



Final Statement of the Plenary Session on Catholic Social Doctrine and Human Rights



The XV Plenary Session of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences addressed the topic of “Catholic Social Doctrine and Human Rights” one year after the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, with the following main conclusions:

1. The Cornerstone of the Universal Declaration

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, considered by Paul VI as one of the United Nations’ greatest achievements, has been fundamental in contemporary history to consolidate the collective awareness of the respect for rights and to integrate the grandeur and dignity of the human person in subsequent Declarations. This process has been positively influenced by the Catholic Social Doctrine on human rights, which has become operational even in non-Western cultures and traditions. Especially since the Encyclical *Pacem in terris*, the Catholic Church has offered growing support to the Universal Declaration.

2. Anthropological Bases of Human Rights. Rights and Duties

Within this shifting framework, with the human rights agenda also considering the introduction of ‘new rights’, it is important to develop the anthropological and moral bases of the rights proclaimed by the Declaration. Indeed, contemporary culture has inherited an anthropocentric view of the world in which the individual is the source of good and evil, while the ‘social contract’ is an agreement modifiable at will. This view is challenged by the realistic Aristotelic-Thomistic

anthropology adopted by the Social Doctrine of the Church, which considers the human person as being in a constitutive relationship with other people and with Creation, that is, in an order – called natural law – that reason must highlight. The solidity of this anthropology is currently challenged by secular anthropologies with an evolutionistic and constructivistic background. These anthropologies refuse the idea of a common human nature and believe that the human being is a social construct in which only the historicity of the various cultures, the relativity of moral rules, and the centrality of individual choices emerge. In the case of the family and procreation, it implies that maternity and paternity are socially constructive realities that can be redefined freely at each step.

We have come to somewhat abuse the notion of right, intended in a very flexible sense. A right, however, does not derive from a wish or a passion, but is the just measure of what is due to a person in his or her relationship with other people or with the institutions. This measure is correct not because of an arbitrary decision, but because it originates from the natural order of things.

The search for the anthropological bases of the Universal Declaration also motivates us to reconsider the inseparable relationship between rights and duties and the need for a new attention to duties, especially in certain geopolitical and cultural areas where new rights are frequently demanded, but without offering any justification or explaining their connection with duties. Quite a few aspects of the exceptional economic crisis that has befallen our planet can be attributed to a widespread disconnection between rights and duties and to the violation of justice and equity. The central assumption of the Catholic Magisterium is that human rights are void when their ties with duties are broken. The right to life, to a family, and to food translate into real duties for others and society to protect life, encourage the establishment of families, and organise society in such a way that each person may ensure his or her own subsistence through his or her work.

3. Human Rights: Universal, Indivisible and Interconnected

Human rights are inherent in the nature of the human being, created in the image and likeness of God. Even though their elaboration largely derives from Western legal culture, they respond to the nature of each human being and, by virtue of this, are universal. They have been ratified by almost all the states in the world, thus representing a universally shared ethos.

The Declaration, however, is not a list of rights from which each person can pick one or two to strengthen and rewrite according to his or her interests and pragmatic opportunities of the moment. The rights listed in the Declaration are universal, indivisible and interconnected, so that none can be left aside.

4. Synchronic and Diachronic Universality of Human Rights

As mentioned during the Session, we can speak of ‘horizontal or synchronic’ universality. In all of the world’s regions, therefore, the right to life, to a family, to religious freedom, and to food must be

guaranteed. The Session studied these in detail.

Peace, environment and development – usually catalogued as third generation rights – are the bases to enable future generations to benefit from first generation rights (civil and political) and second generation rights (economic and social). From this viewpoint we can speak of ‘vertical or diachronic universality’, in the sense that their implementation enables human rights to be guaranteed not only to present generations but also to future ones.

Third generation rights are not justiciable and respond rather to humanity’s noble aspirations, not to be confused with the category of right in the real sense of the word.

Nevertheless, they too need a solid ethical and political basis.

5. Dialogue between Religions and Sciences

Intercultural and interreligious dialogue is an important tool to consolidate and implement the universality of human rights, always keeping their interdependence and indivisibility as a beacon.

Interreligious dialogue contributes to the common commitment towards justice and peace and shows how all religious confessions can aspire to the good of humankind.

The dialogue among different kinds of knowledge is also useful for the common good. This is true in particular today for the dialogue between scientific knowledge and theological knowledge. Indeed, scientific progress ever more frequently proves that the Truth of faith does not go against scientific truth. Natural order and science are not in contrast with each other. One example for all is the first human right, the right to life: the fact that the embryo is a personal human life is not just an affirmation of the Catholic Church, but also the result of the best current scientific research. Even though, as Benedict XVI underlined, Human Rights are not truths of faith in the proper sense, they gain their full light and confirmation from faith.

6. Human Rights and Economic Development

Studies show that, in the mid term, a democratic structure of government and the respect for human rights have a positive effect on a country’s economic development. It would be interesting to know whether the contrary is also true: that is, whether the economic development of a country always brings with it more democracy and better human rights.

