

PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE

**COMPENDIUM
OF THE SOCIAL DOCTRINE
OF THE CHURCH**

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TO JUSTICE AND PEACE***

CHAPTER SEVEN

ECONOMIC LIFE

I. BIBLICAL ASPECTS

a. Man, poverty and riches

323. *In the Old Testament a twofold attitude towards economic goods and riches is found. On one hand, an attitude of appreciation sees the availability of material goods as necessary for life. Abundance — not wealth or luxury — is sometimes seen as a blessing from God. In Wisdom Literature, poverty is described as a negative consequence of idleness and of a lack of industriousness (cf. Prov 10:4), but also as a natural fact (cf. Prov 22:2). On the other hand, economic goods and riches are not in themselves condemned so much as their misuse. The prophetic tradition condemns fraud, usury, exploitation and gross injustice, especially when directed against the poor (cf. Is 58:3-11; Jer 7:4-7; Hos 4:1-2; Am 2:6-7; Mic 2:1-2). This tradition, however, although looking upon the poverty of the oppressed, the weak and the indigent as an evil, also sees in the condition of poverty a symbol of the human situation before God, from whom comes every good as a gift to be administered and shared.*

324. *Those who recognize their own poverty before God, regardless of their situation in life, receive particular attention from him: when the poor man seeks, the Lord answers; when he cries out, the Lord listens. The divine promises are addressed to the poor: they will be heirs to the Covenant between God and his people. God's saving intervention will come about through a new David (cf. Ezek 34:22-31), who like King David — only more so — will be defender of the poor and promoter of justice; he will establish a new covenant and will write a new law in the hearts of believers (cf. Jer 31:31-34).*

When sought or accepted with a religious attitude, poverty opens one to recognizing and accepting the order of creation. In this perspective, the “rich man” is the one who places his trust in his possessions rather than in God, he is the man who makes himself strong by the works of his own hands and trusts only in his own strength. Poverty takes on the status of a moral value when it becomes an attitude of humble availability and openness to God, of trust in him. This attitude makes it possible for people to recognize the relativity of economic goods and to treat them as divine gifts to be administered and shared, because God is the first owner of all goods.

325. *Jesus takes up the entire Old Testament tradition even with regard to economic goods, wealth and poverty, and he gives them great clarity and fullness (cf. Mt 6:24, 13:22; Lk 6:20-24, 12:15-21; Rom 14:6-8; 1 Tim 4:4). Through the gift of his Spirit and the conversion of hearts, he comes to establish the “Kingdom of God”, so that a new manner of social life is made possible, in justice, brotherhood, solidarity and sharing. The Kingdom inaugurated by Christ perfects the original goodness of the created order and of human activity, which were compromised by sin. Freed from evil and being placed once more in communion with God, man is able to continue the work of Jesus, with the help of his Spirit. In this, man is called to render justice to the poor, releasing the oppressed, consoling the afflicted, actively seeking a new social order in which adequate solutions to material poverty are offered and in which the forces thwarting the attempts of the weakest to free themselves from conditions of misery and slavery are more effectively controlled. When this happens, the Kingdom of God is already present on this earth, although it is not of the earth. It is in this Kingdom that the promises of the Prophets find final fulfilment.*

326. *In the light of Revelation, economic activity is to be considered and undertaken as a grateful response to the vocation which God holds out for each person. Man is placed in the garden to till and keep it, making use of it within well specified limits (cf. Gen 2:16-17) with a commitment to perfecting it (cf. Gen 1:26-30, 2:15-16; Wis 9:2-3). Bearing witness to the grandeur and goodness of the Creator, he walks towards the fullness of freedom to which God calls him. Good administration of the gifts received, and of material goods also, is a work of justice towards oneself and towards others. What has been received should be used properly, preserved and increased, as suggested by the parable of the talents (cf. Mt 25:14-30; Lk 19:12-27).*

*Economic activity and material progress must be placed at the service of man and society. If people dedicate themselves to these with the faith, hope and love of Christ's disciples, even the economy and progress can be transformed into places of salvation and sanctification. In these areas too it is possible to express a love and a solidarity that are more than human, and to contribute to the growth of a new humanity that anticipates the world to come.[683] Jesus sums up all of revelation in calling the believer to *become rich before God* (cf. Lk 12:21). The economy too is useful to this end, when its function as an instrument for the overall growth of man and society, of the human quality of life, is not betrayed.*

