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Completing the synthesis of the Round Table, the following intervention gives an overall picture of the present situation.

**Women faced with fundamental choices:
difficulties, challenges, prospects in contemporary culture**

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On the Feast of the Immaculate Conception in 1965, the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council uttered these prophetic words in their Closing Message: "The hour is coming, in fact has come, when the vocation of women is being acknowledged in its fullness, the hour when women acquire in the world an influence, an effect, and a power never hitherto achieved".¹

Thirty-one years ago, no one, not even the Council Fathers, could have foreseen just how profoundly the lives of women were about to change. The decades that followed Vatican II were so turbulent that many of us who lived through that period are still trying to figure out exactly what happened and what it all meant. Today, as we look around, we see that women "at the dawn of the third millennium" enjoy far more opportunities than their mothers and grandmothers ever dreamed possible. Yet they also face a bewildering array of difficulties, challenges, and choices, some of them entirely unknown to previous generations.

It is easy to understand why the ancient Chinese considered it a curse to say: "May you live in interesting times". Nevertheless, few women today would want to change places with women in the past. These are times when more of us have more of a chance than ever before to realize our full potential. They are times when more of us at last can have more of a say in the de-

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isions that affect how we live, work, and raise our children. The Council for the Laity was wise, therefore, to emphasize 'choice' in the title of this morning's program. For whether the times are interesting or ordinary, we Christians cannot remain idle in the vineyard. We are called to sanctify time.

The choices we make now, for better or worse, will help to shape the culture we leave to the next generation. In this respect, we at the beginning of the new millennium are like the children of Israel when they were about to cross into the promised land.

The Lord God told them that they could choose "life and prosperity, [or] death and disaster" (*Deut* 30:15). And so it is for us: we can either contribute to building 'the civilization of life and love', or we can acquiesce in the encroaching 'culture of death'. How fitting it is, then, that this meeting is being held in the advent season, a time for taking stock, repentance, and hope.

This meeting itself is a sign of hope, bringing together so many women from all parts of the world. I am grateful, though daunted, to have been given the assignment to get the ball rolling with a general overview of our current situation. Being a teacher, my first impulse when faced with a difficult task is to make an outline. So I have organized my remarks this morning under four headings: first, some of the aspects of the current situation of women that can fairly be called unprecedented. Second, the novel challenges presented by those new circumstances. Third, a brief evaluation of how organized feminism has responded to those challenges. And fourth, some ways in which Christian social thought may prove to be a fertile source of approaches to promoting "the good of the world's women".

Two preliminary remarks are in order: my emphasis on new dilemmas is in no way meant to slight the ongoing problems that women face, but only to try to make the best use of the time at our disposal. I would also like to emphasize what is probably obvious—that all the problems I will be discussing are, in an important sense, *everybody's* problems, even though they affect women in a special way. I now turn to what is historically novel about the situation of women in the 1990s.

1. Something new under the sun

Every generation has a tendency to believe that its joys and sorrows are unique. In a certain sense, they are right to feel that way, for as St. Paul told the Corinthians, "This world as we know it is passing away" (*1 Cor* 7:31). Our own era, however, is set apart by the speed and the depth of the social changes of the past three decades. These upheavals have thrust us into truly uncharted territory — a place from which familiar landmarks have disappeared, a place where the wisdom of our forebears is of uncertain application, a place from which there is no turning back.

In many cases, it is the *scale* of the phenomenon, rather than the phenomenon itself, that is wholly new. In the affluent societies of Europe and North America, women made striking gains in all areas of public life, not without certain costs. At the same time, longstanding patterns of private life were altered beyond recognition. There was a 'sexual revolution' which entailed increasing acceptance of behaviors previously considered immoral. The link between sex and procreation was disrupted by a variety of technological innovations. Marriage rates fell, and divorce rates doubled. Birth rates dropped, while births to un-married women rose dramatically. A record proportion of children now grow up without fathers. A record proportion of mothers of young children are now employed outside the home. Abortion not only became legal, but in some places a constitutional right.

