

## ***Mater et Magistra: The role of the Church's Magisterium in the development of social thought***

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### **Introduction**

“The Church in each country, under the Pastoral guidance of the local bishops, has a continuing duty to apply the values of the gospel to the problems of the society and so help all members of the Church, lay, religious and ordained to play an active part in striving to build a just and compassionate social order”.<sup>1</sup> Here the duty of the Church is highlighted as that of guiding the faithful in matters of faith and morals in a society. “For more than a century the Catholics have analysed the issues of life in society to propose fundamental principles, to define judgement criteria and suggest concrete guidelines”.<sup>2</sup> This whole thought is called ‘Catholic Social Doctrine’. Several Popes have taken the lead in expounding Catholic Social Teaching by writing many documents called Encyclical Letters. One such letter is the *Mater et Magistra*. This article seeks to discuss the role of the Magisterium in the development of the social thought, in light of *Mater et Magistra*.

### **The Church's Magisterium**

The Church upholds the truth and safeguards it. God gave authority to the Church to teach the truth. This authority to teach is called the Magisterium of the Church. The magisterium is the highest teaching office of the Church. Magisterium is the teaching that comes from the Church's leaders. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that “The Pope and the Bishops are authentic teachers, that is teachers endowed with the authority of Christ, who preach the faith to the people entrusted to them, the faith to be believed and put into practice. The ordinary and universal Magisterium of the Pope and the Bishops in communion with him teaches the faithful the truth to believe, the charity to practice, the beatitude to hope for”.<sup>3</sup> The magisterium says that the Church is “the pillar and ground of the truth”. At the same time, it is the source of life to all who are lost and those who need guidance. Jesus gave two tasks to the Church, to teach and to guide the faithful in their personal capacities

and also as nations and to do that with motherly care. The Church needs to always see to it that her children are well fed with correct knowledge. “Great is their dignity also, a dignity which she has always guarded most zealously and held in the highest esteem”.<sup>4</sup>

“It is said that Christianity is the meeting-point of earth and heaven. It lays claim to the whole man, body and soul, intellect and will, inducing him to raise his mind above the changing conditions of this earthly existence and reach upwards for the eternal life of heaven, where one day he will find his unfailing happiness and peace”.<sup>5</sup> Those who are in this Church need to reflect that they are living a life that they show heaven on earth by leading a just life and a life full of charity.

### *Mater et Magistra*

The term *Mater et Magistra* means Mother and Teacher and this document describes the Church in her role as Mother and Teacher of all nations. This encyclical was written by Pope John XXIII on May 15 in 1961. It was written when the Second World War had ended and the Cold War had begun. This encyclical letter was written as a continuity of previous encyclicals which are *Rerum Novarum* of 1891 and *Quadragesimo Anno* of 1931. In *Mater et Magistra*, Pope John XXIII makes great reference to these two documents. The world had drastically changed in the last 30 years from *Quadragesimo Anno* of 1931. After the war things had changed politically, economically and socially that led the highest office of the church to promulgate this encyclical.

### **The Role of The Church’s Magisterium in *Mater et Magistra***

*Mater et Magistra* then came in to explore the role of the Church in issues dealing with social progress and justice in the world with the intention of giving or raising awareness on the dignity of all people. For a long time, the Church’s role has been to educate and direct people towards salvation. “Though the Church’s first care must be for souls, how she can sanctify them and make them share in the gifts of heaven, she concerns herself with the exigencies of man’s daily life, with his livelihood and education, and his general welfare and prosperity”.<sup>6</sup> She was mainly concerned with the care of souls and leading them to the kingdom of

heaven. Apart from this, the Church's role also involves the taking care of the livelihood, education and complete wellbeing of humanity. The Church must not only show concern on spiritual things or matters. Her authorities make it a point that the people know that it is their concern that the faithful lead a life full of charity and human respect. Following Jesus' example who, in as much as his primary mission was salvation for mankind, he still fed the hungry and had concern for their worldly needs. "The Church in all this is but giving effect to those principles which Christ Himself established in the Church He founded when He said 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life'".<sup>7</sup> The social life of the faithful is the concern of the Church leaders since the Church itself exists in the world where harmony must prevail among the people. *Mater et Magistra* looked at Christianity and Social Progress.

