

THE SOCIAL DOCTRINE IN THE PASTORAL LETTERS OF BISHOP FRANÇOIS-XAVIER NGUYÊN VAN THUÂN

Bishop Mario Toso

Introduction

The *Pastoral Letters* of Bishop Van Thuân are the most obvious demonstration that the Social Doctrine or Teaching or Magisterium of the Church (=SDC) is not mere human wisdom or one political theory among others. It is authentic *sapiential wisdom* that comes from Jesus Christ's saving encounter with humanity. While inside the Church, the people of God, receives, celebrates, proclaims and gives witness to the new life in Christ, in the social fabric of human existence she expresses and shapes a new culture and a new humanism in action that builds the city of man according to man's lofty dignity. This construction is inspired and supported by the love filled with truth which is Christ himself. The SDC indicates the principles for reflection, the criteria for judgment, and the essential practical guidelines for bestowing unity and peace on the *city of man* and making it in some way the anticipation that prefigures the *city without barriers of God* (Cf. *Caritas in Veritate*, No. 7).¹

1. Be vigilant and pray, stay steadfast in the faith: these are the foundations that make credible witnesses to the Gospel and the Church's Social Doctrine

In the second half of the past century, Vietnam and the local Church had to face some very tough challenges. It was then that Bishop Van Thuân, with his *First Pastoral Letter*, exhorted the communities and the *Christifideles laici* to *be vigilant* and to *pray* (Cf. *1 Pt* 4:7).

Before the great changes in their country's set up, Vietnamese Catholics should not sleep and close their eyes to not see or appear to be indifferent to the major problems upsetting their fellow citizens' lives. It is absolutely necessary to go beyond the separation between faith and daily life, to be protagonists of a discernment that can interpret reality in the light of the Gospel. It is necessary to act to change things, and to get committed, especially on the political level, following the major criteria indicated by *Gaudium et Spes*:

- legitimate pluralism and respect for adversaries;
- the distinction between the actions carried out by the faithful, individually or in a group, in their own name as citizens guided by their Christian conscience, and the actions carried out in the name of the Church in communion with her

1 Cf. BENEDICT XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City 2009.

Pastors;

- awareness that the Church can never be confused with the political community or linked to any ideology but, at the same time, through her evangelizing and humanizing mission, she contributes to extending the kingdom of justice and love in people's hearts everywhere on earth;
- responsibility in organizing the life of the political community and in actively promoting the cultural, economic and social progress of one's country and the world;
- the certainty that the Church proclaims and supports the promotion of the rights and duties of the human person and communities, and praises the progress of present-day society with a positive assessment of its civilizing importance.

How can believers be incisive and overcome evil with good, by transforming, or better, transfiguring social reality? To respond to this question, Bishop Van Thuân appeals once again to the first *Letter of Peter* and makes this exhortation: “Resist...steadfast in faith” (*1 Pt* 5:9).

For the bishop, social transformation can only depend on faith, on its *quality*, which is manifested in a believer's spirituality. Only faith that is lived authentically makes it possible to be real “revolutionaries”. We are the light of the world and the salt of the earth when we express in life what we profess with our mouths and love with our heart. Faith does not immobilize us; it does not make us extraneous to world events. The bishop encourages assuming our responsibilities for building the Church and the progress of humanity according to the measure achieved in Christ.

What *means* does a believer have at his disposal to cultivate his faith and make it more grounded in Christ and, therefore, more and more lively and fruitful? First of all, *training* and *education in its practice* are essential, and then “incarnated” prayer. The latter is all the more effective when it is not detached from life, from everyday commitments. It has to take on the whole of human existence, even its most dramatic aspects. Jesus, through his Incarnation, became “close” to every man, especially to the neediest and weakest, in order to take everyone's destiny upon himself and in this way to carry out the Father's will (Cf. *Jn* 4:34). Then Bishop Van Thuân reminds his faithful that those who limit themselves to prayer uttered with their lips and say, “Lord, Lord”, will not enter the kingdom of heaven, but those who do the Father's will (Cf. *Mt* 7:21). Then prayer is sincere and holiness is not illusory. “A Christian who neglects his temporal commitments – says Bishop Van Thuân quoting *Gaudium et Spes* – neglects his duties to his neighbor, indeed to God himself, and endangers his eternal salvation” (GS, No. 43). A believer has the duty to pray for justice and peace, but, above all, he must make every effort for their achievement. This is the real prayer that certifies the authenticity of faith which is dead without works.

