

A Lost
Opportunity:
The *Compendium*
of the Social
Doctrine of the
Church—
A Review Essay

Samuel Gregg
Director of Research
Acton Institute

Though not without its strengths, the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* fails to present a clear and concise synthesis of the principles of Catholic social teaching. While parts of the *Compendium* are very precise, other sections are likely to facilitate considerable confusion among those who desire to know and understand the principles of the Church's social doctrine. Careful analysis of the *Compendium's* structure, method, and content indicates that the text's problems primarily stem from departures from the guidelines set forth for the *Compendium's* drafting in John Paul II's Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in America* (1999).

Introduction

In October 2004, the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace published the long-awaited *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (CCSD). The purpose of this particular dicastery of the Roman Curia is “to promote justice and peace in the world in accordance with the Gospel and the social teaching of the Church,” “to make a thorough study of the social teaching of the Church,” and to ensure “that this teaching is widely spread and put into practice among people and communities.”¹ It was therefore no great surprise that this council was charged with compiling a compendium of official Catholic social teaching.

In his Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in America* (EA, 1999), John Paul II provided guidance concerning the parameters and objectives of such a document:

To this end, it would be very useful to have a compendium or approved synthesis of Catholic social doctrine, including a “Catechism,” which would show the connection between it and the new evangelization. The part which the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* devotes to this material, in its treatment of the seventh commandment of the Decalogue, could serve as the starting-point for such a “Catechism of Catholic Social Doctrine.” Naturally, as in the case of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, such a synthesis would only formulate general principles, leaving their application to further treatment of the specific issues bound up with the different local situations. (EA, no. 54)

Catholic social teaching did not, as some imagine, begin with Leo XIII’s famous encyclical letter, *Rerum Novarum* (1891). As the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith stated in 1986, “The Church’s social teaching is born of the encounter of the Gospel message and of its demands summarized in the supreme commandment of love of God and neighbor in justice with the problems emanating from the life of society” (LC, no. 72). The demands of the gospel message are, of course, profoundly moral in nature, but Catholic social teaching reflects the fact that the Christian way of living is not limited to the proper ordering of personal moral life. It has a social dimension, not least because social life presents man with dilemmas to which he must respond by acting in ways that, like all freely willed acts, meet the gospel’s demands. To this extent, Catholic social doctrine is directed to guiding man’s moral formation and, by virtue of this, to affecting society. The moral theologian Germain Grisez is thus correct to state that the Church’s social teaching essentially concerns the exposition of relevant moral norms that Catholics should use to judge the social situation confronting them, and then, on the basis of that judgment, do what they can to change the situation for the better.²

If this is an accurate summary of the nature and purpose of Catholic social doctrine, then any assessment of the *Compendium* necessarily involves asking whether it contributes to realizing such an end. Unfortunately while there is much to be praised in this *Compendium*, this document contains considerable problems that diminish its utility to the faithful. In some instances, these difficulties may actually result in generating considerable confusion among Catholics about what is binding upon their Catholic consciences and what is not. This being the case, it is questionable whether this *Compendium* realizes the objectives set forth for it by John Paul II in *Ecclesia in America*.

Complete but Not Concise

The *Compendium* begins with a letter from Cardinal Angelo Sodano, the Holy See's secretary of state, to Cardinal Renato Martino, the president of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, both of whom occupied these offices at the time of the *Compendium*'s publication. Thereafter follows a short formal presentation of the *Compendium* by Cardinal Martino. This states that the *Compendium* "has been drawn up in order to give a concise but complete overview of the Church's social teaching."

The *Compendium*'s introductory chapter positions the text in the context of the Catholic Church's journey through history and its priority of evangelizing the world. It then specifies the *Compendium*'s significance, purpose, and objectives. Here, the *expressions complete and systematic manner* (CCSD, no. 8) and "complete overview" (CCSD, no. 9) are employed to describe the scope of the text. These words foreshadow the considerable detail into which the *Compendium* enters about a range of matters—at the expense, regrettably, of succinctness and conciseness.

