

## **The Social Doctrine of the Church**

In 1998 the Bishops of the USA, at the conclusion of their synod, requested from John Paul II a document that would summarise the social doctrine of the Church. The pope entrusted the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace with the task of preparing this particular document, the drafting of which was brought to a conclusion in October 2004, and it was presented in the hall of the Vatican Press on October 25. By now it has been translated into 46 languages throughout the world. Three principal clarifications were made by the Magisterium with respect to the social doctrine of the Church. The first is that it ‘announces God and the mystery of salvation in Christ’, and thus belongs to the evangelizing mission itself of the Church. (1) The second is that it is an organic and unified body of doctrine which grows in insight through contact with History, changing, and at the same time remaining always the same, in that it derives from the light with which the Gospel illuminates the series of new situations that Humanity has to confront (2). The third is that with regard to its formal genre as a discipline it belongs to the field of moral theology, that is, to the field of the service that the Church offers to the world. In this way, social doctrine has a place in the very heart of the Christian message and of the Church’s mission; it is understood as an organic whole, structured and such a way that it can gain depth over time, and is considered moral theology, that is, deriving from the faith, tending towards practical discernment, whether personal or collective, resting on the foundations of the Magisterium, whose competence extends to the sphere of moral theology, and taking account of other fields of knowledge (3). The encyclical *Deus Caritas est* (4) states clearly that ‘... in the fact of new situations and problems a Catholic social teaching has developed, which was set out coherently in 2004 in the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church prepared by the Pontifical Council *Iustitia et Pax*... In the difficult situation in which we find ourselves today on account of the globalization of the economy, the social doctrine of the Church has become a significant sign which brings to the fore orientations which have a validity that transcends its boundaries – these orientations - towards the progress and development – need to be followed in dialogue with all those who care seriously about man and his world. The encyclical *Caritas in veritate* too, like all the social encyclicals, gives us a deeper understanding, to illuminate new problems facing humanity, of truths already taught in the past by the Magisterium. It joins a tradition of social encyclicals the modern phase of which we usually date from Leo XIII’s *Rerum novarum*, and comes nineteen years after the previous social encyclical, the *Centesimus annus* of John Paul II. one of the important clarifications provided by *Caritas in veritate* relates the nature of the social doctrine of the Church, a doctrine defined in the encyclical as ‘Charity in truth in the social field: announcing the truth of love in Christ in Society’ (N.5). The first clarification relates to the fact that it belongs to the living ‘Tradition’ of the Church. The second is that the point of view of the social doctrine of the Church is not reality understood in a sociological sense, but the apostolic faith. Christianity has its own right to participate in the public sphere, in that it sets out a project informed by truth and love for the created world and for society, liberating them from the slavery of their own limits and from the chains of self-sufficiency. In doing this, however, Christianity does not impose itself from the outside, but responds to an expectation immanent in society itself. The whole encyclical is written under the rubric of the concept of ‘purification’: love and truth purifying economy and society, without denying their autonomy, but opening to them their real and complete vocation. In this way, Christianity gives to economy and politics what they need but cannot provide on their own account.

The social doctrine of the Church cannot do this if it adopts a sociological perspective; it can do it if it adopts the perspective of the apostolic faith and the message about God ‘with a human face’ (N.6).

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**NOTE**

- 1.- John Paul II, Encyclical. Centesimusannus, n. 54
- 2.- Cf. John Paul II, Encyclical Sollicitudo rei socialis, nn. 1 e 3
- 3.- Cf. John Paul II, Encyclical Sollicitudo rei socialis, n.41
- 4.- Benedict XVI, Encyclical Deus Caritas est, n.27
- 5.- Benedict XVI, Encyclical Caritas in veritate, n.5
- 6.- Benedict XVI , Encyclical Caritas in veritate, n.9, where there is an explicit citation of II N. 76 of Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church