Although some of these phenomena are more advanced in the North Atlantic countries, transformative ideas about marriage, the family, women's roles and traditional morality have penetrated every part of the world. Many factors have promoted their spread. For one thing, a momentous change is taking place in the developing world — as these countries replicate the separation of home and business that began in the United States and Europe a century ago when men, in increasing numbers, began working for wages outside the home. To appreciate the significance of what is happening now, consider that, from the beginning of human history, the overwhelming majority of human beings have lived in small farming or fishing villages, toiling for subsistence in closely interdependent family groups. In the present decade, for the first time ever, the majority

of the earth's inhabitants will have exchanged those ancient patterns for new ways of life.² This is a historic transition, perhaps comparable only to the displacement of hunter-gatherer by settled agricultural societies.

Moreover, unlike in Europe and America a century ago, the transformation of the developing world is being accelerated by ideas and images received through radio, television, and computers — and by the examples of modernizing elites. These men and women, who constitute a kind of 'first world within the third world' are influential 'agents of change'. As Max Weber pointed out long ago, "new lines of conduct" introduced by such individuals are often even more decisive than economic forces in transforming traditional societies.³

Of all the ideas that are flooding into every household in every corner of the earth, none are more powerful than those which speak to what the Holy Father has called "the universal human longing for freedom".⁴ Fifty years ago, when the Charter of the United Nations proclaimed that women and men had equal dignity and rights, the subordination of women was still institutionalized in most of the world's legal systems, including the United States and many European countries. But a new spirit was in the air and it was contagious. By the early 1950s, nearly every country had a bill of rights — most of them for the first time, and most of them expressly providing for the equality of the sexes.

That was an era when colonial empires were dissolving, and civil rights movements were gathering momentum. The freedom genie was out of the lamp. It was as though a bell had rung somewhere and awakened dreams that had been sleeping in the hearts of women and men in every corner of the earth.

I evoke this history for two reasons. First, because it would be a mistake to let disenchantment with some of the fruits of the women's liberation movement sour us on the longings that gave rise to it. The second reason is to pay respect to the power of the imagination in human affairs.

² R. CHITTFIELD, *The Villagers* (New York, Anchor 1954), 3-39.

³ M. WEBER, *On Law and Economy in Society*, M. Rothstein ed. (Harvard University Press, 1954), 68.

⁴ JOHN PAUL II, *Address to the United Nations*, October 3, 1979.

It is doubtful that established patterns of behavior would have changed so drastically if women and men had not begun to dream new dreams, to tell new stories, and even to *imagine reality* differently from their parents and grand parents.

In sum, then, we are faced with a range of profoundly ambiguous phenomena. Many of the old attitudes that have now passed from the scene affronted women's freedom and dignity, but others helped to assure a degree of decency and responsibility in the relations between the sexes. For many women, the recent changes brought welcome opportunities to realize their full range of talents. But for many more, recent years have seen the emergence of new forms of exploitation, and the spread of what is now called the feminization of poverty.

And that brings me to the second part of this talk — the new challenges which are so perplexing — not only because they are new, but because so many of them are by-products of genuine advances, or unforeseen side-effects of freedoms that modern men and women rightly prize.

2. Five challenges

Keeping in mind that we are just beginning a discussion — and not with any thought of being exhaustive — let me invite your attention to five loosely connected challenges that are daily becoming more acute: a caretaking crisis, a motherhood crisis, a crisis in the mediating structures of civil society, a crisis in beliefs, and the mounting tension between work and family.

1. *The caretaking crisis* arises from something that did *not* change while almost everything else in society was in flux. The proportion of the world's population needing care (young children, the infirm, the frail elderly) is approximately the same as it was a hundred years ago. Yet with women increasingly working outside the home, the traditional pool of unpaid caretakers has shrunk drastically.⁵ That presents every society with a serious challenge to which

⁵ Cf. M. GLENDON, *The New Family and the New Property* (Toronto, Butterworths, 1981), 13.

none has yet found a satisfactory response. To put it another way, *no society has found an adequate substitute for the valuable resource it always took for granted — the unpaid labor of women.*

The composition of the dependent population varies from place to place: in poor countries, there are more children than elderly in the mix; while in affluent countries, the opposite is generally the case. Thanks to medical advances, some countries have never had such a large elderly population. *The full implications of this historical novelty are just beginning to come into view.* In affluent countries with low birth rates, the burden of supporting a larger group of dependents is falling on the shoulders of a labor force that is growing proportionately smaller. Regrettably, that may be part of what is fueling the 'assisted suicide' movement. When you consider that the majority of elderly persons are women — and that women form the *great* majority of poor, elderly persons — you can see that this movement will affect women in a special way. A little noted, but ominous fact about the career of America's infamous Dr. Kevorkian (Dr. Death) is that two-thirds of the people he has "helped" to die are women.

