

Introduction

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The spring of 2005 is remembered for the final decline and death, on April 2, of Pope John Paul II followed by the swift election of Pope Benedict XVI. Overshadowed by these dramatic events, however, almost no one noticed a quiet action that may, in the long view, rival them in significance for American Catholics: the U.S. publication, on March 15, 2005, of the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*.¹

To understand the unprecedented nature of this document, one must recall that over the past century the principles and themes known today as Catholic Social Teaching have been articulated exclusively through occasional documents, that is, documents written and promulgated with respect to particular occasions or social circumstances. While such documents were mindful of the systematic implications of their teachings, their primary purpose was to address a particular situation or context in world affairs. The first task, therefore, of anyone attempting to understand or reflect on the teachings thus promulgated has been to trace the development of themes through the various pastoral, political, and social contexts in which they were articulated. By contrast, in the *Compendium*, the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace has set forth, for the first time, the structure and scope of the entire body of teaching in this area in a systematic and definitive way. In content, structure, authority, and intent the *Compendium* does for Catholic Social Teaching what the 1994 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* did for Catholic doctrine more generally, providing an authoritative magisterial reference and summary for both Catholics and non-Catholics alike.

The *Compendium* thus adds nothing, yet changes everything, for Catholic social thought. In content, the volume claims (8) to be nothing more than a synthesis of teachings previously issued. Yet in a fundamental sense the volume is not only profoundly new, it is an altogether new point of departure for Catholic social thought. From now on, the first task in interpreting Catholic social thought will be not to trace its development through the history of the social encyclicals, but to comprehend its complete and systematic magisterial statement as published in the *Compendium*.

The *Compendium* was compiled at the request of Pope John Paul II, who proposed in 1987, in the encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (41):

In today's difficult situation, a *more exact awareness and a wider diffusion* of the "set of principles for reflection, criteria for judgment and directives for action" proposed by the Church's teaching could be of great help in promoting both the correct definition of the problems being faced and the best solution to them.

The 1997 exhortation *Ecclesia in America*, issued after consultation with the American bishops, issued a definite call for "a compendium or approved synthesis of Catholic social doctrine, including a 'Catechism'" that would

help to promote and support the study of this doctrine [Catholic Social Teaching] in every area of the life of the particular Churches in America, especially in the universities, so that it may be more deeply known and applied to American society.

Two aspects of the resulting *Compendium* are already apparent in this proposal. First, while intended to be relevant to society in general, the *Compendium* was written with special application to American society and for consideration in American universities. Second, its intent is primarily catechetical, following an arrangement and structure designed to teach.

Following the threefold distinction of principles, criteria, and directives noted above, the *Compendium*, after an introduction, is organized into three parts. Part 1 reviews the background theological doctrines pertinent to Catholic Social Teaching, in two chapters focusing on God's activity in the created order and the mission of the Church, before setting forth four foundational "principles for reflection": the dignity of the human person, the common good, subsidiarity, and solidarity. An entire chapter is devoted to human dignity, clearly the most important of these principles, while the fourth and final chapter of part 1 discusses the remaining three principles. Part 2 applies "criteria for judgment" with chapter-length treatments of seven key aspects or institutions of human society: the family, human work, the economy, civil society, the international community, the environment, and military conflict. Part 3 provides guidance for social action for pastors and the lay faithful. A short concluding chapter restates the ideal of Catholic Social Teaching to build a "civilization of love."

American Catholics cannot help but note that this ordering of themes is very different than that proposed by the U.S. bishops or taught in most U.S. theologates. In 1998 the U.S. Bishops published a set of reflections called "Sharing Catholic Social Teaching" in which they articulated seven "key themes" designed to "serve as a starting point for those interested in exploring the Catholic social tradition more fully."² These themes are: life and dignity of the human person; call to family, community and participation; rights and responsibilities; option for the poor and vulnerable; the dignity of work and the

rights of workers; solidarity; and care for God's creation. The presentation of Catholic social teaching in U.S. theologates has followed a similar thematic arrangement. According to a report by Katerina Schuth,³ "[f]our broad categories with sub-themes are frequently chosen as the framework for presenting [Catholic social teaching]" in U.S. seminaries and houses of formation. These categories are: care for the human person; concern for work and family; economic organization and political participation; and developing a culture of peace and solidarity. According to Schuth, this categorization "outlines the basic principles of the complex Catholic social tradition."