Two important cautionary notes are made in the introductory chapter. One is a reminder that Catholic social teaching is not static by virtue of the fact that it is attentive to changes in social life with the passing of time (CCSD, no. 9). Examples of such changes might be the defeat of Communism, the emergence of new scientific possibilities, the Great Depression, and so forth.

The second caution underlined in the *Compendium*'s introduction is that "it is good to keep in mind that the citations of magisterial texts are taken from documents of differing authority. Alongside council documents and encyclicals, there are also papal addresses and documents drafted by offices of the Holy See. As one knows, but it seems to bear repeating, the reader should be aware that different levels of authority are involved. The document limits itself to putting forth the fundamental elements of the Church's social doctrine . . ." (CCSD, no. 8). For Catholics, a document issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith with the pope's countersignature, for instance, is far more authoritative than, for example, a reference to the United Nation's *Convention of the Rights of the Child*, even if the latter has been ratified by the Holy See (which itself is simply a sovereign entity recognized under international law but that possesses no magisterial authority of its own).

Herein lies one of the *Compendium*'s significant flaws. Having stated that varying levels of authority are associated with different texts, the *Compendium* proceeds to cite a tremendous range of documents without indicating how much authority is attached to each. Moreover, the *Compendium* freely mixes citations

from and references to texts carrying varying degrees of authoritative weight. This will surely generate confusion among readers unsure in many instances just how much authority they ought to attach to many sections of the *Compendium*. The likely uncertainty might have been diminished by a reference to the Second Vatican Council's dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium* (1965), specifically paragraph 25, which provides guidance for assessing the authority of various documents. Such a reference, however, is absent from the text.

This is a significant editorial oversight precisely because one of the ongoing difficulties with teaching Catholic social doctrine is that people often ascribe major importance to contingent historically conditioned judgments about particular subjects (an example being the growth of financial markets at the end of the twentieth century), while ascribing only the same (and sometimes less) importance to fundamental principles of Catholic social teaching such as the right to life. Unfortunately the *Compendium*, as it stands, is likely to encourage people to continue making the same error. It may even tempt less scrupulous individuals to invoke the Church's authority on matters where the magisterium has expressed only tentative positions.

Part 1 of the *Compendium*

The material following the *Compendium*'s introduction is divided into three parts. Part 1 contains four chapters, the first being entitled "God's Plan of Love for Humanity." This is one of the stronger chapters. Its particular mixture of biblical, Trinitarian, and Marian themes as well as its emphasis on mutual giftedness and Christian discipleship will remind some readers of the writings of the deceased German theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar. The purpose of this chapter, it appears, is to place everything that follows in the ultimate context of salvation history and to assist Catholics in correctly situating the temporal realm vis-à-vis man's ultimate transcendental destiny. It thus reminds us, as the *Compendium* states, of "the error and deception of purely immanentistic visions of the meaning of history and in humanity's claims to self-salvation" (*CCSD*, no. 38).

It was precisely this error that was at the heart of Marxist-influenced versions of liberation theology. Once Catholic social teaching loses sight of the eschatological dimension of human existence, it then collapses into mere ideology. In the same chapter, the *Compendium* states that the transformation of social relations in this world ultimately depends upon "[t]he inner transformation of the human person, in his being progressively transformed to Christ" (*CCSD*, no. 42.). The message to be drawn from these statements is clear:

There is no real progress that does not involve progress toward conforming our lives to the teaching of the risen Christ definitely revealed to us by his Church. This message needs to be heard by many Catholics, including those working in peace and justice organizations who might be tempted to view the demands of Christian truth and morality as somewhat marginal to their work.

The purpose of the *Compendium*'s second chapter is less clear. It purports to be concerned with delineating the place of Catholic social teaching in the Church's primary mission of evangelization. This, however, constitutes only a small portion of this chapter's focus. More attention is given to explaining the nature of Catholic social teaching as well as its history since *Rerum Novarum*. Though the explanation of Catholic social doctrine's sources is sound, the historical summary is somewhat artificial, primarily because it is, as the *Compendium* states, so brief. It would have been instructive to learn more at this point about the history of Catholic teaching about social matters prior to Leo XIII. Those looking for a thorough treatment of the history of Catholic social doctrine would be advised to consult the two-volume text *Christian Social Witness and Teaching: The Catholic Tradition from Genesis to Centesimus Annus* (1998), authored by Rodger Charles, S.J.

