Religion and Sustainable Development: Reflections on the Commitment of the Magisterium of the Catholic Church

Johnson Uchenna Ozioko

Introduction

In September 2015, all the Member States of the United Nations unanimously adopted the very ambitious 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which eventually took effect from 1st January 2016. This momentous agenda appears in line with the vision of the Catholic Church which, especially through her social doctrine, continues to manifest her commitment to human integral and sustainable development. The Church has at different times, in various ways and from different perspectives addressed the revealed word entrusted to her by her founder to the concrete situations of men and women in the world. By the Church's social doctrine or teaching is meant a complex of principles and norms with which the Catholic Church intervenes in social questions, offering directives to the faithful and to all men and women of goodwill over their actions in this regard[1]. Meghan Clark defines the Catholic Social teaching as «the church's explicit and official grappling with contemporary social problems»[2]. It represents the encounter of the Christian faith with the human person in the face of the human person's real, concrete, personal and social problems, in such a way that the faith becomes the criterion of illumination and understanding as well as a

[1] As highlighted by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church,* the Church's social doctrine «is born of the always new meeting of the Gospel message and social life» (n. 67), and «finds its essential foundation in biblical revelation and in the tradition of the Church»: Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church,* Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano 2004, n. 74.

[2] M.J. Clark, *The Vision of Catholic Social Thought,* Fortress Press, Minneapolis 2014, 4.

hypothesis of solution to these problems. This paper wishes to systematically examine the commitment of the Catholic Church, through her social teachings, to the promotion of the universal project of human integral and sustainable development, especially as encapsulated in the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Panoramically exploring the history of the Church's social doctrine and how the theme of human development remains of deep interest to the Church, it highlights the relationship between the Church's social doctrine on development and the UN's sustainable development agenda. Reflecting on the convergences and divergences between the Church's vision of sustainable development and the approach of the UN's agenda, it identifies what might be considered the fundamental reason that accounts for such divergences and then attempts to draw implications for a more effective and meaningful realization of authentic and integral sustainable development for all people and for every human person.

Brief Historical Excursus of the Church's Social Doctrine

The tradition of the Church's social teaching can be traced back to the early Church, especially to the thoughts of the Fathers of the Church, like Clement of Alexandria, Basil the Great, John Chrysostom, Ambrose, among others, who brought the Gospel message to bear on the socio-political realities of their time. Of great influence in this tradition is the illustrious Doctor of the Church, St. Augustine of Hippo, with the innumerable pages he bequeathed to posterity which link the Gospel message to social realities. The Benedictines, Cistercians, Franciscans and Dominicans of the Middle Ages, epitomized in the immortal works of St. Thomas Aquinas, tried in varying degrees to incorporate some social dimension to their theological reflections, offering valid theological contributions, for instance, to the moral aspects of economic life. In fact, the 13th century witnessed an intensification of theological reflections on economic ethics, and this continued with renewed vigour in the Late Scholasticism, especially in the 15th and 16th centuries[3].

However, as a "corpus" of teachings destined to the evangelization of the human society, the Church's social doctrine was historically

[3] Cf. R. Charles, *Christian Social Witness and Teaching: The Catholic Tradition from Genesis to Centesimus annus,* Gracewind, Herefordshire 1998.

configured as an autonomous "magisterium" in 1891 with the promulgation of Pope Leo XIII's epoch-making encyclical letter, *Rerum novarum*, which addressed the pervasive problems wrought on the social atmosphere by the industrial Revolution. Following its legacy, a plethora of documents have emerged from the long line of his successors, addressing socio-economic and political issues, and trying to proffer adequate moral and pastoral responses to particular contemporary societal situations from the point of view of the Christian faith. In 1931, Pius XI issued his *Quadragesimo Anno*, which, as the title indicates, marked the 40th anniversary of *Rerum novarum*. Though Pius XII had no encyclicals specifically dedicated to social issues, his interventions on social problems are clearly evident in his *Radio Messages* between 1942 and 1944. A new fundamental stage in the Church's social doctrine came with John XXIII's two encyclicals, *Mater et magistra* (1961) and *Pacem in terris* (1963), which explicitly specified the methodology of Catholic social teaching as «seeing, judging and acting»[4]. The Second Vatican Ecumenical Council marked a significant watershed in the life and teaching of the Church. Its pastoral constitution on the Church in the modern world, *Gaudium et spes,* is fundamentally significant for the Church's social doctrine, as it represents the *charta* of the new relationships between the Church and the modern world from the perspective of pastoral renewal of the Council. It covers a vast range of issues on the Church's social concerns and elaborates a concept of development in fully human terms. Its opening statement seems to aptly capture the core motive of the Church's social doctrine[5].

In the wake of the Council, Paul VI promulgated his social encyclical, *Populorum progressio,* whose nucleus was the theme of integral, authentic development. It appeared at a time when development was much discussed in secular circles. However, at that time, development was primarily understood from the limited perspective of economic development and was measured in terms of increase in the Gross National Product. Paul VI affirmed clearly that «progressive development of

[4] Cf. G.B. Guzzetti, *L'insegnamento sociale della Chiesa,* Editrice ElleDiCi, Torino 1991, 18.