Like the *Compendium*, these typologies were formed for pedagogical purposes, and they are not inconsistent, in broad terms, with the *Compendium's* organization of the Catholic social teaching material. Yet the *Compendium* introduces a more focused, ordered, and comprehensive arrangement of the set of ideas comprising Catholic social teaching. It is possible, from the fact that it is listed first, to infer a certain priority for the notion of human dignity in the U.S. Bishops and theologates lists; but in the *Compendium* the fundamental character of this principle is made explicit. The U.S. lists do not indicate any sense of relative priority among the themes or principles they set forth, with the result that it is not clear what organizing principle, if any, guided their selection. Moreover, the U.S. arrangements cannot be said to be comprehensive. Neither mentions subsidiarity, a fundamental principle in the *Compendium*. In the U.S. Bishops' list the common good is addressed only obliquely, as is concern for the environment in the theologates' ordering.

Although never acknowledged, the *Compendium* is strongly influenced by the thought of Joseph Cardinal Höffner, as presented in his widely-used text *Christliche Gesellschaftslehre* (Christian Social Teaching), published in eight editions from 1962 to 1983.⁴ The systematization of Catholic social teaching presented in the *Compendium* is clearly patterned on that of Höffner's text. The table of contents is virtually identical to the arrangement of topics provided in the *Compendium*. Part 1 of Höffner's book, for example, after setting forth the social nature of man, propounds three principles of a Christian understanding of the social order—solidarity, the common good, and subsidiarity—exactly as does the *Compendium*. These principles are then applied, in part 2, to the range of social institutions, with sections on marriage and the family; work and profession; the economy; the state; and the community of nations. With additional chapters on the environment and peace, this is the same list, and in the same order, of the topical applications found in part 2 of the *Compendium*.

In a more detailed way, the *Compendium* at many points reflects specific characteristics of Höffner's exposition and thought. A couple of examples, chosen at random from numerous possibilities, will suffice to illustrate. First, in his discussion of the virtue of justice, Höffner reviews the emergence of the term "social justice" in the nineteenth century in the context of the three traditional forms of justice recognized in Thomist thought. After considering a variety of alternative interpretations of the concept, Höffner proposes, uniquely, that social justice is "identical with legal justice correctly understood."⁵ On the same topic

the *Compendium* teaches: “The Church’s social Magisterium constantly calls for the most classical forms of justice to be respected: *commutative, distributive and legal justice*. Ever greater importance has been given to *social justice*, which represents a real development in *general justice*, the justice that regulates social relationships according to the criterion of observance of the *law*” (201). As a second example, in discussing the economy, Höffner includes an original section titled “Scarcity and the Need to be Economical,” in which he writes: Experience teaches that most essential commodities are not available in unrestricted fullness . . . ; compared with human needs, they are scarce . . . Man’s normal response to the tension arising from having needs which must be met from a limited supply of goods is this: he seeks to deal sparing and economically with scarce goods, i.e., to conserve them, in order to obtain the greatest possible use from those that are available. In the industrial age, . . . [e]conomic growth must take place in an ordered and controlled way.”⁶ The *Compendium*, in a section with no references to magisterial documents (346), expresses essentially the same idea: “Resources in nature are quantitatively scarce, which means that each individual economic subject, as well as each individual society, must necessarily come up with a plan for their utilization in the most rational way possible, following the logic dictated by the ‘*principle of economizing*.’”

Clearly, Höffner’s ideas and interpretation form the basis for much of the *Compendium* material, although his treatment is far more philosophical, and engages the Scholastic material much more extensively, than does the *Compendium*. As noted in chapter 9 of the present volume, the work of another German Thomist social theorist, Johannes Messner, also appears to be reflected in the *Compendium*. For the committed student, a careful study of the work of Höffner, Messner, and perhaps German neo-Thomism in general would help to amplify and provide greater understanding of many of the teachings of the *Compendium*.

In the American Catholic context, there are certain ironies connected with the publication of a document like the *Compendium*. As a new type of document, as noted above, there is a certain lack of clarity regarding the specific nature of the *Compendium*’s authority. The document explicitly claims magisterial authority (8), and is addressed respectively, after the manner of encyclicals, to all bishops, the Catholic faithful, members of other religious communities, and all persons of good will (9-11). Yet it is a publication, not of the Holy See, but of a pontifical council. Unlike the 1994 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which is probably the most similar recent magisterial document in type and form, the *Compendium* is accompanied by no certifying papal apostolic constitution. With a rare hint of asperity (“As one knows, but it seems to bear repeating”), the *Compendium* reminds the reader that the authority of its extensive quoted material rests on the authority of the underlying documents, which can be quite diverse (8). But the *Compendium* never clarifies the nature of its own authority, that is, the authority of its original, non-quoted material.

