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The social and economic message of Benedict XVI's Caritas in Veritate in the perspective of the Roman Catholic social doctrine

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Chapter II – Social doctrine and its *Compendium*

1. *Introduction*

After the presentation of the previous chapter, here I will try to delineate more in detail the content of the *Compendium of the social doctrine of the Church* and use this to offer a further analysis of the Roman Catholic Church's social thought. This requires also a short inquiry into certain aspects of Roman Catholic theology and a brief account regarding the historical development of social teaching, which will be given in the next chapter.

I do not intend to treat all topics present in RC social teaching, nor all the topics organized and elaborated in the *Compendium*. For what concerns us, a few specific topics will be enough to be the interpretative basis for the analysis of *Caritas in veritate*. A large part of the *Compendium* is dedicated to social issues such as family, marriage and the role of politics that, albeit somehow linked to diverse economic issues are not representing here our focus.

Therefore, what I try to do is to give an outline of the meanings and purposes of RC social teaching, as well as reasons and advantages in having such social doctrine summarized in a detailed single document, the *Compendium*. In fact, we could also see the *Compendium* as a relevant step in the exposition and schematization process of the entire RC social thought.³⁹ The *Compendium* appears to be an ideal intellectual place in which all social teaching's principles are presented⁴⁰ in detail with constant reference to the original documents of the RCC through explicit and implicit quotations.

The publication of the *Compendium*, by Pontifical Council Justice and Peace, shows the intention of the RCC for having at hand a specific instrument suitable to all people involved in social matters and interested in the Roman Catholic views on these issues. Here are Cardinal Renato Raffaele Martino's words, at that time President of the Pontifical Council, presenting the *Compendium* at a press conference. These may be helpful considerations for clarifying some aspects regarding its scopes and challenges:

This document has been prepared - at the request of the Holy Father [John Paul II], to whom it is dedicated - by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, which is fully responsible for its content. It is now made available to all - Catholics, other Christians, people of good will - who seek sure signs of truth in order to better promote the social good of persons and societies. [...] The most complex problems that had to be dealt with were essentially those determined by: a) the fact that this amounted to compiling a text that had no precedent in the Church's history; b) the attempt to bring into focus certain complex epistemological questions inherent in the nature of the Church's social doctrine; c) the need to give a unified and universal dimension to the document notwithstanding the countless facets and unlimited variety of social realities in

³⁹ See P. CARLOTTI, 'Un chiarimento decisivo'. DSC e teologia morale, in P. CARLOTTI, M. TOSO, eds., *Per un umanesimo degno dell'amore. Il 'Compendio della Dottrina sociale della Chiesa'*. Roma: LAS, 2005. 163 – 167.

⁴⁰ See below, IV.

the world and of the world; and d) the desire to offer a teaching that loses nothing of its lustre over time, in an historical period marked by very rapid and radical social, economic and political changes.⁴¹

Thus, the *Compendium* is intended to be a systematization of the entire RC teaching regarding social topics starting from the Old Testament and Gospel. As far as it is possible to say now, it should be remarked anyhow that officially Roman Catholic social teaching starts in 1891 with pope Leo XIII and his *Rerum novarum*. But, as we have observed, the RCC traces its social teaching back to the Old Testament.

Such a task of systematization could be hard to fulfil, especially for two reasons: firstly, the enormous amount of sources accumulated in more than 2000 years, and secondly, the fact that the RCC has the aim of being globally understood. This latter objective means that in a global world the RCC finds itself forced to operate with the maximum of global intentions. It claims to show its potential in overwhelming those cultural barriers, such as language, that might slow down understanding its message. Thus, the *Compendium* intends to represent the best exemplification of the effort of the RCC to be relevant everywhere in the world.

One of the *Compendium*'s main subjects is the socio-economic condition of humanity in the widest sense. Social and economic facts are usually subject to fast and sometimes unpredictable changes. Due to this it might be reasonable to think that it was a hard undertaking to conceive a work thought to be suitable to be seen as appropriate from many different standpoints, and holding long-lasting relevance. But the final judgement on this, of course, is up to the reader.

The social teaching of the RCC aims to speak to all humanity, independently from particular faiths, languages and customs. The universality of its message is partially due to the fact that it deals with human matters, like for instance the distribution of wealth, widely felt as problems, not only by Roman Catholics. Indeed, a relevant category in social teaching is 'human integral development'. This concept refers to humanity, and not uniquely to Roman Catholics or believers in general. This is because:

*Men and women, in the concrete circumstances of history, represent the heart and soul of Catholic social thought (see JOHN PAUL II, Centesimus annus. 11, AAS 83. 1991. 807).*⁴²

At the centre of the attention in the *Compendium* we should find what is supposed to be at the centre of Roman Catholic social teaching in general, namely the human being. In other words, the *Compendium* declares that the main concern of the social thought is the condition of the human beings in the practical context they are living, apart from individual cultural identities.