[5] II Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et spes* (7 dec. 1965), n. 1.

peoples is (also) an object of deep interest and concern to the Church»[6]. But against the prevalent narrow and myopic conception of development, he introduced a new dimension to the understanding of development, specifying "authentic development" as the Church's correct understanding of development: «The development We speak of here cannot be restricted to economic growth alone. To be authentic, it must be well-rounded»[7]. Arguing that the causes of underdevelopment are to be sought, not primarily in the material order, but «in other dimensions of the human person: first of all, in the will, which often neglects the duties of solidarity; secondly in thinking, which does not always give proper direction to the will», he underlines that «this is what will guarantee man's authentic development – his transition from less than human conditions to truly human ones»[8]. As Benedict XVI would later testify in his *Caritas in veritate,* «The economic development that Paul VI hoped to see was meant to produce real growth, of benefit to everyone and genuinely sustainable»[9]. In 1971, Paul VI issued another social encyclical, *Octogesima adveniens*, to mark the 80th anniversary of the appearance of *Rerum novarum.*

The pontificate of John Paul II (1978-2005) marked another historic moment in the development of the Church's social teaching. In fact, he was once referred to as «the ultimate master and promoter of Catholic social teaching»", on account of his «trilogy of social encyclicals»[10]. Issued in 1981 to commemorate the 90th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum, Laborem exercens* addressed the theme of human labour as the fundamental key in the social question. *Solicitudo rei socialis* which was promulgated in 1987 to mark the 20th anniversary of *Populorum progressio* takes up again, in the light of changed circumstances, the issues of development already broached in earlier encyclicals, elaborating particularly the theological category of the "structures of sin". This encyclical is particularly significant for its specification of the meaning and scope of the Catholic social doctrine[11]. Advancing the insights of Paul VI on

[6] Paul VI, Encyclical Letter *Populorum progressio* (26 March 1967), n. 1.

[7] Paul VI, *Populorum progressio*, n. 1.

[8] Paul VI, *Populorum progressio*, n. 1.

[9] Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in veritate* (29 June 2009), n. 21.

[10] R.J. Ederer, «After Caritas in veritate?», *Catholic Social Science Review* 16 (2011), 347.

[11] John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Solicitudo rei socialis* (13 Dec. 1987), n. 41: «The Church's social doctrine is not a "third way" between liberal capitalism and Marxist collectivism, nor even a possible alternative to other solutions less radically opposed to one another:

authentic development, John Paul II in this encyclical decries the crisis that has overwhelmed the "economic" concept when used in relation to development, since human happiness cannot be guaranteed by mere accumulation of goods and services, even if this is in favour of the majority. Following Paul VI, John Paul II argues that development is not just about "having" but about "being"; it concerns more the quality of life which material goods permit human beings to realize. In fact, beyond economic growth, authentic development must take into consideration «the social, cultural and spiritual dimensions of the human being»[12]. The trilogy climaxes with *Centesimus annus* which was issued in 1991 to celebrate the centenary of *Rerum novarum.* John Paul II here reiterates that «Development must not be understood solely in economic terms, but in a way that is fully human. It is not only a question of raising all peoples to the level currently enjoyed by the richest countries, but rather of building up a more decent life through united labour, of concretely enhancing every individual's dignity and creativity»[13]. Following the historic fall of the communist regime in 1989, the Pontiff placed the problem of God at the centre of the social question, soliciting the commitment of everybody for a new model of development founded on the transcendent dignity of the human person. John Paul II's pontificate also saw the appearance of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994) and the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (2004). Whereas the former gave the essence of the Catholic social doctrine its proper position as falling within the compass of the Seventh and Tenth Commandments, the latter constitutes a veritable and excellent resource work for the Church's social magisterium as it offers a comprehensive overview of the fundamental lines of the doctrinal corpus of Catholic social teaching.

Another landmark Catholic Church's social magisterium came with the pontificate of Benedict XVI, particularly with the appearance in 2009 of his encyclical, *Caritas in veritate,* also specifically dedicat-

rather, it constitutes a category of its own. Nor is it an ideology, but rather the accurate formulation of the results of a careful reflection on the complex realities of human existence, in society and in the international order, in the light of faith and of the Church's tradition. Its main aim is to interpret these realities, determining their conformity with or divergence from the lines of the Gospel teaching on man and his vocation, a vocation which is at once earthly and transcendent; its aim is thus to guide Christian behaviour. It therefore belongs to the field, not of ideology, but of theology and particularly of moral theology».

[12] John Paul II, *Solicitudo rei socialis*, n. 9.

[13] John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Centesimus annus* (5 Jan. 1991), n. 29.

ed to the theme of integral development. Here, the Holy Father, developing the doctrinal contents of earlier social encyclicals, especially *Populorum progressio*, and amplifying the distilled wisdom of his predecessors with his own penetrating insights on social issues, advanced an innovated doctrine on development. The great novelty of *Caritas in veritate* is seen in its new vision of development which recognizes the dignity of the human life in its fullness and considers economic development in terms of a trajectory of true human blossoming. Realization of authentic and integral human development in the context of globalization is inextricably interdependent with multiple factors: ethics of life, responsible freedom, truth about global and integral human good, fraternity and the charity of Christ[14]. Following his predecessors, Benedict XVI contends that «progress of a merely economic and technological kind is insufficient», maintaining that «development needs above all to be true and integral»[15], by which is meant that it must touch all the dimensions of the human person. In fact, fundamental for an adequate appreciation of Benedict's innovative insight into the understanding of development is the striking theological-anthropological grounding of his doctrine. For him, authentic and integral development is a vocation, and «to regard development as a vocation is to recognize, on the one hand, that it derives from a transcendent call, and on the other hand that it is incapable, on its own, of supplying its ultimate meaning»[16]. What this means is that development cannot entirely be entrusted to the human person since he/she has a transcendent dimension which opens him/her inexorably to God. Severed from his/her ontological dependence on God, the human person's dream of development will be surely elusive. As a vocation, integral development has its basis on «charity in truth»[17]. Both love and truth have their origin in God; they come to human beings as gift. Consequently, isolated from God, or without the perspective of eternal life, human progress in this world runs the risk of being reduced to the mere accumulation of wealth.

All these teachings seem to have culminated and condensed in the two epoch-making encyclicals of the present Pontiff, Pope Francis,

[14] Cf. M. Toso, «Una nuova etica per la globalizzazione e i mercati», in AaVv, *Carità globale: commento alla Caritas in veritate,* Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano 2009, 23.

[15] Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, n. 23.

[16] Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, n. 16.

[17] Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, n. 9.

