

# Catholic Pro-Life Teachings in the New *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*

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ABSTRACT: This essay shows how the new *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, issued by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace in 2004, integrates the Catholic pro-life message. After a preliminary discussion of the development, nature, and sources of Catholic social doctrine, there is a brief consideration of the right of the Church to express moral judgments on social matters and the authority of such judgments. The essay continues with a summary of the new *Compendium's* treatment of abortion; marriage and procreation; war, legitimate defense and capital punishment; and the responsibility of Catholics in the political arena. In the final analysis, the new *Compendium* highlights the right to life from the moment of conception as “the first among all rights and the condition for all other rights of the person.” The Catholic pro-life teaching, therefore, is an essential and foundational aspect of the Church's social doctrine.

I WOULD LIKE TO BEGIN with a true story. Around the year 1990, I was present for a talk given by an auxiliary bishop of a large Midwestern archdiocese. The talk was on Catholic social doctrine. The bishop mentioned the recent pledge of the Knights of Columbus to donate four million dollars to the U.S Bishops Conference for a pro-life education and information campaign entitled “The Natural Choice is Life.” The bishop then commented: “Wouldn't it be wonderful if this kind of pledge could be given towards education in Catholic social doctrine!”

The comment of the bishop is instructive. It reflects an unfortunate separation of the Church's pro-life message from Catholic social doctrine. In reality, though, the affirmation of the sanctity of human life from conception until natural death is an essential dimension of Catholic

social teaching. It is intrinsically connected to many key themes and principles of the Church's social doctrine, viz., the dignity of the human person, solidarity, equality, justice, and the rights of human beings. In this regard, it is encouraging to note how well the new *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* integrates the Church's pro-life message.

The new *Compendium* is a response to a request of the late Pope John Paul II to "give a concise but complete overview of the Church's social teachings."<sup>1</sup> The task was entrusted to the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. The Council's President, the late Cardinal Francois-Xavier Nguyễn Văn Thuận, began the preparation for the document, and Cardinal Renato Raffaele Martino, the current President, brought the text to completion. The *Compendium* contains 583 paragraphs; in the English edition, it has 255 pages of text and an additional 189 pages of indices. The volume has an introduction, three parts, twelve chapters, and a conclusion.

#### SOME PRELIMINARY POINTS

Before looking at the specific parts of the *Compendium* that touch on pro-life themes, there are several preliminary points that should be made. The first relates to the *development* of Catholic social doctrine. The *Compendium* observes that "[t]he 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

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<sup>1</sup> Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004; English edition, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005), p. xxi. Subsequent citations will be made in parentheses to the paragraph numbers of the *Compendium*.

social matters" (§72). Most of these magisterial interventions can be traced from the time of Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, but the "Church's concern for social matters certainly did not begin with that document, for the Church has never failed to show interest in society" (§87).

A second preliminary point concerns the *nature* of the Church's social doctrine. Citing John Paul II's 1987 encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, the *Compendium* notes that the Church's social doctrine is "of a theological nature, specifically theological-moral, 'since it is a doctrine aimed at guiding people's behavior'" (§73). By means of her social doctrine, the Church offers "principles for reflection, the criteria for judgment and the directives for action, which are the starting point for the promotion of an integral and solidary humanism" (§7). This social doctrine "is not an ideological or pragmatic system intended to generate economic, political and social relationships, but is a category unto itself" (§72). It seeks to interpret the complex realities of social and international relations "in the light of faith and the Church's tradition" (§72).

A third preliminary point relates to the *sources* of the Church's social doctrine. The essential foundation is located "in biblical revelation and in the tradition of the Church" (§74). Faith is the starting point, but it also "effectively interacts with reason" (74), leading to "knowledge enlightened by faith" (§75). The Church's social doctrine is likewise in "friendly dialogue with all branches of knowledge (§76), and, "above all, the contribution of philosophy is essential" (§77).

A fourth point is the *right* of the Church to "express her moral judgment" on "all of human reality" because her mission is "truly and intimately linked with mankind and its history" (§426). The Church's social doctrine is "not a privilege for her, nor a digression, a convenience or interference: it is her right to proclaim the Gospel in the context of society, to make the liberating word of the Gospel resound in the complex worlds of production, labor, business, finance, trade, politics, law, culture, social communications, where men and women live" (§70).

Religion must not be restricted "to the purely private sphere." "The Christian message must not be relegated to a purely other-worldly salvation incapable of shedding light on our earthly existence" (§71).