We still have to keep in mind that a foundational element throughout RC social teaching, as stressed in several of the quotations proposed, is the light of the Christian faith. This is, according to the traditional Roman Catholic Church's view, an unalterable and consistent tool for interpreting the world, which consequently

⁴¹ PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE, *Press conference for the presentation of the Compendium of the social doctrine of the Church*. October 25, 2004.

⁴² PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004. 107.

grants stability even in interpreting the meaning of social facts. This also means that the Gospel is the basic point of reference for all the interpretative processes. To have the Gospel translated in social terms, the RCC needs to have interpreted Jesus' words. This also tells us that the theological interpretation of the Gospel and of all the Sacred Scriptures falls within the domain of the Roman Catholic hermeneutic tradition. In this sense this social teaching can be called Roman Catholic.

2. Distinctive traits of the Roman Catholic social doctrine

What exactly does it mean to consider social doctrine as *Roman Catholic*? In answering this question we concretely start to analyse social teaching's content, its domain ('social') and its nature ('doctrine').

'Social doctrine' is composed of two words. The 'social' part of it indicates that the Roman Catholic Church wants to deal here not just with specific matters of faith, such as the sacraments or the liturgy, but with issues concerning, for instance, inequalities in the distribution of wealth, labour rights and human dignity. This does not mean that the RCC treats such topics without what it considers the inspiration of the Holy Spirit or without the enlightenment of its faith. It just means that a great part in comprehending and studying such social objects is strictly related to those fields of human knowledge that specifically treat them, as economy, sociology, and humanities in general. Regarding these considerations, and to frame correctly social teaching's domain, it is worthy reflecting from the beginning that

[...] the Church's social doctrine 'belongs to the field, not of *ideology*, but of *theology* and particularly of moral theology' (JOHN PAUL II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*. 41, AAS 80, 1988. 571). It cannot be defined according to socio-economic parameters. It is not an ideological or pragmatic system intended to define and generate economic, political and social relationships, but is a *category unto itself*. It is 'the *accurate formulation* of the results of a careful reflection on the complex realities of human existence, in society and in the international order, in the light of faith and of the Church's tradition. Its main aim is to *interpret* these realities, determining their conformity with or divergence from the lines of the Gospel teaching on man and his vocation, a vocation which is at once earthly and transcendent; its aim is thus to *guide* Christian behaviour' (*Sollicitudo*, 41).⁴³

As we have now seen above, Roman Catholic 'social' doctrine is defined as 'a *category unto itself*'. This is posing a clear separation between scope and methodology, in the development of social doctrine, compared to the development of social sciences and social thought independent of Roman Catholic theology. Social thought comes from a theological ground, namely the interpretation of the Gospel. And clearly this is a different ground from, for example, from that of an economic or social theory. But social thought claims to share with other specific sciences interest in the interaction with the human beings. It would mean that the liaison between social thought, a category unto itself with a theological ground, and other sciences, is humanity.⁴⁴

⁴³ *Compendium*, 72.

⁴⁴ It might be enriching to read a technical definition of social thought: 'Social thought is an inclusive

In the seventies of the previous century, the term ‘social doctrine’ has been accused to be ‘ideological’, in the sense that it was considered as an authoritative imposition from the RCC directed to influence the shape of society. Regarding the rejection of the ideological role assigned to the RC social doctrine there have been different perspectives. For instance, Dominique Chenu, a French Dominican, indeed criticized the vision of the social doctrine as an ideology, in the sense that he saw the risk of a social doctrine that, as an ideology, would aim to shape from above the social life.⁴⁵ Namely, from the ideal of its principles he saw the dangers of a force willing to shape the material reality from a Westernized point of view. It was in fact a time of large debates about the legitimate character of such a doctrine and its role in regards of the socio-economic organization of the secular world.⁴⁶ In this regard Chenu wished to develop a ‘Christian realism’, *réalisme chrétien*, able to read the ‘signs of the times’.⁴⁷

The abandonment by the RCC of the terminology ‘social doctrine’ that was prospected by Chenu has not happened.⁴⁸ The term ‘social doctrine’ has continued to be present in the teaching of the RCC, but without that burden of ‘ideological’ imposition. This terminology is the space for a dialogue about the dynamics between social facts and the corpus of evangelical principle that social teaching aims to put forward. Indeed, from John XXIII with *Pacem in terris*, starts a process of opening towards certain moderate form of socialism. This process ends with *Octogesima adveniens* of Paul VI, that makes the possibility of political pluralism real.⁴⁹