Coleman states that, "Pope John XXIII, in this encyclical, refers and strongly affirms the teachings of earlier encyclicals and boldly emphasises their lessons such as the recognition of work as a human activity, the right to private property and the right of workers to enter into association".<sup>8</sup> He also points out the importance of Christian Brotherhood when undertaking all these activities. In this encyclical, it is expressed that "in light of individual enterprises being the key to economic progress, the state is asked to be very careful and not interfere with one's capabilities to support his or her family. It is highlighted that with the increase of social relationships made possible by the latest technologies, the workers had a right to a fair and just wage."<sup>9</sup> A worker's wage had to reflect his or her contribution to a company. There should be a just wage determined in accordance with justice and equality.

The document further highlights that "a nation should have a clear balance between economic development and social progress and not undermine the welfare of the people for financial gain".<sup>10</sup> There should be equal distribution of properties together with ownership in business enterprises and economic and social policies should be applied to promote it. In this encyclical, the Pope strongly urges the faithful to keep in mind the fact that property and riches do not have any spiritual significance but the most important thing is striving towards being in the Kingdom of God, in heaven. But it encourages the people to realise that they need to

build the kingdom of God here on earth by leading a just life, a life full of charity and human respect.

One of the other important outcomes of this encyclical is about the wages which are just. The Church says that, for the workers to receive just wages they need not be determined by the marketplace or by the employers alone but there must be an agreement. “It must be determined in accordance with justice and equity; which means that workers must be paid a wage which allows them to live a truly human life and to fulfil their family obligations in a worthy manner”.<sup>11</sup> There are factors to consider when gazetting a just wage in a society, “the effective contribution which each individual makes to the economic effort, the financial state of the company for which he works and finally the requirements of the common good of the universal family of nations of every kind, both large and small”.<sup>12</sup> The Church states that the above principles are valid always and everywhere and they help us to have a just society where workers are justly remunerated. But for a society to be just there must be free discussion between the employer and the employee, meaning the available resources must be shared justly even if it means they are not enough for all. Cassidy comments that “Pope John XXIII also reiterated on the issue of the relationship between the workers and managers whose relationship he said had to be re-established based on justice and equality”.<sup>13</sup> Workers were urged to be morally principled and have respect for civil law in line with the common good. A worker has to take a break from work as well. This should be done so as to regain strength and renew his or her spiritual life. This gives time for worshipping God and attending Mass. Employers also were urged to be considerate and keep the common good in mind whenever they pursued economic activity. Here common good means sharing everything equally, seeing that the natural resources are shared equally among all.

The rich countries or the more developed countries were also urged to help the under developed countries who were struggling to provide basic necessities to their people. They should help by feeding the hungry, building shelter for the homeless, as well as upgrading their infrastructure and developing their technology. As this happens, respect for each country’s individuality and dignity of each person had to be accorded.

However, the Church realises that,

development in social relationships brings many advantages in its train. It makes it possible for the individual to exercise many of his personal rights, especially those which we call economic and social and which pertain to the necessities of life, health care, education on a more extensive and improved basis, a more thorough professional training, housing, work, and suitable leisure and recreation. Furthermore, the progressive perfection of modern methods of thought, diffusion of the press, cinema, radio, television makes it possible for everyone to participate in human events the world over.<sup>14</sup>

The problem which the Church authorities notice and teach is to make sure that as the people are socially taught there must not be an increase in laws and restrictions that jeopardize human life. These laws will narrow the person's freedom of action. Naturally man acts freely if he is in a free environment, but when the environment is restrictive then, even the person will find it hard to behave freely and to have his own initiatives. When there is no personal freedom, you cannot hold anyone accountable or responsible for his or her actions, the church reminds the government authorities to put in place laws that do not suppress freedom of expression. There should be freedom and responsibility put into practice.

