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0. Introduction

The social Magisterium is often subjected to criticism or at least to partial and reductionist understandings. In fact, in the reception of texts of the social magisterium and in media narration of them, it is not difficult to trace such decisively partial readings. We can say a dystonia exists between what is stated and the judgments continually expressed in the semiosphere of discourses about the Church. Suffice to think of how the Church's concrete commitment to workers, the poor, the imprisoned, migrants, the excluded, is considered either as intrusion in the public sphere or as inappropriate political choice.

So from where do these misunderstandings arise?

From the point of view of ecclesial thought and praxis, a first element of distortion can be identified in two diametrically opposed and both misleading poles. On the one hand those who believe the work of evangelization can be configured completely to the proclamation of the kerygma (the reference is to a certain theology of the word); on the other hand those who dilute the salvific event to the point of reducing it to an exclusively social horizon (the theological reference is to a certain political theology).

But the distortion does not just happen *ad intra*, but also *ad extra*, that is within a cultural vision which reduces the believing perspective (which is also made up of a system of values and practice) within a private setting. There is no shortage in society (intellectuals and politicians) of those who, in the name of greater tolerance, construct legal guarantee systems on the part of institutions which necessarily declare themselves to be secular. But in fact beyond maximum formal respect, the Christian faith's possibility to propose an integral vision of the human person in the person's relationship with society is not recognized; the most that is acknowledged is the possibility of fulfilling a private role or supplying services. Such polarization in an *intra* and *extra* ecclesial environment is the progeny of the same problem, in other words the persistence of dual visions such as creation and redemption, natural and supernatural...and so on.

1. CSD and profession of faith

The Church's social reflection, the social doctrine of the Church, as stated by the then Cardinal of Krakow Karol Wojtyla "is the consequence of the very mission of the Church; it falls within its real content and within the tasks of the gospel"¹. Starting out from such a statement it is useful to begin with the homily of Pope Francis during the Mass with the Cardinals the day following his election. He said: "We can walk as much as we want, we can build many things, but if we do not profess Jesus Christ, things go wrong. We may become a charitable NGO, but not the Church, the Bride of the Lord. When we are not walking, we stop moving. When we are not building on the stones, what happens? The same thing that happens to children on the beach when they build sandcastles: everything is swept away, there is no solidity"².

Along the lines of his predecessors, Pope Francis immediately connects belief in Christ, in other words the profession of one's own Christian faith, which is first and foremost witness, manifestation in life of Christ's way of loving, to the very experience of being Church, bride of Christ. He thus eliminates every possible – or desired – misunderstanding between the works of the Church bride of Christ and the works of an NGO. Essentially, the Church does not act by adhering to a social manifesto, but rather she acts as the Bride of Christ, that is, she can love only in God's way.

2. The event of the Incarnation

It is essential to create a faithful vision which places the Incarnation event at the centre. This event becomes for us criterion of understanding and discernment and indicates that the believing experience is not an extrinsic addition to existence: the incarnation shapes both personal and community life³. In baptism, in fact, we are immersed in the paschal love of Christ, in other words in the dynamic of his death and resurrection and we receive filial life as gift. We become children in the Son, we become divine-human⁴. We can say that for us Christians salvation is not a reward but rather a gift placed at the start: it is the life as children of God which is given to us in Baptism. The Christian life is not the expression of a religious "I" who strives to make God's heart generous towards him or her, to conquer God who is completely other. For us God is not totally other but absolutely neighbour, to the extent that as gift we share the divine-humanity. Our life is manifestation of the filial life we have received. We experience relationships and society like the Son. All we think and do, we do to manifest filial love personally and socially.

Let us try to recover the traces of the beginnings of the social magisterium and in particular the context in which the Encyclical *Rerum Novarum* was developing. It is after the pontificate of Pius IX and Leo XIII (1878) had to overcome that sort of isolation in which the Church had placed herself. In fact "The Church had perceived the advent of modernity as an apostasy of the Christian faith and an assault on the ecclesiastical institution". It would be precisely the realism of Leo XIII which would enable it to launch a process to overcome the isolation and the defensive attitude which had naturally taken hold of the Church. Furthermore, what Gioacchino Pecci dealt with in his life should not be forgotten: in particular already in his

¹ V. Possenti, *Oltre l'illuminismo. Il messaggio social cristiano*, Cinisello Balsamo, 1992, p. 68.