Among the means at a believer's disposal to carry out the Father's will “to establish all things in Christ,” and thus be an authentic “builder” of peace, according to Van Thuân, the *Social Doctrine of the Church* has an irreplaceable function. More than once the Vietnamese bishop quotes the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, of John

XXIII's *Pacem in Terris*, and of Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio*; at the same time, he reaffirms constantly that it is only possible to progress in peace if one is strong in *faith* (Cf. *Second Pastoral Letter*). To overcome the negative and anti-human ideologies like Communism, or to oppose Freemasonry – another serious danger for the Church and society –, unfortunately arms and human means are relied on more than the renewal of life and divine grace. To achieve peace, or rather the integral development of every person and every people, it is necessary to be *steadfast* in faith: that is, we have to look at, listen to and follow the Lord Jesus, trust in Him – outside of Him there is no other Savior –, his Church and his teaching, which always includes the social sphere. In fact, where Peter is there is the Church, and where the Church is there is Christ, the bearer of real peace which to be real must be founded on truth, freedom, justice and love.

Therefore, the SDC should be studied and put into practice based on communion with Jesus Christ, dead and arisen. Living his Charity makes us love the Church; it makes us responsible and active parts of the Mystical Body of Christ, the transfiguring presence that leads history to the heavenly Jerusalem. It is not enough to be enlightened by faith and inflamed by the desire to do good. We need to quiver with love for the Lord, to feel compassion for others as Jesus did (Cf. *Mk* 8:2). By dwelling in His love, it is possible to bring about that social “revolution” which has human fulfillment in God as its goal and finds valid route indications in the SDC .

What has been mentioned until now is sufficient to understand how the SDC, for Bishop Van Thuân, is a guide for an authentic faith that is lived intensely. What he taught as a young pastor anticipated what is reaffirmed today regarding the SDC in the context of the Year of Faith and a New Evangelization. The SDC is not an obstacle to living faith in Jesus Christ precisely because it is a reality that develops from the personal encounter with Him, from acceptance of His life. The SDC is what the ecclesial community expresses and offers to believers in order to help them become adults in the faith.

Let us stop and reflect on these two aspects: the SDC as the fruit of the encounter with Jesus Christ and dwelling in Him, and evangelization's need for *Christifideles laici* as credible witnesses.

2. The social doctrine is the fruit of the encounter with Jesus Christ and of dwelling in Him

For Bishop Van Thuân, the SDC is not an ideology that conceals Jesus Christ and disregards the demands of his Gospel. Anyone who believes in Jesus Christ and lives in Him transfigures his existence through conversion and newness of life. As in the case of Zacchaeus, he wanted to see Jesus, and after he met him and received him in his home, he decided to change his life. He stopped being an unscrupulous person dedicated to his own interests and service to the Roman Empire. He became a citizen of Jericho and made relations of justice and solidarity with his fellow citizens. In that

moment Zacchaeus decided to not let himself be corrupted any more by bribes and he became a person with solidarity. He stopped extorting unfortunate people and started to share his bread with the hungry and to help the suffering: “Behold, half of my possessions, Lord, I shall give to the poor, and if I have extorted anything from anyone I shall repay it four times over” (*Lk 19:8*).

For believers, the SDC is the logical consequence of sharing Jesus' life. He alone is the One who changes our hearts and eyes and urges us to renew our lives. The look of people of faith is not greedy and dominating, as Pope Francis says. It is a look of love that does not discriminate among persons because it has the sweetness of friendship. It is like *leaven*: it urges us to change our relations and to help our neighbor from our own city. Faith carries out a “civil service” because it accustoms us to see another as a brother and to make out in him, especially in a poor person, the figure of Jesus, who asks us to be loved. A look of faith improves all of our lives.

The SDC is not developed to replace Christ but to make more explicit the demands of his Gospel to be carried out in social life. If the SDC was designed to replace Christ, it would lose the liberating and healing force that comes from the Redeemer. The new evangelization of the social sphere needs a SDC that is not a mere product of human thinking. Only a SDC that erupts from the experience of faith in Jesus can be ministerial to an evangelization that brings new life for man.

Therefore, the SDC has to be proclaimed and witnessed to in order to help live the Gospel in a more consistent way and surely not to impose any ideology.

