

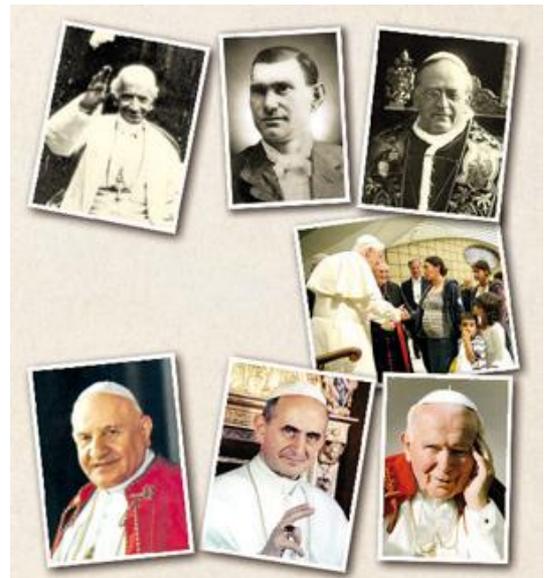


## Introduction

Last month, in order to set the stage for the whole course, we addressed the topic of the role of the laity in society from the perspective of the Magisterium of the Church. This month we want to take a step forward and look at the principles of Social doctrine of the Church (SDC) in order to remind Secular Franciscans about yet another set of guiding tools for engaging in the social arena and for evaluating and improving policies, laws, political and economic systems, etc. Before describing these principles, it seems appropriate to say a few words about the nature and history of Catholic social teaching:

The term “social doctrine” goes back to Pope Pius XI and designates the doctrinal “corpus” concerning issues relevant to society which, from the Encyclical Letter *Rerum Novarum* of Pope Leo XIII, developed in the Church through the Magisterium of the Roman Pontiffs and the Bishops in communion with them. The Church's concern for social matters certainly did not begin with that document, for the Church has never failed to show interest in society. Nonetheless, the Encyclical Letter *Rerum Novarum* marks the beginning of a new path. Grafting itself onto a tradition hundreds of years old, it signals a new beginning and a singular development of the Church's teaching in the area of social matters.<sup>1</sup>

As part of its unfolding process, Catholic social teaching has developed some basic principles that do not trace their deeper roots to mere human wisdom or intelligence, even if they utilize the contributions of diverse human sciences (sociology, economy, anthropology, etc.) to give expression to their theological content, as the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* explains:



These principles, the expression of the whole truth about man known by reason and faith, are born of “the encounter of the Gospel message and of its demands summarized in the supreme commandment of love of God and neighbor in justice with the problems emanating from the life of society”. In the course of history and with the light of the Spirit, the Church has wisely reflected within her own tradition of faith and has been able to provide an ever more accurate foundation and shape to these principles, progressively explaining them in the attempt to respond coherently to the demands of the times and to the continuous developments of social life (n. 160).

### 1. Principles of Catholic Social Teaching

<sup>1</sup> PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2005, n. 87, Internet (13.01.13):

[http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/justpeace/documents/rc\\_pc\\_justpeace\\_doc\\_20060526\\_compendio-dott-soc\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html)

The *Compendium* lists four principles of the SDC that are permanent, general and fundamental, and are considered as the very heart of that teaching. Those are: *the dignity of the human person, the common good, subsidiarity, and solidarity* (n. 160). These principles are not to be considered independently, but rather as part of “a unified doctrinal corpus that interprets modern social realities in a systematic manner” (n. 162). Their value stems from their capacity to “indicate the paths possible for building a good, authentic and renewed social life” (n. 162). They carry a weighty moral value, because they have to do with the primary foundations upon which life in society is constructed, as they relate to the behavior of individuals, groups and institutions, whose freedom and choices affect such life (cf. n. 163).