2. Closely related to the cluster of issues I have grouped under the idea of a caretaking crisis, is a new, risky situation confronting women who become mothers. *The motherhood crisis* arises from the increasing fragility of couple relationships. The rise in divorce has had a disproportionate impact on mothers for reasons that are well-known: most divorces involve couples with minor children; after divorce it is usually the mother who remains primarily responsible for the care of the children; and in most cases the standard of living in that maternal household declines. When one adds to this picture the rise in births to unwed women, it is not surprising that nearly three-quarters of the world's poor are women and children.

Thus mothers at the dawn of the third millennium are faced with what I call the four deadly Ds: the risk of divorce; disrespect for unpaid work; disadvantages in the workplace for anyone who takes time out for family responsibilities; and the destitution that afflicts so many female-headed families.

In the past, and in some societies today, the wider kinship group has been available as a support network for family members with young children. But yet another historically unprecedented as-

pect of our current situation is that both marriage and kinship ties have become attenuated.⁵ There have been societies where kinship bonds counted for more than marital bonds, and others where the converse has been true. *But a simultaneous weakening of marriage and kinship bonds is something new.* As one sociologist has put it, relatives have become increasingly like friends — we choose the ones with whom we wish to associate.⁶

3. As if that were not enough cause for concern, the array of institutions that long served as auxiliaries to the family — schools, neighborhoods, religious groups, voluntary associations of all sorts — are themselves in distress, in part because they too depended on the unpaid labor of women.

This is what I have referred to as *the crisis in civil society.* Just when families need outside help more than ever, the mediating structures that families could once count on are themselves in far from peak condition.⁷ It is a vicious circle.

4. A major impediment to developing effective responses: to these troubling problems is a fourth crisis, a *crisis of beliefs* — the loss of the widely shared understandings that once formed the basis of law and morality. That subject is so vast that I can do no more than signal it here, and note its connection to the spread of "the climate of secularism and relativism" to which the Holy Father refers in *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* (n. 36).

5. Finally, there is *the work-family dilemma.* One consequence of women's increased labor force participation has been to focus attention on the difficult relationship between family life and the world of work, and the contradictions between human values and the values of the market.⁸ These tensions have intensified with the recent,

⁵ Cf. *Ibid.*

⁶ Cf. R. Kósma, *Sociological Introduction*, in "International Encyclopedia of Comparative Law", vol. 4 (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1974).

⁷ On the importance of mediating structures, see especially *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931).

⁸ It is hard to think of anything that has a more decisive effect on the daily rhythms of family life than the structure and constraints of work. Not only are family events, meals, and routines typically built around work schedules, but the values of the workplace have a tendency to permeate home and hearth like the dust and odors that cling to a factory worker's clothing.

massive entry of mothers of young children into the labor force. And in many cases, the work-family dilemma does not end when the last child leaves home, for the needs of aging parents often start the process of juggling job and family responsibilities all over again.

To some extent, this situation is an old story with a new twist — an updated version of the perennial tugs-of-war between desire and duty, the individual and the group, the yearning to 'have it all' and the need to accept limits. The modern metaphor of 'balancing' work and family has not been particularly helpful. For as many of us have learned from experience, what is involved is not so much balancing, as *choosing*. But as the economic circumstances of child-raising families worsen in relation to other types of households, the choices of mothers and fathers are harshly limited.

At this point, it should be noted that all the challenges I have been discussing involve fundamental choices — about what kind of people we want to be, and what kind of societies we wish to bring into being. What kind of society neglects its youngest, oldest, poorest, and most vulnerable members? What kind of society treats motherhood as just another life style choice deserving of no particular recognition or reward? What kind of society abandons the distinction between right and wrong for fear of being 'judgmental' or 'intolerant'?