It has been also pointed out how the conception of social teaching as belonging to the field of RC moral theology is the source of both particular strengths and weaknesses. From one side, RC theology provides social teaching with rigour in the exposition of the doctrine and a certain guarantee of internal coherence but, on the other side, the theological ground of social teaching determines a tendency towards closure for those instances and claims that may come from outside the moral theological framework as elaborated in the RC perspective.⁵⁰ In this sense, for example, it has been understood the clash, and the misunderstanding, between the official RC social teaching and some aspects of the liberation theology.⁵¹

term that refers to any expression of ideas concerning the conduct of relations among men, particularly ideas concerning the comprehensive system of relations that is society. According to this usage, Catholic social thought includes not only the official teaching of the Church affecting the organization of society but all social ideas that can be attributed to Catholic inspiration, whether these ideas are taught formally or only exemplified in the social institutions and popular traditions of a given period of history. [...] The basic assumption of the Church’s teaching on social question is that man is a social being. By nature he is dependent on others at every stage of life, for existence and for the fulfilment of spiritual, intellectual, emotional, physical and social needs.’ *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed. Detroit: Thomson / Gale 2003.

⁴⁵ See D. DORR, *Option for the poor and for the earth. Catholic social teaching*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012. 244.

⁴⁶ See M. D. CHENU, *La ‘doctrine sociale’ de l’Église comme idéologie*. Paris: CERF, 1979. 87 – 96.

⁴⁷ See CHENU, *La ‘doctrine sociale’ de l’Église comme idéologie*, 94 – 96.

⁴⁸ See R. EPP, *A propos de la ‘doctrine sociale de l’Église comme idéologie’*, de M. D. Chenu, in *Revue des sciences religieuses*, Strasbourg: 1980. 78 – 88.

⁴⁹ See EPP, *A propos de la ‘doctrine sociale de l’Église comme idéologie’*, in *Revue des sciences religieuses*, 88

⁵⁰ See F. P. MCHUGH, *Catholic social thought: renovating the tradition. A keyguide to resources*. Leuven: Peeters, 2008. 25.

⁵¹ See MCHUGH, *Catholic social thought: renovating the tradition*, 26 – 27.

Though the RCC has emphasizes its theological source, the advocates of ‘social doctrine’ have also declared that these teachings do not have the specific aim of building a particular socio-economic system or pursuing a definite political or economic program. ‘Social doctrine’ aims to leave to political and economic actors and scholars their proper independence, as clarified since the Vatican II.⁵² Indeed, the objective of the social doctrine is to understand the economic and social world and try to evaluate these elements with the interpretation of the Gospel. Nevertheless, it is worthy to stress that the social doctrine of the RCC aims to be open to all other kinds of knowledge coming from the human sciences:

*The Church’s social doctrine avails itself of contributions from all branches of knowledge, whatever their source, and has an important interdisciplinary dimension. [...] The social doctrine makes use of the significant contributions of philosophy as well as the descriptive contributions of the human sciences. [...] The Church recognizes and receives everything that contributes to the understanding of man in the ever broader, more fluid and more complex network of his social relationships. She is aware of the fact that a profound understanding of man does not come from theology alone, without the contributions of many branches of knowledge to which theology itself refers.*⁵³

Here we have the statement that declares that notwithstanding the theological nature of the social doctrine, it is necessary for the RCC to look at the result of what is outside theology.⁵⁴ In this sense the social doctrine of the RCC assumes an inclusive character. In developing its social doctrine, the RCC recognizes the progress and results of other sciences, and tries to enrich its content with those. The basic assumption coming from the *Compendium* is that the contributions included in the social teaching of the RCC might be effective in improving the human condition which is, as we have seen above, what the RCC presents to have as the centre of its social teaching. In other words, if the objective is to improve the human condition, the RCC believes that its social thought can provide a proper and significant contribution to this end together with more secular perspectives.

2.1. Doctrine and dogma in Roman Catholic theology

According the second word in ‘social doctrine’, the Roman Catholic Church’s teaching on social and economic affairs is called a ‘doctrine’.⁵⁵ Doctrine, which in

⁵² According to which: ‘ [...] we [the RCC] cannot but deplore certain habits of mind, which are sometimes found too among Christians, which do not sufficiently attend to the rightful independence of science and which, from the arguments and controversies they spark, lead many minds to conclude that faith and science are mutually opposed.’ SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, *Gaudium et spes*. 36. AAS 58. 1966.

⁵³ *Compendium*, 76 – 78.

⁵⁴ See MCHUGH, *Catholic social thought: renovating the tradition*, 16.

⁵⁵ A brief definition of ‘doctrine’ in Catholic theology: ‘(Veritates catholicae or doctrina catholica). With this term are called, in a rigorous theological sense, all those truths that the Church is presenting in an authentic way, but not infallible. Catholic doctrine includes some theological conclusions, many affirmations from Papal encyclicals, etc. The Church requires, for such presented truths, an internal adherence, but not an absolute and irrevocable faith adherence. Adherence, given by Church authority, can be taken away when one, with considerations overwhelming the present situation until that

the end means teaching, in our context refers to teaching that is suitable to be shaped and developed through the time. It is an always renewed teaching according to the contemporary situations, in which elements of tension are grasped and analysed.

