

The Social Dimension of Evangelization



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Pope Francis presents us with a powerful and compact summary of the Social Doctrine of the Church in the fourth chapter of his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*. In this section, he states, “To evangelize is to make present to the world the Kingdom of God. I would like to share my concerns about the social dimension of evangelization, precisely because if this dimension is not properly brought out, there is a constant risk of distorting the authentic and integral meaning of the mission of evangelization” (EG, 176).

The Holy Father proposes that the *kerygma* “has a clear social content. At the very heart of the Gospel is life in community and engagement with others. The content of the first proclamation has an immediate moral implication, centered on charity” (EG, 177). That social content of the *kerygma* finds its basis in Scripture, particularly Chapter 25 of Matthew’s Gospel in the parable of the Last Judgment. There, Jesus identified himself with the poor, the sick, the hungry, and prisoners – in short, all who are marginalized – to declare that what is done to them is also done to him (Mt. 25:40).

During Jesus’ public life, people wondered how and why He spoke with such authority. It was a question that even John the Baptist asked, as he sent his disciples to ask Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?” (Mt. 11:3). Jesus answer was direct and affirmative, based on signs and wonders that had a social context: “Jesus replied, ‘Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor’” (Mt. 11:4-5).

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis emphasizes the intrinsic relationship between social action and evangelization. He affirms that religious belief is not meant to be relegated to one’s private life. True faith and religious belief must make a credible communal witness

both in one's personal and interpersonal life. "The Church cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice. All Christians, pastors included, are called to show concern for the building of a better world" (EG, 183). In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis refers to the rich treasure of past encyclicals and other writings of previous pontiffs that shaped the Social Doctrine of the Church as we know it today. From the seminal work *Rerum Novarum* of Pope Leo XIII to the recent *Caritas in Veritate* of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, we see that there is no social issue of the human community not been examined by these papal documents.

The Holy Father is quick to point out the Social Doctrine of the Church is not just based on the teachings of the popes of the last 125 years. It has its roots in the Word of God, in both the Old and New Testaments. The Sacred Scriptures tell stories of salvation and God's constant attempt to break humanity out of the cycle of selfishness and sin. The Bible, along with the writings of the early Church Fathers, shaped the Catholic worldview that care for the poor and the "least among us" is a command of Christ we must readily observe, both as individuals and as a faith community.

In Scripture, Jesus showed us that the poor were always his priority, whether they came to him as grieving widows, lepers, orphaned children, strangers, or others who were living on the margins. He travelled the length and breadth of towns and villages, calling people to conversion and reconciliation with God and one another. Jesus taught them to live a just life based on the moral principles of the Kingdom of God, and to do so with charity and care for their vital needs. Whether by preaching, teaching, healing, or simply caring for their basic needs, Jesus was deeply concerned with "the least among us". Indeed, the "work of Jesus" while on earth is best seen in the parable of the Last Judgment in Matthew's Gospel, summarized in verse 25:40: "Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least of mine, you did for me".

St. Paul, writing to the Philippians, echoes Jesus' all-encompassing gift of himself in the Incarnation: "Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not deem equality with God something to be grasped at. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, and born in human likeness; and thus he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross" (Phil 2:6-8).

The Holy Father mentions many subject areas regarding the social aim of Jesus. I will focus on three:

- The social integration of the poor;
- The common good and the social peace;
- The social dialogue as a contribution for peace.

1. The Social Integration of the Poor

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis writes that, “The task of evangelization implies and demands the integral promotion of each human being. It is no longer possible to claim that religion should be restricted to the private sphere and that it exists only to prepare souls for heaven. We know that God wants his children to be happy in this world too, even though they are called to fulfillment in eternity, for he has created all things for our enjoyment and that of everyone” (EG, 182). Thus, the follower of Christ cannot fail to hear the cry of his brother or sister in need. The Pope also adds, “Who would claim to lock up in a church and silence the message of Saint Francis of Assisi or Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta? They would have found this unacceptable. An authentic faith... always involves a deep desire to change the world, to transmit values, to leave this earth a better place than we found it” (EG, 182).

I note here my need to add the example of our Holy Founder, Saint Vincent de Paul and his preferred love for the poor to the sentiments expressed by the Holy Father. Indeed, regarding the section on the social dimension of the Gospel in the apostolic exhortation, I would like to have seen St. Vincent quoted, as the Church has bestowed on him the title “Father of the Poor”. As you know, Vincent often told his confreres that Jesus Christ is the first evangelizer of the poor, and said that he would never be content to love God if his brother or sister did not also know and love God.

According to the Holy Father, the Church is “By her very nature, the Church is missionary; she abounds in effective charity and a compassion which understands, assists and promotes” (EG, 179). Is not that what St. Vincent meant by saying that our charity must become affective and effective? As the Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) teaches us, God’s love for the poor (and St. Vincent’s preference for service to the poor) was not limited to individuals only, but for justice and the human rights of the individual, and the community of peoples (CCC, 157).

