



Address to the Plenary Session on the Subject ‘The Study of the Tension Between Human Equality and Social Inequalities from the Perspective of the Various Social Sciences’

John Paul II surveys the Social Teaching of the Church since the nineteenth century and declares that the contribution of the social sciences is of importance in ‘finding solutions to people’s concrete problems, solutions based on social justice’. The Pope stresses the ‘central place of the human person’ in development. The Church does not undertake scientific analyses but promotes a series of fundamental principles in relation to man’s place in society: ‘the dignity of the person, his social nature, the universal destination of goods, solidarity, subsidiarity ... charity’. The creation of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences ‘testifies to the Church’s favourable attitude to the positive and human sciences’.

Your Eminences,

Ladies and Gentlemen, Members of the Academy,

1. It is a great joy to me to meet you on the occasion of the opening session of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, established by the Motu Proprio *Socialium Scientiarum Investigationes* of 1 January 1994. In 1991, in view of the increasing importance of social issues, I announced my intention to create an Academy on the occasion of the centenary of *Rerum Novarum*, to gather specialists in social sciences from all over the world. You have accepted my invitation to become its first members: you represent the great disciplines of the social sciences: philosophy, sociology, demography, history, law, political science, economics, whose recent developments are raising questions which are decisive for the future of humanity. I am deeply thankful for your contribution to the Church, which needs your reflection, fostered by close contact with modern social realities. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to your President, Professor Edmond Malinvaud, for his warm words and for agreeing to direct your noble assembly’s first research project. I am pleased to greet Cardinal Roger Etchegaray, President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, with which the Academy will co-ordinate the planning of its various initiatives and will consult for its activities.

2. During the 19th century, the Church was challenged by the frequently tragic effects of early industrialisation on the condition of workers, as well as by anthropology, which was developed at that time. Her reaction was first and foremost motivated by her pastoral concern: to shed the light

of the Gospel on the ever new challenges which men must face; she sought to denounce the blatant injustices to which both liberal and socialist theories led; for the onset of the industrial age coincided with the emergence of liberal and socialist ideologies which are unfortunately reappearing in various forms in the contemporary world.¹ At the same time, the Magisterium and many episcopates saw the need to promote human and spiritual reflection and formation, indispensable if each human being is to be able to find his proper place in society.

Man has central place in society

3. At the end of this second millennium, the development of a technical and materialistic society is still burdening our contemporaries with numerous threats: the spread of unemployment, which creates precarious situations and weakens human beings, particularly youth and families, the many forms of rejection, which marginalise an ever greater number of people, the rise in radical movements, which aggravate tensions, the persistent imbalance between North and South, which drives whole peoples towards ever greater poverty.

Beginning with the Encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, 'the Magna Carta which must be the basis of all Christian activity in social affairs',² the Church has expressed in a consistent teaching all the moral principles contained in Revelation and developed by the Magisterium in the course of history; this social teaching provides moral criteria for decision and action in personal, family and social life: it presents the integral vision of man, of his intrinsic dignity, his spiritual nature and his ultimate destiny.³

4. Since the appearance of these 'new things', the Magisterium has not ceased, in season and out of season, to recall the essential principles of her social teaching: man always has priority over the socio-economic systems in which he participates; human realities are for man, who has a 'central place within society'⁴ and cannot be considered a mere element:⁵ he has an inalienable natural dignity.⁶

My predecessors, Pius IX and Leo XIII in particular, with their Encyclicals *Quanta Cura* and *Quod Apostolici Muneris*, forcefully showed the Church's attention to this social issue and to the dangers of philosophies which give absolute primacy to economics and politics to the detriment of the individual, who 'is and ... ought to be the beginning the subject and the object of every social organisation'.⁷

5. A glance at the social situations existing in the world, in both industrialised and developing countries, shows how important it is to reinforce the contribution of the social sciences, with a view to finding solutions to people's concrete problems, solutions based on social justice.

It is well known, for example, that the negative effects of the current economic situation in many countries too often jeopardise social programmes whose *raison d'être* should be the protection of the weakest. The Church is deeply sensitive to this factor. At the international level, it appears that numerous macro-economic reform projects fail to consider the human dimension, so that it is always the weakest who feel the harmful effects of heavy cuts in public spending. Hence it should be remembered that no model of economic growth which neglects social justice or marginalises

human groups is sustainable in the long term, even from the purely economic point of view.

You will help to understand man's central place in society

The forthcoming United Nations Conference in Copenhagen on social development will be an important moment for the international community: we should, in fact, reflect on the conditions necessary for creating a human, economic and political environment which is favourable to this social development, especially by firm commitment to the struggle against poverty and to job creation.

This summit conference is one of a series of events of international importance destined to influence social philosophy in the world at the end of the century. As we could see at the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, there is a real awareness in all States that the new challenges in the political arena are giving rise to technical questions but also involve one's understanding of human life and the preservation of essential values. Your Academy will help to understand the central place of the human person in the whole development programme.

6. However, as she has stressed many times, the Church is not competent to undertake scientific analyses: neither has she technical solutions to offer; she does not wish to support any theoretical model for the explanation of social phenomena, nor any concrete social system.⁸ However, she defends man's primordial place according to God's design, and she recalls the duties which derive from his dignity as a human person living in society.

The economy, systems of production and exchange, the State and rights, are always at the service of the concrete individual and not the other way round. By virtue of his proper dignity, man has inalienable rights. He also has the duty to work for the common good, to bear fruit,⁹ to transform the social order¹⁰ and to enable each, by just and equitable sharing, to have his place in society and to enjoy the fruits of the earth; several basic principles of the Church's social teaching fit into this perspective, such as the right to private property, which is nevertheless subordinate to the universal destination of goods.¹¹ On the other hand, according to the principle of subsidiarity, the human being enjoys legitimate autonomy of decision and action and the freedom to exercise his rights to the full; he must be protected from the possible arbitrary authority of institutions and of social and political structures. Indeed, man retains his share of responsibility in the different communities to which he naturally belongs: the family, his cultural milieu, associations, the nation and the community of nations.¹² However, this principle cannot be separated from that of solidarity, which requires each person as a member of the human community, to play an active part in the destiny of society and to feel responsible for the well-being of all.