Laudato si'[18], on the care for our common home, and *Fratelli tutti*[19], on fraternity and social friendship. Appearing in May 2015, just shortly before the promulgation of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda, *Laudato si'* palpably made sustainable development its signature concern, using the word "sustainable" for well over 20 times. Earlier, Pope Francis' very first magisterial document, *Evangelii gaudium*[20], which has aptly been considered his "missionary manifesto", though not directly dedicated to social issues, had nonetheless broached many social questions, making invaluable contributions to the corpus of the Church's social doctrine. In the fourth chapter of the Exhortation particularly, entitled *The Social Dimension of Evangelization*, the Holy Father not only introduces a novel language which highlights the relationship between the Church's missionary mandate and social commitment, but also brings in fresh perspectives which enrich the Church's thinking about social matters, perspectives such as «Time is greater than space»[21], «Unity prevails over conflict»[22], «Realities are greater than ideas»[23], and «The whole is greater than the part»[24]. In *Laudato si'*, while building on the body of earlier Catholic social doctrine, Pope Francis undertakes a complex and full-scale analysis of environmental issues as part of an 'integral ecology' approach to sustainable development, and questions the current model of development, inviting all people of goodwill, especially members of the Catholic Church, to unite in a dialogue for a re-definition of progress and promotion of integral and sustainable human development that will be beneficial to all, especially to the poorest and the most vulnerable, while at the same time respecting our natural environment. Thus, «the anthropology developed in *LS* insists on the dynamism and the social dimension of being human as in the previous encyclicals, but there is a major shift in focus that considers human beings in their

[18] Cf. Francis, Encyclical Letter on Care for our Common Home *Laudato si'* (24 May 2015).

[19] Cf. Francis, Encyclical Letter on Fraternity and Social Friendship *Fratelli tutti* (3 Oct. 2020).

[20] Cf. Francis, Apostolic Exhortation on the proclamation of the Gospel in the Present World *Evangelii gaudium* (24 Nov. 2012).

[21] Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 223.

[22] Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 228.

[23] Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 233.

[24] Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 235.

kinship relations with the whole creation»[25]. For the Pope, «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»[26]. Pope Francis' last social encyclical, *Fratelli tutti,* issued in October 2020, is addressed to all men and women of goodwill, irrespective of their religious persuasions and beliefs. Proposed as a space of reflection on universal fraternity, it focuses on love which transcends the barriers of geography and distance, and charts the path humanity has to walk in order to build a more just and fraternal world beginning with everyday relationships and then extending to the social and political institutions. Envisaging a healthy politics directed towards the fostering of the common good, the Pope urges that we have to construct the ideal of fraternity beginning from the concrete circumstances of human existence and making use of those human instruments which help to beneficially transform our world. One of the veritable instruments for the attainment of justice, in the thinking of Pope Francis, is social and political commitment. According to him, «The development of a global community of fraternity based on the practice of social friendship on the part of peoples and nations calls for a better kind of politics, one truly at the service of the common good»[27].

Church's Social Doctrine and the UN's Sustainable Development Agenda

The above historical adumbration makes it evident that sustainable human development, with varying levels of accent, remains a deep concern of the Catholic Church in her social doctrine. A perusal of the UN's 2030 Agenda for sustainable development, with its seventeen goals and a hundred and sixty nine targets, reveals wide ranging convergence between the concerns of the Church regarding sustainable development and the goals encapsulated in the Agenda. In fact, throughout the history of the Church's social doctrine, certain essential themes have emerged as constituting its fundamental principles, fundamental on account of their permanence in time and universality. These princi-

[25] G. Catta, *Catholic Social Teaching as Theology,* Paulist Press, Mahwah NJ 2019, 11.
[26] Francis, *Laudato si'*, n. 13.
[27] Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, n. 154.

ples, which constitute the fundamental parameters of reference for the Church's interpretation of social phenomenon, include the centrality of the human person, principle of the common good as guarantor of individual good, principle of solidarity and principle of subsidiarity. All these principles, in one way or the other, also find expression in the essential lines that define the 2030 sustainable development agenda. And even beyond these essential principles, there are still many other themes of the Church's social doctrine reflected directly or indirectly in the 2030 agenda. Since the appearance of Pope Francis' *Laudato si'* which, as we have observed, made sustainable development its signature concern, for instance, a plethora of studies has been elicited in pursuit of the deepening and realization of its concerns, and remarkable attention has also been directed to its relationship with the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development. In 2018, an extensive study was undertaken, coordinated by Graham Gordon and Diego Martinez-Schütt, and involving the collaboration of international organizations from all parts of the world – including Amacea, Cafod (Caritas England and Wales), Caritas Africa, Caritas Australia, Caritas Denmark, Caritas Española, Caritas Europa, Caritas Ghana, Caritas Italiana, Caritas Kenya, Caritas Sierra Leone, Caritas Internationalis, Caritas North America, Catholic Social Academy of Austria, Ceas Peru, Cidse, Cordaid Netherlands, Koo Austria, Misereor, Repam and Secam – in which they explored the relationship between *Laudato si'* and the 2030 Agenda. The resulting document, entitled *Engaging in the 2030 Agenda through the lens of Laudato si'*[28], outlined 9 key themes uniting the Papal encyclical with the 2030 Agenda:Uphold the dignity of the human person and respect for human rights

- Leave no-one behind
- Tackle inequality
- Integrate environment and development
- Promote participation and dialogue
- Strengthen governance and global partnership for implementation
- Change consumption and production patterns

[28] G. Gordon - D. Martinez-Schüt (co-ordinators), *Engaging in the 2030 Agenda through the lens of Laudato si'*, in CF-SDGs_Laudato_Si_report_v8_single_page.pdf (cafod.org.uk) (12/05/2021).

