

# From Rejection to Proclamation

## *A Brief Overview of the Development of the Catholic Church's*

### *Thinking on Human Rights*

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Few people today would doubt that the Catholic Church is a great champion of human rights yet the Catholic Church has not always viewed the concept of human rights as a positive thing. The journey of the Catholic Church from an outright rejection of human rights, to a very active and committed proclamation of human rights, is instructive for us all as we celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.

Monsignor Franco Biffi, of the Lateran and Gregorian Universities, describes the Church's engagement with the idea of human rights as having passed through four phases: rejection; discernment; dialogue; and proclamation. The notes that follow are indebted to the work of Monsignor Biffi in course notes and in his article "Human Rights in the Magisterium of the Popes of the Twentieth Century", in *Human Rights a Christian Approach*, International Federation of Catholic Universities Research Coordination Centre, Manila, 1988.

## **1. THE PHASE OF REJECTION (PIUS VI - PIUS IX)**

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The Church's initial response to the French Revolution and the resultant *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* was complete rejection. This was essentially a defensive reaction against the anti-Christian, anti-religious, anti-clerical, rationalist and indifferentist spirit of the movement which produced the Charter of 1789.

The Church saw the French revolution as proclaiming a 'liberty' that was total and without limits. Such a 'liberty' was seen as ultimately promoting a freedom from God, the laws of God, and the social requirements of the common good. The base of this movement for liberty was naturalistic and materialist.

The Church's rejection of the human rights ideas being promoted reached a peak during the reign of Pope Gregory XVI. In *Mirari Vos* (1832) he saw freedom of opinion and the separation of Church and State as 'crazed absurdity'. He also rejected religious liberty, freedom of the press and indifferentism (the idea that it is possible to obtain salvation through the profession of any kind of religion ie being indifferent between different religions)

The logic of the Church at this time was as follows. The Roman Catholic faith is the true religion. It is good for people to believe what is true. The State is obliged to promote the common good. Therefore the State is bound to promote Catholic belief, and, wherever possible, to establish Catholicism as the religion of the State.

The basic idea was that error has no rights. The Church now sees persons as being the subject of rights rather than abstract concepts.

### **Key Papal Texts:**

Gregory XVI, *Mirari Vos*, 1832  
Pius IX, *Quanta Cura* & the *Syllabus of Errors*, 1864

## **2. THE PHASE OF DISCERNMENT (LEO XIII - PIUS XII)**

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Pope Leo XIII began to discern and accept some positive elements in the human rights ideas of his times. His great contribution to the Church's teaching on human rights was the incorporation of whatever he saw as true or healthy in the liberal institutions being established in society.

Leo XIII saw human dignity as the root of natural, universal and inviolable rights. He saw a need for the State to exercise authority according to the rule of law, to defend the powerless, and to promote the common good. In taking this position he stressed that the person is prior to and above the State and therefore the State has no

right to 'swallow up' the individual or family. In the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution, Leo XIII understood that the Church must become an advocate of the social and economic rights of the person and his landmark encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891) elaborates a whole series of socio-economic rights.

Pius XI developed further the thinking of the Church about the rights of the person in relation to the State. In *Non Abbiamo Bisogno* (1931) he spoke out against fascism and in favour of the liberty of conscience. In *Mit Brennender Sorge* (1937) he rejected Nazism and the idolatry of the state, emphasising the right to profess one's faith and live according to it and the primary right of parents to the education of their children. In *Divini Redemptoris* (1937) he rejected communism and its reversal of the order of relations between the person and the state. He also enunciated a whole range of the respective rights and duties of the person and the state. In the third of his 1937 encyclicals which became known collectively as the Easter Trilogy, *Nos Es Muy Conocida*, Pius XI made it clear that Catholic citizens should not passively accept the infringement of their religious and civil liberties and that defence of oneself and one's nation by legitimate and appropriate means (with certain conditions) is not prohibited.

Pius XII's thoughts during the second World War were already focussed on what would be needed to reconstruct just and peaceful nations. His Christmas radio messages were particularly important in setting the philosophical and juridical framework of the Church's approach to human rights and the role of the State. Pius XII's contribution is often overlooked because he published few encyclicals and lacked the charisma of John XXIII who was later to rely so heavily on his predecessor's work.