Chapter 2 of the *Compendium* also ends on a somewhat ambiguous note. It states that the Church's social teaching is not prompted "by theoretical motivation but by pastoral concerns" (*CCSD*, no. 104). Even though no one would suggest that the Church's teaching should be oblivious to pastoral matters, this comment could be interpreted as suggesting that ideas about what is true and good are somehow of secondary importance in shaping Catholic social doctrine. We know, however, that right practice cannot be determined simply by reference to the circumstances in which we discover ourselves. As Joseph Ratzinger wrote in 1985, "Does not the decision for a right *behavior* presuppose right *thinking*, does it not thereby itself refer to the necessity of a search for an orthodoxy?"³

Chapter 3 is entitled "The Human Person and Human Rights." A more accurate title would have been "Christian Anthropology" insofar as this chapter unfolds the Christian answer to the eternal question: Who am I? Closely following the theological anthropology contained in *Gaudium et Spes* and elaborated upon by John Paul II, considerable attention is given to the place of sin in understanding human beings. This openness to what the *Compendium* itself calls "Christian realism" (*CCSD*, no. 121) about the human condition is, however, marred by an over-lengthy and at times obscure discussion of the relationship between personal and social sin. The precise dynamics of this complex question are dealt with, with far-greater precision, in John Paul II's 1985

apostolic exhortation *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, its key point being that while structures of sin influence people, sin is in the end something chosen by individuals who are always capable of not doing evil precisely because of man's unique gift of free will.

Significant attention is given in this same chapter of the *Compendium* to the place of human rights in Catholic social teaching. Strangely, the *Compendium* makes no reference to the indispensable contribution to the idea of human rights by Catholic scholars ranging from Thomas Aquinas to Francisco Suárez, S.J. Instead, the *Compendium* seems to locate the idea and movement for human rights almost exclusively in the modern period. Those who had hoped for a clear explanation about the manner in which the Church derives specific rights from human nature and/or man's status as the *imago Dei* will be disappointed in this chapter. The *Compendium* does state that "the roots of human rights are to be found in the dignity that belongs to each human being" and that "the ultimate source of human rights is not to be found in the reality of the State, in public powers, but in man himself and in God his Creator" (*CCSD*, no. 153). No doubt this is all true, but precisely *how* we get to human rights from human nature or the notion of *imago Dei* is left unspecified by the *Compendium*, save for elusive references to "fulfillment of the essential needs of the person in the material and spiritual spheres" and "every aspect of the good of the person and society" (*CCSD*, no. 154). Catholic scholars ranging from early moderns such as Suárez and contemporary figures such as John Finnis⁴ have invested considerable energy into explaining the precise derivation of a range of human rights from the natural law. The *Compendium* does not appear cognizant of much if any of this scholarship. We should not be too surprised by this. For all the embrace of rights-language by Catholic laity, theologians, clergy, and bishops (an embrace viewed in many quarters as verging on the uncritical and excessive), few would dispute that the magisterium needs to do more to articulate the Catholic understanding of the origin and nature of human rights more precisely—if only to underline how different this is from secular-rights theories.

Chapter 4 of the *Compendium* is entitled "Principles of the Church's Social Doctrine." As the *Compendium* itself says, "these are principles of a general and fundamental nature," "the primary and fundamental parameters of reference for interpreting and evaluating social phenomenon" (*CCSD*, no. 161). They are in fact what, according to John Paul II's instructions in *Ecclesia in America*, the *Compendium* was supposed to concentrate on synthesizing. Instead, they have been condensed into one chapter of a thirteen-chapter document.