- Promote the role of technology
- Support economic growth, business and decent work

These themes of course are not exclusive to *Laudato si'* but are recurrent in varying degrees in the long tradition of the Catholic social doctrine[29]. It is not my intention to begin to analyse each of these items in details to see how they are reflected in the Church's social magisterium and in the UN's Agenda. However, two questions arise which I wish to address. First of all, are these themes represented the same way in both the magisterial teachings and the 2030 Agenda or are there divergences in the way they are understood from both perspectives? Secondly, if there are inherent differences in the understanding of these issues in both the magisterial teachings and the UN Agenda, what reasons account for these divergences and what are their implications for authentic, sustainable, integral development? But before we begin to address these questions, it may be important, first of all, to fundamentally clear our understanding of development. It is true that though a common craving of all contemporary human societies, development remains a very complex and ambiguous notion, admitting of several connotations, nuances and meanings. A look at the history of philosophy and of the social sciences easily reveals a rich array and extensive repertoire of conceptions of development which have continually been drawn upon and reconfigured in different ways. And today more than ever, notwithstanding the ubiquitous chorus of voices about development and its need at international, national and local planes, the notion of development still remains very complex. Indeed, even scholars of development economics are often not in agreement regarding the development index and criteria to assess and determine the essence of development. Moreover, in ever-new and ever-changing settings, the practice of development equally assumes complex dimensions and is as well fraught with ambiguities such that contradictory and sometimes even bewildering range of policy prescriptions, paradigms and strategies have often been paraded under the banner of development. Denis Goulet, one of the pioneers in the field of development ethics, decrying the bankruptcy of many development paradigms, staunchly sustains

[29] Cf. M.J. Clark, *The Vision of the Catholic Social Thought*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis 2014, 10.

that much apparent development today would prove to be "anti-development" when subjected to critical examination[30]. So what are we to understand by human development?

In my opinion, human development may be defined as *the process of the actualization or fulfilment of the human person and the human society in the entirety of their dimensions, bringing particularly to bear the human person's ultimate end.* Human persons and the society which they constitute have incredible and imponderable potentialities. Development means the continuous unlocking and harnessing of the hidden and latent potentials of the human person and the human society to realize a more abundant and fulfilling life for every human being, the human society and indeed, the entire universe, where abundant and fulfilling life means one congruent with the ultimate purpose of the human being's earthly existence, that is the human person's ultimate end[31]. And what is the ultimate end of the human person? Philosophers have through the ages proffered different answers to the question of the human person's ultimate end. Thomas Aquinas, following Aristotle and Augustine, sees the ultimate goal of the human being as happiness which can be found in God alone, even though Aristotle had a different conception of the divine. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle convinced that there exists some ultimate end or good toward which, in the final analysis, every human action is aimed, had argued that this ultimate aim is happiness, in Greek *eudaimonia* which may also be translated as «blessedness or good living»[32]. In the same light, Augustine concluded in his *De Trinitate* that happiness or blessedness is what every human being desires[33]. Endorsing their opinions, Aquinas sought to specify in what happiness consists. In fact, in Aristotle, happiness emerges as the realization of the human nature, in virtue and in theoretical life. Aquinas follows this outlook, but goes further to the point of affirming that happiness is found only in the contemplation of God. Really instructive is the distinction

[30] Cf. D. Goulet, *Development Ethics: A Guide to Theory and Practice,* Zed Books Ltd, London 1995, 195.

[31] S.C. Ilo, *The Church and Development in Africa,* Pickwick Publications, Eugene, OR 2011, 95.

[32] Cf. Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics,* I, 1, 1094a, 1-3; I, 6, 1097b, 1-5; I, 7, 1098a, 15-20.

[33] Cf. St Augustine, *De Trinitate,* XIII, 3, eng. trans. in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. P. Schaff, First Series, vol. 3, Hendrickson Publishers, Massachusetts, 1995^2, 1-228.

he makes between imperfect and perfect happiness, what he calls *beatitude*. In his words, «by perfect happiness we are to understand that which attains to the notion of happiness; and by imperfect happiness that which does not attain thereto, but only partakes of some particular likeness of happiness [...]. Final and perfect happiness can consist in nothing else than the vision of the divine essence»[34]. For Aquinas, happiness neither consists in wealth, honour, fame, power nor any bodily good. It does not also consist in the good of the soul, for «happiness is something belonging to the soul; but that which constitutes happiness is something outside the soul»[35]. Consequently,

> It is impossible for any created good to constitute man's happiness. For happiness is the perfect good, which lulls the appetite altogether; else it would not be the last end, if something yet remained to be desired. Now the object of the will, i.e., of man's appetite, is the universal good; just as the object of the intellect is the universal true. Hence it is evident that naught can lull man's will, save the universal good. This is to be found, not in any creature, but in God alone; because every creature has goodness by participation. Wherefore God alone can satisfy the will of man […]. Therefore God alone constitutes man's happiness[36].

Thus, the human person's perfect happiness, his/her ultimate end cannot be found in anything material, or even in any created reality, but only in God. It then follows that human development is only true when, while taking adequate care of the human person's material good, concerns itself also with his/her more fundamental inner flourishing, with his/her spiritual good; human development is authentically so only when it orients the human being to his/her ultimate self-realization in God. This implies that just as it would be impossible to understand human development independently or isolated from the concrete conditions of human existence in the world without emptying it of meaning, it would also be radically impossible to understand human development as indifferent to the reality of God and eternal life without as well

[34] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 3, art. 6 and 8.
[35] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 2, art. 7.
[36] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 2, art. 8; I, q. 12, art. 5.

emptying it of meaning[37]. The human person's inextricable relationship with God cannot be ignored, or worse still, relegated to the periphery in understanding the true meaning of development: rather it is central, it is fundamentally essential, since God is the singular source and guarantor of authentic human development.

