

## Conclusions

Seminar «God entrusts the human being to the woman»

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The first thing we talked about when we met together was our gratitude for this conference at this time in history and in the history of women's development. So thank you for handling both the large intellectual organization of the conference and the many details... Your Eminence Cardinal Rylko, Bishop Clemens and all the staff of the Pontifical Council for the Laity.

We are honoured to be part of this conversation and not only to come with the thoughts that we had, but to be inspired to think at this time together about the question of the woman and her vocations.

When Professor Salatiello and I met yesterday, we were happy to find that our many notes were easily gathered under two general headings: first, the large theoretical ideas that need further development and specification and second, the theme of communications and how we go from what we said here to a new evangelisation about these matters, to communicating them to *particular* audiences, to adopting one particular tone versus another. We were able to isolate from our many notes four proposals or themes under the heading of “communications”. I will treat each of these below.

**The First**, and perhaps most often repeated notion, was the importance of having *positive* proposals about women to offer the world. To echo Prof. Salatiello: I think everyone of us here is convinced of the genius of the anthropology we consider here, of the depth of our tradition, of its sheer beauty – and the more you read and reflect upon MD, even twenty-five years after the fact, the more you realize that it has not lost its power, but in fact has new relevance and explanatory powers for the times at hand. Therefore I echo Professor Salatiello's remark about seeking not to arrive at the conversation “one minute late,” but rather being early to the table, to

the conversation, with our positive proposals. Women and societies have old questions that remain unsettled; they have new questions now that the experiment of the sexual revolution has been operating this last 50 years. As Professor Scaraffia pointed out so straightforwardly, the promises of the sexual revolution have not delivered: love and male-female relationships and marriage and parenting are not idyllic by a very long way. The situation is also more dramatic for the poor, particularly the poor woman, the single mother, the children who have not found their identity or their place in a solid family environment or community. Because the secular feminist revolution left many old questions unanswered, and because it raised so many new questions, there arise real opportunities for our gaining a hearing on our ideas concerning the attainment of authentic dignity and freedom and non-discrimination for women. There are many problematic sources who are only too willing to answer all questions about women; if we do not speak, they will fill all the space, they will claim to answer all the questions. We do not want to miss these opportunities.

The Church has innovative and dramatic proposals in favour of women following Jesus' examples in the Gospel. Here I refer to that marvellous part of MD where JPII recites Jesus' wonderful encounters with the woman caught in adultery, with Martha, and with the Samaritan women at the well, which he notes are among the most important theological exchanges in the Gospel. These are dramatic offerings of freedom to women who are not in situations of freedom. We need to make these proposals in our own time, these are proposals involving what Cardinal Rylko referred to as "solid love," as distinguished from temporary or liquid love. These are what Mons. Melina so beautifully captured in his discussion about life-long love – which is to be distinguished from the instinct of romance, which is more about *me* than about *us* or about all of us, or about the importance (to the community and in salvation history) of woman's particular gifts for receptivity to new life and to all persons. It is important to make these positive proposals that women are free to accept, as distinguished from an uninterrupted practice of casting women as powerless victims of harmless messages, institutions and governments. We

are not powerless. As the intervention from Nigeria so beautifully pointed out, we have not realised this utopian promise of sisterhood but we women can do better than we have, and we know – as was discussed not only in *MD* but also in Pope Benedict's *On the Collaboration of Men and Women* – that we will be more powerful not only if we are *together*, but if we bring men into this enterprise from the beginning, and strike a balance between making demands and sharing duties.

We need this new kind of solidarity and we need support from the Church in these efforts as we look for both a new masculinism and a new feminism *together* to meet the challenges of the day. Furthermore as we address women and men in the public square, we have to take care that the language in which we convey these new proposals is not confusing or confined to terms of art that we alone understand. It also cannot be self-referential

We should not be afraid to make use of the media in these efforts. As one of our interveners stated in these past days: who is the media? It is people we know. It could be us, our children, or our friends. The media is part of our community too and we should not be afraid to treat them as such.

A **second** theme under the heading of communications: There are many forms of communication which are not propositions *per se*. Rather, they are personal witness in many cases. Women love the telling of these witness stories about loss and success, about failure and resurrection. These include stories about the path from slavery to the freedom offered by the voice of the Church, the voice of Jesus Christ himself. Stories detailing the path from the slavery of subjugation or violence against women, from the slavery of fear or self-hatred or bodily obsession... from wordliness, materialism, individualism, or contention with men... *to* the freedom of being a daughter of God. These testimonies from women to women (and it would be wonderful if we could get men to give their testimonies too) are another form of communication. There is also the communication uniquely powerfully accomplished by “being-with,” by presence, by simply loving the neighbour that God has given you. To cite

the quotation offered by Mons. Melina, “only love is credible.” Thus the power of the *demonstration* of the feminine capacity for entrustment. We saw that this might be particularly necessary – this communication by loving presence – to young women and men moving through our educational institutions and our society who do not understand solid love in their own situations, whether at home or in school, ... who do not understand what it means to be loved unconditionally. Or perhaps they do not understand from the media, from the entertainment industry, from the Internet, ... what is a man; what is a woman; what do they have in common; how do they operate as men and as women; and what does it mean to love one another as man and as woman. We had beautiful testimonies from married women about how it was that, as their life was unfolding, the company of the Church – whether in conversations with priests or religious, or documents, or sacraments – helped them to understand the life that was unfolding before them and what the “custodianship” of their children meant. Finally, there was mentioned even the possibility of communication by a willingness to suffer publicly for Jesus Christ, by our observation of martyrdom to live out our vocation to the cause of the human person as we understand it.

The **third** aspect of communication we discussed was about how lay women and religious women have opportunities commensurate with their platforms – with their expertises, with their knowledge, with their spheres of influence – for undertaking communication *in* the Church but also *beyond* the Church. They are, by definition, the voice *ad extra*, the voice of the Catholic woman, who knows her field, the language of her field, the sensibilities of her field. She also knows the terms of art used by the Church that the world does not understand, and possesses as a lay expert, the possibility for communicating in each of her fields of influence.

**Fourth** and finally we identified some particular subject matters within this question of the vocation of women that require further sustained thought, and particular ingenuity to support successful communication.

1. The matter of complementarity – this subject is very fraught, very neuralgic in the world. How do we explain that this is not biological reductionism, not a fractionalising of the image of God, that it is not elevating one sex over another, but rather a still a very inadequately explored gift of God not only as between a man and a woman in a romantic or marital relationship, but in *every* field of action in the world, given that we are together everywhere in the world? And we have the additional fact that women are not only doing things that they used to do in the traditional professions, but that they are today doing things men *alone* used to do. But the language of complementarity has an enormous amount of baggage; it is the proverbial over-loaded camel trying hard to get through the eye of the needle that is the entry point to the world's understanding.
2. Another difficult subject to communicate without generating negative feedback is the matter of the good of women's care-taking, service, nurturance, of children, and of the elderly, not only in their personal lives, but also in the fields that women disproportionately populate: medicine, law, social work, teaching, health-care. Why do we as women make these choices disproportionately to spend more time caring for other people when we are often unpaid or underpaid? We need to generate effective messages at a social level about these things. When there is talk about the Church being loving and nurturing like a mother, there is a great deal of positive feedback. When there is talk about individual women doing the same, there is resistance. It is objected that “care” is subservient, care is underpaid or unpaid. Why is it that what we love about our Mother the Church we cannot love about the individual woman's actions in the world?

These are some particular areas of communication we identified as fraught and in need of our particular attention.