

**Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. USCCB, 2005. 528 pp. Softcover.**

With a number of social encyclicals having been published over the last 120 years, and a new *Catechism of the Catholic Church* published 11 years ago, one might ask why there was a need for the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace to publish this *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. Perhaps it is because the social teachings, which some have dubbed “the Church’s best kept secret,” are largely unknown and therefore un-lived. In ever more complex political, economic, familial, and cultural settings that are becoming more and more hostile to the demands of the Gospel, the Church is offering Catholics, and all others of good will, the way not only towards a more just, peaceful and charitable society, but also, as a necessary part of the evangelization (*Compendium*, #7), the means required for the Church’s primary and sole purpose: “helping man on the path of Salvation” (69). Indeed, the *Compendium’s* origin is found in John Paul II’s post-synodal exhortation *Ecclesia in America*, where he expressed a desire for the creation of a compendium of social doctrine and its relation to the new evangelization.

According to the Pontifical Council’s Secretary, Cardinal Martino, the purpose of the *Compendium* is “to give a concise but complete overview of the Church’s social teaching.” At 331 pages, it attempts to do just that. For those who are in any way familiar with the state of the Church, one knows that there are misinterpretations of the social teachings, by both lay and religious. They do this perhaps by either ignoring an aspect of the teachings, viewing the teachings through other principles or cultural biases, or by focusing on one aspect to the detriment of the others. There are even some Catholics who want to deny, in the name of an economic or political theory or system, that the social teachings are in fact doctrinal teachings of the Church. Yet, the *Compendium* makes clear that they are Magisterial teachings (8), and that the principles must be taken as a unified whole in all their fullness (162). This, unfortunately, is no easy task, especially while living among the many false and misguided ideologies that have penetrated all aspects of society, including some areas of the Church. The *Compendium* is an attempt by the Magisterium to dispel these ideologies and provide the “principles for reflection, the criteria for judgment and the directives for action” (6) that will lead to better social conditions, not only economically and politically, but also culturally, morally, and most importantly, spiritually.

The *Compendium* is divided into an introduction, 3 parts in 12 chapters, and a conclusion. It begins with the relationship between God's plan, the mission of the Church, and the social doctrine, then moves on to the human person and rights, followed by a discussion of the specific principles of the common good, subsidiarity, and solidarity. It then proceeds to the family, human work, economic life and the political community, the international community, the environment, and the promotion of peace. The *Compendium* rounds out with the social doctrine and its relation to ecclesial action: the members of the Church – both priests and the lay faithful – in their attempts to build a civilization of love.

Since man's social life is so vast, it is no surprise that there are so many principles and subject matters which the *Compendium* presents and discusses; indeed, there is an additional 175 page topical index. Because it does cover a wide range of principles and topics from different perspectives, one can easily be tempted to focus on one passage in an attempt to support an ideology, e.g. an idolatry of the market (349). It is true that one finds very many favorable statements and principles regarding the free market (e.g. 347), yet, at the same time, the Church reaffirms other important principles, thus effectively transforming what is commonly advocated as "free market economics" and properly placing it within the whole of man's social life. At times, one is tempted to say that the *Compendium* appears to be inconsistent or perhaps contradictory. This appearance is related to a few issues associated with the social teachings: the notion of the development of doctrine and its relation to changing historical circumstances; the understanding that the principles are universal and permanent, versus their need to be applied in contingent particular circumstances; the continually increasing complexity of society; the Church's assimilation of any truth found in the human social sciences; and the different documents with differing levels of teaching authority used in the *Compendium*. Despite these difficulties, it is possible to see that the *Compendium* is both coherent and consistent with the Tradition of the Church. One can say that the document is not a justification of the *status quo* of the ideologies, practices, and current state of affairs in the world. The *Compendium* recognizes and affirms what is good in the modern world's social systems. Yet, because the world tends more toward a culture of death, the *Compendium* recognizes that it falls far short of the Christian ideal.

There are many interesting and provocative passages in the *Compendium*, yet I would like to mention a very important and intriguing one regarding religious freedom. Since the publication of

Vatican II's "The Declaration on Religious Freedom" (*Dignitatis Humanae*), many, both in and out of the Church, have been focusing on one's right to freedom of religion and conscience. In recent years, it seems as if the Magisterium has become a little bit wary of the current counterfeit version of this freedom proclaimed and practiced in much of the world, and even within the Church: The right to believe whatever one wants. The *Compendium's* presentation of it (at least in one part) continues the recent trend towards clarifying the true nature of religious freedom by stating, "religious freedom is not a moral license to adhere to error, nor an implicit right to error"( 421). This reaffirmation of the Church's traditional teaching is very interesting, given that many believe that "error has no rights" has been doctrinally superseded. Of course, man should not be coerced, but free to seek out and accept Christ. This reaffirmation probably is due to the very public and prominent danger of religious relativism and indifferentism that the Vatican noted in its November 2004, *Doctrinal Notes on Catholic Politicians*. In reading the signs of the times, the Magisterium has begun to turn more toward a re-emphasis on the end for which we have our freedom: the Truth who is Christ. The *Compendium* itself is at the service of the full truth of man, as is noted in the Introduction (c).

This service depends on whether the *Compendium* will either bear fruit or wither. It is first of all intended for the bishops to interpret the document correctly in order to teach the teachers – priests, religious, catechists and teachers – for the purpose of forming the lay faithful (11). Since it is primarily the lay faithful who will be working in the world, they obviously need to be well-instructed in the social doctrine of the Church. Thus, any renewal in the methods and substance of catechesis must include the social teachings as well. Since the *Compendium* touches on so many aspects of man's life, the teachings interact with the many different social sciences. Therefore theologians, philosophers, and social scientists of all disciplines need to read, discuss, understand, and pray about its contents in order to improve their own research and teaching, as well as their own lives. Furthermore, any professional – politician, government worker, businessman, attorney, etc. – should be well-grounded in the social teachings presented in this *Compendium*. This formation will enable them to transform their individual work and their professions to be more in harmony with the Gospel. While the *Compendium's* publication is welcome, the big challenge is accurately understanding the principles. This understanding is necessary not only to offer truth and hope to those in error, but also to help transform the social structures and practices. If the Church is to have a greater impact as the pillar and bulwark of truth in the world (1 Tim. 3, 15), all

Catholics must be united in their understanding of these teachings. This unity in Truth will take a humble collaboration from all within the Church to forgo ideology. Only then can we more likely incarnate the doctrine into the totality of man's social life.

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