Yet it is far from clear how the probabilities might be shifted in a more positive direction. How can respect for women's family roles be harmonized with women's advancement in all areas of social, economic and political life? How, in a global economy, can the workplace be structured in a way that is less destructive to families and communities?

How can the notion of the common good be retrieved in a pluralistic society?

The idea is sometimes heard in conservative circles that we should just go back to the way things were in some former 'golden age'. But one thing Mrs. Gertrude Mongella was right about at Beijing is that "there's no going back". Those who would like women to bear all of the risks and burdens of family obligations without help from men and society are like the chicken in the story of the chicken and the pig who were trying to think what they could give

to Farmer MacDonald for a nice birthday present. The chicken said, "I've got a great idea. Let's make him a nice breakfast of ham and eggs. You give the ham and I'll give the eggs". The pig, for obvious reasons, was not enthusiastic about that division of labor.

No, there is no going back, and there are no simple solutions. Faced with such thorny dilemmas, the groaning world surely needs all the intelligence, creativity, and good will that it can muster! And that observation brings me to my third topic.

3. The response of "official feminism"

Let us first give credit where credit is due. The feminists of the 1960s and 1970s took the lead in raising the consciousness of men and women alike concerning a wide range of injustices, not least of which was the lack of respect, reward and security accorded to much of women's work. Organized feminism was also an important, though by no means the only, force in expanding women's educational and employment opportunities.

But with regard to the five challenges I have mentioned, official feminism has not been in the vanguard, and has often been part of the problem. The reason seems to be an ideological block. Once feminist leaders decided to treat marriage and motherhood as the main obstacles to women's advancement, they found it hard to support women who had chosen to make marriage and child-raising central to their lives. There have always been women in feminist circles who hold different views, but their voices have never prevailed. Thus, in the 1960s and 1970s, feminists were in the forefront of the movement for unilateral no-fault divorce. They were cheerleaders for the sexual revolution and the abortion rights movement. And at last year's Beijing conference, the old warhorses of 1970s feminism were still at it — fighting every positive reference to marriage, motherhood, or the family in the conference documents.

At the close of last year's Beijing conference, the Holy See delegation predicted that the best parts of the Program of Action would languish for want of funding, while the worst parts would be exploited by special interest groups whose main concern is not to help women, but to gain legitimation for their own activities. Unfortunately, time has borne out those predictions all too well.

With a year's hindsight, the Beijing conference was in some respects like an offshore manufacturing site where special interests strove to convert their agendas into so-called 'international norms' — far from public scrutiny and without input from the people who would be most affected.

I would like to take a moment to give you an example of how the Beijing Program of Action is already being used to confer legitimacy on the activities of the abortion industry. In September 1996, "to mark the first anniversary of the Beijing Conference", the International Planned Parenthood Federation in London issued a document it calls "a new Charter on Sexual and Reproductive Rights". Unveiling the charter, Planned Parenthood said its main purpose was to show the extent to which sexual and reproductive rights have been recognized within the international community.¹⁰ They claimed that certain provisions of the Beijing and Cairo documents, plus "additional rights that IPPF believes are implied by them", have "the moral weight that recent UN conferences have carried, with the additional weight of having achieved international consensus in relation to IPPF's activities". IPPF's work, they concluded, is based on international documents that "carry status".

Note the language — 'moral weight', 'international consensus'. Note, too, how the rights that population controllers did not succeed in planting in the Cairo and Beijing documents are now alleged to be 'implied' in those texts.¹¹ Never mind that reservations by 43 countries on the very points in question make it misleading to speak of moral weight or consensus where reproductive rights are concerned. Never mind that the document expressly reaffirms that abortion is never to be promoted as a means of birth control. Population controllers, pharmaceutical manufacturers, and abortion profiteers do not like to have to justify their actions with their version of the golden rule ("We've got the gold, we make the rule"). They prefer to say: "We have the blessing of international standards".