A doctrine is conceptually to be distinguished from that which in RC theology is defined as dogma.⁵⁶ Doctrine and dogma both teach something. But in the theology of the Roman Catholic Church, dogma indicates a taught truth not open to modification. Dogma goes untouched through the ages. It is a principle from which certain consequences arise on the level of belief as well as in everyday activity for the believer. Only from dogma itself, in a descending line, is it allowed to speculate on its consequences or deeper meaning. Never is a modification of its content allowed once it has been defined as such by the authority of the RCC. This is due to the fact that a dogma comes, according to the RCC, directly from the revelation of God, and the RCC can only give a written interpretation of it but cannot modify its content.

In contrast to dogma, doctrine, about social and economic topics in this case, allows for more extensive speculation, which may involve also the meaning and content of related principles.

moment, has acquired a sure conviction that an opinion, proposed by the Church in an authentic but not infallible way, does not correspond to reality anymore.' K. RAHNER, H. VORGRIMLER, *Kleines Theologisches Wörterbuch*. Freiburg: Verlag Herder, 1968. 211 [my translation from the Italian edition] Another definition: 'The word doctrine comes from the Latin *doctrina*, the Vulgate translation for *διδασκαλία* and *διδασχῆ*. It means teaching or instruction and is closely associated with the words catechesis and kerygma. It is used both in the active sense of the imparting of knowledge and in the passive sense of what is taught.' *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed. Detroit: Thomson / Gale 2003.

⁵⁶ A brief definition of 'dogma' in Catholic theology: '[...] In modern usage by Church and theology (that is common and unambiguous only since XVIII century) dogma is a proposition object of *fides divina et catholica*; namely a proposition that Church expressly preaches as revealed by God, through ordinary Magisterium or a definition by Papal or Council. Its negation is heresy.' RAHNER, VORGRIMLER, *Kleines Theologisches Wörterbuch*. 205 [my translation from It. ed.]. Another definition: 'The Greek word dogma, also used in English, is found among classic authors. It is derived from the Greek *δοκεῖν* [...]. It can mean (1) a private option: what seems good to the individual; (2) a decree: what seems good to public authority; (3) the teaching of a philosopher, which was considered authoritative by his followers. In the Septuagint and New Testament the word is used of a decree of the state (Dn 2.13; 3.10; Lk 2.1). The ordinances of Moses (Eph. 2.15; Col 2.14) are called dogmas, as also decrees of the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 16.4). However, it is a derivation of the third sense indicated above that finds general acceptance among the Fathers and theologians. [...] Contemporary usage. Today dogma is widely used in a strict sense, for all and only those truths that have been revealed by God and proposed as such by the Church for belief by the faithful, that is, those things that Vatican Council I (H. DENZINGER, *Enchiridion symbolorum*, 3011) maintains have to be believed on divine and Catholic faith. Thus, denial of a dogma is heresy. To be a dogma in this strict technical sense, the truth in question has to be part of the public revelation. (Thus, truths privately revealed are not dogmas). Moreover, it has to be declared by the Church's authority to be believed as revealed. Since dogma is proposed for men's belief as revealed, it is the object of divine faith and is to be distinguished from those other truths that the Church proposes but not precisely as revealed.' *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed. Detroit: Thomson / Gale 2003. Also: 'Since the eighteenth century, the term dogma has been used for religious truths officially defined by the Church as divinely revealed. [...] Attention needs to be directed to the distinction between dogma and doctrine. Although these terms are often used interchangeably, dogma technically refers to a declarative statement that discloses revealed truth. Doctrine refer to explanations of how such truths may be understood. There may be several acceptable doctrines or explanations of a single dogma. It is on the level of doctrine, not of dogma, that the Church admits pluralism.' M. GLAZIER, M. K. HELLWIG, eds., *The modern Catholic encyclopedia*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004.

Moreover, for the individual believer, a doctrine has not to be accepted without any sort of criticism as it should be for a dogma. Dogmas descend from the acceptance of the Roman Catholic faith, and this implies that accepting the Roman Catholic faith also dogmas are accepted. On the contrary, a single doctrine may be questionable at any level of the Roman Catholic hierarchy, included the individual lay believer.

The social teaching of the Roman Catholic Church does not represent a dogma according to the same RCC. Nonetheless, this does not mean that the single believer is exempted from a confrontation with it. Its status as doctrine simply means that adherence to social teaching is not compulsory in all its elements for the recognition, for instance, of the Roman Catholic faith as such. The Roman Catholic faith sees itself as based on dogmas intended as revealed facts not suitable for modification through time, such as the Roman Catholic dogmas of the Immaculate Conception, namely the birth without original sin, of the virgin Mary, or the dogma of the one nature and three persons of the Holy Trinity.

