

The Social Doctrine of the Church in the Sphere of Priestly Formation in the Vincentian Major Seminaries in Colombia

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1. Introducing the theme

From the start let me hasten to assure the reader that I am no specialist in the handling of Church social doctrine as such. As an expert more within the depths of Catholic morality, the theme has always interested me not only from an academic and systematic point of view, but above all from my continued, deep concern for pastoral, ecclesial and Vincentian action. With everything else I do consider that my not inconsiderable experience as formator both of diocesan clergy and of our own confreres, and my serious and conscientious work in the area of social apostolates have all helped me to gain some fair and adequate understanding of the role of Church social doctrine in the formation of priests. Let me add that I have worked as clergy formator only in Colombia.

I think it is equally important here to state that the philosophical and theological mindset of our diocesan major seminaries fulfills in every way what is endorsed by the bishops. For this reason the philosophical and theological curriculum of our formation houses differs from that of the diocesan only in the marked emphasis given by the Vincentian charism and in some specific Vincentian contents. Given all of these things I do maintain that in Colombia the Vincentian tradition of clergy formation does not set out any special program pertaining to Church social doctrine in the major seminaries. On the other hand one should note the conscious and serious concern with conveying to future presbyters the entire and fully updated teachings of the Church's social doctrine. In this sense, it is fitting to keep in mind that the Colombian Vincentian missionaries, in their role as rectors of major diocesan seminaries and of our own, do sit at the table of OSCOL, the *Organization of Major*

Seminaries of Colombia, which in turn forms part of OSLAM, the *Organization of Seminaries of Latin America*. At this moment in the Church, the Colombian Province has contributed enormously to the wider group involved in the formation of clergy in Colombia and Latin America, while at the same time being enriched throughout its long career of clergy formation.

These relevant points now made, I plan to develop the matter in three parts. First of all I will try to gather together some data that will allow us to see that the Church's social teaching has indeed been conveyed in our Colombian seminaries. Secondly, I will propose a series of key moments in the development of the Church's social doctrine, moments which bring us naturally to a value judgment of our own educational and formation practice. Finally, with hope set on a vigorous resurgence of the Vincentian charism, I will formulate some criteria for a Vincentian reading of the Church's social doctrine.

2. Some data concerning how the teachings of the Church's social doctrine have been imparted in our major seminaries

2.1. *Before Vatican Council II*

For their resource in teaching Church social doctrine, formators and professors most frequently turned to the reading and explanation of the documents of the Magisterium, especially the social encyclicals from *Rerum Novarum* on. Many periodicals and publications, for example *L'Ami du clergé*, offered deep and extensive commentaries of the pontifical social documents, which served to orient the professors and formators. To facilitate the academic work involved they also relied on the publication of so-called encyclicals or social documents as pamphlets or in something more voluminous that would gather everything together from *Rerum Novarum* until the last one known. There was little treatment of the social teachings of Pius XII, given that his famous Christmas messages did not circulate in written text among us as did the encyclicals. It was sufficient to make reference to the encyclicals. For some time *La Código Social de Malinas* — published in 1927 and re-treated in 1934 and 1948 — was used as a kind of social doctrine text. There were various books used frequently as textbooks: *La Doctrina Social de la Iglesia* by C. van Gestel, edited by Herder; *La Doctrina Social de la Iglesia* by Perre Bigo, edited by ICES in Barcelona. It is no less important to recall that first in France and later, with repercussions in Latin America, the fifties were marked by P. Lebreton's influence with his analysis about economic progress and development. Not a few professors and

formators, including some who were among us, availed themselves of P. Lebret's contributions to orient their own lessons on the Church's social teaching.

Generally the theme of social doctrine was dealt with within the framework of theological studies, granting it no more than one semester. At times the matter was relegated to a course within philosophy because one could notice a certain closeness to introductory sociology classes. Instead of having the matter of Social Doctrine linked with Moral Theology in its social side, it tended to be associated with Pastoral Social Theology. Keeping in mind that neither the contents of Pastoral Theology nor the methodology for explaining them enjoyed any real clarity and coherence, it was frequently the case that any reference to Social Doctrine was only random. It was common to see a subject as sensitive and important as this reduced to praxis or practices of social pastoral theology. On the other hand there were no professors or formators properly prepared in Social Doctrine. In addition, the importance of Social Doctrine went unnoticed. It seemed an optional subject or one reserved to enthusiasts or experts. For this reason it was often the custom to have a seminar or brief workshop in order to be absolved of this subject, as important as it is.