The fifth preliminary point touches on the *authority* of the

*Compendium* for Catholics. The Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace “prepared the text in a broad-based consultation with its own Members and Consulters, with various Dicasteries of the Roman Curia, with the Bishops Conferences of various countries, with individual bishops, and with experts on the issues addressed” (§7). The citations of magisterial texts “are taken from documents of differing authority” and “different levels of teaching authority are involved” (§8). The *Compendium* is intended in a special way for bishops “who will determine the most suitable means for making it known and interpreting it correctly” (§11). The document, though, is also intended for priests, men and women religious, the layfaithful, the brethren of other Churches and ecclesial communities, followers of other religions, “as well as to all people of good will who are committed to serving the common good” (§12).

#### THE COMPENDIUM ON ABORTION

There are several places where *Compendium* either explicitly or implicitly condemns abortion. Chapter three focuses on “the human person and human rights” (§105ff). In this chapter, the *Compendium* teaches that: “the relationship with God requires the life of man be considered sacred and inviolable” (§112). Taking note of the tragedy of sin, we are told that: “Certain sins, moreover, constitute by their very object a direct assault on one’s neighbor” (§118). Among such “social sins” is “every sin against the rights of the human person, starting with the right to life, including that of life in the womb, and every sin against the physical integrity of the individual” (§118). Here we see that abortion is included among those “social sins” which “perpetuate the structures of sin” (§119).

The inviolability of human life in the womb is also highlighted in that subsection of chapter three, which deals with “human rights.” Citing John Paul II’s 1991 encyclical, *Centesimus Annus*, the *Compendium* includes in the list of human rights “the right to life, an integral part of which is the right of the child to develop in the mother’s womb from the moment of conception” (§155). The *Compendium* points out that “the first right presented in this list is the right to life, from conception to its natural end, which is the condition for the exercise of

all other rights, and in particular, implies the illicitness of every form of procured abortion and euthanasia" (§155). The *Compendium* here is quite explicit that the right to life from conception until natural death has priority among human rights because this right is "the condition for the exercise of all other rights."

The *Compendium* also touches on abortion in chapter five, which discusses "the family, the vital cell of society" (§209ff.). Speaking of the family as "the sanctuary of life" (§230), the text notes that, among the "methods" for practicing responsible procreation,

the first to be rejected as morally illicit are sterilization and abortion. The latter in particular is a horrendous crime and constitutes a particularly serious moral disorder; far from being a right, it is a sad phenomenon that contributes seriously to spreading a mentality against life, representing a dangerous threat to a just and democratic social coexistence. (§233)

The *Compendium* rejects "recourse to contraceptive methods in their different forms" while justifying "recourse to periodic abstinence during times of the woman's fertility" (§233). Abortion, though, is singled out as a particularly horrendous crime and a source of social instability and injustice. Indeed, the *Compendium* underscores the need for "political and legislative action to safeguard family values, from the promotion of intimacy and harmony within families to respect for the unborn and to the effective freedom of choice in educating children" (§252).

#### THE COMPENDIUM ON MARRIAGE AND PROCREATION

While abortion is singled out as a horrendous crime of particular gravity, the *Compendium* also touches on a number of other issues related to marriage, the family and respect for human life. The stability and the indissolubility of marriage are essential aspects of family life, which deserve to be protected and promoted "by the whole of society" (§225). Moreover, "the introduction of divorce into civil legislation has fuelled a relativistic vision of the marriage bond and is broadly manifested as it becomes 'truly a plague on society'" (§225). Homosexual persons "are to be fully respected in their human dignity," but there can be "no legitimization of behavior that is not consistent with the moral law" nor

any recognition of an alleged “right to marriage between persons of the same sex” (§228). The family can only be brought about “in a permanent union originating in marriage, that is, in a covenant between one man and one woman, founded on the mutual and free choice that entails full conjugal communion oriented towards procreation” (§227).

As we have seen, responsible procreation entails the rejection of sterilization, abortion and “recourse to contraceptive methods in their different forms” (§233). Natural methods of regulating births can be morally acceptable, and “the judgment concerning the interval of time between births, and that regarding the number of children, belongs to the spouses alone” (§234). From this it follows that “all programmes of economic assistance aimed at financing campaigns of sterilization and contraception, as well as the subordination of economic assistance to such campaigns, are to be morally condemned as affronts to the dignity of the person and the family” (§234).