From the definition of doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church emerges another relevant element for our analysis, that is the historical character of doctrine. Social doctrine may also be shaped by the same reality it has to face. We may see this for example in regards to globalization, which is a process involved in almost all contemporary debates concerning economy and development, and thus social thought cannot ignore it.

We have not to forget that the denomination ‘social doctrine’ or ‘social teaching’ or ‘social thought’, used in this work as synonyms, are relatively recent in the RCC. Not even in the writings of the late nineteenth century pope Leo XIII, with whom started officially the social doctrine, we find such terminology. Its formal introduction occurred with Pius XII in 1947.⁵⁷ The *Compendium* individuates that the term ‘social doctrine’ goes back to the teaching of pope Pius XI.⁵⁸ It is customary to distinguish the use of ‘social doctrine’ before or after Vatican II (1962 - 1965). Before the Council the term referred to ‘a corpus of unchanging teaching on social issues’. After the Council, and with John Paul II, ‘social doctrine’ assumes the teaching to be more flexible.⁵⁹

*The Church’s social doctrine was not initially thought of as an organic system but was formed over the course of time, through the numerous interventions of the Magisterium on social issues. The fact that it came about in this manner makes it understandable that certain changes may have taken place with regard to its nature, method and epistemological structure.*⁶⁰

What we have just seen above would mean that in the intention of the RCC, social teaching has been shaped according to the present needs of humanity.

Thus, the material conditions of the world are the main cause for a social doctrine to exist. This has been possible thanks to the Apostles, and then the

⁵⁷ See J-Y. CALVEZ, J. PERRIN, *Église et société économique. L’enseignement social des Papes de Léon XIII à Pie XII (1878 – 1958)*. Paris: Éditions Montaigne, 1959. Vol. I, 18 – 27.

⁵⁸ See *Compendium*, 87.

⁵⁹ See DORR, *Option for the poor and the earth*, 244 – 245.

⁶⁰ *Compendium*, 72.

theologians of the early church,⁶¹ and then all the people, both laic and clerical, who through their studies and deeds have given significant contributions.⁶²

Everything, however, according to the RCC, happens on a single path of doctrinal elaboration. In this sense, to consider social teaching as developing a solid and unique structural line becomes essential to its role and relevance within RC teaching. In the opinion of the RCC the fact that social teaching changes its focus through time does not entirely allow one to deny its inner coherence, or to suggest that there might be diverse and conflicting social doctrines. The point seems to be that through history the RCC faces different circumstances that can also influence the method and the content of the teaching. However, there might be a unitary line of development because social teaching's main light, according to the RCC, comes from the Gospel, and this always remains the same light.

From the *Compendium*'s words we have an exemplification of this:

Guided by the perennial light of the Gospel and ever attentive to evolution of society, the Church's social doctrine is characterized by continuity and renewal (see Sollicitudo, 3; PIUS XII, Address to Participants in a Convention of the Catholic Action movement, 29 April 1945, in Discorsi e Radiomessaggi di Pio XII, vol. VII, 37 - 38; JOHN PAUL II, Address at the international symposium From Rerum Novarum to Laborem Exercens: towards the year 2000, 3 April 1982, in Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II, V, 1, 1982. 1095 - 1096).⁶³

'Continuity' and 'renewal' might give us the possibility to interpret RC social thought in a twofold meaning. The Gospel is a constant source of basic principles and inspiration, but the historical conditions require adaptation in the practical application to the specific context. In the end we can also acknowledge that the social agenda of social teaching is shaped by the world's circumstances. Nonetheless, even though doctrine has a more flexible inner character than dogma, doctrine also aims to be universally valid. That is why the same social doctrine is taught all over the world by the Roman Catholic Church.

Though doctrine is to be taken serious, it remains substantially different from dogma. Because dogma is taken to descend directly from God, it is compulsory in all its codified elements. For being one must accept without hesitations or doubts all dogmas proclaimed and defined by the RCC, according to its official self-understanding. Doctrine, on the contrary, remains provisional, and open to debate. There can be arguments about concrete and local implementation of its principles, without raising any controversy about whether all disputants are still Roman Catholic. In some elements of the doctrine an individual believer may reject a particular social teaching without in consequence being considered outside the RC faith. This allows for specific implementation of the social doctrine in different social contexts. Indeed, the tension between the diversity of the local contexts and a need of universality in the teaching of the RCC can be seen also in sympathetic light, as far as the RCC is able to encourage and let flourish the 'local' social doctrine.