The cases of China and India, which were studied in particular detail, are a litmus test of this.

7. Human Rights Crisis, Democracy Crisis, Capitalism Crisis

The Human Rights crisis was caused by several factors.

From a phenomenological point of view, despite being affirmed in numerous international documents, Human Rights are widely violated in many countries in all regions of the world, even those governed by democratic regimes. For example, Catholic Social Doctrine puts religious freedom at the centre of the rights deriving from human nature and is now considered by international charters and documents a human right in all its aspects (individual, collective and institutional). However, it is still denied in various states (a Bishop was arrested in China at the beginning of April) and discrimination against believers continues, particularly in those countries without a Christian tradition, with the novel twist that today, in countries with Christian roots, such as Spain, for example, discriminated people belong to the religious majority.

But there is a deeper crisis. First of all, it is caused by the disconnection of Human Rights from the natural order. Not only is their subjective and individualistic character exasperated, but simple wishes are raised to the status of rights.

Secondly, the effective, concrete capacity of the international community to guarantee their compliance is experiencing a crisis. Therefore, equal attribution of rights continues to correspond to unequal access to the means to obtain it.

Regrettably, the proliferation of international documents and institutions (agencies, organisations, special rapporteurs...) has not always worked to the advantage of protecting these rights as demanded. For example, the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights considered food a human right, but the World Food Summit was not held until 1996 and the Guidelines only appeared in 2004. Even in this field, being late means denying a right. As His Holiness Benedict XVI underlined, in his address to the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, the fact that, today, a fifth of humanity still goes hungry 'is a shameful tragedy', which implies international responsibilities just like the problems of water and energy.

8. The Response to the Crisis

There is growing awareness that a global response to the crisis is necessary. This response must gain the maximum consensus possible and must be shared as widely as possible.

From this point of view the central role played by the G20 rather than the G8 is a positive sign, but other means and instruments must be found to guarantee proper representation of the cases of the least developed countries.

Besides, protection of the weakest certainly cannot be left to the anti-globalisation movement, a strongly ideologised spontaneism.

Respect for natural right and promotion of solidarity and subsidiarity with the poorest regions and populations, so as to eradicate social inequalities, is a commitment for all, for those who have decision-making responsibilities at the international or national level, no less than for private players.

9. Ethics and Politics: Democracy and Capital

Above all, it is necessary today to return to the primacy of ethics over politics and of politics over technology.

Politics as the highest form of Christian charity (Paul VI) requires respect for the ethics of responsibility. It is the instrument with which ethics can be reintroduced in the system.

Law or economics alone, without the control and guidance of politics, run the risks of becoming technicalities which, far from guaranteeing the common good, tend to make the rich richer and the poor poorer. The current financial crisis is an example of this: very sophisticated instruments from a legal and economic point of view have been employed to the detriment of the weakest links in the social chain.

Companies (especially multinational corporations) must be urged (through international regulations, state laws and public opinion campaigns) by international organisations, states and NGOs (that is, by all political decision-makers), to question the role they play in ensuring Human Rights. A few of them are already committed to doing this. The approach must be global: activities as a whole must be ethically inspired and must comply with these criteria all over the world.

The financial bubble that is producing devastating consequences, although it was backed by laws enabling it, is now and ever more adopting analogous aspects to those characterising crimes against humanity. The principle of enumerated powers prevents the issue from being submitted to the international courts, which, besides, would be too late to meet the real needs. However, it is necessary for everyone to become aware of the ethical gravity underlying the current financial crisis. Moreover, in this field too it is necessary to reaffirm both the primacy of politics over technical aspects in an international setting, and the significance of economic and social rights. In respect of these rights a reduction of state control over labour regulations and a lowering of the social standards of protection and implementation are taking place.

10. Globalisation of Solidarity and Responsibility to Protect

Natural law, inscribed in the heart of each human being, calls on everyone, beginning with international organisations, to promote the globalisation of solidarity in view of helping the most fragile areas of the planet, protecting human life, promoting religious freedom, encouraging families, and safeguarding the environment. In this scenario the 'responsibility for the protection of

man', which Benedict XVI referred to at the UN General Assembly, concerns all Human Rights. None of them must be bent to special interests, disrespectful of the unity of the human person and the indivisibility of his or her rights.

Using weapons to respond to aggression is possible, provided that it is the last resort after the failure of all possible diplomatic measures. This is part of the responsibility of protecting populations or ethnic groups threatened with genocide or extermination, and of addressing situations of serious humanitarian emergency.

In promoting the globalisation of solidarity, as in exercising the responsibility to protect, we should let Christian hope lead the way.

11. Implementing and Monitoring Human Rights

The importance was pointed out of monitoring human rights violations through international agencies capable of implementing actions for the correction and compliance with violated rights, using all available resources in view of the evolution towards an international human rights law, based on the axiom *dignitas humana servanda est*.

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