

*From The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*  
Person, Nature, & Human Flourishing  
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**NOTE: To access endnotes, indicated in square brackets, please see on-line full text at**

[http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/justpeace/documents/rc\\_pc\\_justpeace\\_doc\\_20060526\\_compendio-dott-soc\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html)

**135.** *Man can turn to good only in freedom, which God has given to him as one of the highest signs of his image*[251]: “For God has willed that man remain ‘under the control of his own decisions’ (Sir 15:14), so that he can seek his Creator spontaneously, and come freely to utter and blissful perfection through loyalty to Him. Hence man’s dignity demands that he act according to a knowing and free choice that is personally motivated and prompted from within, neither under blind internal impulse nor by mere external pressure”[252].

Man rightly appreciates freedom and strives for it passionately: rightly does he desire and must form and guide, by his own free initiative, his personal and social life, accepting personal responsibility for it[253]. In fact, freedom not only allows man suitably to modify the state of things outside of himself, but it also determines the growth of his being as a person through choices consistent with the true good[254]. In this way man generates himself, he is *father* of his own being[255], he constructs the social order[256].

**136.** *Freedom is not contrary to man’s dependence as a creature on God*[257]. *Revelation teaches that the power to decide good and evil does not belong to man but to God alone* (cf. Gen 2:16-17). “Man is certainly free, inasmuch as he can understand and accept God’s commands. And he possesses an extremely far-reaching freedom, since he can eat ‘of every tree of the garden’. But his freedom is not unlimited: it must halt before the ‘tree of the knowledge of good and evil’, for it is called to accept the moral law given by God. In fact, human freedom finds its authentic and complete fulfilment precisely in the acceptance of that law”[258].

**137.** *The proper exercise of personal freedom requires specific conditions of an economic, social, juridic, political and cultural order* that “are too often disregarded or violated. Such situations of blindness and injustice injure the moral life and involve the strong as well as the weak in the temptation to sin against charity. By deviating from the moral law man violates his own freedom, becomes imprisoned within himself, disrupts neighbourly fellowship and rebels against divine truth”[259]. *Removing injustices promotes human freedom and dignity*: nonetheless, “the first thing to be done is to appeal to the spiritual and moral capacities of the individual and to the permanent need for inner conversion, if one is to achieve the economic and social changes that will truly be at the service of man”[260].

**138.** *In the exercise of their freedom, men and women perform morally good acts that are constructive for the person and for society when they are obedient to truth, that is, when they*

*do not presume to be the creators and absolute masters of truth or of ethical norms*[261]. Freedom in fact does not have “its absolute and unconditional origin ... in itself, but in the life within which it is situated and which represents for it, at one and the same time, both a limitation and a possibility. Human freedom belongs to us as creatures; it is a freedom which is given as a gift, one to be received like a seed and to be cultivated responsibly”[262]. When the contrary is the case, freedom dies, destroying man and society[263].

**139.** *The truth concerning good and evil is recognized in a practical and concrete manner by the judgment of conscience, which leads to the acceptance of responsibility for the good accomplished and the evil committed. “Consequently in the practical judgment of conscience, which imposes on the person the obligation to perform a given act, the link between freedom and truth is made manifest. Precisely for this reason conscience expresses itself in acts of ‘judgment’ which reflect the truth about the good, and not in arbitrary ‘decisions’.* The maturity and responsibility of these judgments — and, when all is said and done, of the individual who is their subject — are not measured by the liberation of the conscience from objective truth, in favour of an alleged autonomy in personal decisions, but, on the contrary, by an insistent search for truth and by allowing oneself to be guided by that truth in one's actions”[264].

**140.** *The exercise of freedom implies a reference to a natural moral law, of a universal character, that precedes and unites all rights and duties*[265]. The natural law “is nothing other than the light of intellect infused within us by God. Thanks to this, we know what must be done and what must be avoided. This light or this law has been given by God to creation”[266]. It consists in the participation in his eternal law, which is identified with God himself[267]. This law is called “natural” because the reason that promulgates it is proper to human nature. It is universal, it extends to all people insofar as it is established by reason. In its principal precepts, the divine and natural law is presented in the Decalogue and indicates the primary and essential norms regulating moral life[268]. Its central focus is the act of aspiring and submitting to God, the source and judge of everything that is good, and also the act of seeing others as equal to oneself. The natural law expresses the dignity of the person and lays the foundations of the person's fundamental duties[269].

**141.** *In the diversity of cultures, the natural law unites peoples, enjoining common principles.* Although its application may require adaptations to the many different conditions of life according to place, time and circumstances,[270] it remains *immutable* “under the flux of ideas and customs and supports their progress ... Even when it is rejected in its very principles, it cannot be destroyed or removed from the heart of man. It always rises again in the life of individuals and societies”[271].