2.2. As of the Second Vatican Council

Due to the theological and pastoral impact of Vatican II, and the teaching of John XXIII, Paul VI and John Paul II, a beneficial change could be noted, little by little, in the putting forth of Church Social Doctrine into the formation of future priests. With the great contribution of Latin-American teaching, above all that of Medellín, Puebla and Santo Domingo, the need to fully and responsibly assume the task of teaching Social Doctrine in seminaries became obvious. In effect, the bishops in Puebla took care of Church Social Doctrine in all its depth and breadth.¹ It is also necessary to recognize that the rise of Liberation Theology, with its normal development and the clarifying debate that came along with it, all enriched enormously the spreading of the teachings of Social Doctrine. (cf. *Instruction Concerning Various Aspects of the "Theology of Liberation,"* by the SACRED CONGREGATION FOR THE DEFENSE OF THE FAITH, Vatican City, 1984, and *Instruction Concerning "Christian Freedom and Liberation,"* by the SACRED CONGREGATION FOR THE DEFENSE OF THE FAITH, Vatican City, 1986). One can point out, with no hesitation, that with the

¹ Cf. *The Documents of PUEBLA*, 472 f.

recognition given the Church's Social Doctrine by John Paul II in his own rich and varied official teaching,² and out of the reflection and action of the Pontifical Commission of Justice and Peace, created by his predecessor Paul VI, Social Doctrine was consolidated into the theological formation stage in our major seminaries.

Admittedly, there continued an exaggerated use of appealing almost exclusively to the sources, to papal or episcopal documents, and to thematic courses, all in place of having a systematic exposition of Social Doctrine in the Bible (where it is so obviously supported), in Tradition, and in both theological and general pastoral practical reflection.

In any case one should recognize since then the "corpus" of the Church's Social Doctrine did begin to be put forward with greater freedom and seriousness within the circle of professional theologians and as an integral and indispensable part of theological formation for candidates to the priesthood. In this sense it is worthwhile pointing out that Social Doctrine has fully come to occupy its rightful place in the theological mindset.

With all that, it still is a notorious fact that there is no institutional concern to provide an integral and competent formation of professors and formators in the area of Social Doctrine. It is interesting, that shortly before and after Vatican Council II some importance was given to the preparation of confreres in the study of sociology. Perhaps this was related to the boon of the so-called helping sciences in the study of theology. But it seems to me that there was lacking a needed critical evaluation of sociology, valuable in itself, and of relating it with Social Doctrine in such a way that, on the one hand, one would not fall into a certain sociology-ism when expounding Social Doctrine, and that, on the other hand, one could succeed to giving Social Doctrine both a sociological basis and a systematic framing. Unfortunately at this moment in time, and for many reasons, we tend to abandon the practice of forming and of preparing confreres in the social sciences.

In ending this first part I consider it opportune to make one value judgment. To do so there is nothing better than to start from an official text of the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education. It concerns "The Theological Formation of Future Priests" from February 22, 1976. In number 114 the text reads: "Naturally, for a complete theological formation, other materials of great importance take part, for example, Liturgy, Canon Law, Church History and

² *Laborem Exercens*, 1981; *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 1988; and *Centesimus annus*, 1991.

THE AUXILIARIES, such as Spiritual Theology, CHURCH SOCIAL DOCTRINE, Ecumenical Theology, Missiology, the Sacred Arts, etc. THESE either flank the pastoral subjects or remain framed within the SPHERE OF PASTORAL THEOLOGY” (the emphasis is mine). The document I have alluded to and specifically quoted took as its objective to establish parameters for “an adequate and updated theological preparation of candidates for the priesthood,” as it states. Following the tone of this referenced document, one easily deduces that Church Social Doctrine was not considered principal material in the basic program of theological formation of future priests. Burdened with relegation Pastoral Theology, it is now thought of in general terms.

Following the data just developed, although not exhaustively, I think that for what concerns Colombia, Social Doctrine in the major seminaries — diocesan or our own — has not been a priority, either theologically or pastorally. Nor can it be said it was given any emphasis.