While affirming the orientation of marriage towards procreation, the *Compendium* is clear that there is no “right to children” (§235). Instead, the rights of the unborn child must be fostered. In this regard, “the unborn child must be guaranteed the best possible conditions of existence through the stability of a family founded on marriage, through the complementarities of the two persons, father and mother” (§235). Along these lines, the *Compendium* underlines

the ethical unacceptability of all reproductive techniques—such as the donation of sperm or ova, surrogate motherhood, heterologous artificial fertilization—that make use of the uterus of another woman or of gametes of persons other than the married couple, injuring the right of the child to be born of one father and one mother who are mother and father both from a biological and from a legal point of view. Equally unacceptable are methods that separate the unitive act from the procreative act by making use of laboratory techniques, such as homologous artificial insemination or fertilization, such that the child comes about more as a result of an act of technology than as the natural fruit of a human act in which there is a full and total giving of the couple. (§235)

The *Compendium* goes on to condemn human cloning in very clear language. While the mere replication of cells “presents no particular ethical problem,” cloning in the proper sense refers to “the reproduction

of individuals at the embryonic stage with methods that are different from those of natural fertilization and in such a way that the new beings are genetically identical to the individual from which they originate" (§236). Cloning in the proper sense is rejected first because "it takes place in total absence of an act of personal love between spouses," and, secondly, because "it represents a form of total domination over the reproduced individual on the part of the one reproducing it" (§236). Furthermore, "the fact that cloning is used to create embryos from which cells can be removed for therapeutic use does not attenuate the moral gravity, because in order that such cells may be removed the embryo must first be created and then destroyed" (§236).

#### WAR, LEGITIMATE DEFENSE AND CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

The *Compendium* teaches that "peace is a value and a universal duty founded on a rational and moral order of society that has its roots in God himself" (§494). Along these lines, we are told that peace is the fruit of justice and love and "an order willed by God" (§495). We are also reminded that the magisterium "condemns the savagery of war and asks that war be considered in a new way" (§497), especially in light of "the obligation to protect civil populations from the effects of war" (§505).

The *Compendium* accepts the criteria for legitimate use of force laid out by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §2309: (1) there must be damage inflicted by the aggressor against the nation or community of nations that is "lasting, grave and certain"; (2) all other means of putting an end to the aggression have been shown "to be impractical or ineffective"; (3) "there must be serious prospects of success"; and (4) "the use of arms must not produce evils and disorders greater than the evil to be eliminated" (§500).

The *Compendium* notes that: "Arms of mass destruction—whether biological, chemical or nuclear—represent a particularly serious threat" (§509). Singled out for particular condemnation is terrorism:

Terrorism is to be condemned in the most absolute terms. It shows complete contempt for human life and can never be justified, since the human person is always an end and never a means. Acts of terrorism strike at the heart of human dignity and are an offence against all humanity; "there exists, therefore, a right

to defend oneself from terrorism.” However, this right cannot be exercised in the absence of moral and legal norms, because the struggle against terrorists must be carried out with respect for human rights and for the principles of a State ruled by law (§514) ... It is a profanation and a blasphemy to declare oneself a terrorist in God’s name ... No religion may tolerate terrorism and much less preach it” (§515).

With regard to punishment, the *Compendium* teaches that “in order to protect the common good, the lawful authority must exercise the right and duty to inflict punishments according to the seriousness of the crimes committed” (§402). In inflicting punishments, the State discourages harmful behavior and seeks to repair “the disorder created by criminal activity” (§402). Punishment not only defends the public order and the safety of persons, it likewise serves as “an instrument for the correction of the offender, a correction that also takes on the moral value of expiation when the guilty party voluntarily accepts his punishment” (§403).

In carrying out criminal investigations, the regulation “against the use torture, even in the case of serious crimes, must be strictly observed” (§404). With regard to the death penalty, the *Compendium* reiterates the teachings of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §2267 and John Paul II’s *Evangelium Vitae* §27 and §56. While it is admitted that “the traditional teaching of the Church does not exclude the death penalty ‘when this is the only practical way to defend the lives of human beings against the aggressor,’” the *Compendium* notes that “bloodless methods of deterrence and punishment are preferred as ‘they better correspond to the concrete conditions of the common good and are more in conformity to the dignity of the human person’” (§405). The *Compendium* believes that the “growing public opposition to the death penalty” is “a sign of hope” and an indication of “a heightened moral awareness” (§405). Moreover, “the growing number of countries adopting provisions to abolish the death penalty or suspend its application” is interpreted as evidence “that cases in which it is absolutely necessary to execute the offender ‘are very rare, if not practically non-existent’” (§405).