#### Key Papal Texts:

Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, 1891  
Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno*, 1931  
*Non Abbiamo Bisogno*, 1931  
*Mit Brennender Sorge*, 1937  
*Divini Redemptoris*, 1937  
*Nos Es Muy Conocida*, 1937  
Pius XII, *Summi Pontificatus*, 1939  
*Christmas Radio Messages* during  
Second World War, especially 1941, 1942, 1944

### 3. THE PHASE OF DIALOGUE (JOHN XXIII - VATICAN II)

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Pope John XXIII initiated a phase of dialogue between the Church and the international community on human rights. In his teachings and that of Vatican II the affirmation, defence and promotion of human rights was included with increasing clarity as one of the fundamental and indispensable tasks of the Church's mission.

In *Mater et Magistra* (1961) Pope John picked up Pius XII's revival of the expression the 'signs of the times' and he set about reading the hopeful and the concerning signs of his times. He identified as a positive sign of the times the increasing consciousness of their own dignity and rights of workers, women and newly independent nations.

*Pacem in Terris* (1963) is as close as the social magisterium of the Church in modern times comes to its own declaration of human rights. Pope John saw human rights as the basis of peace, without which real peace is not possible. He sets out the rights and duties of individuals within the community, and the rights and duties of political communities. He went on to outline the need for a supranational authority capable of ensuring a more enduring peace between nations.

In was in the context of the encyclical *Pacem in Terris* - addressed not only to Catholics but to all people of goodwill - that Pope John explicitly praised the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* which had been issued by the United Nations in 1948. This was highly significant given that his predecessor had passed the Declaration over in silence. Pope John built on the secular Declaration to produce a 'Christian Charter of human rights', which saw human rights as based on the dignity of the human person created in the image and likeness of God, and giving emphasis to the social nature of the person and the reciprocal nature of rights and duties. It had been the absence of these dimensions from the UN Declaration that had so disappointed Pius XII that he failed to explicitly welcome it. Pope John, as Cardinal Roncalli the Papal Nuncio in Paris, had worked on the drafting of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, and in *Pacem in Terris* he completed his own declaration.

The Second Vatican Council, initiated by Pope John and brought to completion by Pope Paul VI, focussed on the Church's role as a servant of humanity. All of the rights enunciated by the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* can be found in the texts of Vatican II, and especially in *Gaudium et Spes* (1965).

**Key Texts:**

John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, 1961  
*Pacem in Terris*, 1963  
Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 1965

## **4. THE PHASE OF ANNOUNCEMENT (PAUL VI TO THE PRESENT)**

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By 1971, the Synod of Bishops saw the promotion of human rights as not only part of the work of the Church, but as central to the demands of the Gospel. This theme was taken up by Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975) which sets out the relationship between evangelisation and the work for social justice, human rights and development.

Pope Paul taught about rights, duties and peace through a range of 'gestures of peace' such as the institution of the World Day of Prayer for Peace, and the establishment of the Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace (now a Pontifical Council). Pope Paul engaged in many of the activities and conferences of the United Nations and frequently made positive reference to the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. He worked hard to assist those whose rights had been violated although little of this 'diplomatic' action was known. He fostered ecumenical collaboration via SODEPAX (Committee on Research on Society, Development and Peace) which acted as a link between the World Council of Churches and the Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace. And it was Pope Paul who initiated the great Papal travels of our times.

During the past twenty years, Pope John Paul II has contributed strongly to the development of Catholic Social Teaching producing important social encyclicals and taking part in many significant international forums. His journeys to so many countries around the world have become an important tool for highlighting the particular forms of human rights abuses present in various parts of the world. The theological underpinnings of John Paul II's human rights work is explicitly Christological and incarnational. Followers of Christ, who embraced the human condition, must be lovers of humanity and are called to imitate him in defending the dignity and rights of every human person and of all peoples.

The Catholic Church's attitude to human rights has come a long way since the French Revolution. We now understand that far from offending God, the defence of human rights is the will of God.

**Key Texts:**

Synod of Bishops, *Justice in the World*, 1971  
Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, 1967  
*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 1975  
John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, 1979  
*Laborem Exercens*, 1981  
*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 1987  
*Centesimus Annus*, 1991

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