#### **a. The Principle of the Dignity of the Human Person or the Personalist Principle<sup>2</sup>**

The human person has received a unique and inalienable dignity from God who created man and woman as the living image of God<sup>3</sup>, and redeemed them through the incarnation and Paschal Mystery of Christ. Thus, this unparalleled dignity does not come from, nor depend on circumstantial aspects, such as: nationality, race, gender, age, social status, language or ethnic origin, etc. The Church exhorts all peoples to acknowledge the dignity of every single human being, especially of the poor and suffering, and to consider the human person as the origin and foundation of social life, as well as its active subject and goal, and not as an object or passive element (cf. *Compendium* 106). This principle should be considered in the light of the mystery of universal sin and universal salvation, and the many aspects of the human person: their unity as a material and spiritual being, their openness to transcendence, their uniqueness, the value and limits of their freedom, their social nature, their rights and duties and those of the nations, etc. (n. 115-159).



#### **b. The Principle of the Common Good**

The *Compendium* defines the principle as: “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily” (n. 164). This principle derives from the dignity, unity and equality of all people; it is indivisible and only together is it possible to achieve it, advance it and preserve its effectiveness, with regard also to the future generations. This principle can be simply explained as the pursuit of the good of all people and of the whole person; this pursuit should be the primary goal of every society (cf. n. 165) and every single person, according to each one’s capabilities and to the historical circumstances of every society, through the integral promotion of, and respect for the human person and their fundamental rights. This commitment includes all levels of society, the structures of every single nation and the worldwide stage of cooperation (cf. n. 166). The common good should not be utilized by reductionist perspectives aimed at favoring special interests, but should instead be promoted in its entirety, calling for an ever-growing responsibility for the good of others (cf. n. 167).

Besides every single person, political authorities are also responsible for achieving the common good, which is the reason for their existence (cf. n. 168). Their participation, along with the contribution of every members of society, helps to harmonize “the particular goods of groups and those of individuals,” (n. 169) and safeguard the good of all, including that of the minority. The common good should not be regarded as limited to its socio-economic and historical dimensions, since it is ordained towards the transcendent goals of humanity and of the whole of creation in God, the Supreme Good (cf. n. 170).

#### **c. The Universal Destination of Goods**

<sup>2</sup> Cf. PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE, *Compendium*, n. 105-159.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. II VATICAN COUNCIL, *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 11.

The *Compendium* quotes the definition of the principle of the universal destination of goods from *Gaudium et Spes*: “God destined the earth and all it contains for all men and all peoples so that all created things would be shared fairly by all mankind under the guidance of justice tempered by charity” (GS 69). The Church’s social teaching states that this principle is natural, inherent and innate in every human being (n. 171), and “all other rights, whatever they are, including property rights and the right of free trade must be subordinated to this norm; they must not hinder it, but must rather expedite its application” (n. 172). This principle invites people “to develop an economic vision inspired by moral values” conducive to the creation of “a world of fairness and solidarity, in which the creation of wealth can take on a positive function” (n. 174). In addition, every effort should be made to guarantee that no individual or country is left on the margins of development, especially in the face of the emergence of new technological and scientific knowledge (cf. n. 179). The principle of the universal destination of goods is directly connected with the Church’s *preferential option or love for the poor*, which “is inspired by the Gospel of the Beatitudes, by the poverty of Jesus and by his attention to the poor. This love concerns material poverty and also the numerous forms of cultural and religious poverty” (n. 184). Practicing charity entails engaging in works of corporal and spiritual mercy, but it also requires “addressing the social and political dimensions of the problem of poverty”, aware that “what is already due in justice is not to be offered as a gift of charity”(n. 184).