With this understanding of development as background, we can now return to the two questions raised regarding the relationship between the common themes of the 2030 Agenda of sustainable development and the Church's magisterial teachings. One can hardly discountenance the presence of very significant convergences between the UN's sustainable development agenda and the four essential principles of the Church's social doctrine as well as the 9 key themes outlined above as connecting the 2030 Agenda with Pope Francis' *Laudato si'* which, as we have observed, represents the culmination of the Church's social teaching on sustainable development. Notwithstanding these convergences, however, a more critical reflection on the Church's perspective and that of the UN's Agenda reveals very deep-rooted divergences which have far reaching implications for the whole universal goal of authentic sustainable development. Let me just single out as an example, for the purposes of this paper, the first common theme identified between *Laudato si'* and the UN's Agenda: «uphold the dignity of the human person and respect for human rights». Promotion of human dignity and respect for the right of the human person is at the heart of the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development. The Agenda makes explicit right from the preamble that «We are determined to ensure that all human beings can fulfil their potential in dignity and equality and in a healthy environment»[38]. Thus, it aims at ensuring a dignified living for every human person in every part of the earth through the availability and equal access to all the goods and services necessary to render life dignifying and worth living. These include food, water, energy, healthcare, education, etc. The United Nations Agenda envisages «a world of universal respect for human rights and human dignity»[39], underlining

[37] Cf. B. Kanakappally, «Lo sviluppo come vocazione dell'uomo», in Aa.Vv., *Lo sviluppo ha bisogno dei cristiani*, Edizioni OCD, Roma 2011, 92.

[38] United Nations, *Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,* 2015, preamble, in 21252030 Agenda for Sustainable Development web.pdf (un.org).

[39] United Nations, *Transforming our World…*, n. 8.

the «responsibilities of all States, in conformity with the Charter of the United Nations, to respect, protect and promote human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, without distinction of any kind as to race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth, disability or other status»[40].

Pope Francis' *Laudato si',* following the long tradition of the Church's social teaching, also affirms the rights of every human person which find their basis on the dignity every person has as a creature of God. In fact, the long tradition of the Catholic social doctrine affirms the primacy and centrality of the human person as its most fundamental principle. As John XXIII clarifies in *Mater et Magistra,* «This teaching rests on one basic principle: individual human beings are the foundation, the cause and the end of every social institution [...]. On this basic principle, which guarantees the sacred dignity of the individual, the Church constructs her social teaching»[41]. The human person's essential dignity stems from his/her having been created in the image and likeness of God. According to Pope Francis, «The Bible teaches that every man and woman is created out of love and made in God's image and likeness (cf. *Gen* 1:26). This shows us the immense dignity of each person»[42] (. This essential dignity on account of the human person's creation in the image of God is what endows him/her with basic rights and responsibilities which are to be exercised within the social order. Catholic social doctrine recognizes the following human rights: the right to life, liberty, and security of person; the right to physical and moral integrity; the right to sufficient and necessary means to live in a becoming manner (food, clothing, housing, rest, health care, social services); the right to security in case of sickness, disability, widowhood, old age, unemployment, and any involuntary loss of means of subsistence; the right to due respect for one's person and good name; the right to religious freedom and to freedom of conscience and of thought; the right to declare and defend one's own ideas (freedom of expression); the right to culture and access to objective information about public events; the right to education and, in relation to it, freedom to teach; the right to free choice of a position or profession, and to a just wage; the right to private prop-

[40] United Nations, *Transforming our World…*, n. 19.

[41] John XXIII, Encyclical Letter *Mater et magistra* (15 May 1961), nn. 219-220.

[42] Francis, *Laudato si'*, n. 65.

erty, including ownership of means of production; the right to assembly and of association; the right to form unions and to strike; the right to choose one's residence, to travel, to emigrate; the right to participate actively in public life; the right to personal participation in attaining the common good; the right to legal protection of one's rights; the right to citizenship. In *Laudato si',* Pope Francis emphasized among other things the right to water[43], natural resources[44], housing[45] and basic services[46]. Accompanying these rights, according to the Church's teaching, are also duties and responsibilities. Pope Benedict XVI warned against an exaggerated emphasis on rights to the negligence of duties and responsibilities, arguing that «rights presuppose duties, if they are not to become mere licence»[47]. For Pope Francis, a fundamental responsibility imposed on every human person by our dignity is the responsibility of respecting creation and its laws[48].

It becomes thus evident that concern for the respect and enhancement of human rights and dignity suffuses both the Church's social doctrine and the UN's sustainable development agenda. But where then lies the difference? The difference is to be seen in the source of the human person's essential dignity which is the basis of all human rights. While the Church's social doctrine explicitly acknowledges the human person's creation in the image of God as the origin of the human person's essential dignity and rights, the UN's sustainable development agenda does not seem to provide any account of their origin. In fact, all other differences that may be seen between the Church's teaching on sustainable development and the UN's agenda seem hinged on this basic dividing line. According to the Church's teaching, what characterizes the human person, distinguishing him/her from all other created realities, and endowing him/her with inalienable dignity, is the image of God in the human person. Created in the image of God, he/she is endowed with a special dignity. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* expresses it, the human being is a person, «not just something, but someone. He

[43] Francis, *Laudato si'*, n. 29-30.
[44] Francis, *Laudato si'*, n. 23.
[45] Francis, *Laudato si'*, n. 152.
[46] Francis, *Laudato si'*, n. 154.
[47] Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, n. 43.
[48] Francis, *Laudato si'*, n. 69.

is capable of self-knowledge, of self-possession and of freely giving himself and entering into communion with other persons»[49]. By virtue of his/her creation in the image of God, the human person, according to the Church's teaching, is not an end in him/herself; he/she transcends him/herself and is capable of opening up to relations with others and especially with God to whom he/she owes his/her existence. The UN's human development agenda seems not to acknowledge the essential role of the human person's relationship with God in sustainable human development. It does not seem to pay any attention to the human person's origin and destiny; it sounds as if the human being is the author, the end and the destiny of him/herself, as if sustainable development entirely lies in the hands of the human being, and as if he/she can through his/her unaided human powers guarantee authentic and integral sustainable human development. We may then ask: what reason accounts for this fundamental difference?

