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**Woman brings to society and to the Church
her ability to nurture human beings**

The Address of John Paul II

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,
Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. I joyfully welcome you to this meeting entitled 'Women', organized by the Pontifical Council for the Laity. A year ago, the Fourth World Conference on Women took place in Beijing. It opportunely shed light on the moral, cultural and social challenges still facing the international community. Prominent among the areas still in need of reflection for finding suitable solutions are the legal and practical norms that guarantee the rights of the individual, universal access to education, respect for human dignity and family units and the recognition of male and female identity.

It is no exaggeration to say that the work of the conference, an event followed with interest on all five continents, rightly stressed the close connection between issues affecting women and the value that the contemporary world puts upon life. I am therefore delighted that during your days of study you will be able to examine these themes in greater depth and thus show the Church's constant concern that women should renew and continue their involvement in social life. With your reflections you will be making an original contribution to the Church's mission in the service of man, created in God's image, "the only creature on earth that God has wanted for its own sake" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 24), and to whom he entrusted the whole of creation.

2. *A renewed commitment of all for the good of the world's women*: this was the theme you chose in accordance with the mandate I gave the members of the Holy See's Delegation — led by a woman — on the eve of their departure for Beijing. Today, I would like to pay tribute once again to the achievements of the Delegation which

was constantly concerned with the true good of all women, while taking into account the sociocultural context and attaching importance above all to respect for the individual. Furthermore, the Delegation forcefully reminded political leaders and all who work in international organizations that every person must be respected, in his or her physical, intellectual and spiritual integrity, so that a person will never be treated as an object or be exploited by political or economic interests that are often inspired by neo-Malthusian ideologies. Your initiative fits within the framework of the Post-Synodal Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, in which I described a necessary condition for ensuring women their rightful place in the Church and in society, for the full development of their particular genius: "a more penetrating and accurate consideration of the anthropological foundation of masculinity and femininity for the purpose of clarifying woman's personal identity in relation to man" (n. 50).

3. The legitimate quest for equality between men and women in such important areas as education, the workplace and parental responsibility has led research to the question of the equality of rights. In principle at least, this has enabled many discriminatory practices to be abolished, although it has yet to be universally implemented and further action will be necessary.

In the sphere of human rights, it is more appropriate than ever to ask our contemporaries to question themselves on what is mistakenly called 'reproductive health'. The expression contains a contradiction that distorts the very meaning of subjectivity: actually, it includes the alleged right to abortion. Thus it denies the basic right of every human being to life, and in harming one of its members it injures the whole human race. "The roots of the contradiction between the solemn affirmation of human rights and their tragic denial in practice lies in a notion of freedom which exalts the isolated individual in an absolute way, and gives no place to solidarity, openness to others and service of them" (*Evangelium Vitae*, 19). Recognition of someone as a human being is never based on the awareness or experience we may have of him, but by the certitude that he has an infinite value from conception, which comes to him from his relationship with God. A human being has primacy over

the ideas others have of him, and his existence is absolute and not relative.

4. At the moment, it should be noted that insistence on equality is also accompanied by renewed attention to the difference between men and women and a great respect for their distinctive traits. A true reflection might suggest that the foundations of difference and equality have been well laid. In this perspective, the Church does not only make a theological contribution but is also involved in anthropological research. The role played by the 20th-century Christian philosophers who exalted the greatness of the human being cannot be forgotten. Thus the Church takes part in the creation of a common cultural base for men and women of goodwill, so as to offer a systematic answer to our contemporaries' questions and to recall that equality goes hand in hand with the recognition of differences inherent in them since creation (cf. *Gen* 1:27).

In our societies, deeply marked by the individual pursuit of success, each person will nonetheless realize that he cannot live without openness to others for, as Maurice Nédoncelle commented, "an individual exists for himself through others" (*La personne humaine et sa nature*). He does not find himself and does not consciously develop except by being linked to a specific culture, and through it, to all humanity. The advancement of individuals and their interpersonal relations therefore includes the advancement of cultures which are like a jewel box in which every human being finds his proper place for the protection and growth of his being.

5. Conjugal love is the loftiest and most beautiful expression of human relations and self-giving, for it is essentially a desire for mutual growth. In this encounter based on reciprocal love, each is recognized for what he is and is called to express his personal talents and achieve his potential. The logic of the sincere gift of self (cf. *Letter to Families*, 11) is a source of joy, help and understanding.

6. Human love finds in Trinitarian love a model of perfect loving and giving. Through the total gift of himself Jesus gives birth to the people of the New Covenant. On the Cross, the Lord entrusted the disciple he loved and his Mother to each other (cf. *Jn* 19:26-27). Does not the Apostle compare the love of Christ and his

Church to the love between man and woman? (cf. *Eph* 5:25-32). The biblical texts also reveal to us the profound meaning of the motherhood of woman "introduced into the order of the Covenant that God made with humanity in Jesus Christ" (*Mulieris Dignitatem*, 19). In its personal and ethical sense, this motherhood shows a creativity on which the humanity of each human being largely depends; it also invites man to learn and to express his own fatherhood. Thus women contribute to society and to the Church their ability to nurture human beings.

The Church is our mother. We are her children and are called to share in giving birth to a new people for God. We learn this motherhood from Mary for to all those who are working for the rebirth of man through their participation in the apostolic mission, she is an "exemplar both of virgin and mother" (*Lumen Gentium*, 63). You are providentially holding your meeting on the eve of the feast of the Immaculate Conception. This is certainly an occasion for everyone, priests, religious, laity, men and women, to contemplate Mary and to ask her help so that each, according to his own vocation, may contribute to the witness given by the Church, Bride of Christ, "in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish". (*Eph* 5:27).

7. At the close of our meeting, I am delighted with this initiative taken by the Pontifical Council for the Laity and I hope that your work here may be fruitful and give the Church a precious means to carry out her pastoral mission and service in society. I encourage you to continue your activities in the Catholic organizations, ecclesiastical communities and the various associations in which you are involved. As I commend you to the intercession of the holy women who throughout history have shared in the Church's journey, I cordially give you my Apostolic Blessing, which I extend to all your dear ones.