² Pope Francis, Homily 14 March 2013.

³ Cf. S. Lanza, *Teologia dell'azione ecclesiale*, Queriniana, 1989.

⁴ V. S. Solovev, *Sulla divinumanità e altri scritti*, Jaca Book, Milan 1971.

Perugian episcopate “he took a stance on political-ecclesiastical problems of the time with statements doctrinally demanding but with a rational reasoning and respectful tone, very different from the emotional explosions so dear to so many Catholic journalists of the time”⁵. It would be precisely Pecci who would begin a debate with modernity through his magisterium recalling the fact that the Church is called to a work of continual discernment. As Acerbi states the Church herself “was able, in a certain sense, to legitimise the new society. This is really the aim of the Leonine magisterium: to offer a synthesis in which merge the positive elements of the modern experience together with the theological and social theses of Catholic doctrine”⁶.

The issue is really about the synthesis, in other words the epistemological element of the synthesis, to avoid social magisterium being identified simply with moral theology or BEING REDUCED to a sort of religious sociology.

3. The social magisterium of Pope Francis

Since the Social Doctrine of the Church is a body of thought in permanent development, the dynamic of discernment is essential, since its theological activity happens at the intersection between the Word of God and the concrete reality offered by the *rerum novarum* of each historic moment. It is therefore appropriate that the CSD examines the signs of the times, above all the signs of society in all its dimensions, in order to respond to historic and changing challenges. Only thus can the Church offer responses which, flowing from the solid principles of her social doctrine, can illuminate changing realities with the permanent light of the Gospel. For the Church, therefore, discernment is an act of faithfulness to God and to humanity, and this category becomes decisive because it enables us to be interpreters of history according to God’s perspective; it is knowing how *to be reborn from above* to see in the correct light. Thus begin processes able to proceed on past history without ever repeating it as if it were a static principle.

Pope Francis’ perspective is placed within the dynamics of discernment. “Before the evils or problems of the Church”, he said at the Convention of the Italian Church in Florence, “it is useless to seek solutions in conservatism and fundamentalism, in the restoration of obsolete practices and forms that even culturally lack the capacity to be meaningful. Christian doctrine is not a closed system, incapable of raising questions, doubts, inquiries, but is living, is able to unsettle, is able to enliven. It has a face that is supple, a body that moves and develops, flesh that is tender: Christian doctrine is called Jesus Christ”.

The social teaching of Pope Francis enters into such a perspective and wants to re-awaken and involve in a commitment which is inscribed in the DNA of being Church, her teaching and her activity, the DNA of a people of men and women who, having received the gift of filial life, live as leaven in society, with differences but without contrasts but with that integral specificity to allow testimony.

In other words, the Church, her praxis and teaching is to do with the proper logic of the incarnation which is dynamic and calls for continual discernment. In fact, just as Leo XIII did then, so today Pope Francis calls for a work of discernment which is the “the compass which

⁵ A. Acerbi, *Chiesa e democrazia. Da Leone XIII al Vaticano II*, Vita e pensiero 1991, p. 26.

⁶ Ivi., p. 29.

orients the journey of a people [...] the art of evaluation, sifting, distinguishing principles, scientific data: the historic feeling of a culture to take a decision”⁷.

A living Church for a society equally alive to contribute to it as citizens able to hold together, to make unity of things which differentiate us. Not sheltering in similarity, but a solution in difference is the endeavour of the political and civil commitment of believers. “May the Church”, Pope Francis continued, “also be able to give a clear response to the threats that emerge from public debate: this is one of the forms of specific contribution of believers to the building of a common society. Believers are citizens. I say it here in Florence, where art, faith and citizenship are always arranged in a dynamic balance between complaint and proposal. The nation is not a museum but a collective work under permanent construction in which the very things that differentiate, including political or religious memberships, are to be placed in common”.