This judgment is worrisome, and given the testimony of the very same documents of Medellín (1969), Puebla (1979) and Santo Domingo (1992), and “Ecclesia in America” (1999), the reality of poverty, injustice and violence is alarming, and constitutes an enormous sign of contradiction facing the whole of a continent which is itself majority Catholic.

Finally it can be affirmed that the academic treatment given Social Doctrine was neither systematic nor contextualized in a real situational framework of the country, as asked by Paul VI in *Octogésima Adveniens*. As a consequence it was hardly acceptable that newly ordained priests would leave the major seminary without the conviction that the Church, the expert in humanity, does offer in her social doctrine a set of principles for reflection, criteria for judgment, and directives for action, so that the profound changes required by the situation of misery and injustice, may be carried out in such a way as serve the true good of people.

3. Key Points in the Development of Church Social Doctrine

3.1. To begin this second part of my work I quote Fr. Ricardo Antoncich, S.J., in his article: “The Evangelization of Politics.”³ He states “Social Doctrine arises as a response of evangelization to the challenge of modern industrialization. Industrialization means not

³ “La evangelización de lo político,” *Colección Iglesia Nueva*, No. 49, Indo-American Press Service, Bogotá, 1980.

only a transformation of technologies that change nature and place nature at the service of men, but also the rise of new social groups and of new economic and political interests. The Church rejects as invalid the accusation that she protects the interests of the rich and forgets about the poor: "There is no lack of those who slander the Church placing her on the side of the rich versus the proletariat, something that constitutes an injustice most atrocious...."⁴ Social Doctrine is incapable of causing, then, whether objectively or subjectively, the effects or the impression of defending the interests of the rich and forgetting the struggle of the poor. If this were to happen, it would be a contradiction against its deepest intentions."

I consider that the sensible considerations made by Fr. Ricardo Antoncich could serve as a guide in an attempt to trace the milestones or most relevant points of the Church's Social Doctrine. From my own modest point of view, the Church's Social Doctrine knows five crucial moments, reflecting nothing less dramatic than a radical shift in direction in our society from the middle of the nineteenth century until our own time.

3.2. *The Response to the Social Question*

Pope Leo XIII with his encyclical, *Rerum Novarum* gives a response, both relevant and hoped for, and one that looks to fundamentally improve the fortune of workers in the industrialized world. But it also makes one notice aberrations of ideologies then in vogue: capitalism and communism. No one doubts the importance of this historical landmark. But one has to keep in mind "Church Social Doctrine is not born with *Rerum Novarum*. Perhaps this encyclical is the clearest expression of Social Doctrine at the dawn of a new era, the industrial; but the principles which should govern social, economic and cultural coexistence are hidden like roots in the very same Holy Scripture, in the tradition of the Church Fathers and in the great theologians such as Thomas Aquinas."⁵

Just as did Pius XI (*Quadragesimo Anno*), so also Pius XII (with his Christmas radio messages) would follow the steps of Leo XIII and face the situation of war and of totalitarianism. All the work completed by Pius XII is quite relevant to establish and build up the relationship between *morality and law* as a basis and frame for a just society. Without denying the universal validity of stated principles

⁴ *Quadragesimo Anno*, 44.

⁵ Cf. RICHARD ANTONCICH, *op. cit.*

and established criteria, it is at least fair to make two comments: first, the pontiffs had before their eyes principally the European situation; secondly, the basis for argumentation is constructed from a philosophical mediation (resting on the doctrine of natural law), and the language would seem more targeted to theologians, bishops, and the academic world.

3.3. *Opening the Social Question to World Level*

With the encyclical *Mater et Magistra* begins a second moment which is considerably decisive in the development of Church Social Doctrine. John Paul II, Paul VI and Vatican Council II each shed light on the whole of reality: The world as social, as cultural, as political, as economic, in conflict, all seen with the light of the Gospel. In this way the “corpus” of Social Doctrine increases and is invigorated. In addition mechanisms are created to nurture its vitality and expansion: The Pontifical Commission of Justice and Peace (now the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace), the World Day of Prayer for Peace (January first of each year), and the Message for the World Day for Peace.

Starting with the encyclical *Mater et Magistra*, the argumentation is more social-empirical (for example, in its analyses of social change), a simpler style is used, directed to all people; Social Doctrine takes on a more pastoral character; to encourage Christians towards transformative action in society.

Meanwhile, in Latin America, there is developing the whole pastoral and social movement that will culminate in Liberation Theology.