⁶¹ Benedict XVI states that: 'Social doctrine is built on the foundation handed on by the Apostles to the Fathers of the Church, and then received and further explored by the great Christian doctors.' BENEDICT XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*. Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana. 2009. 12.

⁶² See MCHUGH, *Catholic social thought: renovating the tradition*, 12 – 15.

⁶³ *Compendium*, 85.

2.2. About the interpretative sources of the Roman Catholic social doctrine

Before starting to analyse the content of social thought, it would be proper to say something more about its origin. For doing this, it might be valuable to see where the Roman Catholic Church identifies its sources.

The starting point of the Roman Catholic Church's economic principles is in what we might call the socio-economic legislation of the Bible, this is what RC theology says to us. The laws of ancient Israel are those laws from which the RCC constantly draws sense and meaning for its contemporary social thought. They are in this sense a perennial source that supposedly will never be old-fashioned or out-dated. These laws are those founded in some specific passages from Exodus, Deuteronomy and Leviticus; and always according to such a theological framework they form a substantial socio-economic legislation for the people of the ancient Israel.⁶⁴ In particular, the *Jubilee year* and *Sabbatical year* seem to represent, in the interpretation recapitulated in the *Compendium*, a true legislation of institutionalised redistribution.⁶⁵

These laws usually refer to forgiveness of debts, to manumission of slaves and to the temporary end of private property of the land for a renewed common use. This is how the RCC sees such norms:

*The precepts of the sabbatical and jubilee years constitute a kind of social doctrine in miniature (see JOHN PAUL II, Tertio Millennio Adveniente. 13, AAS 87, 1995. 14). They show how the principles of justice and social solidarity are inspired by the gratuitousness of the salvific event wrought by God [...]. These principles become the focus of the Prophets' preaching, which seeks to internalize them.*⁶⁶

The Roman Catholic Church claims to inherit social teaching from the Old Testament and then, under the Gospel's interpretative light, to translate it in contemporary terms. Practically it is a complex process, but it is presented with the objective of maintaining the main line as expressed above.

The *Compendium* identifies a social teaching *ante litteram* in the prescriptions of the Old Testament. A relevant element seems to be that of the general atmosphere of gratuitousness that should pervade the application of these laws. Social teaching claims indeed that the main inspiration and criterion for the application of these laws comes from the gratuitousness of God's salvific message. More practically, in the interpretation of the Roman Catholic Church, the regulations adopted in the biblical passages quoted above are generally supposed to balance the disparity among people that have been accumulated through time.

⁶⁴ Insights and a general overview about this topic and the presence of socio-economic laws in the Old testament can be found in B. GORDON, *The economic problem in biblical and patristic thought*. Leiden: Brill, 1989. For a classic but still stimulating approach see also R. NORTH, *Sociology of the biblical Jubilee*. Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1954. A specific and detailed inquiry about the economic institutions of the ancient Israel is in R. DE VAUX, *Les institutions de l'Ancien Testament*. Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1958 – 1960. III, ch. XI Economie.

⁶⁵ See *Compendium*, 24.

⁶⁶ *Compendium*, 25.

3. The Compendium and its content

The *Compendium* is the RCC's most recent and extensive effort to express with the highest possible degree of schematization all the principles in the social doctrine. Until now it is a unique attempt in the history of the RCC's social doctrine.

The *Compendium* can be a concrete influence and inspiration for the contemporary RC believer or the scholar who deals with practical everyday questions regarding human relations. It represents the main pragmatic reference tool for answers coming from the RCC's official voice, and it might be the main element of comparison with other social thoughts. Here we will introduce two key notions from the *Compendium*, notions on human well-being and its understanding of humans.

3.1. First concept in the Compendium: a new humanism

A first significant concept within the social thought needs now to be introduced. This conception articulates what the RCC's aims for, namely to propose a practicable path towards a 'new humanism':

Humanity is coming to understand ever more clearly that it is linked by one sole destiny that requires joint acceptance of responsibility, a responsibility inspired by an integral and shared humanism. It sees that this mutual destiny is often conditioned and even imposed by technological and economic factors, and it senses the need for a greater moral awareness that will guide its common journey.⁶⁷

For humanity to be 'linked by one sole destiny' implies, according to the above quote, recognizing a social responsibility of which each person is charged just because they are all part of the human family. Understanding humanity as a global family is an idea social thought often expresses, albeit sometimes less explicitly. But it is a characteristic trait that we will find again in the *Compendium* as well as in *Caritas*.

Social teaching recognizes progress in technology and economics interweave human living in this world. Given this condition, it is considered necessary to introduce an ethical framework suitable for such globally interlaced human condition.

