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Empowerment of Women in the Church and Society

I. Introduction

On behalf of the Pontifical Council for the Laity I cordially greet all the cardinals, archbishops and bishops that are taking part in this assembly. I would like to greet most especially the President of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, His Eminence Cardinal Telesphore Toppo, and the Apostolic Nuncio to India, His Excellency Archbishop Pedro López Quintana. I am very happy to be able to take part in this Plenary Assembly and I thank you for having honoured me with your invitation.

The topic you have chosen, "Empowerment of Women in the Church and Society", is appropriate in a year that commemorates the 20th anniversary of the Apostolic Letter *Mulieris dignitatem* by the Servant of God John Paul II. This is a truly providential document in the magisterium of the Church that has given us major guidelines concerning the presence of women in the Church and in society. Years have passed, but this document has not lost its relevance and it continues to be a contemporary resource that summons our attention today.

It is for this reason that the Pontifical Council for the Laity decided to commemorate this anniversary by organising a congress on "Woman and man, the *humanum* in its entirety" that took place a few days ago in Rome with the participation of 250 delegates from around the world. The objective was to take stock of the progress made over the past twenty years with regard to the advancement of women and recognition of their dignity. They looked at the challenges presented by the new cultural paradigms in the light of Revelation and also on the difficulties that Catholic women must surmount in order to live according to their identity and mission.

II. A new cultural paradigm

The Letter of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the *Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church*

and in the World agrees that "recent years have seen new approaches to women's issues".¹ The first is a tendency to create antagonism between men and women. "Faced with the abuse of power, the answer for women is to seek power. This process leads to opposition between men and women...".² The second tendency is a consequence of the first. "In order to avoid the domination of one sex or the other, their differences tend to be denied".³ This second tendency specifically refers to the kind of feminism that places the ideology of gender among its principle elements.

The gender ideology promoted by radical feminism is like the tip of the iceberg of a new cultural paradigm that is being imposed on a secularised and nihilistic society. Gender feminism considers that masculine and feminine characteristics are socially constructed. It does not take nature into account nor the sexual differences inscribed in biology. It appropriates and radicalises the concept of gender in order to speak of the social dimension of the differences between the sexes.⁴ Jacques Derrida's definition of the deconstruction of philosophy was adopted and a movement was initiated that used the term "gender" as a weapon against the social roles that had to be combatted: religion, tradition, education and politics. Gender ideology separates the immutable sexual roles of men and women from their social functions, and by doing so considers that social functions can be continually constructed and deconstructed according to cultural tendencies and individual arbitrary options. As a consequence, motherhood and fatherhood are two roles that should be deconstructed according to the role we opt for in society, and individuals can choose the role they wish to play. Here we have a new version of feminism that does not so much demand parity between men and women as an approach to an androgynous humanity.

In this way we see how radical feminism or gender ideology is not only a philosophical position with respect to the subject of women, but it is rather a way of putting forward a new cultural paradigm that attempts to eliminate a society based on stable and perennial values. So, we find that this is about something beyond the subject of women, but is in fact a much wider anthropological issue. There is an attempt to bring about a global cultural

¹ CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World*, no. 2.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Cf. SECRETARIAT GENERAL DE LA CONFERENCE DES EVEQUES DE FRANCE, *La problématique du genre*, Paris 2006, 4

revolution, a new post-modern, and hence post-Judeo-Christian, ethic.⁵

This new approach is based on two pillars: individual autonomy on the one hand, and on the other, emphasis on cultural diversity and relativism without taking anthropological unity into account. Shortly before his election as Supreme Pontiff, Cardinal Ratzinger spoke about the dictatorship of relativism.⁶ This is where anarchic liberty and cultural relativism are characteristics that form part of the phenomenon of a “liquid modernity” where all hope of totality and substance are abandoned. This concept coined by the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman expresses a culture in which it is held that society is no longer guided by universal principles or social rules, but that it affirms cultural and psychological specificity and reduces everything to the sphere of the individual.⁷ Liquid modernity, in the area of men and women, thus becomes “liquid identity” where it is no longer possible to define the profiles of the identity of men and women through the dynamic relation between nature and culture.⁸ This liquid culture generates men and women who experience confusion concerning their own identity, a deep insecurity regarding their vocation and destiny, a pressing need to know how to be fulfilled and happy. If a human being does not know who he is, they also lose the ability to guide their own destiny and existence, and hence society.⁹

