

## Introduction

I am a graduate student of Religious Education and Catechetics. At the undergraduate level of study, I attended a compulsory course on Social Teaching of the Church and elective courses under the titles: «Christian Caritas and Social Advocacy» and «Human rights and the Social Teaching of the Church». Attending these courses helped me acquire an interest in the presentation of the Church's social themes in Catholic religious education. My wish is to point out how the Church's social teaching can be interesting in religious education and in the service as a teacher of religion for which I am preparing.

Catholic religious education in Croatian public schools is a compulsory-elective subject. Under the influence of radical secularist currents, discussions about Catholic religious education often take place in the public space, and the main question is whether this education should be held in public schools. However, it is an undeniable fact that religious education gives a young person both knowledge and guidance for life, more than any other subject. Likewise, it is irrefutable that in the whole teaching process the most important role is that of the religion teacher, and the way he or she teaches, as well as the ease of access to religious education classes.

I see the relevance of Catholic religious education in its social themes. Key questions are: how explicitly and how implicitly is the Church's social teaching present in religious education programs, and how to teach religious education properly while giving the lead to the social teaching of the Church and its contents?

### 1. Social teaching of the Church is «a valid instrument of evangelization»

It is in the essence of the social teaching of the Church to interpret human life in society in accordance with the Gospel teachings on man himself, his social nature, and the social reality that surrounds him.

Social teaching is important for the complete development and formation of every human person. Its goal is also to accompany and assist the full development of the human person in society. Thus, the social teaching of the Church becomes an essential element of education and forma-

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tion in faith. When we ask ourselves as believers on what grounds to build our life, society, and relationships in it, the Catholic Church offers us, and reveals, the treasures of the social teaching of the Church, which serve us as a guiding light and inspiration for action.

In 1987, Pope John Paul II in the social encyclical *Sollicitudo rei socialis* writes: «The teaching and spreading of her social doctrine are part of the Church's evangelizing mission. And since it is a doctrine aimed at guiding people's behavior, it consequently gives rise to a "commitment to justice", according to each individual's role, vocation and circumstances». <sup>1</sup> John Paul II already stresses here, though he will only use this term later, that the Church's social teaching is actually *an instrument of evangelization*: «This is why the Church has something to say today, just as twenty years ago, and also in the future, about the nature, conditions, requirements and aims of authentic development, and also about the obstacles which stand in its way. In doing so the Church fulfills her mission to evangelize, for she offers her first contribution to the solution of the urgent problem of development when she proclaims the truth about Christ, about herself and about man, applying this truth to a concrete situation» (SRS 41). Likewise in the encyclical *Centesimus annus* of 1991, when he also proclaimed the Year of the Social Teaching of the Church, and used the expression that the social teaching of the Church is «a valid instrument of evangelization», <sup>2</sup> Saint Pope John Paul II holds that the social teaching of the Church cannot be only theoretical; its gospel mission should also be seen as an impulse to act in the direction of changing harmful lifestyles, production and consumption models, and those structures of power that prevent or hinder the integral development of the human person and of society (cfr. CA 53; 54).

In this perspective — «that the Church's social teaching is at the heart of the Church's mission» <sup>3</sup> — the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace put together and published in 2004 the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the*

*Church* in which, in the third part *Social doctrine and ecclesial action* it indicates a strong link between the social teaching of the Church and religious formation: «The Church's social doctrine is an indispensable reference point for a totally integrated Christian formation». <sup>4</sup>

### 2. Catholic religious education in the service of the New Evangelization

To talk about Catholic religious education means to talk about the individual and social dimensions of a faith that needs to grow and develop. It opens a space of opportunity for the permanent and intensive formation of the lay faithful, i.e. the space for formation and training of young people for true freedom, with a sense of accountability and cooperation with others for the humanization of temporal realities. It is therefore an important task to promote and strengthen the formative value of the Church's social teaching in Catholic religious education. With its transposition into religious education, the social teaching of the Church becomes a form of theoretical-practical knowledge, not limited to the contemplation of social reality. It is the fruit of evangelization in the social field. It is the proclamation of the work of salvation of Jesus Christ. <sup>5</sup>

What is praiseworthy and important is that the study program to become a teacher of religion that I attend pays special attention to the Church's social teaching. During my first six semesters, I listened to and studied the theoretical part of education and catechesis. In the sixth semester, I had a course in the Social Teaching of the Church, as well as elective courses in that area. Now, in the seventh and eighth semesters of my studies, I have the opportunity to acquire practical knowledge. Through the prism of teaching practice in school, I have gained practical insight into the possibilities of working with children, as well as a deeper insight into the essence of Catholic Religious Teaching.

The Catholic Curriculum for primary and secondary schools in the Republic of

Croatia is rich in a variety of subjects, from mandatory to elective. Though largely implicitly, the contents of the Church's social teaching are also present. During my teaching practice I had the opportunity to talk to the students about the dignity of the human person, the virtues, human rights and *caritas*, even though at that time it was not teaching any topic of with these names. In the fourth grade of the elementary school I treated the subject of Jesus' temptation in the desert; we know how much this implies questions of relationship and social status.