327. *Faith in Jesus Christ makes it possible to have a correct understanding of social development, in the context of an integral and solidary humanism. In this regard, the contribution of theological reflection offered by the Church's social Magisterium is very useful: “Faith in Christ the Redeemer, while it illuminates from within the nature of development, also guides us in the task of collaboration. In the Letter of St. Paul to the Colossians, we read that Christ is ‘the*

firstborn of all creation,' and that 'all things were created through him' and for him (*Col* 1:15-16). In fact, 'all things hold together in him', since 'in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things' (v. 20). A part of this divine plan, which begins from eternity in Christ, the perfect 'image' of the Father, and which culminates in him, 'the firstborn from the dead' (v. 15-18), *in our own history*, marked by our personal and collective effort to raise up the human condition and to overcome the obstacles which are continually arising along our way. It thus prepares us to share in the fullness which 'dwells in the Lord' and which he communicates 'to his body, which is the Church' (v. 18; cf. *Eph* 1:22-23). At the same time sin, which is always attempting to trap us and which jeopardizes our human achievements, is conquered and redeemed by the 'reconciliation' accomplished by Christ (cf. *Col* 1:20)".[684]

b. Wealth exists to be shared

328. Goods, even when legitimately owned, always have a universal destination; any type of improper accumulation is immoral, because it openly contradicts the universal destination assigned to all goods by the Creator. Christian salvation is an integral liberation of man, which means being freed not only from need but also in respect to possessions. "For the love of money is the root of all evils; it is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith" (1 Tim 6:10). The Fathers of the Church insist more on the need for the conversion and transformation of the consciences of believers than on the need to change the social and political structures of their day. They call on those who work in the economic sphere and who possess goods to consider themselves administrators of the goods that God has entrusted to them.

329. *Riches fulfil their function of service to man when they are destined to produce benefits for others and for society.*[685] "How could we ever do good to our neighbour," asks St. Clement of Alexandria, "if none of us possessed anything?"[686] In the perspective of St. John Chrysostom, riches belong to some people so that they can gain merit by sharing them with others.[687] Wealth is a good that comes from God and is to be used by its owner and made to circulate so that even the needy may enjoy it. Evil is seen in the immoderate attachment to riches and the desire to hoard. St. Basil the Great invites the wealthy to open the doors of their storehouses and he exhorts them: "A great torrent rushes, in thousands of channels, through the fertile land: thus, by a thousand different paths, make your riches reach the homes of the poor".[688] Wealth, explains Saint Basil, is like water that issues forth from the fountain: the greater the frequency with which it is drawn, the purer it is, while it becomes foul if the fountain remains unused.[689] The rich man — Saint Gregory the Great will later say — is only an administrator of what he possesses; giving what is required to the needy is a task that is to be performed with humility because the goods do not belong to the one who distributes them. He who retains riches only for himself is not innocent; giving to those in need means paying a debt.[690]

d. Social doctrine and lay associations

549. *The Church's social doctrine must become an integral part of the ongoing formation of the lay faithful. Experience shows that this formative work is usually possible within lay ecclesial associations that respond to precise "criteria of ecclesiality".*[1148] "Groups, associations and movements also have their place in the formation of the lay faithful. In fact they have the

possibility, each with its own method, of offering a formation through a deeply shared experience in the apostolic life, as well as having the opportunity to integrate, to make concrete and specific the formation that their members receive from other persons and communities”.[1149] The Church's social doctrine sustains and sheds light on the role of associations, movements and lay groups that are committed to the Christian renewal of the various sectors of the temporal order[1150]. “Church communion, already present and at work in the activities of the individual, finds its specific expression in the lay faithful working together in groups, that is, in activities done with others in the course of their responsible participation in the life and mission of the Church”[1151].

550. The Church's social doctrine is extremely important for ecclesial associations that have pastoral action within society as their objective. These associations represent a privileged point of reference in that their presence in the life of society is characterized by their nature as ecclesial bodies; this shows the importance and value of prayer, reflection and dialogue for addressing and improving social realities. One must keep in mind the distinction, in each case, “between the activities of Christians, acting individually or collectively in their own name as citizens guided by the dictates of a Christian conscience, and their activity acting along with their pastors in the name of the Church”[1152].

The various specialized associations that gather people together in the name of their Christian vocation and mission within a particular professional or cultural field have a precious role to play in forming mature Christians. For example, a Catholic association of doctors forms those who belong to it through the exercise of discernment with regard to the many problems that medical science, biology and other sciences place before the professional competence of doctors, as well as before their personal conscience and faith. The same could be also said of Catholic associations of teachers, legal professionals, businessmen and women, workers, as well as Catholic sports associations and ecological associations and so forth. In this context, the Church's social doctrine shows that it is an effective means for forming individual consciences and a country's culture.