

Introduction

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Presentation of the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church

When he signed the Encyclical *Rerum novarum* on 15 May 1891, I do not know if Pope Leo XIII was aware that this text was to give rise to what Pius XII, in his radio message for Pentecost 1941, called the *Social Doctrine of the Church*, the *Compendium* of which the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace has published.

The word of God and a word on God, the Gospel is also a word on man and society and the Church has always considered it as an integral part of the mission which Christ entrusted to her, namely to affirm the values which allow our society to be human and fair. It has never ceased inviting Christians and men of goodwill to organise the earth in a just and peaceful way.

The Book of the Acts of the Apostles are abundant testimonies of this: at the beginning, then throughout its history, the institutions set up on the initiative of the Church and the writings of the fathers and theologians, whenever the world has undergone in-depth human, cultural and social changes.

It was, however, with the birth and development of the industrial society that the social doctrine was drafted. In France, on the initiative of lay persons (Frédéric Ozanam, René de la Tour du Pin, Léon Harmel, ...) what is termed *Social Catholicism*, but also through the stands taken by the French Bishops during the Restoration concerning child and women's labour then the observation of Sunday as a day of rest.

In Germany, with the Catholic workers' associations of Father Kolping and the action of the Bishop of Mainz, Monsignor Ketteler,

- recalling that the true right of ownership only belongs to God and that an owner cannot be the absolute master of his goods,
- fighting economic liberalism,
- demanding the payment of a minimum wage, the reduction of working hours, the regulation of work for women and the ban on employing school-age children,
- recommending the participation of workers in the profits of the companies,
- and calling for State action in the economic and social field.

The Church's duty is to work with all her might to solve the social question which is the most important problem of our day and age, declared the German Bishops in Fulda in 1869.

Thus a plan on how the poverty of the destitute and workers could be alleviated was prepared with a view to the first

Vatican Council. Its interruption, on 20 October 1870, does not allow us to know if the Commission which directed the work on this subject would have approved it.

But in March 1881, the Count of Breda and René de La Tour du Pin addressed two papers to the Pope which can be considered as the first of the files which led to the drafting of *Rerum novarum*. The Count proposed that the Pope take an initiative by organising a Conference of European Governments in the Vatican during which, while no decision would be made, they would plead the cause of the poor and the workers; a kind of “social Assisi Conference” if you so wish.

The files flooded in from France, but also from Germany, Austria and England (where Cardinal Manning intervened in 1889 in the London Dockers’ strike and obtained advantages for them), and even from the United States and Switzerland (where, in order to aid the Catholics in Geneva which included a large number of poor immigrants, Msgr Mermillod founded the Fribourg Union). The doctrine drafted was taken up by Leo XIII. The way thus opened up by Leo XIII was continued by his successors: the anniversaries of the publication of the Encyclical are all occasions to state and complete the social positions in adapting them to new situations.

What is more, following this, after the meeting of the Latin American Episcopal Council (CELAM) in Puebla in 1979, John Paul II re-launched the expression « social doctrine of the Church » and through this, the social doctrine itself. It must indeed be recognised that in order to respect the autonomy of terrestrial realities, affirmed at Vatican II, it was nonetheless necessary to draw the conclusions of a social nature of the Gospel and of faith.

All during his Pontificate and through four Encyclicals (*Redemptor hominis*, 4 March 1979, *Laborem exercens*, 14 September 1981, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, 30 December 1987, and especially *Centesimus annus*, 1 May 1991), John Paul II worked to make people understand that the social doctrine is an element of the Christian message as such and not only an offshoot. “The teaching and the dissemination of the social doctrine of the Church belong to its mission of evangelisation, he writes in *Centesimus annus* (5). It is an essential part of the Christian message because this doctrine proposes its direct effects in the life of society and places daily work and the fight for justice in the framework of the testimony rendered to Christ the Saviour”.

The decision taken by John Paul II to propose a kind of manual of the social doctrine of the Church goes back to the Synod of American Bishops meeting in Rome from 16 November to 12 December 1997. The Bishops of the United States and the Latin American continent asked the Pope to make available to the laity “a summary or an authorised synthesis of this doctrine” This synthesis “would be limited to formulating general principles, leaving their practical implementation to ulterior developments after a study of the problems linked to different local situations” *Ecclesia in America*, 1999, §54).

The drafting of this document was entrusted to the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, presided at that time by Cardinal François-Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan. In autumn 1999, some Bishops and Rectors of Catholic Universities from various countries were convened. The drafting of this *Compendium* proved more complex than it appeared. Its Italian version was, however, completed in September 2002 and presented in its final version by Cardinal Martino, the new President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, on 2 April 2004.

Your Eminency, I am particularly honoured to welcome you on the occasion of the second anniversary of the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* and its official presentation in France.

The Council that you now preside in Rome is a study body which takes an interest in everything that concerns social justice between nations, the progress of poor countries, international aid and the promotion of peace.

The courageous stands of your Council and the international missions entrusted to its Presidents testify to the Church's fidelity to her tradition of commitment in the service of man for the cause of the Gospel. I sincerely thank His Excellency Msgr. Fortunato Baldelli, Papal Nuncio in France and Msgr. Francesco Follo, the Holy See's Permanent Observer at UNESCO, for their presence. In the drafting of the social doctrine of the Church, the laity has played a decisive role. I therefore thank most cordially and sincerely *Évangile et Société* and its President, Hervé l'Huillier, as well as the Catholic associations which are at the origin of this meeting and responsible for its organisation.

In concluding, allow me to quote one of my predecessors, the President of the Social Committee, Msgr. Joseph Rozier, former Bishop of Poitiers: « the social question is nothing more than the question of man and his future, through the tasks, the activities and the commitments in which his adventure is played out, that of freedom and the relationship with others, that of knowledge and conscience, namely, the relationship with oneself and that of work and the relationship with the world. It means, in every field, recognising, respecting and making man grow in his sphere of existence ».