4. The Encyclical *Laudato si'*

Starting from the perspective briefly outlined above, we can indicate at least three constants in the social magisterium of Pope Francis. Conscious that it is a process to start and difficult to fulfil. “Even against the intentions of their proponents, however, solutions proposed on one side or another may be easily confused by many people with the Gospel message. Hence it is necessary for people to remember that no one is allowed in the aforementioned situations to appropriate the Church’s authority for his opinion” (GS 43).

Pope Francis himself underlines in *Laudato si'* the fundamental axes of his contribution to social doctrine, which run through the whole of the encyclical letter. They are themes which the Holy Father has constantly emphasised, examining in depth and broadening these themes which have become, moreover, one of the main arguments of his pontificate. By way of example, the Pope offers a not exhaustive list of some of these arguments in the encyclical: “the intimate relationship between the poor and the fragility of the planet, the conviction that everything in the world is connected, the critique of new paradigms and forms of power derived from technology, the call to seek other ways of understanding the economy and progress, the value proper to each creature, the human meaning of ecology, the need for forthright and honest debate, the serious responsibility of international and local policy, the throwaway culture and the proposal of a new lifestyle. These questions will not be dealt with once and for all, but reframed and enriched again and again” (LS 16).

This summary provided by the Pope includes the fundamental elements for understanding his diagnosis of the situation, to identify the main victims of the ecological (socio-environmental) crisis and to know the ways he sees for possible solutions. So we are proposing this analysis in three phases which also coincide with the constants of his social magisterium:

The diagnosis. There is an ecological crisis which manifests itself in a simultaneous environmental and social neglect, and which is firmly anchored in an anthropological problem reflected in the prevalence of a mainly technocratic model of development. This has an impact at a global level, since in Creation “everything is connected”, so human relations and social dynamics generate and suffer at the same time the consequences of their own actions.

⁷ F. Ochetto, *Ricostruiamo la politica. Orientarsi nel tempo del populismo*, San Paolo Cinisello, 2019 p. 17.

The victims. The ecological crisis impacts in particular the most vulnerable people in society, at a local and global level, those who live (or “survive”) in those peripheries which the Pope has defined as “territorial and existential” of contemporary societies. This phenomenon of social harm manifests itself in new types of exclusion, that is in millions of people discarded by society and excluded from the benefits of a type of development characterised by injustice and the lack of humanity.

A proposal for a solution. The Holy Father insists on the fact that the urgent challenges facing humanity demand an integral response, not just technical but especially human, which requires a global conversion of the criteria which govern political, economic and social decisions, as well as individual ones. These solutions will be found only through open and sincere dialogue, to which Francis openly calls well beyond the confines of the Catholic Church.

4.1 The diagnosis

In *Laudato si'* Pope Francis states that the Earth is sick, and call this earth “our common home”, explaining that this refers not just to the biological and environmental dimension of the planet, but to the integrity of the place in which we live, greatly wounded by the activity of humanity. “This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her” (LS 2).

Francis calls the planet “home”, referring to the physical place in which the *human family* co-exists with all the other creatures. Thus is established a vision of togetherness, a conception of Creation as a complex system which goes beyond the vision of ecology as a purely biological fact. For this reason the Pope states that “When we speak of the “environment”, what we really mean is a relationship existing between nature and the society which lives in it” (LS 139).

As regards the inter-connectivity between mother earth and the men and women who inhabit it, it is interesting to note that the verbs used in Gen 2:15 about *cultivating* and *caring* for the earth also describe “the cultic service and observance of the divine law, foundation of the covenant between God and his people. There is, therefore, a sacred primordial covenant between created and human creature”⁸.

Now, with this “house” the Pope associates the category “our”, in fact he speaks of “our common house”, underlining it as that gift which we have received but which has been loaned to us, which we can use, but which we must not ransack. “Beginning in the middle of the last century and overcoming many difficulties, there has been a growing conviction that our planet is a homeland and that humanity is one people living in a common home” (LS 164). For Pope Francis it really is a house which is ours, but which also belongs to others. “The natural environment is a collective good, the patrimony of all humanity and the responsibility of everyone. If we make something our own, it is only to administer it for the good of all” (LS 95).