American Catholics are also likely to perceive some irony in the very fact of the Vatican issuing such a *Compendium* of social teachings a mere four decades after Vatican Council II. The Council highlighted the social and cultural plural-

ism of both the Church and the world, acknowledging a difference between central truths and the multiple ways these truths needed to be brought home to different peoples. Consequently it recognized the legitimacy of nations democratically generating their own economic and political programs. It called for the celebration of the sacraments in vernacular languages and endorsed the use of indigenous musical and artistic styles in order to reach out to various peoples and encourage their active participation. It emphasized the responsibility of bishops to spread the gospel message in ways suitable to their environments. Yet in the *Compendium* we have a statement of Church social doctrine that synthesizes formulations that have emanated entirely from the Holy See and the Vatican curia itself. No statements from local bishops or national councils of bishops, let alone from Catholics *sans mitres*, found their way into the *Compendium*'s multitudinous footnotes. Despite the interest at Vatican II in ecumenical initiatives, no references are made to statements from other Christian churches, other religious traditions, or from such personages as Mohandas Gandhi, Desmond Tutu, or Martin Luther King, Jr. Despite the image of the Church as the people of God so prominent in the Council documents, there are no references to Mother Theresa or Dorothy Day. Despite the widespread intent at the Council to update the Church, no intellectuals from the modern era are cited. This is simply to say that, as its name implies, the *Compendium* does not pretend to be a statement of all that should weigh upon one's conscience in social matters, but that it is "simply" a statement of magisterial views. Such a statement is no mean achievement, but it should be seen as but one step toward formulating a truly catholic social ethic.

Irony, of course, is double-edged. At the same time as the centripetal nature of an exclusively Vatican statement pulls in the opposite direction of diversity, decentralization, indigenization, and ecumenism, it also gives these a correcting contextual significance that they would not otherwise have. Without the integrative system of thought that the Vatican provides, Catholic social theory would be analogous to a drama that features striking scenes and memorable characters but is somewhat lacking in story line or narrative coherence. Catholics would confront as many sensitivities and issues as others, but would lack perspective to see the significance of day-to-day events. Because the modern world features what sociologists term "differentiation"—an extension and refinement of the division of labor into an array of specializations and job descriptions—faith risks being compartmentalized into the Sunday (or in some traditions, Sabbath) worship business. A synthesis of the *social* teachings of the Church serves as a correction of that. Because the modern economy divides people into a public life—in such macro-institutions as big business, big government, and big military—and a private life—of such micro-institutions as family, local education, and religion (especially under the guise of "spirituality")—a synthesis of teachings that themselves synthesize all such dimensions of life serves as a double corrective.

But the correction can go further. Without the sense of a larger picture such as that inherent in the general nature of the *Compendium*, there is a danger of the

Church itself assuming the form of a loose union of otherwise unrelated fixations. The late Cardinal Bernardin of Chicago was attuned to this danger when he called for a consistent ethic of life, weaving different issues together into a seamless garment. The fact that some American Catholics campaign against the death penalty but remain silent on the matter of abortion, while some “pro-life” (i.e. anti-abortion) activists pass over executions without comment, is evidence of this danger. To become so one-dimensional as to be hyperactive over one manifestation of a value, but then not open one’s mouth over another, is to lack a pervasive faith and a real sense of the larger picture. Was it admirable for church people to stand before the racial slavery of previous centuries and be concerned instead with the precise date of the Second Coming? Is it admirable in the very hour of these lines being written for Christians to be so keen on immigration laws being upheld that they cannot be moved by the plight of people so desperate as to smuggle themselves at great risk across international boundaries to work at a job as a busboy or day laborer? The sense of the larger picture, though visionary, is very practical; it adds greater realism to one’s view of the world.

