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The International Meeting 'Women'

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Will the XXI century be feminine? As we approach the year 2000 there are some who are asking this. The radical changes in the lives of women and in man-woman relations over the last thirty years give grounds for a stock taking and a glance at the future.

The years of John Paul II's Pontificate have seen a succession of reminders of the consideration due to women and of the need for adequate study of their mission in a pluralistic world which thinks that it is marked by equality. The Pope is aware of the strong tensions to which women are exposed and the little store that is set by femininity in our day. His constant exhortation is to give living space to "woman's genius". His thinking in this regard is wonderfully spelt out in the *Letter to Women*, dated 29 June 1995, year of the IV World Conference on Women organized by the United Nations.

The Meeting sponsored by the Pontifical Council for the Laity was attended by 120 participants, in majority women, but not excluding a good representation of men. There were members of ecclesial associations and movements, delegates of the Conference of Catholic International Organizations, university professors, representatives of pastoral councils, women religious. There were also women active in politics, demographers, lawyers, business women, writers, journalists, women working in the various dicasteries of the Roman Curia; many were mothers of families, but others single.

Following the method *see, judge, act*, the Meeting proceeded in three stages. On the first day current reality was illustrated in a round-table discussion between — among others — the American, Mary Ann Glendon, professor of Law at Harvard University, the Nigerian Kathryn Hawa Hounkwap, Doctor in Political Science, the Polish Hanna Suchocka, lawyer and former Prime Minister, and Irina Ilovaïsky Alberni, editor of the review, 'Christian Russia'. Four women who have an overall vision of women's situation today, and

who, one after the other, presented its main features. "Women faced with fundamental choices: difficulties, challenges, prospects in contemporary culture", a talk which gave rise to a stimulating debate, dealing also with the question of "Women protecting life and caring for humanity"; "The participation of women in various forms of social commitment"; "Feminine genius in the cultural and religious tradition of peoples".

On the second day, 'judging' meant seeking to understand, in the light of the Bible and the Magisterium, the reality of the gift represented by the creation of the human being in 'the unity of the two', a reflection that can be seen as more and more necessary in our day. The Church can, in fact, make an anthropological and theological contribution that is irreplaceable — and in a sense, valid for the whole of humankind — for the building of a society in which men and women will be able to live, consciously and to the full, identity, difference, equality, complementarity, reciprocity.

The elements for this reflection were given in masterly fashion by Bruna Costacurta, lecturer on the Old Testament in the Pontifical Gregorian University, and by Monsignor Angelo Scola, Emeritus Bishop of Grosseto and Rector of the Pontifical Lateran University.

The two lectures centred on the person, created in the image of God. Bruna Costacurta gave an overall explanation of the biblical story, stressing that it is not to be interpreted "as though there was in the first place the creation of the male being and then, secondly, that of the female, but rather as one great creative event, that of the human being in the full sense, coming to completion only with the differentiated human being: man and woman". Bishop Angelo Scola, starting from this anthropological statement of the dual unity and its theological (Christological and Trinitarian) roots, offered an understanding of its finality, with reference to the Church, Spouse of Christ.

On the third day, the working groups compared studies and experiences related to the themes under discussion, and that can be seen as offering a response from the Church to the exhortation of John Paul II to seek "a renewed commitment of all for the good of the world's women". Scholars and representatives of the 'grassroots', working with and for women in various associations, reflected to

gether on questions ranging from "Various aspects of feminine poverty: women protagonists of their own development, to "Men and women building the future together in reciprocal complementarity"; "Women, 'allies' of God in building the civilization of love"; "Communicating women: image of woman, role of the mass media"; "Women and the care for humanity".

On this last subject one of the groups wrote: "The times of caring are different in women's lives, they succeed one another in different ways, but they all come to have one same meaning. The times of caring are care for small children, accompanying them in their growth, in their education; there are the special times of accompanying our children or young people entrusted to us in planning for their future. The time of caring is *care through dialogue*, care for the otherness developing all through married life, maintaining otherness and seeking unity. So it is care for dialogue in difference. Through the mother reaching the father. The Holy Father spelt this out when he said in his greeting to us: "In its personal and ethical sense, this motherhood shows a creativity on which the humanity of each human being largely depends; it also invites the man to learn and express his own fatherhood". So, caring in dialogue and *caring in gratitude*: towards our parents, since caring continues in time: the time that, through motherhood, passes from one generation to another. But the overall dimension of caring, embracing all dimensions of life, every moment of woman's life, means care for body and spirit, that is, care for destiny, care for the mystery that is in humanity.

What are the places for caring? Wherever women are living they should create places for caring and maintain them in time. But the privileged place for caring is the family, *intra* and *extra* — as many have stressed —, the family as social and ecclesial value. The family in which the woman experiences this care for what is human; not a private value, but a care that is social, because, at once, a relationship is established, passing from the mother to her children, and a conjugal relationship, through every moment of history. Every motherhood has this generative and spiritual dimension, which is at once social.

Reciprocity in the family becomes, should become, a social norm; symbolically it represents a form of solidarity that our so-

city has lost and that many societies have not yet reached. Emblematically the 'home' — a term repeated in many interventions — is the place where one is welcomed, as expression of this form of caring".

Discussing the various aspects of *feminine poverty*, another group stressed women's capacity for responding to the challenges of poverty, for dealing with it on their own. "Women are often motivated by their will to give their children a better future. The 'tontina' in Africa, the practice of 'mutirão' in Brazil, the organization of cooperatives — examples, among others, of many projects based on solidarity among women, on mutual help, on the application of the principle of subsidiarity. We might speak of a new pedagogy of help, not only giving hope of emerging from poverty, but reviving the sense of personal dignity. The greatest poverty is being unable to help anyone".

Women's participation in *building a civilization of love* must be based on a spirituality of communion. This was affirmed by another group. It pointed out that "throughout history, we can follow the action of the Spirit through the women who have contributed, with their own insights and resources, to creating a world that is more human, in harmony with God's plan. Today, through a new awareness, enlightened by the Magisterium of John Paul II, the Spirit is throwing light upon woman's special dignity and vocation. This spirituality of communion is given through the Spirit of Truth, bringing about conversion, the purification of mutual relationships, reconciliation within the human family; through the Spirit of Life, using the body, intelligence and heart of each one to generate human beings physically and spiritually, and to overcome the culture of violence and death that threatens humankind today; through the Spirit of Communion, enabling men and women to live reciprocal giving and solidarity within the family and in every human community".

To strengthen this conviction that there has to be a constant transition from a mentality of power to a mentality of service, those taking part in the Meeting had guidance from intense liturgies: Eucharistic celebrations and the prayer of the Hours, in the beautiful chapel of the Nazareth Centre.

On the evening of December 8, as they prepared to leave for their respective countries, they took with them in their hearts the words spoken on the previous day by John Paul II: "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, 'exemplar both of virgin and mother' (*Unam Sanctam*, 63)".