Its precepts, however, are not clearly and immediately perceived by everyone. Religious and moral truths can be known “by everyone with facility, with firm certainty and without the admixture of error”[272] only with the help of Grace and Revelation. The natural law offers a foundation prepared by God for the revealed law and Grace, in full harmony with the work of the Spirit[273].

**142.** *The natural law, which is the law of God, cannot be annulled by human sinfulness*[274]. It lays the indispensable moral foundation for building the human community and for establishing the civil law that draws its consequences of a concrete and contingent nature from the principles of the natural law[275]. If the perception of the universality of the moral law is dimmed, people cannot build a true and lasting communion with others, because when a correspondence between truth and good is lacking, “whether culpably or not, our acts damage the communion of persons, to the detriment of each”[276]. Only freedom rooted in a common nature, in fact, can make all men responsible and enable them to justify public morality. Those who proclaim themselves to be the sole measure of realities and of truth cannot live peacefully in society with their fellow men and cooperate with them[277].

**143.** *Freedom mysteriously tends to betray the openness to truth and human goodness, and too often it prefers evil and being selfishly closed off, raising itself to the status of a divinity that creates good and evil: “Although he was made by God in a state of holiness, from the very onset of his history man abused his liberty, at the urging of the Evil One. Man set himself against God and sought to attain his goal apart from God ... Often refusing to acknowledge God as his beginning, man has disrupted also his proper relationship to his own ultimate goal as well as his whole relationship toward himself and others and all created things”*[278]. *Human freedom needs therefore to be liberated.* Christ, by the power of his Paschal Mystery, frees man from his disordered love of self[279], which is the source of his contempt for his neighbour and of those relationships marked by domination of others. Christ shows us that freedom attains its fulfilment in the gift of self[280]. By his sacrifice on the cross, Jesus places man once more in communion with God and his neighbour.

**199.** *Freedom is the highest sign in man of his being made in the divine image and, consequently, is a sign of the sublime dignity of every human person*[435]. “Freedom is exercised in relationships between human beings. Every human person, created in the image of God, has the natural right to be recognized as a free and responsible being. All owe to each other this duty of respect. The *right to the exercise of freedom*, especially in moral and religious matters, is an inalienable requirement of the dignity of the human person”[436]. The meaning of freedom must not be restricted, considering it from a purely individualistic perspective and reducing it to the *arbitrary and uncontrolled exercise* of one's own personal autonomy: “Far from being achieved in total self-sufficiency and the absence of relationships, freedom only truly exists where reciprocal bonds, governed by truth and justice, link people to one another”[437]. The understanding of freedom becomes deeper and broader when it is defended, even at the social level, in all of its various dimensions.

**200.** The value of freedom, as an expression of the singularity of each human person, is respected when every member of society is permitted to fulfil his personal vocation; to seek the truth and profess his religious, cultural and political ideas; to express his opinions; to choose his state of life and, as far as possible, his line of work; to pursue initiatives of an economic, social or political nature. This must take place within a “strong juridical

framework"[438], within the limits imposed by the common good and public order, and, in every case, in a manner characterized by responsibility.

*On the other hand, freedom must also be expressed as the capacity to refuse what is morally negative, in whatever guise it may be presented*[439], as the capacity to distance oneself effectively from everything that could hinder personal, family or social growth. The fullness of freedom consists in the capacity to be in possession of oneself in view of the genuine good, within the context of the universal common good[440].

**201.** *Justice is a value that accompanies the exercise of the corresponding cardinal moral virtue*[441]. According to its most classic formulation, it "consists in the constant and firm will to give their due to God and neighbour"[442]. From a subjective point of view, justice is translated into behaviour that is *based on the will to recognize the other as a person*, while, from an objective point of view, it constitutes *the decisive criteria of morality in the intersubjective and social sphere*[443].

The Church's social Magisterium constantly calls for the most classical forms of justice to be respected: *commutative, distributive and legal justice*[444]. Ever greater importance has been given to *social justice*[445], which represents a real development in *general justice*, the justice that regulates social relationships according to the criterion of observance of the *law*. *Social justice*, a requirement related to the *social question* which today is worldwide in scope, concerns the social, political and economic aspects and, above all, the structural dimension of problems and their respective solutions[446].