As with any system of moral thought, Catholic social thought is concerned with applying general or normative truths to particular choices and actions. There are far-ranging implications of the core theology behind the multitude of issues taken up in the *Compendium*. That core theology, expressed in the first four chapters, is based on the strong doctrine of creation so characteristic of the Catholic theological tradition: God wants to love and does love and therefore is both inherently plural in a divine unity; however, God does not stop there but goes on to create, so that there can be a divine love for non-divine entities as well. Moreover, God fashions part of creation, humanity, to reflect the divine nature and thus also be capable of that kind of love. Humans are thus transcendent creatures, worthy of having their dignity respected, who are therefore called to transcend themselves and respect that dignity in each other. The Church is the vehicle of that insight, continuing the revelatory activity of Jesus, who united the divine and the human in himself. In modern thought these ideas are expressed in terms of the “personalist principle” and human rights. Personhood and rights are aspects of the social nature of humans; persons are not isolated entities who have no obligations toward one another. The particular principles of the Church’s social doctrine are extensions of this theology: the common good, the universal destination of goods, subsidiarity, participation, and solidarity.

Far-ranging as these principles may be, they do not provide ready-made answers to every social issue. One must use one’s own reason to grasp the facts of situations, identify the relevant principles, and move toward a moral conclusion. This is, of course, the traditional procedure of natural law, which is not a set of answers so much as a process. Humans, created in the image and likeness of God, can grasp the creative will of God by observing the creation, since the creation reflects the intent of the Creator. If the human reasoning is right, it will agree with positive revelation rightly understood, since God will not be in self-contradiction. Thus reason needs be allowed to operate so that people can pro-

ceed from the general principles toward responses to the issues that arise in everyday life. Tradition represents the independent reasoning of thousands of minds over time and can thus be understood as a resource for the comprehension of truths. Freedom is a positive good insofar as it allows tradition and reason to operate.

Much of the original material in the *Compendium*, particularly in parts 2 and 3, appears to be comprised of such reasoning on the part of Vatican officials, that is, statements that proceed from the core theology and principles but do not themselves necessarily comprise such. Thus one can faithfully accept the core theology without necessarily accepting, at the same level, all of the particular criteria and applications to be found in the *Compendium*. One would do well, consequently, to dwell upon the core principles in the volume and to take the issues raised in various chapters quite seriously. Taking them seriously means understanding and appreciating the various arguments—about the family, human work, economic life, the political community, the international community, the environment, and the promotion of peace—and engaging them with one’s own intellectual powers.

As Cardinal Martino elegantly expressed in the Presentation of the *Compendium*, it is the motive of its authors that it serve as an occasion “for an encounter, for dialogue, for cooperation in serving the common good.” Likewise, Cardinal Sodano’s introduction to the volume notes that Pope John Paul II “invokes God’s blessings on those who will take the time to reflect on the teachings of this publication.” The various authors whose contributions follow below do exactly that. They explore the core theology, follow the *Compendium*’s applications in its various arguments, and apply their own intellectual powers to the applications. Some of their essays are largely expository, some more critical (in both a positive and negative sense). Some operate from a standard of magisterial assent in conformity with *Ad Tuendam Fidam*, others do not. Together they represent the range of Catholic thinking on social issues in the American Church today. All the chapters should be taken as invitations to join the discussion.

As academics, we believe that critical appraisals and hard questions regarding the teachings and claims of the *Compendium* are not inconsistent with, indeed are some of the best ways to express, faithful submission to magisterial truth and strong appreciation for the work, in a spirit of solidarity, respect, and love (18). We would not want such scrutiny to obscure the fact that, in our opinion, the very project of the *Compendium* is commendable and the resultant volume admirable and deeply enlightening. The Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace has given a great gift to the world. For the first time, the Church at large, as well as citizens everywhere on the globe, have in hand a convenient volume in which Catholic social teaching can be found.

Notes

1. Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004). Hereafter referenced as the *Compendium*.

2. United States Catholic Conference, *Sharing Catholic Social Teaching* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Social Development and World Peace, 1998).

3. Katerina Schuth, "Seminaries and leadership formation" (Paper presented at the Joint Consultation, Commonwealth Foundation/Faith and Reason Institute, June 15-17, 2001): 3.

4. Joseph Cardinal Höffner, *Christian Social Teaching* (Bratislava: LUC, 1996). This is a translation of *Christliche Gesellschaftslehre*, 8th ed. (Cologne, Germany: Butzon Bercker, 1983).

5. Höffner, *Christian Social Teaching*, 164.

6. Höffner, *Christian Social Teaching*, 147.