#### **d. The Principle of Subsidiarity**

The principle of Subsidiarity has been present in the SDC since the Encyclical Letter *Rerum Novarum* (cf. RN 101-102, 123), as one of its most recurrent and peculiar directives (cfr. *Compendium* 185). It basically affirms that in order to promote the dignity of the human person and the authentic common good of society, it is necessary for societies of a superior order to defend, support and promote lower-order societies (Cf. *Compendium* 186). In a positive sense, it entails assistance or help (*subsidium*) of diverse kinds – economic, institutional or juridical – and, in a negative sense, it requires that higher-order institutions do not interfere or substitute for lesser social entities. This principle opposes both “the unjustified and excessive presence of the State in public mechanisms” (n. 187) and economic monopolies, which undermine human freedom and initiative. It also requires promoting the full and active participation of all citizens, families, associations and intermediate organizations in the socio-political realm. Only in cases of exceptional needs, may the State step in to supply certain functions, but just as a temporary measure (cf. n. 188).

#### **e. Participation**

Participation is the characteristic implication of subsidiarity, and includes all the activities by means of which individual citizens or associations contribute to the economic, political and social life of their civil community. This contribution is a responsibility of every person and should aim at seeking the common good in all areas of society (cf. n. 189). The active, qualified and effective participation of all citizens constitutes one of the foundations and guarantees of all democratic systems (cf. n. 190). It is critical to work for a greater access to information and education in order to overcome all obstacles (cultural, juridical and social) to the shared participation of citizens in shaping their communities. Among these grave obstacles to social and political participation are: corruption, disaffection towards politics, voting abstention, *totalitarian or dictatorial regimes*, the bureaucracy *de facto*, etc. (cf. n. 191)



#### **f. The Principle of Solidarity**

The accelerated development of ways and means of communication that is taking place in our time has produced an unprecedented and widespread awareness of the relationships of

interdependence between individuals and peoples (cf. n. 192). However, solidarity is not only a *social principle*, but it is also a *moral virtue* that is necessary for the proper ordering of institutions and for the transformation of *structures of sin* into *structures of solidarity*; it is not a feeling of “shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people [...] On the contrary, it is a *firm and persevering determination* to commit oneself to the *common good* [...] to the good of one's neighbour” (cf. n. 193), after the example and teachings of Christ who made himself one with humanity to the extent of dying for all on the cross (cf. n. 196). The principle of solidarity calls all men and women to realize that they owe a great debt to all that humanity has developed in society and to present and future generations (cf. n. 194).

#### **g. The Fundamental Values of Social Life and the Way of Love**

In a reciprocal relationship with the abovementioned principles, the SDC also indicates four fundamental values: truth, freedom, justice, and love. “Putting them into practice is the sure and necessary way of obtaining personal perfection and a more human social existence.” (n. 197) In the face of often distorted views of love, it is urgent to reaffirm its value as “the highest and universal criterion of the whole of social ethics” (n. 204), the “more excellent way” (cf. 1 Cor 12:31), from whose “inner wellspring” the other values emerge (n. 205). There is no legislation, methodology or negotiation that can substitute for love “in persuading men and peoples to live in unity, brotherhood and peace” (n. 207). Social and political charity includes, but is not limited to interpersonal relationships (n. 208); it also requires striving for a profound renewal of structures, social organizations and legal systems.

This general overview of the principles of the SDC is just an introduction to these very specific themes. There are many other topics addressed by the SDC, such as: human rights, the family as the vital cell of society, the dignity of work and workers, economic life, the political community, the international community, safeguarding the environment, the promotion of peace, etc. Our hope is that by studying and reflecting on the principles and values presented here, you will be encouraged to learn more about the SDC and apply it in all areas of your life.

## **2. Suggested Bibliography and Related Websites (In alphabetical order)**

CARDINAL VAN THUÂN INTERNATIONAL OBSERVATORY FOR THE SOCIAL DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH, *Fourth Report on the Social Doctrine of the Church in the World*, F. Felice, et al., Cantagalli, Siena, 2012.

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KRIER MICH M. L., *The Challenge and Spirituality of Catholic Social Teaching*, Revised edition, Orbis, New York, 2011.

PENNOCK M., *Catholic Social Teaching: Learning & Living Justice*, Ave Maria, Indiana, 2007.

PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. Washington, DC: USCCB, 2005.

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Bread for the World: [www.bread.org](http://www.bread.org)

Cardinal Van Thuân International Observatory for the Social Doctrine of the Church:

<http://www.vanthuanobservatory.org/?lang=en>

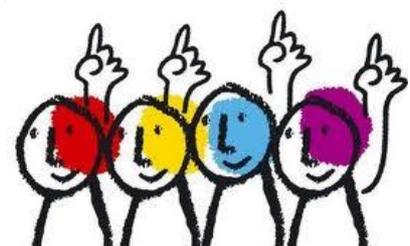
Catholic Relief Service: [www.catholicrelief.org](http://www.catholicrelief.org)

Dept. of Justice, Peace and Human Development: [www.usccb.org/jphd](http://www.usccb.org/jphd)

The Holy See: [http://www.vatican.va/phome\\_en.htm](http://www.vatican.va/phome_en.htm)

NETWORK: [www.networklobby.org](http://www.networklobby.org)

Pro-life Activities: [www.usccb.org/prolife](http://www.usccb.org/prolife)



### 3. A case study: The Milan “Civic-Fraternal Laboratory” – by Gianluca Lista OFS

Upon request of the Regional Council of Lombardy, from the fall of 2010 to the present, a small but representative group of secular Franciscans from different OFS fraternities of Milan has established a Civic-fraternal Laboratory with two objectives.

The first of these was to define a “method” of work – as opposed to the current model, in which it is difficult to find the way of mediation – based on “dialogue” so that, even with diverse perspectives on the issues addressed, we would listen to each other in order to find together the path of “fraternal understanding”, searching for the common good. We would then take this method to our local fraternities in order to place ourselves as interlocutors to all the people in the civil society that is interested on the common good, regardless of their ethnicity, culture, political belief or religion. The second objective had to do with “the content”: setting the Gospel and the Magisterium of the Church as the main source for finding the meaning and orientation of our propositions.

For this reason, we worked together on the encyclical letter *Caritas in Veritate*, elaborating worksheets on it which were then passed on to the Regional Council, so that they could be used in formation programs of several local fraternities. Then we went on to use the compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church and mindful of this historical moment – characterized by a severe economic crisis, which stems also from the moral and spiritual crisis – we engaged in reading the documents that could help us to reflect on a new way of conceiving the economy, from a perspective that is not detached from moral and ethics. This way of thinking has deep roots in our charism and, therefore, in the history of Franciscan spirituality.

The approaching of important events, such as the municipal and political elections, became then opportunities for discussion among the members of the *Laboratory* who seek to understand how to embody the OFS Rule and the Gospel in our political options. We reflected as a community, respecting the diverse opinions but also giving precedence to the sense of “fraternitas”, inherent in our Franciscan option. Undoubtedly, prayer and the reference to the Word and the Franciscan sources – which we wanted to be always present in our meetings – have helped us to make the Lord clearly present in our *Laboratory*.

Then, in 2012 and in line with the Formation commission of our region, an introductory course to the Social Doctrine of the Church was implemented. The course was developed over four meetings on a monthly basis (with over sixty participants per session), in which – starting from the reasons why the Church can and must speak on the socio-political commitment – presentations were made of the history and contents of the Social Doctrine, as well as secular Franciscan personalities who spent their lives in the service of the Church and of society, and, finally, some leads were given for the ecclesial and social commitment of the OFS in future years.

### 4. Suggested topic for reflection and dialogue in community

The principle of the dignity of the human person is embedded in the OFS Constitutions, especially in Title II – dedicated to “Active Presence in the Church and in the World” (art. 17-27).

1. Read this section anew and discuss in fraternity at least articles 18.1 and 22.2. How are they being implemented? If they are not, why might this be? What are some of the ways they can be applied by your fraternity?
2. In reference to the concrete social context in which your fraternity finds itself, discuss how the principles and values of Catholic social teaching are relevant.