III. An anthropological challenge

⁵ Cf. M. A. PEETERS, *The New Global Ethic: challenges for the Church*, 13

⁶ CARD. J. RATZINGER, Homily at the “Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice” Mass, 18 April 2005

⁷ Cf. Z. BAUMAN, *Liquid modernity*, Polity 2000

⁸ In some cases, this confusion of identity or liquid identity leads some people to feel capable of constructing their own identity. By eliminating the truth about human nature and reducing all to a cultural construct, some even feel the desire to make decisions about their own body by modifying and defining their own identity. In this way the body becomes a space where new technologies are used for a total self-design of fluid identity. (Cf. H.B. GERL-FALKOVITZ, “Las nuevas mujeres o, ¿existe aún una imagen de mujer” [The new women, or, does an image of women still exist?], in: G. LUDWIG MÜLLER [ed.], *Las mujeres en la Iglesia. Especificidad y corresponsabilidad* [Women in the Church. Specificity and co-responsibility], Madrid, 2000, 60 [our translation]).

⁹ Herein lies the profound difference between human beings and animals, because a person is always in danger of being dehumanised. As Ortega y Gasset said: “While the tiger cannot stop being a tiger, cannot be de-tigered, man lives in perpetual danger of being dehumanized. With him, not only is it problematic and contingent whether this or that will happen to him, as it is with the other animals, but at times what happens to man is nothing less than ceasing to be man. And this is true not only abstractly and generically but it holds of our own individuality. Each one of us is always in danger of not being the unique and untransferable self which he is. (ORTEGA Y GASSET, *Man and people*, (Translator: Willard R. Trask). New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1957).

[http://www.uwmc.uwc.edu/communication_arts/barry/Quotes/Gasset_Man_People.htm]

Nowadays we are witnessing how relations between men and women, instead of being based on reciprocity and communion, display distrust, rivalry, and the pursuit of power and dominion over the other. In Western countries, post-modern culture propounds the model of a woman who has totally achieved her autonomy. The liquid freedom of present-day culture proclaims that any kind of commitment would threaten the autonomy achieved by women. Today there are many young people who consider that family is not the way to fulfilment and that it would threaten their independence in some way. Post-modern culture urges people to achieve power, money and efficiency, and it invites women to become more like men in order to prove to themselves that they can compete with men and be successful in the professional and economic sphere. Quite a number of men and women reduce themselves to their body. They degrade the Eros and make objects of themselves for each other.¹⁰

There are still many places where “the woman remains disadvantaged or discriminated against by the fact of being a woman” (*Mulieris dignitatem*, n. 10). With regard to culture in Asia, on the occasion of the 51st session of a meeting of the Commission on the Status of Women in New York (22 February - 9 March, 2007) on the theme: “Elimination of all forms of violence against girls”, one of the studies affirmed that in many countries in Asia, specifically India and China, the practice continues of the infanticide of girls and female feticide through selective abortions.¹¹ In many countries in Asia women have to face the consequences of war, poverty and disease. The Asian Post-synodal Exhortation in 1999 “voiced special concern for women, whose situation remains a serious problem in Asia, where discrimination and violence against women is often found in the home, in the workplace and even within the legal system. Illiteracy is most widespread among women, and many are treated simply as commodities in prostitution, tourism and the entertainment industry”.¹²

Faced with this difficult cultural situation, both men and women must meet several challenges. What is the identity of each? What light can be offered by Christian Revelation to encourage and advance the identity of men and women as persons and as the fullness of the *humanum*? What specific contribution did John Paul II give in his anthropological reflection in the apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*?

¹⁰ Cf. BENEDICT XVI, *Deus caritas est*, n. 5

¹¹ In China and India, there are, respectively, 117 and 120 boys born for every 100 girls

¹² JOHN PAUL II, Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*, no. 45

First of all we must point out that it is not enough to undertake a unilateral reflection on the subject of women. We cannot delve more into the feminine identity if we do not also study masculine identity. Moreover, it is necessary that both reflections be preceded by in-depth study on the human person, especially the meaning of being a person. It is from this anthropological fundamental that we must reflect on the dual unity of the male and female persons. Christian Revelation in the account in Genesis states a basic anthropological truth: “in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (*Gn* 1:27). This simple affirmation contains profound anthropological truths.