Meanwhile, the parts of the Beijing Program that do have moral weight and that were truly supported by consensus remain paper

promises. A year after Beijing, organized feminism continues to offer ideological stones for bread to the women who are most in need of effective representation.

One might have expected feminist organizations at least to be in the forefront with regard to the work-family dilemma, given the importance they attach to education and employment. But here, again, they have been handicapped by ideology. Their chief formula for women's advancement was modelled on a male pattern that takes such a toll on family life that men themselves have begun to search for something better.¹²

In sum, feminist leaders have concentrated on what they thought women ought to want instead of listening to women's own testimony concerning their actual needs and concerns. Ironically, they behaved much like the so-called 'patriarchy' against which they so bitterly railed.

No wonder that the handwriting is on the wall for the peculiar form of feminism that had its heyday in the 1970s. And the message on the wall is the same as that in the Book of Daniel: "You have been weighed in the balance and found wanting" (*Dn* 5:27). Recent polls in the United States are revealing: two-thirds of American women answer "No" to the question "Do you consider yourself a feminist?"¹³ Among young college women, the rejection is even more striking: fewer than one in five says she considers herself a feminist. The reasons are simple. They are put off by old-style feminism's negative attitude toward marriage and motherhood, its antagonistic attitude toward men, and above all by its relative indifference to children.

The failure of organized feminism to win the minds and hearts of most women in the very country that embraced it so fully in the 1970s testifies to an encouraging fact about our current situation: we have not reached the point where no one in our society wants to perform caretaking, nurturing, and child-raising roles. For what-

¹⁰ Some feminists have begun to concede that it was a mistake to refuse to go to bat for their sisters who want to give priority to family life. But as they begin, belatedly, to address that problem, official feminism is handicapped by another ideological factor — a preference for top-down, statist solutions.

¹¹ E. FOX-GENOVESE, *Feminism Is Not the Story of My Life* (New York, Doubleday, 1996), 32.

¹² INTERNATIONAL PLANNED PARENTHOOD FEDERATION, *Open File Newsletter*, September 1996, 12.

¹³ For critique of the "implied rights" argument, see M. GLENDON, *What Happened at Beijing*, *The Things*, January 1996, 30, 34.

ever reason, most family members, and especially mothers, are already showing their willingness, often at considerable personal sacrifice. With the repudiation of the old, angry feminism, it is not fanciful to imagine that a new way of thinking about women's issues is already emerging — a feminism that treats men and women as partners, not antagonists; a feminism grounded in an adequate understanding of the social dimensions of human personhood; a feminism that perhaps will not be called feminism.

A major contributor to that new way of thinking has been the Catholic Church in the time of John Paul II, to which I now turn.

4. A hidden treasure

In *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, Pope John Paul II poses this rhetorical question: "It must be asked how many Christians really know and put into practice the principles of the Church's social doctrine" (n. 36). To that question we might well append another: How many Catholic women are aware of their Church's emergence as one of the most influential and energetic champions of the freedom and dignity of women in the world today?

I suspect the answer is "too few", for in recent months, I have frequently been asked: Why has the Church only addressed women's issues in connection with the Beijing conference, but not before or after? To show how far that question is from the mark, I have drawn up a list which shows that a major theme of this papacy from its very beginning has been the advancement of women.

Item 1. It has been in this period that the Church has become a leading advocate in international settings of social and economic justice for women, especially the most disadvantaged women. It was the Holy See that first introduced the subject of women's education at a Least Developed Nations conference in 1971, and the Holy See was the first U.N. Member to respond to the Beijing conference's call for concrete commitments, pledging the Church's educational and health agencies to adopt a priority strategy for girls and young women.

Item 2. In *Familiaris Consortio* in the early 1980s, the Pope was already insisting that the equal dignity of women fully justifies their

access to public functions — and that family roles and public roles must be "harmoniously combined if we wish the evolution of society to be fully human" (n. 23). (Those same themes recur in several other writings on all sorts of topics — the laity, human work, social concern, the family, and so on).