So the Earth must be understood as a common good, as something community rather than collective, a source of resources to which every human being has rights, but also duties. The earth, air and water, just to give some examples of essential natural resources, must be available for everyone, but at the same time it is the responsibility of everyone to preserve them.

⁸ G. Ravasi, *Il cosmo, profusione di bellezza in cielo e sulla terra*, in Path, 2020, n. 2, p. 206.

Thus the Pope declares that this good, “our common home”, is not available to everyone and, furthermore, it is being plundered by private and selfish interests causing damage with significant environmental and social consequences. So the Pope denounces the globalisation of the technocratic paradigm which rules the lives of millions of people (LS 106), forcing them to adopt lifestyles which end up being oppressive and subjecting them to economic and financial models which kill. In this context, the Holy Father identifies as the most urgent but not the only problems pollution and climate change; conflicts about the use and abuse of water; harm to biodiversity; the deterioration of the quality of human life and the breaking of social bonds; the scandalous gap between rich and poor which is repeated throughout the world; and finally indifference about these situations which allows the problems (environmental and social) to intensify faced with the world’s perplexities.

According to Francis, all these symptoms have a common origin which lies in human behaviour. In fact, he states that “It would hardly be helpful to describe symptoms without acknowledging the human origins of the ecological crisis. A certain way of understanding human life and activity has gone awry, to the serious detriment of the world around us” (LS 101). The Pope links this conviction to a statement repeated ad infinitum throughout the whole of the encyclical letter, that is “everything is connected”, underlining that there are no actions which are innocuous or without consequences either for nature or for society. “Everything is connected. Concern for the environment thus needs to be joined to a sincere love for our fellow human beings and an unwavering commitment to resolving the problems of society” (LS 91). During the General Audience of 22 April 2020, which coincided with the 50th Earth Day, the Holy Father returned to this theme and stated that “We have failed to care for the earth, our garden-home; we have failed to care for our brothers and sisters. We have sinned against the earth, against our neighbours, and ultimately against the Creator”.

In summary, we can say that the Pope provides a severe diagnosis of a sick Earth, an ecological crisis viewed in an integral perspective, where environmental neglect is taking place at the same time as human and social neglect. And since on the planet, “our common home”, everything is connected, the impact of the sickness is spread throughout the world, but there are those who suffer more the consequences of this sickness. And the people struck by it are above all the poorest and most vulnerable.

4.2 The victims: the cry of the poor

From the start of his Petrine ministry, the Pope has wanted to be the voice of the excluded, of the marginalised, of those discarded by development. This is another very clear fundamental element of his teaching which must always be linked to a consistent attitude. In fact, he himself said that after he was elected successor of Peter he chose the name Francis, moved by the plea of the Brazilian Cardinal Claudio Hummes who asked him not to forget the poor.

The Holy Father’s option for the poor has been expressed in messages and his actions. His apostolic journeys have been mainly to developing nations, where up-close meetings with the most vulnerable of those societies have been put first. So it is no surprise that in *Laudato si’* on many occasions there is emphasis on how the poor are those most impacted by the ecological crisis, to the point of identifying their suffering with the cry of the wounded earth: “It needs to be said that, generally speaking, there is little in the way of clear awareness of problems which especially affect the excluded. Yet they are the majority of the planet’s population, billions of people. ... Today, however, we have to realize that a true ecological approach *always* becomes

a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*” (LS 49).

For Francis it is very clear that “The human environment and the natural environment deteriorate together” and that “the deterioration of the environment and of society affects the most vulnerable people on the planet: “Both everyday experience and scientific research show that the gravest effects of all attacks on the environment are suffered by the poorest”” (LS 48), he says, quoting a statement made by the Bolivian Bishops’ Conference.

In fact, in the encyclical the Pope takes time to describe in very concrete terms how the phenomena of environmental deterioration often become a very heavy burden for the most vulnerable populations: “Many of the poor live in areas particularly affected by phenomena related to warming, and their means of subsistence are largely dependent on natural reserves and ecosystemic services such as agriculture, fishing and forestry. They have no other financial activities or resources which can enable them to adapt to climate change or to face natural disasters, and their access to social services and protection is very limited. For example, changes in climate, to which animals and plants cannot adapt, lead them to migrate; this in turn affects the livelihood of the poor, who are then forced to leave their homes, with great uncertainty for their future and that of their children. There has been a tragic rise in the number of migrants seeking to flee from the growing poverty caused by environmental degradation” (LS 25).