Principles of human dignity are valid in all forms of society

7. The Church's Magisterium considers the sciences, whatever their aim and research methods, to be at the service of man. Nevertheless, no science can ultimately claim to explain the whole of

reality. On the contrary, outside its scientific context, a science becomes an ideology that claims to explain the whole of the universe and of history.¹³ However, awareness of the limits of scientific progress must not become a refusal to be open to the transcendent dimension.

8. Epistemology plays an even more essential role for the social sciences than it does for the natural sciences. The same instruments of analysis can be used differently, according to the vision of man they are intended to serve.

On the other hand, although the Church expects a great deal from the analyses proposed by the social sciences, she is also convinced that her social teaching can supply the appropriate methodological principles to direct research and to provide useful elements for building a more just and fraternal society, a society which is truly worthy of man. By working within the framework of the Church's social doctrine, which asserts that order in collective life is not arbitrary, you will demonstrate that the social sciences display all their fruitfulness when they work within the perspective of the order of creation.

The social doctrine of the Church seeks to reconcile the affirmation of man's freedom, of his spiritual nature made for a life of relationships, of his capacity to progress in knowledge, with the objective nature of the created order. Thus she does not fear to rely on a metaphysical and rational anthropology that makes it possible to take into account the mystery of man and his destiny, which cannot be reduced to any specific cultural conditioning or determinism. The principles of the dignity of the person, his social nature, the universal destination of goods, solidarity, subsidiarity, which the Church's social teaching deduces from the anthropology of creation, remain valid in all forms of society as appeals to overcome the constraints that in the end practical systems always impose upon human beings.

Intensifying dialogue with social science research

9. Among the fundamental values of the Church's social doctrine, a special place should be reserved for charity, because this represents the first category of life in society; charity makes it possible to take into account the free and voluntary action that consists in loving one's neighbour as oneself. It is the virtue which will endure to the end of history¹⁴ and the duty on which moral life is based.¹⁵ Charity 'as the queen of all virtues, all commandments, all counsels, ... gives to all of them their rank, order, time and value'.¹⁶ Love is demonstrated by kindness to others, the concern for reciprocity in relationships and the sense of true communication.¹⁷ Hence this society which you are studying is not composed of strangers¹⁸ but fellow citizens redeemed by Christ.

10. In the Encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, I said that the Magisterium wished to encourage analysis of the complex conditions in which men work, produce and exchange goods and services, satisfy their vital needs, share the resources resulting from work, determine the respective powers and responsibilities of families, businesses, unions and the State. By examining and interpreting scientific data, it is your task to make your contribution to the Church's progress. According to the first article of its Statutes, the Academy is established 'for the purpose of promoting the study and advancement of the social, economic, political and juridical sciences, thereby making elements

available which can be used by the Church to deepen and develop her social teaching'. This is why your Academy is open to experts in different fields who desire to serve the truth. Our intention is to gather all the grains of truth present in the various intellectual and empirical approaches, in the image of St. Thomas Aquinas who remains an example for philosophical and theological reflection.

The creation of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences testifies to the Church's favourable attitude to the positive and human sciences, which have the right to a just autonomy. It is in line with the efforts of the Church, which tirelessly seeks to enlighten consciences on the ethical dimension of the concrete choices which men and societies are led to make. Through its research, the Academy will show the harmony and continuity between the discoveries of the social sciences at the service of mankind, the principles of natural morality and the Church's social teaching. Appealing to your expertise today, the Church wants to intensify dialogue with researchers in the social sciences¹⁹ for mutual enrichment and to serve the common good. She hopes to perceive yet more clearly the complexity of the causes that lead to sometimes inhuman situations and can burden people or institutions with dangers which risk seriously jeopardising the dignity of humanity and the future of the world. This understanding of social realities will make it possible to discern the ethical stakes and to present them in a clearer way to our contemporaries. And it is up to the Church to continue to develop and perfect her social teaching by closely collaborating with Catholic social movements and experts in the social disciplines, of which you are the illustrious representatives in this new Academy.

Ladies and Gentlemen, members of the Academy, at the end of our meeting, as I assure you once again of my respect and my very best wishes for your work, I invoke the assistance of the Spirit of truth and the Blessings of the Lord upon you.

1 Cf. Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*; John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, n. 13.

2 Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno*.

3 Cf. John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, n. 11.

4 *Centesimus Annus* n. 54; cf. Pius XI *Quadragesimo Anno*.

5 Cf. *Centesimus Annus*, n. 13.

6 *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 84, § 2.

7 *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 25, § 1.

8 Cf. *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, n. 41.

9 Cf. *Optatam Totius*, n. 16.

10 Cf. Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, n. 42.

11 Cf. *Laborem Exercens*, n. 14.

12 Cf. *Christifideles Laici*, n. 42; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nn. 1883-1885, 1894, 2209.

13 Cf. Pius XI, *Mit Brennender Sorge*; John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, Ch. IV.

14 Cf. *Mt 25*; *1 Co 13*.

15 Cf. *1 Jn 4:11*.

16 St. Francis de Sales, *Traité de l'amour de Dieu*, 8, 6.

17 St. Thomas Aquinas, *S. Th.*, II-II, 23, 1.

18 Cf. *Ep* 2:19.

19 Cf. *Centesimus Annus*, n. 59.