3. The Social Doctrine of the Church aids the redemption of the world, which is already under way, and this is done through a new evangelization of the social sphere that will give life to new generations of credible believers, educators and spiritual guides

The certainty that underpins the ecclesial community in all its components is that the redemption of the world – through the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – is already under way. As Cardinal Van Thuân liked to reiterate, the Risen Christ is already “globalized”. He anticipated the globalization that is besieging the world today. He, the Alpha and Omega of history, is sown in the furrows of human events, like the positive germ of a new humanity and a more fraternal universal family. The task of the Church and of believers is to contribute to consolidating the seeds of a budding goodness that has to become more and more luxuriant, and to oppose the negative aspects of a human family that is still not tending towards the world common good and peace.

For Van Thuân, the young bishop or the President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, the SDC should be considered something that helps to complete the global redemption of every man, of every people. It has to do with strengthening a “sense” of the world that does not have to be invented *ex nihilo* and cannot be destroyed because

it was planted germinally by the Creator and later confirmed and strengthened by the Redeemer. The SDC is worked out by the community that accepts, proclaims and gives witness to universal redemption in order to carry out the task actively and joyfully of transfiguring the world according to human dignity which has its highest degree in the New Adam.

This calls for *new generations of believers*: that is, people with an adult faith. Only a faith that is fully *accepted*, entirely *thought out*, *lived* deeply and *celebrated* can become the source of a new humanism, a new civilization. The *quality* of faith of each one of us and of the whole Church is the great treasure in which it is possible to invest and on which we have to base ourselves for a renewal that is not illusory of society, institutions, the economy and politics.

New generations of believers with an adult faith who are involved in politics and all the fields of the social sphere will only be possible thanks to a *new generation of priests and formators*. In more than one case, this entails re-programming formation in the Seminaries and in the Catholic and Pontifical Universities.

A new evangelization requires in particular a new pastoral care or, even better, a pastoral *conversion* in addition to a new catechesis and a new education.

New generations of believers, priests, formators and protagonists of evangelization will flourish if the relation between the ecclesial communities' evangelizing mission and the social sphere is rethought and goes beyond disincarnated forms of spiritualism and immanentism that disregard Transcendence.

The formation of new generations of Catholics *who are competent in the field of politics* can only come about through the ecclesial communities' serious awareness of the social dimension with the resulting re-organization of pastoral care and formation. It should be said in this regard that if the parish communities do not seriously cultivate the social dimension of pastoral care, catechesis and education, they would jeopardize not only the Church's mission, but also the fulfillment of the *vocation to the social sphere* of the *Christifideles laici*. This would be an out-and-out renunciation to be the salt that gives flavor and the leaven of new life. It is urgent to recognize that new generations of believers who will take care of the *res publica* in a responsible way – a hope expressed many times by Benedict XVI –, cannot come from a pastoral and pedagogical void and a lack of immersion in experiences of the good life.

Therefore, it is not pointless to reaffirm that the SDC is the essential instrument for formation to an adult faith.

Only a mature faith, with its driving center which is Christ, the universal Redeemer, will give substance to the connective tissue of believers' spirituality and holiness. It will help Christianity – at a time when its ability is doubted to forge new *ethos* and institutions considering it merely a reserve of good will – to reveal itself with all its newness and inspiring, civilizing power.

Redemption and the newness of life come from being permanently and deeply rooted in the One who is in our midst and has called us with his name, also for culture and society: in a word, for the whole life of the *pólis*. This reform is not so much the work of politicians, jurists and economists as of holy persons.

The humanization and integral liberation which every society needs, and hence the family of peoples, can only be the work of people who live constantly in that union with God which transfigures and is not simply human. Only based on a permanent communion with God and deep rooted in *a love filled with truth*, in *caritas in veritate*, individual persons and societies can lead a *good* and professionally competent life, develop a new way of thinking, cultivate a deep spiritual fraternity, and express new energies in the service of the civilization of love (Cf. CIV, Nos. 78-79), which are reflected in the reform of institutions and the achievement of social justice in every corner of the earth, which is the justice of the human family's common good.

All of this is equivalent to saying that the real “revolution”, real social changes are the fruit of the work of *saints*: that is, people who do not seek their own success, their own personal advantage and partisan interests. To be real reformers it is necessary to put God-Love at the top of one's thoughts and turn to Him, the guarantor of our freedom and all that is truly good and true. He is the *measure* of what is just and, at the same time, of eternal Love. Only from Him salvation and redemption can come for citizens, for politics and for the people in its service. When God is marginalized or replaced by other absolutes, it is easy to become slaves to idols which instead of liberating people, take away their dignity and hope, exploit them, and lead them to resignation.