3.4. *The urgent need to contextualize the principles, the criteria, and the directives of Social Doctrine*

On the occasion of the 80th Anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, Paul VI published his apostolic letter, *Octogesimo Adveniens* within a turbulent climate of furious ideological debate. It is my opinion that this document provides a novel and bold change of direction for Social Doctrine, which perhaps had not always been perceived as radical or profound. Faced with the impossibility of finding solutions uniformly deduced and applied in order to respond to an enormous complexity of the depressing international situation, the Pope proposes substantially two criteria: the first, the responsible exercise of animation and accompaniment of pastors in intimate relationship with their communities; the second, a contextualization of Social

Doctrine's criteria, principles and directives along the lines of regions, countries, and local places. In this form, it is crystal clear that the Church's Social Doctrine is neither ideology nor "third way."

3.5. *Reconsideration and applicability of social doctrine*

Perhaps, having participated in the early days of his pontificate in Puebla (1978), i.e. in the General Conference of the Latin-American Bishops, is what made John Paul II personally take on the task of Social Doctrine with such passion and conviction. Besides his three great social encyclicals, Pope John Paul II made good use of his letters and apostolic exhortations not only to deepen Social Doctrine and hone its edge, but also to cry out that Social Doctrine must be taken seriously, that it be studied, that it be taught, and that it be lived.

Throughout this long period in Latin America he attended the two great assemblies of Bishops in *Puebla* and *Santo Domingo*, each deeply affected by matters having to do with Social Doctrine. Of particular importance, he took part in the debate concerning Liberation Theology that would produce conclusions not only of the validity of a legitimate Liberation Theology but also of the urgent necessity to apply pastorally the Church's Social Doctrine as the solution to the enormous problems that afflict Latin American peoples.

In the face of dehumanizing economic globalization, John Paul II energetically advocated a globalization of world-wide solidarity.

3.6. *Moment for synthesis*

I consider that the publication of *The Compendium Of Church Social Doctrine* (April 2, 2004) by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, constitutes a very important point in the development of Social Doctrine. Pope John Paul II as well as the Synod for the Americas had expressed the desire to have a document that would pull together all the pieces of Church Social Doctrine in a systematic and complete way. From that moment on — the materials having arrived and having been synthesized — the knowledge, the teaching and the practical application of the Church's Social Doctrine cease to be random, unsystematic, and non-compulsory.

3.7. Upon concluding this rapid review of the unique moments of the Church's Social Doctrine, I can now do an appraisal as to how they were perceived and received in the studies and in the teaching of Social Doctrine in our seminaries.

On this point I can neither be lax nor can I lack objectivity, even at the cost of appearing negative. I do not believe I am mistaken if I state that the dynamic sense, be it diachronic or synchronic, of the Church's Social Doctrine passed practically unnoticed. Probably many had the idea that the "corpus" of Social Doctrine would be a finalized collection whose diverse contents were being explained in a systematic way along with the necessary authority of the Magisterium, without paying attention to internal development and to the timely response to demands presented by new situations. The deeply felt new responsibility with each pronouncement of the Magisterium concerning social welfare diminished, hidden by the same newness of yet one more document. One could say that due to this superficial appreciation, the dynamic and compelling aspect of each step in the development of Social Doctrine did not capture the attention of formators or of those in formation. But there is one much deeper cause which underlies all of this. In a few words I could express it this way: complete indifference to politics and sociology. It has always turned out easier to understand charity in terms of aid and of paternalism, and even in terms of development. The authentic social and political dimension of charity and of the entire gospel, is seen and lived out only with difficulty.

4. A Vincentian reading of the Church's Social Doctrine

4.1. I think that, besides Gospel and moral responsibility, in as much as it pertains to every son and daughter of the Church to know, teach and put into practice Social Doctrine in ways that are creative and open to the many settings in which the Church is present in the world, that there is a certain binding relationship between this and the Vincentian charism. I believe that here is a spiritual, theological, and pastoral vein that has yet to be exploited. For now I dare to propose three criteria for a Vincentian reading of the Social Doctrine of the Church.

4.2. *Sensitivity for the Poor*

Paul VI states explicitly that our Church's Social Doctrine "develops with sensitivity appropriate to the Church and designed for the disinterested willingness for service of and attention to the poor."⁶

⁶ OA, 42.