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF CATHOLICS IN THE POLITICAL ARENA



Chapter 12 of the *Compendium* deals with “social doctrine and ecclesial action.” We are told that: “the Church’s social teaching is the indispensable reference point that determines the nature, modality, articulation and development of pastoral activity in the social field” (§524). Moreover, “the Church’s social doctrine is an indispensable reference point for a totally integrated Christian formation” (§528). The importance of this social doctrine for catechesis and evangelization is underscored, as well as its relevance for dialogue with “Jewish brothers and sisters” and members of other religions (cf. §536-37).

The *Compendium* devotes significant attention to the topic of “social doctrine and the commitment of the lay faithful” (cf. §541-74). Because of the special secular character of the lay vocation, this attention is certainly justified. The importance of the sacraments and proper spiritual formation of the laity is brought to bear (cf. §542-46) as well as the need for the laity to act with prudence (§547-48). The lay faithful are called to be of service to the human person. In this regard, we are told that: “promoting human dignity implies above all affirming the inviolability of the right to life from conception until natural death, the first among all rights and the condition for all other rights of the person” (§553).

The preeminence of the right to life is also brought to bear in the section dealing with the political service of the laity (cf. §565-74). In this regard, we are reminded that, “a well-formed Christian conscience does not permit one to vote for a political programme or an individual law which contradicts the fundamental contents of faith and morals” (§570). Following the teachings of John Paul II enunciated in *Evangelium Vitae* §73, the *Compendium* recognizes that

a parliamentary representative, whose personal opposition to these programmes or laws is clear and known to all may legitimately support proposals aimed at limiting the damage caused by such programmes or laws and at diminishing their negative effects on the level of culture and public morality. In this regard, a typical example would be a law permitting abortion. The representative’s vote, in any case, cannot be interpreted as support for an unjust law but only a contribution to reducing the negative consequences of a legislative provision, the responsibility for which lies entirely with those who have brought it into being (§570).

Clearly, a Catholic representative may not support laws that directly contradict “the fundamental contents of faith and morals.” The *Compendium* gives absolutely no support for a Catholic politician being actively “pro-choice” with regard to abortion. On the contrary, a Catholic representative may never vote for a political program or law that contradicts the fundamental moral principle of “the inviolability of the right to life from conception until natural death,” since this is “the first among all rights and the condition for all other rights of the person” (§553).

#### CONCLUSION

Overall, the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* is a great asset to the Catholic pro-life teaching, especially when read in its entirety and not selectively. Some Catholics might be disappointed that more is not said about the growing threat of euthanasia.<sup>2</sup> Others might wish for a sharper distinction between those moral teachings that concern intrinsic evils (e.g. abortion and euthanasia) and those that involve a combination of moral principles and prudential judgment (e.g., the morality of a particular war or the preference against the death penalty). The *Compendium*, however, reminds us “that different levels of teaching authority are involved” (§8). Moreover, “the document limits itself to putting forth the fundamental elements of the Church’s social doctrine, leaving the Episcopal Conferences the task of making appropriate applications as required by the different local situations” (§8).

In my opinion, the *Compendium* is a fitting tribute to the genius of Pope John II, who is cited more than any other source in the document. Indeed, *Evangelium Vitae* is referred to in over 40 footnotes. In a letter included in the *Compendium*, Cardinal Angelo Sodano, the Secretary of State, tells how John Paul II asked for the blessings of God “on those who will take the time to reflect on the teachings of this publication.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The Index lists only one reference to euthanasia, §155.

<sup>3</sup> Letter of Cardinal Sodano to Cardinal Martino, p. xviii in the English edition.

The legacy of John Paul II's pontificate is evident in the emphasis on the right to life as “the first among all rights and the condition for all other rights of the person”<sup>4</sup> (§553; cf. also §155). This is a most significant affirmation. The pro-life message, therefore, is not something extrinsic to Catholic social doctrine. On the contrary, it is an essential and foundational dimension of the social teaching of the Church.

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<sup>4</sup> §553 cites the 1987 instruction, *Donum Vitae*, of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, while §155 cites John Paul II's encyclicals, *Centesimus Annus* §47 and *Evangelium Vitae* §2.