In other words, integral and solidary humanism, as intended by the social teaching of the RCC, must be

[...] capable of creating a new social, economic and political order, founded on the dignity and freedom of every human person, to be brought about in peace, justice and solidarity. This humanism can become a reality if individual men and women and their communities are able to cultivate moral and social virtues in themselves and spread them in society. 'Then, under the necessary help of divine grace, there will arise a generation of new men, the moulders of a new humanity' (*Gaudium*, 30).⁶⁸

⁶⁷ *Compendium*, 6.

⁶⁸ *Compendium*, 19.

It seems that this new integral humanism that the *Compendium* is calling for includes many elements usually described as human rights. Dignity and freedom for every human person is an objective that many secular institutions also pursue. Social thought recognizes the relevance of having such human rights reflected on a wider scale in society, that is what is intended with ‘social virtues’. Humanity, in the RCC’s perspective, should build a new economic and social order. The fact that a new one is thought of, may be seen as a practical criticism of the contemporary economic order. This criticism is probably due to the fact, I argue, that the RCC is concerned about the lack of that dignity and freedom for every human being that it aspires to.

Though there is agreement on many facets of ‘human rights’, there is a particular difference with the secular discourse about human rights. The role of men and women is to shape society according to such values and rights, but social teaching calls for ‘the necessary help of divine grace’. This element seems to characterize the social discourse here examined and, as we will see explicitly later for instance from *Caritas*, is pointing to the fact that, in the RCC’s view, God’s help is unavoidable, ‘necessary’.

The call for a new humanism may have been inspired by the philosophy of Jacques Maritain. The *Humanisme intégral*⁶⁹ of the French philosopher is similar to the humanism of the social thought regarding the meaning of ‘humanism’, and not only the words used.

The name of Maritain is not expressively quoted in the *Compendium* or in the documents of Vatican II that refer to the new integral humanism, like *Gaudium*, but there are elements that might support the thesis that the philosophy of Maritain contributed to the development of social doctrine. The first is the evidence that one may find in the texts of Maritain and in those of the Roman Catholic Church at the time of the Vatican II. The reference is to the already quoted *Humanisme intégral* for Maritain, and to the documents of the Vatican II *Gaudium et spes*, *Apostolicam actuositatem* and the declaration *Dignitatis humanae*.⁷⁰ Then, there is also the acknowledged friendship and esteem between the pope of the Vatican II, Paul VI, and Maritain.⁷¹ Paul VI, at the end of Vatican II gave the closing message of the Council fathers directed to the world of the intellectuals to Jacques Maritain, recognizing in this way his influence over the Council.⁷² Also, one may find Maritain quoted in Paul VI’s encyclical *Populorum Progressio* about the new humanism the Roman Catholic Church wishes for our modern time.⁷³

⁶⁹ J. MARITAIN, *Humanisme intégral. Problèmes temporels et spirituels d’une nouvelle chrétienté*. Paris: Aubier, 1947.

⁷⁰ See ATTI DEL SEMINARIO DI STUDIO. SEZIONE ITALIANA ISTITUTO INTERNAZIONALE JACQUES MARITAIN, *Il contributo teologico di Jacques Maritain*. Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1984. 5 – 9. In this same book one may find a bibliography regarding the works on the theological contribution of Maritain, but for the most part these are only in French and Italian.

⁷¹ See P. CHENAUX, *Paul VI et Maritain. Les rapports du ‘maritainisme’ et du ‘maritanisme’*. Roma: Istituto Paolo VI, 1994; the preface of P. VIOTTO, Prefazione, in M. GROSSO, *Alla ricerca della verità*. Roma: Città Nuova, 2006. 20 – 24.

⁷² See ATTI, *Il contributo teologico di Jacques Maritain*, 7.

⁷³ *Populorum*, 20.

3.2. Transcendence

The *Compendium* does not ignore the topic concerning the transcendent character human beings have according to Roman Catholic theology and to the Roman Catholic definition of the human person.

Generally speaking, the topic of transcendence in the wide context of Roman Catholic theology refers to the overwhelming of the material aspects of life to project the individual towards ‘immaterial’ aspects of life. Indeed, regarding the social doctrine, we may find the path the Roman Catholic Church proposes for having what it considers the unavoidable assistance from God that human beings need in order to build a new humanity. Transcendence is a concept that needs here to be firstly noticed and then eventually developed later on:

‘Man cannot give himself to a purely human plan for reality, to an abstract ideal or to a false utopia. As a person, he can give himself to another person or to other persons, and ultimately to God, who is the author of his being and who alone can fully accept his gift’ (*Centesimus*, 41). For this reason, ‘a man is alienated if he refuses to transcend himself and to live the experience of self-giving and of the formation of an authentic human community oriented towards his final destiny, which is God. A society is alienated if its forms of social organization, production and consumption make it more difficult to offer this gift of self and to establish this solidarity between people’ (*Centesimus*, 41).⁷⁴

What appears relevant about transcendence in the Roman Catholic Church’s view from the above quote, is that without recognising it, human beings risk to be ‘alienated’ and, consequently, society as a whole would experience alienation.