That said, this chapter contains some of the *Compendium's* best work. The stress upon not treating these principles in isolation from each other (*CCSD*, no. 162) is particularly welcome, given the tendency of some Catholics to emphasize one principle at the expense of others. The section on the common good (*CCSD*, nos. 164–70) could have been clarified by specifying that the context of the discussion is, presumably, the political common good of the political community. Nevertheless, the *Compendium's* acknowledgment that much of the precise configuration of the common good of a given society is somewhat dependent upon its particular circumstances is helpful, as is the specification that the common good's permanent core is man's "fundamental rights" (*CCSD*, no. 166).

The paragraphs in chapter 4 that outline and explain the origin and nature of the universal destination of material goods are among the *Compendium's* stronger sections. It synthesizes the most important commentaries on this much-misunderstood subject, most notably those of Pius XII and John Paul II, to illustrate the primacy of the universal destination of goods. The *Compendium* also correctly situates the universal destination vis-à-vis the institution of private property while simultaneously dispelling any notion that the universal destination somehow equates to cryptosocialist arrangements. "Universal destination and utilization of goods," the *Compendium* specifies, "do not mean that everything is at the disposal of each person or of all people, or that the same object may be useful or belong to each person of all people" (*CCSD*, no. 173).

The *Compendium* then discusses the preferential option for the poor in the context of the universal destination of goods. While this is certainly legitimate, it is possible that the preferential option for the poor merited a separate treatment of its own as a principle of Catholic social teaching, for who can doubt that care of the poor has always been a priority of the Christian community from its very beginnings? Another reason that the preferential option for the poor merited more detailed attention is that it is one of the most widely misunderstood principles of Catholic social teaching. This much is evident from the considerable lengths to which the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith went in the mid-1980s to correct Marxist-influenced interpretations of this principle in the context of the struggle against Marxist-shaped versions of liberation theology. Putting the point negatively in its *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the "Theology of Liberation" Libertatis nuntius* (*LN*, 1984), the Congregation stated:

The “theologies of liberation,” which deserve credit for restoring to a place of honor the great texts of the prophets and of the Gospel in defense of the poor, go on to a disastrous confusion between the “poor” of the Scripture and the “proletariat” of Marx. In this way they pervert the Christian meaning of the poor, and they transform the fight for the rights of the poor into a class fight within the ideological perspective of the class struggle. For them the “Church of the poor” signifies the Church of the class which has become aware of the requirements of the revolutionary struggle as a step toward liberation and which celebrates this liberation in its liturgy. (*LN*, IX.10)

As noted in the same Congregation’s *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation Libertatis conscientia* (*LC*, 1986), the poor from a Christian perspective should not be narrowed exclusively to those lacking material goods:

In loving the poor the Church ... is particularly drawn with maternal affection toward those children who, through human wickedness, will never be brought forth from the womb to the light of day, as also for the elderly, alone and abandoned. The special option for the poor, far from being a sign of particularism or sectarianism, manifests the universality of the Church’s being and mission. This option excludes no one. This is the reason why the Church cannot express this option by means of reductive sociological and ideological categories which would make this preference a partisan choice and a source of conflict. (*LC*, no. 68)

Evidently aware of these clarifications, the *Compendium* states that the church’s love of the poor concerns not only material poverty but “also the numerous forms of cultural and religious poverty” (*CCSD*, no. 184). Nonetheless, the *Compendium*’s location of its treatment of the preferential option for the poor in the context of the universal destination of material goods tends to obscure the fullness of the Church’s understanding of the preferential option. As John Paul II once remarked in reflecting upon the Beatitudes:

The poor in heart are those who are most open to God and to the “wonders of God.” Poor, for they are always ready to accept this gift from on high that comes from God himself. Poor in heart, for, conscious of having received everything from God, they live in gratitude.... They are the people of whom Jesus said they are meek and that their hearts are pure, that they hunger and thirst after justice, and weep, that they are peacemakers and persecuted in the cause of right. Finally, they are the merciful of whom the same beatitudes speak.⁵

This understanding of the gospel’s vision of the poor is both theologically deeper and broader than that of the *Compendium*.

The next principle examined by the *Compendium* is that of subsidiarity. It brings out the two essential facets of subsidiarity—that is, assistance and non-interference—by referring to subsidiarity “in the positive sense” (assistance of lower level organizations by associations of a higher nature, or *subsidium*) and subsidiarity as “a corresponding series of negative implications that would de facto restrict the existential space of the smaller essential cells of society” (CCSD, no. 186). This clarification provides the Church with a useful way of explaining subsidiarity to the faithful.

