Human rights in Catholic thought: A new synthesis

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Human Rights in Catholic Thought

A New Synthesis  BY DAVID HOLLENBACH

Over the past half-century, hopes that human rights could become truly effective standards of international behavior have risen and fallen like the tides. When the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights was proclaimed in 1948, many saw it as a genuine commitment to “never again” tolerate genocide and to resist the domination of one people by another through the power of moral consensus rather than armed force. From 1948 to 1989, however, cold war ideological strife pushed human rights off the international agenda.

Hopes rose again in the immediate post-cold war period. At the 1993 U.N. conference on human rights in Vienna, for example, delegates representing 85 percent of the world's population reaffirmed the declaration and declared that the universal binding power of the rights and freedoms it proclaimed was “beyond question.” In today's world, however, after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, the issue of universality is again hotly debated. Some see a rising “clash of civilizations” setting Western nations with their democratic values on a collision course with the religious-moral-legal system of Islamic shariah and with nations guided by Confucian traditions and “Asian values.” President George W. Bush, on the other hand, holds that the human rights associated with Western democracy and free markets are the wave of the global future. Meanwhile, some Western academics of a postmodernist bent reject human rights norms as incorrigibly Western, in the name of a respect for diverse cultures that itself, ironically, sounds somehow Western.

In the face of this ebb and flow of opinion, it is striking how strongly the new Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church affirms the Catholic Church's commitment to human rights as moral standards to which all nations and cultures should be held accountable. Like earlier church documents, the compendium grounds the link between Christian faith

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and human rights in the dignity of the human person as created in the image of God. But its discussion has greater theological depth than all previous teachings, which serves to link its ministry in the domain of human rights tightly to its essential religious identity. The grace of Christ is not added to human nature extrinsically, "from the outside." Rather, our status as a new creation in Christ is understood as fulfilling the intrinsic dynamism of human existence (Nos. 109, 122). Consequently, the church's work in support of human rights is essentially connected to its mission to proclaim the Gospel. Human rights, the vocation of every Christian, and the mission of the church are inseparable.

At the same time, in the theological framework of the compendium, work for human rights is a task shared by Christians with all other human beings. "An integral and shared humanism" links all human beings together in mutual responsibility (No. 6). Therein lies the hope that people of all religious traditions can come to support human rights. In our multicultural environment, in which many are tempted to regard such hope as illusory, this is an important contribution.

Given the interreligious conflicts of our world, the compendium's treatment of the right to religious freedom is also significant. Theologically, freedom is affirmed as one of the highest manifestations of the image of God in persons (No. 135); further, humans can seek God only in freedom. The right to religious liberty thus does not arise from relativism or indifference to the truth about God, as some Catholic critiques of religious freedom had suggested before the Second Vatican Council. Rather, it flows directly from a Christian understanding of the human person and of the way persons come to faith in God. Intimately connected to our relationship with God, religious freedom is a "paramount" right. The compendium stresses that peace in our time is increasingly dependent on the protection of this freedom. Religious and cultural differences are, sadly, often occasions for violence and war; as such, commitment to both freedom and dialogue by the great religious and cultural traditions of the world is a precondition of peace.

Further noteworthy is the compendium's affirmation of the equal dignity of every person. The glory of God shining in the face of every person gives all people a "radical equality." In addition, all are called to a covenantal self-gift that presupposes reciprocity, and such reciprocity is impossible except among equals. All human beings, therefore, are equal before God and before one another, "regardless of their race, nation, sex, origin, culture, or class" (No. 144). This mutual relatedness among equal persons reflects the very life of the Trinitarian God (Nos. 111, 122).

Commitment to equal worth calls forth a special concern for the poor and the marginalized. In this spirit, the compendium strongly affirms that all have the right to basic necessities, such as food, housing, just wages and adequate social security (Nos. 301 and 365). The right to economic initiative is also affirmed, as is the importance of markets in
stimulating growth. At the same time, the existence of social and economic rights are presented as fundamental requirements of human dignity. Democracy is likewise unambiguously affirmed as the preferable political system; yet following the thinking of John Paul II, the compendium insists that democracy is important not because we cannot really know what values are truly important, but precisely because democracy reflects the truth that political power must be accountable to the dignity of human persons.

No previous official discussion of human rights in the Catholic tradition has been as thorough as that of the compendium. Throughout the document, human rights are repeatedly invoked as essential expressions of the Christian vision of life in society and as requirements of human reasonableness. In this regard alone, the text is a highly successful synthesis of church social teaching. I predict that it will stand as a landmark in the development of Catholic social teaching.

A Developing Body of Thought
The fact that the document is such a fine development of church teaching should also be noted carefully in reaching an overall assessment of its contribution. The compendium acknowledges that the movement to identify and proclaim human rights is a distinctively modern phenomenon. It sees this modern movement as an “extraordinary opportunity” to promote in a more effective and universal way the human dignity that “has been inscribed by God the Creator in his creature” (No. 152). At least implicitly, therefore, the compendium acknowledges that Catholic social teaching is a developing body of thought.

Still, it never mentions the fact that many of the human rights it so strongly proclaims today have not always been affirmed in their present form by the church. In fact, it was not so long ago that the church actually opposed many of these rights or violated them in practice. In fairly recent times, as John T. Noonan presents in his recent work, The Church That Can and Cannot Change, popes and bishops were condemning the rights to religious freedom, free speech and democratic self-governance, supporting the legitimacy of slavery, and defending and practicing the use of coercion and even torture in support of religious truth. In light of this history, it is clear that Catholic moral thought has been a changing and evolving tradition.

The fact that the compendium takes almost no notice of the fact that it is the latest phase of a developing tradition could unfortunately lead some to conclude that it is the final word on the issues it considers. But as the document itself clearly shows, historicity and development need not be threats to the Catholic tradition. They can lead to growth in understanding of both the requirements of the Gospel and the demands of human reasonableness.

In my view, there are several aspects of the treatment of human rights in the document where deeper understanding could lead to such further growth. First, the affirmation of the “radical equality” of men and women is accompanied by support of a kind of “complementarity” of the sexes that far too often negates this equality in practice. The complementarity of male and female is usually understood to mean that men and women have different social roles; this frequently slides into a claim that women should be excluded from some of these roles. Yet how this is compatible with genuine equality is rarely clear. Second, the discussion of the relation between the moral requirements of fundamental human rights, like the right to life, and the way these requirements should be embodied in civil law is not as careful as the complexity of this question demands.

Much experience and serious theological discussion were required to attain the teachings expressed in the compendium. We would do well to remain open to possible future developments on the two issues I have mentioned, and perhaps on others as well. The compendium is an excellent new synthesis of Catholic thought on human rights. But it is certainly not the last word.