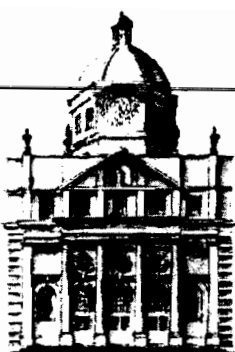


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**Speech by the Taoiseach, Mr. Bertie Ahern, T.D., at the opening of the  
Conference on the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church,  
“The Common Good in an Unequal World,”  
in Croke Park, on 2 March, 2006 at 9.35 am.**

I am very pleased to be with you this morning on the occasion of a very timely conference. The programme of speakers assembled for today bears testimony to the importance of the issues and the relevance of the initiative in publishing this impressive Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church. In welcoming Cardinal Martino, can I note the association of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, of which he is President and which produced the Compendium, with Archbishop Diarmuid Martin, who previously served as Secretary of the Pontifical Council.

I also notice that the Allegory of Good Government, from the Civic Palace in Siena, was chosen to illustrate the Compendium. I have always been interested in the fact that the Council of Siena met under that beautiful, but stern reminder of the consequences for citizens of the decisions that they made.

In my own experience, citizens are far more likely to reflect the message about Bad Government also portrayed in that room, by blaming the Government even for bad weather and poor sports results, without giving us any credit when things go well! Nonetheless, the message to Governments remains clear: to govern well; choose justice; and act justly by seeking wisdom.

The wisdom to be found in the social teaching contained in the Compendium is both ancient and modern. It is ancient, because it draws on the insight into the nature of the human person found in Scripture and the spiritual tradition of the Church over centuries. It is modern, in that the expression of its application to life today is to be found in the great documents of the Popes addressing contemporary issues. This begins with *Rerum Novarum* of Pope Leo XIII. That document dealt with the very pressing contemporary question of labour and its rights within a just social order. That essential message about the requirements to be met for the common good was restated at critical points, such as by Pius XI in the face of international financial crisis and the rise of totalitarian regimes during the 1930s.

Blessed John XXIII addressed the “*Signs of the Times*”, regarding the increasingly global challenge of development. He positioned the Church as a cooperator in building up, with all men and women, an authentic economic development which would promote their dignity. In the face of nuclear proliferation and the risk of nuclear conflict, he

addressed "*all men of goodwill*", on the challenge faced by the world community to develop systems to promote the universal common good.

The Second Vatican Council in its great Pastoral Constitution of the Church asserted the importance and relevance of its social message. It also asserted the central importance of its pastoral concern for the problems of men and women and for dialogue with the world. Later, Paul VI expressed a profound truth when he wrote that "*development is the new name for peace*". His vision of a "*complete humanism*" inspired by spiritual values struck a chord which resonates even today.

In his writing, the late John Paul II returned to the theme of work and its importance for the dignity of every person and as a foundation for a just social life. Writing in the context of the collapse of the Soviet system, John Paul asserted the critical importance of social solidarity, if the values of democracy and the free economy are truly to provide a basis for authentic human development.

This important volume, drawing together the insights from this tradition, is therefore, not only of value to members of the Catholic Church, it is also of value to all people of goodwill who would seek to develop their understanding and to build right relationships between peoples. The world today is acutely in need of such wonderfully positive expressions of faith and guidance to assist us in difficult times.

It would be difficult for the ordinary person, coping with the many distractions of modern living, to find time to explore all the source materials covered in the Compendium. Yet I do not doubt that many people will dedicate time to this volume and find it a rewarding and fulfilling experience.

While religious faith and practice have declined, or at least find less obvious expression in the Church, the spiritual dimension remains vital in the lives of most people. The ethical principles of the Judaeo-Christian tradition have shaped our society and culture. They are central to how we see ourselves as a nation and to our vision of the wider world. Developing over centuries, Christian teaching has been the cornerstone for the cultural development of Europe. In Ireland, our personal and national responses to the great public issues have been informed by these principles. This tradition of faith and values remains central to most of us as we contemplate the ultimate questions of who we are and the meaning of our existence.

My own experience in Government convinces me of the continued importance of these principles. If I were to focus on one thing that has been at the centre of my political vision, it is the dignity of the human person. Whether seeking advances in the economic and social conditions in the State, building improved relationships on the island of Ireland, engaging in closer partnerships in Europe or addressing our national responsibilities towards global needs and targets, I have sought to maintain a central focus on the effects of decisions on the lives of individual people, today and in the future.

The emphasis in Catholic social teaching on the rights of labour is, to me, one of its most attractive features.





an important statement of the ethical importance of politics and the democratic process. In a very clear expression of the proper separation of Church and State, the Second Vatican Council solemnly affirmed that the political community and the Church are mutually independent and self-governing. That is not to imply a form of separation that requires distance or excludes cooperation. The Church argues that the good of all is best achieved if Church and State work better, for wholesome mutual cooperation, in a way suitable to the circumstances of time and place.

It is in that spirit that the draft European Constitutional Treaty provides for a structured dialogue with the Churches, faith communities and non-confessional bodies. In that same spirit, the Irish Government decided to initiate such a process of dialogue at the domestic level. I am pleased to say that the response has been strongly positive. Detailed arrangements for the initiation of such dialogue on the basis of principles adopted by the Government, following consultation with the Churches, are at an advanced stage. I believe that it provides an important framework within which the values expressed in this Compendium can be discussed and applied.

I welcome all initiatives that enrich debate about the quality of life and the development of greater citizen participation in our society. A political community is healthy if it enjoys the committed loyalty of its citizens, rather than merely requiring their compliance with rules. In the words of the Compendium: *"an authentic democracy is not merely the result of a formal observation of a set of rules, but is the fruit of a convinced acceptance of the values that inspire democratic procedures: the dignity of every human person, the respect of human rights, and commitment to the common good as the purpose and guiding criterion for political life"*.

Study and reflection on the contents of this important volume will, I believe, contribute to the attainment of that committed engagement on the part of members of the Church and other people of goodwill. I applaud the initiative of the Irish Commission for Justice and Social Affairs in organising this conference, to put the Compendium and its implications before a wider audience. I am very pleased to have been invited to share these reflections with you, and to have the opportunity to wish all of the participants a successful conference.

Thank you.

**ENDS**