A potentially confusing aspect of the *Compendium*’s treatment of subsidiarity is its use of the phrase *civil society* (CCSD, no. 185). This, the *Compendium* states, refers to “the sum of the relationships between individuals and intermediate social groupings” (CCSD, no. 185). This is the most common way in which the term is presently used in the secular realm, at least since the mid-nineteenth century. Although Karl Marx and Alexis de Tocqueville, for instance, had very different views on most subjects, both used the phrase *civil society* in this manner.⁶ The problem for the *Compendium* is that the Catholic Church has always used this term to describe “non-ecclesiastical society”: that is, the temporal realm and especially the political community that embraces the state as well as nonreligious intermediate associations. This is the manner in which the phrase is employed in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC, nos. 2234–46). The *Compendium*’s imprecise use of language in this regard is repeated elsewhere in the text. In a section entitled “The Political Society at the Service of Civil Society,” the *Compendium* quotes Leo XIII as stating “The purpose of civil society is universal, since it concerns the common good, to which each and every citizen has a right in due proportion” (CCSD, no. 417 citing *Rerum Novarum*). The content of this statement with its references to the common good and citizens, as well as its original textual context in *Rerum Novarum*, indicate beyond doubt that Pope Leo used the term *civil society* as a synonym for the political community rather than the sphere of associations existing between state and family.

Closely following the *Compendium*’s statements about subsidiarity are its analysis of the principles of participation and solidarity. The treatment of participation is somewhat odd insofar as the traditional emphasis upon the manner in which human participation in social activities enhances the human flourishing of individuals and groups is missing. This appears to have been replaced by a stress upon the need to expand the circle of involvement in activities, most particularly in democratic political systems, as a matter of justice and equity. One need only compare the *Compendium*’s treatment of participation to that of the Second Vatican Council in *Gaudium et Spes* (GS, nos. 48, 50, 60,

68) to observe the difference. By contrast, solidarity's treatment by the *Compendium* is succinct and its significance underlined by the *Compendium*'s attention to the hitherto understated Christological dimension of solidarity (*CCSD*, no. 196).

Having stated the principles of the Church's social teaching, chapter 4 concludes by outlining what it calls the fundamental values of social life. These are identified as truth, freedom, justice, and love (*CCSD*, no. 197). The *Compendium*'s summary of the place of truth and freedom is sound. One wonders, however, why they were not given more prominence given the Church's vigorous defense of the classical meaning of these terms in recent decades against secularist debasements of these words. Even more curious is the *Compendium*'s treatment of justice (*CCSD*, no. 201). Given the vital role played by the various categories of justice in Catholic social teaching's determination of people's objective obligations to their neighbor, the *Compendium*'s failure to define the specific characteristics of commutative, distributive, and legal justice in more detail is a significant flaw in a document that could surely be expected to explicate these terms. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*'s relatively brief statements about these forms of justice (*CCC*, no. 2411) are more comprehensive and clear than what we find in the *Compendium*.

Even less satisfactory is the *Compendium*'s definition of *social justice*. This is first identified as a species of general justice before being described as concerning "the social, political and economic aspects [of the social question] and, above all, the structural dimension of problems and their respective solutions" (*CCSD*, no. 201). This is broad enough to embrace potentially anything. The reference attached to the end of this sentence (*Laborem Exercens*, no. 2) fails to clarify the meaning of the statement, not least because it makes no reference to structural issues. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* provides a more succinct definition when stating, "Society ensures social justice when it provides the conditions that allow associations or individuals to obtain what is their due, according to their nature and their vocation. Social justice is linked to the common good and the exercise of authority" (*CCC*, no. 1928).