Item 3. In 1988, the Pope set forth the theological foundation for the partnership of women and men in the mystery of redemption in *Mulieris Dignitatem*. This is the text where he meditates deeply on the freedom and dignity of women in the light of Scripture and the authoritative teachings of the Church. Its tone is modest and tentative, inviting women to help the Church think about the application of eternal principles to the dilemmas of our time. It stands open to improved knowledge, to dialogue, and to the Holy Spirit.

Item 4. In 1995, two aspects of the documents issued in connection with the Beijing conference were striking: the Pope's adoption of feminist language (so surprising to many); and his reflections on the status of women within the Church itself.

Item 5. Within his own sphere, the Pope has set an example by making an unprecedented number of appointments of lay and religious women to various church bodies, and exhorting his brother priests in ever stronger language to welcome the contributions of women at all levels.

Item 6. Far from dropping these subjects after the Beijing conference, the Holy Father recently wrote with reference to consecrated women: "It is therefore urgently necessary [for the institutions of the Church] to take concrete steps, beginning by providing room for women to participate at all levels, including decision-making processes, above all in matters which concern women themselves".⁴

Needless to say, these efforts on behalf of women are almost never mentioned when the press berates the Church for its stance on women's ordination.

We often hear that the Church has not done enough to advance the good of the world's women. No doubt, the Holy Father himself would be the first to agree. But it *has* done enough to show that

⁴ Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, 58.

this is a time of tremendous vitality for women in the life of the Church — and to inspire women who love the Church to help it do more. Catholic women who are dissatisfied with the pace of change should consider asking themselves: Where in contemporary society do I feel most respected as a woman, whatever my chosen path in life? What body of thought takes most seriously my deepest concerns? What organization speaks most clearly on behalf of all women, including those in poverty? Catholic mothers might consider asking as well: Where do I feel most supported and encouraged in the difficult task of raising children under today's conditions? For my own part, I cannot think of any institution that surpasses the Catholic Church in these respects.

Nor can I think of any more fruitful principles to guide and promote further progress for women than those contained in Scripture and the Church's social teachings. The bearing of Catholic social thought on the challenges facing women has yet to be fully explored. It is, one might say, a hidden treasure waiting to be discovered and put to use. What is hidden are the *connections* that need to be made between the recent writings on women on the one hand, and related writings on the laity, the family, social justice, and human work on the other hand. The implications of these great writings, *taken together*, are truly revolutionary.

As remedies for the four deadly Ds, Catholic social thought proposes the four great Ss: subjectivity, solidarity, subsidiarity, and spirituality.

Just imagine, for example, what John Paul II's radical call for a new "culture of work" could mean for the work-family dilemma. As outlined in *Laborem Exercens* and *Centesimus Annus* that would be a culture the world has not yet seen — where human values are protected along with the values of efficiency and productivity, where the dignity of all legitimate types of work is respected, and where the workplace and the polity are structured in such a way that women and men do not have to pay for security and advancement at the expense of their families.

Now it is time to bring to a conclusion these remarks which are meant to serve as a beginning to our discussions. The task ahead of us is truly daunting, is it not? Perhaps never since the dawn of the

Christian era, have women and laypersons been called to such awesome responsibilities as in this 'new Advent' time. Never have women been faced with more complicated problems. To help set the mood for what lies ahead, I would like to close with a thought of the Jesuit philosopher Bernard Lonergan which has meant so much to me that I have taken the liberty of embroidering it a bit over the years.

In times of cultural upheaval, according to Lonergan, "there is bound to be formed a solid right that is determined to live in a world that no longer exists. There is bound to be formed a scattered left, captivated by now this, now that new development... But what will count is a perhaps not numerous center, [sufficient numbers of men and women who are knowledgeable enough to be] at home in the old as well as the new, [imaginative enough to recognize the possibilities in the current situation, and] painstaking enough to work out...the transitions to be made..."⁵

As you can probably guess, what I added to Lonergan's passage are women and imagination. And that, I hope, is what this conference will contribute to the Pontifical Council for the Laity's deliberations concerning "a renewed commitment of all for the good of the world's women!"

⁵ B. LONERGAN, *Dimensions of Meaning*, in "Collection: Papers by Bernard Lonergan", R. F. Coove ed. (London and New York: Herder & Herder, 1967), 252, 267.