**202.** *Justice is particularly important in the present-day context, where the individual value of the person, his dignity and his rights — despite proclaimed intentions — are seriously threatened by the widespread tendency to make exclusive use of criteria of utility and ownership*. Justice too, on the basis of these criteria, is considered in a reductionist manner, whereas it acquires a fuller and more authentic meaning in Christian anthropology. Justice, in fact, is not merely a simple human convention, because what is "just" is not first determined by the law but by the profound identity of the human being[447].

**203.** *The full truth about man makes it possible to move beyond a contractualistic vision of justice, which is a reductionist vision, and to open up also for justice the new horizon of solidarity and love*. "By itself, justice is not enough. Indeed, it can even betray itself, unless it is open to that deeper power which is love"[448]. In fact, the Church's social doctrine places alongside the value of justice that of solidarity, in that it is the privileged way of peace. If peace is the fruit of justice, "today one could say, with the same exactness and the same power of biblical inspiration (cf. *Is 32:17; Jas 3:18*): *Opus solidaritatis pax*, peace as the fruit of *solidarity*"[449]. The goal of *peace*, in fact, "will certainly be achieved through the putting into effect of social and international justice, but also through the practice of the virtues which favour togetherness, and which teach us to live in unity, so as to build in unity, by giving and receiving, a new society and a better world"[450].

**204.** *Among the virtues in their entirety, and in particular between virtues, social values and love, there exists a deep bond that must be ever more fully recognized*. Love, often restricted

to relationships of physical closeness or limited to merely subjective aspects of action on behalf of others, must be reconsidered in its authentic value as the *highest and universal criterion of the whole of social ethics*. Among all paths, even those sought and taken in order to respond to the ever new forms of current *social questions*, the “more excellent way” (cf. 1 Cor 12:31) is that *marked out by love*.

**205.** *It is from the inner wellspring of love that the values of truth, freedom and justice are born and grow.* Human life in society is ordered, bears fruits of goodness and responds to human dignity when it is founded on truth; when it is lived in justice, that is, in the effective respect of rights and in the faithful carrying out of corresponding duties; when it is animated by selflessness, which makes the needs and requirements of others seem as one's own and intensifies the communion of spiritual values and the concern for material necessities; when it is brought about in the freedom that befits the dignity of men and women, prompted by their rational nature to accept responsibility for their actions[451]. These values constitute the pillars which give strength and consistency to the edifice of life and deeds: they are values that determine the quality of every social action and institution.

**396.** *Authority must be guided by the moral law. All of its dignity derives from its being exercised within the context of the moral order,*[804] *“which in turn has God for its first source and final end”.*[805] Because of its necessary reference to the moral order, which precedes it and is its basis, and because of its purpose and the people to whom it is directed, authority cannot be understood as a power determined by criteria of a solely sociological or historical character. “There are some indeed who go so far as to deny the existence of a moral order which is transcendent, absolute, universal and equally binding upon all. And where the same law of justice is not adhered to by all, men cannot hope to come to open and full agreement on vital issues”.[806] This order “has no existence except in God; cut off from God it must necessarily disintegrate”.[807] It is from the moral order that authority derives its power to impose obligations [808] and its moral legitimacy,[809] not from some arbitrary will or from the thirst for power,[810] and it is to translate this order into concrete actions to achieve the common good.[811]

**397.** *Authority must recognize, respect and promote essential human and moral values.* These are innate and “flow from the very truth of the human being and express and safeguard the dignity of the person; values which no individual, no majority and no State can ever create, modify or destroy”.[812] These values do not have their foundation in provisional and changeable “majority” opinions, but must simply be recognized, respected and promoted as elements of an objective moral law, the natural law written in the human heart (cf. *Rom 2:15*), and as the normative point of reference for civil law itself.[813] If, as a result of the tragic clouding of the collective conscience, scepticism were to succeed in casting doubt on the basic principles of the moral law,[814] the legal structure of the State itself would be shaken to its very foundations, being reduced to nothing more than a mechanism for the pragmatic regulation of different and opposing interests.[815]

**398.** *Authority must enact just laws, that is, laws that correspond to the dignity of the human person and to what is required by right reason.* “Human law is law insofar as it corresponds to right reason and therefore is derived from the eternal law. When, however, a law is

contrary to reason, it is called an unjust law; in such a case it ceases to be law and becomes instead an act of violence”.[816] Authority that governs according to reason places citizens in a relationship not so much of subjection to another person as of obedience to the moral order and, therefore, to God himself who is its ultimate source.[817] Whoever refuses to obey an authority that is acting in accordance with the moral order “resists what God has appointed” (*Rom 13:2*).[818] Analogously, whenever public authority — which has its foundation in human nature and belongs to the order pre-ordained by God [819] — fails to seek the common good, it abandons its proper purpose and so delegitimizes itself.