Part 2 of the *Compendium*

Chapter 4 of the *Compendium* concludes its first part. Part 2 begins with a chapter on the family. The strength of this chapter is not surprising given the detailed attention given to this subject by John Paul II as well as various Roman Curial dicasteries in the wake of the contemporary political and legal assault on the family, accurately defined as "the first natural society" (*CCSD*, no. 209)

by the *Compendium*. It is also pleasing to see the family given a significant place in the *Compendium*, in light of the tendency of some Catholic justice and peace activists to treat the family, marriage, and associated issues (such as homosexual “marriage,” contraception, abortion, euthanasia, embryonic stem-cell research, and so forth) as peripheral to the Church’s commitment to justice.

The next chapter concerns the subject of human work. Much of it consists, appropriately enough, of long extracts from John Paul II’s encyclical on this issue, *Laborem Exercens* (1981). Chapter 5 of the *Compendium* thus addresses matters such as work’s subjective and objective dimensions, the family and work, and the role of unions in society. This is preceded by reflection on the biblical meaning of work, the unique worth accorded to human work by the Incarnation, as well as the manner in which human work allows man to contribute to the fulfillment of the divine plan. The last section of this chapter is devoted to the new things of the world of work, with the primary focus being on the phenomenon of globalization. Though an interesting foray into what is happening to work in a globalized world at the end of the twentieth century, it is difficult to see why this commentary—which is by its nature contingent and time-bound—has been placed in a document that was supposed to synthesize principles of Catholic social doctrine. The very reason for a compendium or synthesis of the principles of Catholic social teaching is, in part, to allow the faithful to know and understand the timeless principles to which they ought to pay heed amidst changing circumstances. This integration of the articulation of principles with the expression of time-bound contingent judgments is only likely to confuse the faithful.

Close examination of the chapters on the economy (chap. 7), the political community (chap. 8), the international community (chap. 9), the environment (chap. 10), and the promotion of peace (chap. 11) illustrates that this problem manifests itself several times throughout the *Compendium*. Each chapter begins with biblical exegesis followed by relevant reflection on the life of Christ. Then follows the articulation of particular principles but also a range of contingent judgments that, whatever their merits, surely have no place in a synthesis of Catholic social principles. Thus, we find the *Compendium* expressing approval of much of the work done by nongovernmental organizations and in movements for human rights (*CCSD*, no. 443). Given the role played by many NGOs and human-rights organizations in the promotion of goals that directly advance the cause of the culture of death, it is surprising that the negative aspects of such groups’ work do not rate as a prominent mention in the *Compendium*. Stranger still is the insertion of a paragraph on the juridical personality of the Holy See (*CCSD*, no. 444) followed, even more inappropriately,

by a paragraph that discusses the role of the Holy See's diplomatic service (CCSD, no. 445). For all the importance of the Holy See's status under international law, and for all the good achieved by its diplomatic service, neither is a relevant subject for a synthesis of the Church's social doctrine.

Throughout these chapters, discerning readers will occasionally find themselves wondering whether the *Compendium* is as clear as it could have been in conveying church teaching on several subjects. In the chapter on peace and with specific reference to the notion of preventative war, for instance, the *Compendium* claims, "International legitimacy for the use of armed force, on the basis of rigorous assessment and with well-founded motivations, can only be given by the decision of a competent body that identifies specific situations as threats to peace and authorizes an intrusion into the sphere of autonomy usually reserved to a state" (CCSD, no. 501). Revealingly, no text is referenced as providing magisterial precedent for this statement. This is not surprising because no such precedent exists in either Catholic moral or social teaching or the Church's just-war tradition of moral reasoning about war and peace. Instead, the *Compendium* bases its authority for this statement on a reference to the *Charter of the United Nations*. This is described as being "based on a generalized prohibition of a recourse to force to resolve disputes between nations, with the exception of two cases: legitimate defense and measures taken by the Security Council" (CCSD, no. 501).