I would particularly point out a teaching unit that at first glance has no connection with the Church's social teaching. It is called *Jesus Christ – the greatest of all prophets*, assigned to the seventh grade of elementary school. I talked with the students as to why Jesus is the greatest prophet and what his actions were like. The answers were as follows: Jesus healed the sick, He met with customs officers and sinners, with the poor and rejected, with those who were on the brink of society; Jesus «saw» the man; He saw the human need for love and mercy. I had not been quite aware of how much one religious lesson can direct young people to social topics. Thus I agree with the attitude that our professors Baloban and Migles enthusiastically conveyed to us students, which is that the future of religious education depends on the implementation of the social teaching of the Church.

Furthermore, an important part of the class lesson is the «actualization» that comes at the very end. Actualization in the methodological and pedagogical way of helping the students is to bring what he or she has learnt in class into his or her personal and social life. Again, the importance of the social teaching of the Church is revealed. We observe life-time activity, evangelization, reflection on one's own life as well as the lives of other people; on how to make it better, higher in quality and more purposeful.

### 3. The Social Teaching of the Church makes Catholic religious education relevant

In the vision of the Church's social teaching, Catholic religious education has the task to educate for «an integral and sol-

idary humanism».<sup>6</sup> Pope Francis keeps repeating that good education «is the backbone of humanism».<sup>7</sup> In the document *Educating to fraternal humanism* (2017), the Congregation for Catholic Education defines the fundamental lines of education that are entirely directed towards humanized, healthy and open education.<sup>8</sup> To achieve this, Pope Francis points out: «we need to realize that certain mindsets really do influence our behavior. Our efforts at education will be inadequate and ineffectual unless we strive to promote a new way of thinking about human beings, life, society and our relationship with nature».<sup>9</sup> Humanized education is not limited to providing and receiving lessons; it is rather about education that is thorough and open, which links and promotes the wealth of human potential. The very presence of the Catholic Church's social teaching in Catholic religious education provides a harmonious development of moral and intellectual abilities, growth in freedom, as well as positive and wise sexual education. The culture of dialogue is also vitally important, and it can be fostered by young people through the education of a humanism built on solidarity.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, social spirituality is an integral part of a religion teacher's identity. The religion teacher is the person who is sent to testify in the name of the Church through his or her knowledge and by example. To be a teacher is first of all a life calling. It is a path that, especially today, is not at all easy. Religion teachers are faced with the various tasks that are placed before them in the upbringing of children. To carry out these tasks it is necessary to know how to approach the pupil; indeed, to see, listen, talk to, and dedicate oneself to him or her. In order to do so, teachers should continually work on their growth and development in a professional, spiritual and social sense. Hence, authentic spirituality cannot be observed outside one's competence in the Church's social teaching. In the words of John Paul II, «Thus for the lay faithful, to be present and active in the world is not only an anthropological and sociological reality, but in a specific way, a theological and ecclesiological reality as well».<sup>11</sup>

## Final thought

Thinking about this subject I have become aware that the social teaching of the Church represents has powerful potential for evangelization. It is for the religion teachers, and tomorrow for me as well, to try gradually to uncover the «hidden wealth» of the social teaching of the Church through the testimony of their life and then through the instruction they give in the Catholic faith. Guided by that vision, I also want to succeed one day!

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>JOHN PAUL II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, 30-XII-1987, no. 41. (Further: SRS).

<sup>2</sup>Idem, *Centesimus annus*, 1-V-1991, no. 54 (Further: CA); PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 2-IV-2004, no. 2; 67. (Further: *Compendium*).

<sup>3</sup>Renato Raffaele kard. MARTINO, *Kompendij socijalnog nauka Crkve*, in: Stjepan BALOBAN – Gordan ČRPIĆ (eds.), *Socijalni kompendij: izazov i nadahnuće*, Zagreb, 2007, p. 15.

<sup>4</sup>*Compendium*, no. 528.

<sup>5</sup>Cfr. Alojzije HOBLAJ, *Socijalna dimenzija kršćana u župnoj katezezi i u školskom vjeronauku*, in: Stjepan BALOBAN (ed.), *Kršćanin u javnom životu*, Centar za promicanje socijalnog nauka Crkve–Glas Koncila, Zagreb, 1999, p. 120.

<sup>6</sup>*Compendium*, no. 327.

<sup>7</sup>CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION, *Educating to fraternal humanism. Building a "civilization of love" 50 years after Populorum progressio*, 16-IV-2017, no. 9.

<sup>8</sup>Ivi, no. 11.

<sup>9</sup>Pope FRANCIS, *Laudato si'*, 24-V-2015, no. 215.

<sup>10</sup>Cfr. *Educating to fraternal humanism. Building a "civilization of love" 50 years after Populorum progressio*, no. 120.

<sup>11</sup>JOHN PAUL II, *Christifideles laici*, 30-XII-1988, no. 15.