In my thinking, the reason is to be sought in the different anthropologies upon which both perspectives are constructed. Whereas the Church's teaching is founded on an integral anthropology that acknowledges the human person's essential transcendent dimension, the UN's agenda seems constructed on an immanentistic, secular and earth-bound anthropology that neither acknowledges the human person's transcendent origin nor looks beyond his/her earthly concerns. What do we mean by the human person's transcendent dimension? Etymologically, the English word "transcendence" comes from the Latin verb *trascendere,* meaning to step or climb over, to surpass, to exceed, to go or get beyond. The substantive refers to either the act, the state or the fact of going beyond, surpassing, exceeding or stepping over. From the etymological perspective, therefore, it expresses the notion of going beyond in the sense of stepping over every limit. With regard to the human person, it is often expressed in terms of self-transcendence by which is meant a connatural inner tendency in the human being to constantly go beyond him/herself and open up to an infinite horizon[50]. It is that interior movement with which the human person systematically goes beyond him/

[49] *Catechism of the Catholic Church,* Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano 1993, n. 375.

[50] Cf. G.I. Onah, *Self-Transcendence and Human History in Wolfhart Pannenberg,* Pontificia Universitas Urbaniana, Roma 1994, 11.

herself, beyond all that he/she is and does, his/her wishes, thoughts and realizations. Of course, the phenomenon of human self-transcendence seems so self-evident that it may not require much phenomenology of human action to demonstrate the fact that it is a typical manifestation of every human activity. The question to ask, therefore, is not whether the human person is capable of self-transcendence or not, but rather what the direction of this self-transcendence is. In other words, what is the direction or the goal of the human being's self-transcendence? Continually projecting him/herself beyond his/her immediate situation, where is the human person heading to and what does he/she want to become? Battista Mondin has categorized the different interpretations hitherto advanced by different thinkers on the human person's self-transcendence into three: the egoistic, the philanthropic and the theocentric interpretations[51]. This is not an opportune occasion to begin to examine these interpretations together with their attendant merits and demerits. However, the most plausible so far is perhaps the theocentric interpretation according to which the human person constantly goes out of him/herself, moving beyond the limits of his/her proper reality because he/she is driven by a superior will, that which most people (though with different names) call God. This interpretation has been sustained by a long line of thinkers ranging from Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Augustine and Thomas Aquinas in the ancient and medieval periods to Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant, Hegel, Bergson, Coreth, Scheler, Blondel, Teilhard de Chardin, Karl Rahner, Lonergan, Reinhold Niebuhr, Joseph De Finance and Wohlfahrt Pannenberg in the modern and contemporary epochs of philosophy. For Pannenberg, for instance, self-transcendence is the human person's unlimited openness to the world (*Weltoffenheit*). However, the goal of this self-transcendence is neither the world nor the human being but only God. In other words, the human person's transcendence is neither anthropocentric nor cosmocentric, but rather theocentric. According to Max Scheler, «For in the person whole and undivided, in the core of the human person […] in our deepest depth, then, there lies that wonderful mainspring which, mostly unnoticed and disregarded in wonted circumstances, is ever latent and active to lead us

[51] Cf. B. Mondin, «Autotrascendenza e Religione», in E. Barbotin, *Humanité de l'homme,* Aubier, Paris 1970, 54-70.

upward, over and above ourselves and all things finite, to the divine»[52]. For Pannenberg, the human person's openness to the world «signifies ultimately an openness to what is beyond the world, so that the real meaning of this openness to the world might be better described as an openness to God which alone makes possible a gaze embracing the world as a whole»[53]. It is fundamentally the absence of the acknowledgement of this essential dimension of the human person that accounts for much of the divergences between the Church's doctrine on sustainable development and the UN's 2030 agenda, and this lack has far-reaching repercussions for the whole project of sustainable human development, since its presence not merely adds a new dimension, but transforms the entire notion of development[54]. As Godfrey Onah has argued, before talking of development, it is necessary to have a clear concept of the human person, a correct anthropology, since the very understanding of development presupposes a concept of the human person. If one does not have an idea of one's destination, it becomes impossible to evaluate if one is moving forward or backward. In the same way, if we do not have a correct concept of the human being, it will not be possible to evaluate if a change regarding him/her is really a development or rather a degeneration[55].

Implications for the Goal of Sustainable Human Development

Granted the fact that the UN agenda advocates the respect of human dignity and rights, by the fact of not paying attention to the human person's essential transcendent dimension, it seems to limit and truncate the complete understanding of the human person for whom sustainable development is destined, thereby severing him/her from the primal font of his/her personal value and meaning, it seems anchored on a reductive anthropology which does not present the human person in the full truth of his/her existence. Such an anthropology tends to divest the human person of his/her spiritual dimension. But many people

[52] M. Scheler, *On the Eternal in Man,* Routledge, London and New York 2017, 107.

[53] W. Pannenberg, *Anthropoligie in theologischer Perspektive,* Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 1983,66.

[54] Cf. S. Deneulin, «Human Development: Benedict XVI vs. Amartya Sen», *Revista Cultura Economica,* 27 (2009) 117.

[55] Cf. G.I. Onah, «L'essere umano al centro della tradizione filosofica Africana», *Euntes Docete* 60 (2007), 27-28.

would agree that the human person has an essential spiritual dimension; he/she is not just matter but a composite of body and soul, indeed a "person". At the height of philosophical reflections on the human nature in the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas, illuminating the Aristotelian philosophical heritage with the light of Christian revelation, elaborated a rigorous anthropology that conceives the human being as a "person", that is a substantial union of immortal spirit and material body. Though all living beings are endowed with body and soul, what actually distinguishes the human soul from those of other living beings is that the human soul is spiritual. The human person, made up of body and soul, is God's creature, he/she has his/her origin in God and will find his/her end in God[56]. Max Scheler in his *Die Stellung des Menschen* argues in fact that the human person is clearly set apart from other creatures by a distinguishing principle which goes beyond mere intelligence or power of choice. This principle is neither an outcome of biological evolution, nor is it to be regarded as just a fresh step in the development of life in beings, since it is itself opposed to life itself. Scheler identifies this principle as the spirit (*Geist*), a word which encompasses «not only reason, the capacity of thinking ideas, imagination and opinion, but also volitional and emotional acts like kindness, love, contrition or regret, reverence, astonishment, happiness, despair and free decision»[57]. Though Scheler does not explicitly state the origin of this principle in the human person, furthering his thoughts, Pannenberg affirmed that the human person's spiritual dimension has its origin in God. Thus, not to acknowledge the human person's transcendent dimension, that is, his/her essential orientation towards God, is akin to the neglect of human person's essential spiritual dimension, and the neglect of the spiritual dimension of the human person inevitably boils down to distorted notion of the human nature and essence[58]. As Benedict XVI argues in his *Caritas in veritate,* «when God is eclipsed, our ability to recognize the natural order, purpose and the 'good' begins to wane»[59].