This method of justification will strike many as rather odd. First, while authoritative Catholic teaching on war and peace, especially after World War II, has not questioned the moral validity of legitimate defense, nowhere does the Magisterium state that a war's legitimacy is dependent upon whether it receives authorization from any international institution. No such reference can, for example, be found in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* or *Gaudium et Spes* (GS). The *Catechism* limits itself to stating (citing *Gaudium et Spes*):

All citizens and all governments are obliged to work for the avoidance of war. However, "as long as the danger of war persists and *there is no international authority with the necessary competence and power*, governments cannot be denied the right of lawful self-defense, once all peace efforts have failed" (CCC, no. 2308 citing GS, no. 79, emphasis added)

In this light, some might suggest that the *Compendium* appears to go beyond the limits of the Church's teaching by, first, suggesting that—outside those instances in which a nation defends itself by a proportionate response to an act of war against it—the justice of a war is at least partly dependent upon whether it receives authorization from a legitimate international authority, and second,

implying (albeit obliquely) that the United Nations and the United Nation's Security Council are the relevant international authorities that the *Catechism* affirms do not yet exist. Certainly the Church's magisterium has referred on several occasions to the international common good, necessitating some type of international authority. Yet, it has always been careful not to define the powers that might be ascribed to such a body. Moreover, while the magisterium has mentioned the United Nations and its hopes for this body on several occasions, it has *never* identified the United Nations as the international authority envisaged by the council and the *Catechism*.

Given these facts, it is difficult not to conclude that the drafting of this section of the *Compendium* may have been unduly shaped by particular controversies surrounding the 2003 Iraq war and subsequent debates concerning the status and legal authority of the United Nations organization under international law. If this is true, then regardless of people's views of the legitimacy or otherwise of that war or the very concept of preventative war (whatever this means, given that the precise content of such an expression appears, to this author's mind, relatively undefined and unexplained by Catholic theologians and scholars of international law reputedly opposing or favoring such a concept), permitting such debates to influence the drafting of a document designed to synthesize principles of Catholic social teaching is regrettable.

Part 3 of the *Compendium*

The *Compendium*'s third part contains a chapter that illustrates how the Church's social teaching ought to be put into practice (chap. 12) as well as a conclusion (chap. 13). It underscores the difficulty in pursuing such ends in light of the deep rift between the Catholic faith's vision of the human person and his ultimate destiny, and the "secularized vision of salvation that tends to reduce even Christianity to 'merely human wisdom, a pseudo-science of well-being'" (CCSD, no. 523). This has been stated before by the magisterium but it is important that the *Compendium* underlines the depth of the rift insofar as it encourages Catholics to have no illusions about the difficulty in communicating the Church's teaching to minds deeply conditioned to thinking in skeptical and utilitarian patterns. This makes all the more pertinent the *Compendium*'s attention to the importance of Christians' giving personal witness to Catholic social doctrine in how they live their lives (CCSD, no. 526).

This is not to suggest that the *Compendium* emphasizes action at the expense of contemplation and education. The *Compendium* remarks that one of the problems facing the Church is that the Church's social doctrine "is

neither taught nor known sufficiently” (*CCSD*, no. 528). Here, the *Compendium* directs attention to the importance of integrating formation of Catholic social teaching into catechesis (*CCSD*, no. 529). This is underlined as a particular responsibility of bishops, priests, and religious (*CCSD*, nos. 539–40). The same chapter makes it clear that the primary responsibility for implementing Catholic social doctrine belongs to the laity, a mission that amounts “to the sanctification of the world ... by fulfilling their own particular duties” (*CCSD*, no. 545 citing *Lumen Gentium*, no. 31). This is significant insofar as it reminds lay Catholics that commitment to the Church’s social teaching does not require everyone to become a political activist. This is followed by attention to the ways in which lay Catholics undertake their function in this area, especially when it comes to practical implementation. Alongside careful specification of the role of Catholics in the political sphere (*CCSD*, nos. 568–74), the *Compendium* stresses the importance of prudence (*CCSD*, nos. 547–48), which is specifically disassociated from shrewdness, indecisiveness, and utilitarian calculations (*CCSD*, no. 548).

