigrants are to be received as persons and helped, together with their families, to become a part of societal life. In this context, *the right of reuniting families should be respected and promoted*’ (par. 298).

Hence the *Compendium* supports State subsidies ‘for the subsistence of unemployed workers and their families; the right to a pension and to insurance for old age, sickness, and in case of work-related accidents; the right to social security connected with maternity; the right to assemble and form associations.’ (par. 301).

It insists that a just wage is not simply a contractual matter, since ‘natural justice precedes and is above the freedom of the contract’ (par. 302). Social justice requires an equitable distribution of income in accord with the dignity of workers, but redistribution of income must also take account of general conditions, and ‘look at merit as well as the need of each citizen’ (par. 303).

Given the great changes in the organisation of work involved with globalisation, the *Compendium* recognises the need ‘to update the norms and systems of social security that have traditionally protected workers and guaranteed their fundamental rights’ (par. 309). The State must also guarantee ‘systems of social insurance and protection that are designed above all to protect the weakest members of society.’ ‘In the redistribution of resources, public spending must observe the principles of solidarity, equality and making use of talents. It must also pay greater attention to families, designating an adequate amount of resources for this purpose.’ (355).

The *Compendium* recognises ‘*the market as an irreplaceable instrument for regulating... the economic system*’ but insists it meet certain ‘*ethical objectives*’, without which it would degenerate into “‘an ‘idolatry’ of the market’” (par. 349).

While the State must favour the free exercise of economic activity, ‘*It must also be inspired by the principle of solidarity and establish limits for the autonomy of the parties in order to defend those who are weaker.*’ State intervention in the economy must be ‘commensurate with society’s real needs... In addition to the tasks of harmonizing and guiding development, in exceptional circumstances the State can also exercise a *substitute function*’” (par. 351).

Debates over the scope of the welfare State cannot be resolved in the abstract, as so much depends on the economic circumstances, history and culture in various societies. It is up to people in different countries to determine how best to respond to local needs with the resources available. As those who work in social services know so well, the provision of services is immensely complex and requires continual careful evaluation and adjustment better to meet the needs of people.

Thus the *Compendium* supports the welfare State in principle, and rejects the neoconservative calls for a minimalist State. However, the Church calls for an ethical framework around State activities, stressing the need to redistribute goods and services more equitably, particularly to promote greater equality of opportunity, but at the same time encouraging people to take responsibility and participate more actively in society. Above all, the Church urges all people of good will to give priority to the needs of the poorest people, and those in special need.