If sensitivity for the poor is to guide the process of creation and development of social teachings, it is logical to infer that such a sensitivity should also be the criterion for the reading and interpretation of these teachings, since they were written in this spirit and should be read in the same way. John Paul II's discourses in Puebla and in Mexico offer — as magisterial teaching of the Church — precise criteria for an evangelical option for the poor, which should be the place from which the Church's social teaching is read and interpreted. With little effort one can see that the Vincentian charism is a place in the Church where the Church's social teachings can be found such as in one's home, and where one is able to do things in new and creative ways with the same gospel energy that resides in the poor, according to the fortunate expression in Puebla.

In addition to the content and the inspiration of the Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission, there is a suggestive and always up to date proposal in Statute 9, which routes the Vincentian charism towards a substantive and normative acceptance of the Church's Social Doctrine. In the General Assembly of 1992, within the theme of New Evangelization, confreres were emphatically urged to keep in mind the Church's Social Doctrine in their work with the poor.

4.3. The Mission of Evangelization

Another criterion to understand and absorb the Church's Social Doctrine is the Mission. The Vincentian Mission has, in effect, the charge of helping personal conversion and the transformation of society, because of the poor. With regard to the poor the Mission is not an isolated action but rather embraces the person as center-point and moves from there to social change guided by the needs of the Kingdom of God — offered from the outset to the poor, humble, and simple. The mission dynamism, therefore, finds in the materials of Church Social Doctrine a prospective and hope-giving cause, one that channels efforts and provides Christian love with a tried and true tool to transform society according to the Gospel. As he was dying, St. Vincent de Paul realized openly that he and his mission of evangelization of the poor had practically changed the face of France and of the Church. It is not far from the truth to state that Vincent de Paul was clearly one of the modern fathers of the Church who shaped missionary action theologically, spiritually and practically, with results which materialized as matured fruit of the Church's Social Doctrine.

Today it is important to have the necessary insight to state that the Vincentian Mission is truly a Church activity, and not a

movement nor a third way. Vincent was fully conscious of this, and how little it bothered him! In these times, no one is hidden from the many attractive offers from groups and movements of all different types in the Church, which include, sometimes, those that undermine the healthy missionary tradition of the Church. It is also for this reason that I consider that the Vincentian missionary identity is, in this crucial moment in the life of the Church, one of the best helps so that the Church's social teachings be proposed "out of an integral and social humanism, capable of encouraging a new social, economic and political order, founded upon the dignity and upon the liberty of each human person, and for bringing about peace and justice in solidarity."⁷

4.4. Lay Action

For me this third millennium should be deeply distinguished in God's Church for being about the laity and about lay activity. Thanks be to God, the Congregation of the Mission, after the Second Vatican Council, little by little has been taking on a consciousness of the importance of the layperson — it is worth adding, of the *faithful* layperson, thus recovering as well the genuine and primitive inspiration of our Founder. I consider that every impulse brought to bear to make visible and active the distinct links and branches of the Vincentian Family expresses, among other things, a clear desire for the presence and action of the layperson among us, for the Church and for the world.

It is obvious to note, from *Octogesima Adveniens* onward, the insistence that lay faithful are both the agents and beneficiaries of the Church's Social Doctrine. In the Post Synodal exhortation, *Ecclesia In America*, are the words: "With respect to this (the Church's Social Doctrine) that [we] have to initiate the formation of lay faithful capable of working in the name of the faith in Christ, for the transformation of earthly realities" (No 54). It is the same John Paul II, who in his Apostolic Exhortation *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, highlights the importance of the lay faithful in the Church in this new millennium. Equally, in the same document, he makes very pressing the need to put into practice the Church's Social Doctrine.

It is worth the trouble to point out that in the *Compendium of the Church's Social Doctrine*, in the third part, the commitment of laypersons in relation to Social Doctrine is fully described and

⁷ *Compendium of the Church's Social Doctrine*, 19.

pondered. Thus is placed in manifesto the enormous importance of the layperson in the field of Social Doctrine.

It sets up quite a rivalry, then, that those lay faithful now immersed in temporal things and institutions would be the first ones charged with contributing to the enrichment, the understanding, and the fulfillment of Social Doctrine. In this way the faithful layperson is not just a simple, passive subject or mere recipient of the gestating and working out of Social Doctrine. In this specifically ecclesial field we will have to think and work as *co-responsible* pastors and lay faithful.

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