Also useful is the *Compendium*’s gentle reminder that Christians ought to be careful not to confuse the platform of any one particular political party with the entirety of the Christian faith (*CCSD*, no. 573). A potentially confusing note, however, appears at the end of this chapter which states, “In any case, ‘no one is permitted to identify the authority of the Church exclusively with his own opinion’” (*CCSD*, no. 574, citing *GS*, no. 43). In itself this is true, but it risks obscuring the point (made elsewhere in the *Compendium* and affirmed by the *Catechism* and two thousand years of unbroken teaching) that there are certain issues that, for Catholics and anyone open to right reason, are non-negotiable. A Catholic should certainly not cite the Church’s authority, for instance, in support of his considered view that 50 percent rather than 35 percent of a nation’s gross national product should be in the public sector. Such a subject is reasonably in dispute among Catholics. Catholics are, however, obliged in conscience to oppose the legalization of procured abortion and euthanasia, and a Catholic who invokes the Church’s authority on these matters when confronting Catholics and other Christians who favor legalizing such activities is surely within his rights to do so.

The *Compendium*’s conclusion is an elegantly written chapter that places the Church’s social teaching in the context of the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. This is refreshing not least because many documents of Catholic social teaching do not always make these connections explicit. In doing so, the *Compendium* implicitly underlines what makes Catholic social teaching different from other ways of approaching social problems. The first

of these factors is its explicitly Christian inspiration. Although there is no shortage of people who speak about justice, Catholic social teaching tempers this by reminding us—as did Benedict XVI in his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* (*DCE*, 2005) and John Paul II in his powerful encyclical on Christian mercy, *Dives in Misericordia* (*DM*, 1980)—that justice in itself is not enough (*DM*, no. 12; *DCE*, nos. 26–29). For the Christian, there can be no justice without the faith that God exists and has revealed himself definitively in the person of Jesus Christ, without the hope of salvation and the ultimate judgment of everyone’s actions, and without the love that, as the *Compendium* states, “is the only force that can lead to personal and social perfection” (*CCSD*, no. 580).

Conclusion

Given that the *Compendium* ends on such an inspiring note, it is disappointing to report that the text does not live up to the expectations many had for it. This is primarily due to the *Compendium*’s departures from the objectives set for it in *Ecclesia in America*. This might have been avoided had the *Compendium*’s drafting enjoyed the quality of editorship that makes the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* such an outstanding document. No doubt many people labored to produce the *Compendium*, but many of the difficulties identified above could presumably have been rectified by editors whose attention was upon keeping the *Compendium* faithful to its designated purpose. Not only would such an effort have produced a document perhaps half of the *Compendium*’s size, but it would have reduced the chances of the confusions outlined above appearing in the text.

Those looking for a synthesis of Catholic social teaching of the type requested by *Ecclesia in America* should know that the outlines of such a text already exists in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (nos. 2401–63) and the paragraphs devoted to Catholic social doctrine in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith’s *Instruction on Christian Liberation and Freedom* (nos. 71–96). A compendium of Catholic social doctrine would be something similar in style and purpose to the recently published *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2005). To produce a similar synthesis of the *Compendium of the Church’s Social Doctrine* would effectively mean drafting a compendium of the *Compendium*. Such says volumes about the lost opportunity presented by the present *Compendium*.

Notes

1. John Paul II, Apostolic Constitution *Pastor Bonus* (1988), arts. 142–43. See online at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_jp-ii_apc_19880628_pastor-bonus-index_en.html.
2. Germain Grisez, *The Way of the Lord Jesus*, vol. 2, *Living a Christian Life* (Quincy: Franciscan Press, 1993), 262.
3. Joseph Ratzinger, with Vittorio Messori, *The Ratzinger Report: An Exclusive Interview on the State of the Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985), 23.
4. See Francisco Suárez, S.J., “De legibus, ac Deo legislatore” in *Selections from Three Works of Francisco Suárez, S.J.*, ed. Gwladys L. Williams, Ammi Brown, and John Waldron (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1944) and John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980).
5. André Frossard and Pope John Paul II, *Be Not Afraid! Pope John Paul II Speaks Out on His Life, His Beliefs, and His Inspiring Vision for Humanity*, trans. J. R. Foster (New York: Image Books, 1985), 138.
6. See John Keane, “Introduction,” in *Civil Society and the State: New European Perspectives*, ed. John Keane (London: Verso, 1988), 1–19.