The encyclical stresses the need for rebuilding or reconstruction of a social order. The document strongly urges that in as much as man can make all technical and economic progress, there will be no peace nor justice in the world until they return to a sense of their dignity as creatures and children of God.<sup>15</sup> It is said that a man separated from God is nothing but a monster. Pope John XXIII emphasises the need for the formation of man's conscience aligning it to God, the principal source of all justice, truth and love.<sup>16</sup> One has to allow God to rule one's life. The document also stresses the point that men are by nature, social beings. The church builds her social teaching by stressing this point and at the same time guaranteeing an individual's dignity. "The principles she gives are of a universal application, for they take human nature into account, and the varying conditions in which man's life is lived, taking into account the principal characteristics of contemporary society".<sup>18</sup> This encyclical

also urges the studying of social doctrine in most educational institutions, be it in seminaries, lay institutions or in associations, parishes and all Catholic schools to have a curriculum promoting social teaching. Social doctrine was also urged to be included in most publications such as newspapers, magazines and also broadcasted on radio and television. It also emphasised the point that social doctrine should not only be studied but put into practice as well. The basic principle of See, Judge and Act should be applied when putting social principles into practice. In the event of a conflict, disagreement or argument, people are urged not to lose respect for each other but instead find a common ground and resolve amicably. When in contact with those who do not share the same Catholic faith, the document urges Catholics not to do anything that compromises their religion and morality. They have to do everything in a spirit of understanding and unselfishness.

### **Conclusion**

The encyclical *Mater et Magistra* is of great importance in how the society needs to live. It points out important points which each individual needs to remember and consider putting into practice. It serves as the voice of the voiceless as it promotes human dignity and a life lived in charity. This letter has something in common with *Rerum Novarum* and it makes emphasis of many same points. It made clear that even private properties are to be seen as means to promote human race, not to be seen as instruments of personal gain or self-rule. Hence, it reiterates that, as Leo XIII so wisely taught in *Rerum Novarum*: “whoever has received from the divine bounty a large share of temporal blessings, whether they be external and corporeal, or gifts of the mind, has received them for the purpose of using them for the perfecting of his own nature, and, at the same time, that he may employ them, as the steward of God’s Providence, for the benefit of others”. The church says those with talents must not hide them for they are for the good of all meaning that this encyclical calls for unity of purpose amongst everyone.

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<sup>1</sup> Coleman, John J. *Globalisation and Catholic Social Thought: Present Crisis, Future Hope*. (New York: Orbis Books, 2005.) 23.

<sup>2</sup> Holland, Joe. *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: The Popes Confront the*

- Industrial Age 1740-1958. (New York: Paulist Press, 2003.) 9.
- <sup>3</sup> The Catechism of the Catholic Church, CCC. (Nairobi: Pauline Publications, Africa, 1994.) 2034.
  - <sup>4</sup> Mater et Magistra. Encyclical of Pope John XXIII on Christianity and Progress, 1961, 5.
  - <sup>5</sup> Atherton, John. *Christianity and the New Social Order: A Manifesto for the Future*. (London: SPCK Press, 2011.) 36.
  - <sup>6</sup> Mater et Magistra. Encyclical of Pope John XXIII on Christianity and Progress, 1961. N\*3
  - <sup>7</sup> Himes, Kenneth R. *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: Commentaries and Interpretations*. (Washington DC: George Town University Press, 2004.) 10.
  - <sup>8</sup> Coleman, John J. *Globalisation and Catholic Social Thought: Present Crisis, Future Hope*. (New York: Orbis Books, 2005.) 17
  - <sup>9</sup> Mater et Magistra. Encyclical of Pope John XXIII on Christianity and Progress, 1961, 15.
  - <sup>10</sup> Mater et Magistra. Encyclical of Pope John XXIII on Christianity and Progress, 1961, 17.
  - <sup>11</sup> Mater et Magistra. Encyclical of Pope John XXIII on Christianity and Progress, 1961, 71.
  - <sup>12</sup> Mater et Magistra. Encyclical of Pope John XXIII on Christianity and Progress, 1961, 72.
  - <sup>13</sup> Cassidy, Eoin G. *The Common Good in an Unequal World*. (Dublin: Betaprint Publishers, 2007.) 13.
  - <sup>14</sup> Mater et Magistra. Encyclical of Pope John XXIII on Christianity and Progress, 1961, 62.
  - <sup>15</sup> Mater et Magistra. Encyclical of Pope John XXIII on Christianity and Progress, 1961, 221.
  - <sup>16</sup> Mater et Magistra. Encyclical of Pope John XXIII on Christianity and Progress, 1961, 222.
  - <sup>17</sup> Mater et Magistra. Encyclical of Pope John XXIII on Christianity and Progress, 1961, 220.
  - <sup>18</sup> Holland, Joe. *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: The Popes Confront the Industrial Age 1740-1958*. (New York: Paulist Press, 2003.) 9.