We have in the same quote also a definition of what such alienation would mean. Alienation is defined in relation to the idea that human beings should understand their inner nature as made for each other, and ultimately made for God. The Roman Catholic Church appears convinced that without this assumption at the basis it would be impossible to build a fraternal society. In other words, without perceiving human beings as able to transcend themselves, and seeing themselves as part of a wider frame of reference than the material alone, there is little space left for a view of a new humanistic attitude.

The relevance of transcendence as a topic within social discourse will be clearer when we face the content of *Caritas*, and it will be a key issue for analysing the relationships between religion and economy as explained by the Benedict XVI. Within the context of *Caritas*, it should be possible to better see what social teaching points out, namely, that without a transcending intention, economic acts would be tied to the ground. Without the orientation on transcendence, such deeds would only consider their material level as absolutely relevant, thus losing sight of the true meaning of economic action according to the Roman Catholic Church’s perspective. In the sense proposed by social thought the true meaning of the economic actions is, instead, exactly in perceiving economic action not as an end in itself, but as an action with a scope that transcends the economic sphere.

The *Compendium* does not address the question of transcendence in economic actions so specifically as it is done in *Caritas*. The *Compendium* stresses a

⁷⁴ *Compendium*, 47.

general openness towards 'others', the rest of humanity, and in this we may eventually find a partial result related with what signifies to give a transcendental meaning in living our life, namely to transcend one's own self. More specifically, according to this orientation, transcendence would allow us to trespass our human nature as we usually immediately perceive it. The possibility for doing it, which represents then a tie with economic subjects, is for the most part in the detachment from selfish and extreme materialistic views of life.

Such views, in social thought's idea, are found today in a society too often oriented in consumerist paths as the only practicable paths:

The phenomenon of consumerism maintains a persistent orientation towards 'having' rather than 'being'. This confuses the 'criteria for correctly distinguishing new and higher forms of satisfying human needs from artificial new needs which hinder the formation of a mature personality' (Centesimus, 36). To counteract this phenomenon it is necessary to create 'lifestyles in which the quest for truth, beauty, goodness and communion with others for the sake of common growth are the factors which determine consumer choices, savings and investments' (Centesimus, 36).⁷⁵

In this opposition of having and being that the *Compendium* poses as fundamental in the debate on contemporary societies, it refers to the encyclical *Centesimus annus*, in which John Paul II tried to warn his listeners about a consumerist attitude able to shape for us new artificial, and if I may add, superfluous needs.

I argue that following the suggestions that the Roman Catholic Church made officially since the Vatican II with *Gaudium*, about the possible contributions, for instance, of psychology and sociology,⁷⁶ it is possible to see a parallel with some classic standpoints. These views about 'having rather than being' and society that is 'alienated' are also present in some secular interpretations. And in their conclusions these appear to criticize the same consumerist attitude which is the object of criticism in Roman Catholic social doctrine.

Among many authors, I refer to the theories about consumption and alienation of authors like Fromm and some developments of the theories of Marx about alienation.⁷⁷ For these latter indeed is not new the possibility of dialogue between moderate forms of Marxism and the social teaching of the Roman Catholic Church.⁷⁸

According to social thought's view on consumerism, a consumerist mentality clashes with lifestyles that would be more spiritually oriented without its pressure. In other words, consumerism appears to be a force pushing human beings far from

⁷⁵ *Compendium*, 360.

⁷⁶ See above, I, 6., the quote from *Gaudium*, 62.

⁷⁷ See E. FROMM, *To have or to be?* New York: Harper & Row, 1976; *The sane society*. London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1956. And Marx in social sciences, see K. MARX, *Economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844*. New York: International Publishers, 1964; I. MÉSZÁROS, *Marx's theory of alienation*. London: Merlin Press, 1970; P. C. ROBERTS, M. A. STEPHENSON, *Marx's theory of exchange, alienation and crisis*. Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1973.

⁷⁸ See DORR, *Option for the poor and the earth*, 3, 281; see also G. SANS, Che cosa rimane di Marx dopo la caduta del muro di Berlino, in *La Civiltà Cattolica*, IV, 3824, 2009, 127 – 136. The author is professor of history of contemporary philosophy at the Pontificia Università Gregoriana, and a shorter version of this article has been also published in *L'Osservatore Romano*, October 21, 2009.

reaching their mature personality, and the alternative is to propose different lifestyles able to set objectives that are more spiritually oriented.

In the end, according to the *Compendium*, our perception of the transcendental meaning in our living together as the human family is obfuscated by a mentality that sees for the human being only material satisfaction. In this consumerist context, the RCC tries to propose an alternative view, of which some principles are represented in its social teaching.