What all this implies is that sustainable development needs God, God has priority in sustainable human development. The UN's sustainable development agenda is very ambitious and has very lofty goals, but

[56] Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, qq. 75-102.
[57] G.I. Onah, *Self-Transcendence and Human History,* 32.
[58] Cf. W. Pannenberg, *Anthropoligie in theologischer Perspektive,* 34.
[59] Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, n. 18.

we have to recognize that sustainable development does not just lie in the hands of the human being; he/she always has to make reference to a superior being to whom he/she owes his/her very existence. According to Benedict XVI, «*God is the guarantor of man's true development*, inasmuch as, having created him in his image, he also establishes the transcendent dignity of men and women and feeds their innate yearning to 'be more'. Man is not a lost atom in a random universe: he is God's creature, whom God chose to endow with an immortal soul and whom he has always loved. If man were merely the fruit of either chance or necessity, or if he had to lower his aspirations to the limited horizon of the world in which he lives, if all reality were merely history and culture, and man did not possess a nature destined to transcend itself in a supernatural life, then one could speak of growth, or evolution, but not development»[60]. What this means, according to S. Deleulin, is «that the human good, or the definition of human flourishing, is not left to human beings alone. The human good, what it means to live well, finds its origin in God, the Absolute Truth»[61]. It is true that development is for the human person and his/her flourishing, a correct anthropology reveals that he/she is not an end in him/herself; he/she is neither the source of his/her existence nor does his/her life end with him/her; the human person's life is from God and is directed towards God. Though the human person is the end of sustainable development, he/she is not the ultimate end; his/her ultimate end is found in God.

A further implication of the foregoing is that religion is essential for development. St. Thomas Aquinas, going back to and synthesizing the different etymological derivations of the word religion presented it as a human virtue connected to the virtue of justice and denoting our just relationship with God[62]. Religion thus concerns all human beings insofar as they are human and regards their just relationship with God. It is in this light that Glenn Olsen avers that «There is on first view not much to be said to those who, simply in reading the historical record, cannot see that, as the Latin word *religio* (a connection between the human and the greater-than-human) suggests, humans are by nature religious

[60] Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, n. 29.
[61] S. Deneulin, «Human Development», 117.
[62] Cf. Thomas Aquinas, STh. II-II, q. 81.

animals»[63]. Siby George remarked that «On account of an inflated understanding of religion as an impediment to development, sometimes, religion is suggested to be kept out of development practice, forgetting the fact that religion and development have had an intimate relation whether for good or ill»[64]. It is understandable that, on account of its secular nature, the UN's document on sustainable development agenda does not mention the word religion outside on two isolated, peripheral instances[65]. Apart from these two appearances, there is no other mention of the word religion or recognition of its role in sustainable human development. However, as Leah Selinger contends, «religion, as a central and definitive element of culture, has to be addressed if development is to be successful and sustainable»[66]. Denis Goulet observes candidly that «A growing chorus of voices, in rich and poor countries alike, proclaim that full human development is not possible without regard for essential religious values. These voices assert that achievements in political, social, economic, technical, artistic and scientific realms do not exhaust the creativity, beauty or triumphs of which human beings are capable»[67]. The human person's essential transcendent dimension requires that his/her religious and spiritual aspirations be taken into consideration in questions of sustainable human development. Goulet was indeed right in pointing out that the problem of those who assume that religion is irrelevant or detrimental to development stems from their uncritical acceptance of secularism, that is, the philosophy which reduces the world of values to secular matters[68]. Even from the empirical-pragmatic perspective, it seems really incongruous to ignore the positive role of religion in human sustainable development. As Jeffrey Haynes rightly

[63] G.W. Olsen, *The Turn to Transcendence,* The Catholic University of America Press, Washington D.C. 2010, 33.

[64] S.K. George, «Religion and the Ethics of Development», *Journal of Dharma* 32 (2007), 321; cf. S. Alkire, «Religion and Development», in D. Clark, *The Edgar Companion of Development Studies,* 502.

[65] Cf. United Nations, *Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,* 19; Goal 10.2.

[66] L. Selinger, «The Forgotten Factor: The Uneasy Relationship between Religion and Development», *Social Compass* 51 (2004), 524.

[67] D. Goulet, «Development Experts: The One-Eyed Giants», *World Development* 8 (1980), 488.

[68] Cf. D. Goulet, «In Defense of Cultural Rights: Technology, Tradition and Conflicting Models of Rationality», *Human Rights Quarterly* 2 (1981), 11-12.

observed, «there is much evidence that religious individuals and bodies have often played significant roles in many aspects of development, including education, social welfare, charitable work and humanitarian relief»[69]. This role is not to be seen as just peripheral but fundamental and imperative for really sustainable, integral and authentic human development. In fact, Emma Tomalin et al. are in agreement that, «Religion is a major cultural, social, political, and economic factor in many official development assistance (ODA) recipient countries. After decades of being ignored by global development processes, greater portions of development aid are now channelled via faith-based organizations, and religion is increasingly recognized as a human resource rather than just an obstacle to development»[70]. Pope Francis in *Fratelli tutti* is unequivocal that «The different religions, based on their respect for each human person as a creature called to be a child of God, contribute significantly to building fraternity and defending justice in society»[71].