Pope Francis poignantly observes that issues regarding human rights are often distorted to justify an inordinate defense of individual rights or those of the wealthy. With respect to the autonomy and culture of all nations, we must never forget that our planet belongs to humanity, and is meant to be shared for the good of all people. That some people are born in places with fewer resources and less development does not justify their having to live with less dignity. To resolve this grave situation, Pope Francis believes “the more fortunate should renounce some of their rights so as to place their goods more generously at the service of others” (EG, 190).

In this way, the Holy Father is without a doubt referring to the experience of the ‘new global society’ where a small group of countries,

(also known as the G-8 or G-9) winds up with the biggest part of world resources. Here, Pope Francis reminds us of the consistent teaching of the Church, specifically, the Second Vatican Council. In *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church and the Modern World, it states “God has destined the earth and all that is in it to the use of all men and all peoples, so that all the good of creation must benefit to all men equally, according to the rules of justice, inseparable from charity” (GS, 69). In fact, according to the Compendium, “in the first chapter of Genesis (1:28-29), we see God has given the earth to humankind to make the living of all in it, excluding no one, nor offering a special privilege to anyone” (CCC, 171).

Unfortunately, the principle of social teaching of the Church is not taken into consideration in today’s society, nor in many countries across the world. It is mostly the opposite that occurs, as seen in the fact that a majority of people living in the developing world will suffer and die because of the scandal of hunger. When we see the reality the poor face, listen to their cries, and learn of their suffering, we are shocked by the fact that there is actually enough food for all. Hunger is due to an uneven and unjust distribution of goods and services. This becomes even worse when we see the actual amounts of waste generated by first world countries (EG, 191).

2. The common good and the social peace

As for the preferential option for the poor and their social integration, Pope Francis speaks about the common good and the status quo, often disguised as a type of ‘social peace’. He declares, “True peace does not act as a pretext for justifying a social structure which silences or appeases the poor, so that the more affluent can placidly support their lifestyle, while others have to make do as they can. Demands involving the distribution of wealth, concern for the poor and human rights cannot be suppressed under the guise of creating a consensus on paper or a transient peace for a contented minority. The dignity of the human person and their common good rank higher than the comfort of those who refuse to renounce their privileges. When these values are threatened, a prophetic voice must be raised” (EG, 218).

3. The social dialogue as contribution for peace

In this era of a globalized world, where we live, it has become a “small village” (according to a phrase used by Pope St. John Paul II), In this Middle Eastern area of Lebanon, comprised of Arabs, Muslims, and Christians where I exercise my ministry as a Vincentian Bishop, we are experiencing a serious crisis. As fanatical groups and other foreign movements spread their power, an important dialogue has

become a necessity and an emergency so that the Christian community can remain in regions where they have lived since the beginning of the Christian era. Fortunately, the majority of Muslims do not follow that flow of fanaticism. Many among them suffer similarly. That fact is of primary importance, and we are called to collaborate with them in a dialogue to mutually enrich our lives and stop the fanatics.

Pope Francis invites and encourages us to engage in this type of dialogue. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, he underlines the significance of inter-religious dialogue, which must be entered into with an attitude of sincere openness and in love. He observes that the teachings of Jesus (as seen in the Gospels) promote such a dialogue, which can be of mutual benefit to Christians and Muslims, while avoiding a type of syncretism that can lead to totalitarianism' (EG, 253). True openness, says the Holy Father, requires each to remain firm in its own religious convictions. He observes that our relationship with the Muslim faithful is a most important priority in this modern era (EG, 253).

In fact, Muslims are today present in numerous countries of Christian tradition where they can freely celebrate their rituals. Unfortunately, it is not the same in some Muslim countries, where Christians cannot celebrate their rituals and are unable to give public witness to their Christian identity and symbols. That is our role and mission: to work together with religious, civil and political authorities, so Christians may freely practice their religion and to remove all religious interdictions. To achieve that objective, we are planning special meetings and encounters in the Archdiocese of Tripoli-Lebanon. This is an important objective to pursue, because religious freedom is considered a fundamental human right, which includes the freedom to choose one's faith and to practice publicly that faith.

Pope Francis agrees with this fundamental freedom to "choose a religion one judges to be true and to manifest one's beliefs in public" (EG, 203). The Holy Father notes that "a healthy pluralism, one which genuinely respects differences and values them as such, does not entail privatizing religions in an attempt to reduce them to the quiet obscurity of the individual's conscience or to relegate them to the enclosed precincts of churches, synagogues or mosques" (EG, 255).

4. Conclusion

Much of the fourth chapter of *Evangelii Gaudium* serves as a small compendium of the social teaching of the Church, and is worthy of our consideration. The three themes discussed affirm that the Church is present to the challenges her members face, and that Evangelization must always have a social dimension. As the opening paragraph of *Gaudium et Spes* so beautifully states:

“The joys and the hopes, the grief and the anxieties of this age, especially the poor or in any way afflicted; these are the joys and hopes, the grief and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community composed of men. United in Christ and led by the Holy Spirit in their journey to the Kingdom of their Father, they welcomed the news of salvation meant for every man. That is why this community realizes that it is truly linked with mankind and its history” (GS, 1).

Translated from French by PROSPER MOLENJI, C.M.