In his reflection, Pope Francis knows how to combine the individual and incarnate gaze on people with the more global perspective. That is why he warns that this drama of “Inequity affects not only individuals but entire countries; it compels us to consider an ethics of international relations” (LS 51), an ethics which according to the Pope is still not enough, because “Sadly, there is widespread indifference to such suffering, which is even now taking place throughout our world” (LS 25).

On the other hand the Holy Father also warns about reductive ecological approaches, that is, those which are slightly sentimentalist and seek the healing of the earth, the conservation of biodiversity, the care of ecosystems, and the protection of the planet, but ignore the fate of its human inhabitants, above all that of the poorest. In fact, Francis states that “A sense of deep communion with the rest of nature cannot be real if our hearts lack tenderness, compassion and concern for our fellow human beings” (LS 91). And he goes further, indicating that “every ecological approach needs to incorporate a social perspective which takes into account the fundamental rights of the poor and the underprivileged” (LS 93).

4.3 The proposal: an international commitment and a global ecological conversion

Faithful to his very propositional style, Pope Francis does not stop at the prophetic denunciation of injustice, but taking the witness of the Church’s Social Doctrine, he also suggests ways to find solutions. Not to give them, but to look for them. The Social Doctrine of the Church knows perfectly well that it is not called to offer technical or scientific solutions, but above all to guide from the Gospel the human criteria which inspire the promotion of a more just and fraternal world. The diagnosis of *Laudato si’* about the global impact of ecological problems therefore calls for a response which involves the whole of humanity, for which world leaders have a special responsibility, both at the local and international level in relations between the different peoples. As final objective, Pope Francis proposes a conversion to a truly integral ecology

“which clearly respects its human and social dimensions” (LS 137) and which is willing to reflect on “and debate about the conditions required for the life and survival of society, and the honesty needed to question certain models of development, production and consumption” (LS 138). So the Holy Father states that it “is essential to seek comprehensive solutions which consider the interactions within natural systems themselves and with social systems. ... Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature” (LS 139).

The Pope’s appeal which encourages an ecological conversion is addressed to all people of goodwill, because “The urgent challenge to protect our common home includes a concern to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development, for we know that things can change “(LS 13). So the path proposed is a dialogue, a real “conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all” (LS 14). This will to listen to everyone is manifested in a constant commitment of the pontificate of Pope Francis to build bridges with experts of different disciplines, and also in listening to and sharing with other religious traditions which often enrich his reflections as successor of Peter, too.

An obvious consequence of the fact that “everything is connected” is that we, too, “are all linked”. In fact the Pope has spoken of “that (blessed) common belonging, of which we cannot be deprived: our belonging as brothers and sisters” (Urbi et orbi of 27 March 2020). Irrefutable proof of this is the world health crisis generated and caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Because of this, in front of the anguish of millions of people who were following his homily on that day of the extraordinary Urbi et orbi blessing, the Holy Father reiterated that “We have realized that we are on the same boat, all of us fragile and disoriented, but at the same time important and needed, all of us called to row together, each of us in need of comforting the other. On this boat... are all of us. Just like those disciples, who spoke anxiously with one voice, saying “We are perishing” (v. 38), so we too have realized that we cannot go on thinking of ourselves, but only together can we do this” (Urbi et orbi, 27 March 2020).

Consequently, the Holy Father, as a citizen of modern society, continues to call for a change in our individual and community attitudes, so that the cry of the wounded earth which is heard particularly in the voice of the poor may find those urgent responses which must materialise in the human promotion of every human person and the whole of humanity. For Francis there is no other path than the commitment of everyone to heal the earth, a collective effort proper to a human community which gradually is becoming aware of the need to heal the social bonds between each other. “As a single and interdependent family, we require a common plan in order to avert the threats to our common home. “Interdependence obliges us to think of one world with a common plan” (LS 164). We are aware of the importance of cooperation as an international community for the protection of our common home” (22 April 2020, World Earth Day).