Conclusion

The commitment of the Catholic Church to sustainable human development remains indubitable. It is true, as Benedict XVI affirmed, that «The Church does not have technical solutions to offer and does not claim to 'interfere in any way in the politics of States'. She does, however, have a mission of truth to accomplish, in every time and circumstance, for a society that is attuned to man, to his dignity, to his vocation»[72]. The Church embraces this mission especially through her social doctrine. Through numerous papal encyclicals and cognate teachings, the Church continues to show deep insight and motherly concern about the complex dimensions of the human situations, living and working under diverse and complicated circumstances. But she refrains from proclaiming specific solutions to the problems of social justice in various national settings. Yet in her solicitude for the sustainable, integral and authentic development of all persons, the Church goes to

[69] J. Haynes, *Religion and Development: Conflict or Cooperation?,* Pangrave Macmillan, London 2007, 106.

[70] E. Tomalin et alii, «Religion and the Sustainable Development Goals», *The Review of Faith and International Affairs* 17 (2019), 102.

[71] Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, n. 271.

[72] Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, n. 9.

teach and to exhort, thereby giving an authoritative and comprehensive guide on the path that leads to greater human well-being. Through her social teachings based on the Gospel and observing the world in the context of the revealed word, the Church continues to speak eloquently to the pressing questions of the human person's earthly life and to offer sublime insights which reconcile temporarily motivated behaviour with her interpretation of the revealed word. As G.A. Ross argues, «An integral Catholic approach to social problems is founded upon revealed truths which transcend our social and historical context. Not subject to the variety of subjective value claims common to current historical thought, an integral approach to social problems can offer a more authoritative, consistent portrayal of the social conditions that threaten human dignity. And because it is based on the Church's understanding of the nature and purpose of man, it can speak more effectively for the true good of man in society, guarding the dignity of the human person and facilitating his true flourishing»[73]. I'm of course aware of the fact that someone might raise the objection that the Catholic social doctrine has value only for one who shares the Catholic faith. I make mine the response which Aldo Vendemiati, in a recent publication dedicated to a philosophical investigation of the place of God in Ethics, offers to such objections, arguing that

The Christian faith performs a cognitive function in the ethical-philosophical field, not because it provides pre-established solutions to concrete problems, but because it offers morally relevant perspectives within which human reason can seek solutions. But it must be said that perspectives of this kind, while deriving from Revelation, are also understandable rationally and can also attract consensus among those who do not recognize themselves in the Christian faith[74].

As Johan Verstraeten rightly explained with regard to the tradition of the Catholic social doctrine,

> The Catholic social tradition can be interpreted as a tradition which comprises a particular set of shared understandings about the hu-

[73] G.A. Ross, «Integrating the Analysis of Social problems with a catholic Understanding of Man and Society», *The Catholic Social Review* 10 (2005), 92.

[74] A. Vendemiati, *Dio nell'etica,* Urbaniana University Press, Città del Vaticano 2021, 313 (trans. is mine).

> man person, social goods, and their distributive arrangements. This particular understanding is grounded in a living relation to the constitutive narratives provided by the Bible, integrated in a theoretical framework which makes it possible for the catholic understanding to remain open to rational explanation and public debate[75].

Perhaps, I have to leave it to experts to disprove, if they consider it necessary, the universal value and relevance of the profound anthropology rationally elaborated by such prodigious Christian thinkers like St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, their contemporaries and so many other Christian thinkers after them. The classical Aristotelian notion of *Anthropos* is taken up and deepened by these Christian thinkers, not only illuminating it with the light of the Christian faith, but precisely by deepening its universal substance that is accessible to all human beings. Without limiting the autonomy of reason, but stimulating the intellect to investigate ontologically more profound dimensions in the light of the Christian faith, they elaborated a robust anthropology that acknowledges the human person's openness to a Person that transcends him/her and gives foundation to his/her very transcendence. It is precisely on such solid anthropology, respectful of the full truth of the human person, that the Catholic social doctrine is constructed. This is why its teachings are not just circumscribed to the Catholic church but are directed to all men and women of goodwill, and so enjoy universal relevance and perennial validity.

Summary: This paper systematically examines the commitment of the Catholic Church, through her social teachings, to the promotion of the universal project of human integral and sustainable development, especially as encapsulated in the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Panoramically exploring the history of the Church's social doctrine and how the theme of human development remains of deep interest to the Church, it highlights the relationship between the Church's social doctrine on development and the UN's sustainable development agenda. Reflecting on the convergences and divergences between the Church's vision of sustainable development and the approach of the UN's agenda, it identifies what might be considered the fundamental reason that accounts for such divergences and then attempts to draw implications for a more effective and meaningful realization of authentic and integral sustainable development for all people and for every human person.

[75] J. Verstraeten, «Re-Thinking Catholic Social Thought as Tradition», in *Catholic Social Thought: Twilight or Renaissance?*, ed. J.S. Boswell, et alii, Leuven University Press, Leuven 2000, 64.

Key Words: Anthropology, Catholic Church, Development Goals, Religion, Magisterium, United Nations.

Sommario: Questo lavoro esamina sistematicamente l'impegno della Chiesa cattolica, attraverso i suoi insegnamenti sociali, per la promozione del progetto universale di sviluppo umano integrale e sostenibile, in particolare come incapsulato nell'Agenda 2030 delle Nazioni Unite per lo sviluppo sostenibile. Esplorando panoramicamente la storia della dottrina sociale della Chiesa e come il tema dello sviluppo umano rimanga di profondo interesse per la Chiesa, evidenzia il rapporto tra la dottrina sociale della Chiesa sullo sviluppo e l'agenda delle Nazioni Unite per lo sviluppo sostenibile. Riflettendo sulle convergenze e le divergenze tra la visione della Chiesa dello sviluppo sostenibile e l'approccio dell'agenda delle Nazioni Unite, identifica quella che potrebbe essere considerata la ragione fondamentale che spiega tali divergenze e poi tenta di trarre implicazioni per una realizzazione più efficace e significativa di uno sviluppo sostenibile autentico e integrale per l'umanità e per ogni persona umana.

Parole chiave: Antropologia, Chiesa cattolica, Obiettivi di sviluppo, Religione, Magistero, Nazioni Unite.