Nevertheless, this original design was hindered by human sin which affected relations between man and woman. God in his infinite love did not hold back God’s Plan for humanity. In Jesus Christ, God gave us revelation to grant men and women their original vocation. *Gaudium et Spes* in number 22 states that Jesus became flesh in order to reveal man to men. Therefore we can state that Jesus became flesh in order to reveal woman to women. The true advancement of women must be Christocentric because the message of Christ shows us the newness of the Gospel as it takes up the anthropological truths of Genesis and carries them to fullness.

IV. The mission of women in the ecclesial community

The newness of the Gospel does not only refer to the identity of woman but also to the mission that Jesus Christ confers on her. In order to understand the mission of women we must contextualise it in their baptismal call. Since the Second Vatican Council, many lay men and women discovered the greatness and beauty of their vocation and mission in the Church and in the world. It became very clear that this was the “hour of the laity” in the Church. Today there is a special need to reread the theology of the laity in Vatican Two in a “masculine and feminine” framework or approach. Each baptised person is a man or a woman, and they therefore live their baptismal identity according to their corresponding definition and with Christian commitment that is shaped as woman or man. Women are called by their very womanhood to serve and live the beauty of their vocation and mission. It is a kind of “added value” to the specific Christian way of living. Women are therefore very important and irreplaceable in the mission of the Church. The Synod of Bishops in 1987 on the vocation and mission of the laity recommended that it was necessary that “the Church recognize all the gifts of men and women [...] and put them into

practice”.¹³ In this sense, the Servant of God John Paul II insisted very much on the co-presence and collaboration of men and women in the life of the Church. The reason for this should not be seen so much for the sake of effectiveness and opportunities for the apostolic mission, but rather because it is the original design of God the Creator. In his loving plan, God willed the human person to be a unity of the two so that man and woman would be the prime community and source of all communities.¹⁴

On the basis of this baptismal identity and on their discipleship as female persons, the mission of women within the Christian community finds its roots. We cannot forget that women are lay members of the Church and as such their mission is the evangelisation of the world. Nevertheless, in their mission as lay people, it is also important to encourage their participation within the various Church structures. Here we must ask ourselves how the theme should be approached. We often hear and use the word “empowerment” in reference to the need to give support to greater responsibility for women in Church structures. The word “empowerment” has been defined in many ways. Zimmerman¹⁵ states that it is the “feelings of personal power” in structures and in the system. In the sociological sphere, “empowerment” means the process by which citizens who are less privileged can make their voices heard and take part in the decision process in public institutions by means of democratic channels. However, the Church is not purely sociological like other public institutions. As Church, it would be a serious mistake if it contained a worldly perspective of power games for either men or women, or if the rules of democratic society were to be introduced. It is necessary to avoid the risk that the ecclesial community should become a copy of world debates on the subject of women. The Church sees itself above all as a mystery of communion, as an organic structure and not a dialectic of power games. Power in the Church means service and ministry, and in the lives of the lay faithful, men and women, this means responsible, active and real participation in the mission of the Christian community. The Church has no need to borrow concepts or words that distance it from its essence and its Gospel message. It has a different *language, style* and *method* of debate. Reflection on the subject of women urgently needs a correct ecclesiology in order to avoid falling into the traps of the dominant ideologies of postmodern culture. What is needed at this time is the courage to go against the tide and proclaim the truth of a healthy anthropology that springs from the Revelation of

¹³ JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici*, no. 49

¹⁴ *Ibid*, no. 52

¹⁵ Cf. N.A. PETERSON - M.A. ZIMERMANN, Beyond the individual: toward a nomological network of organizational empowerment, in: *American Journal of Community Psychology*, vol. 34, 129-145.

God and that is manifest in natural law and in the person and message of Christ the Redeemer. In the light of this anthropology we find the Christian “newness” that should be taken to the debate on the theme of woman at the different levels: cultural, social, economic and political.

It is from the standpoint of ecclesiology of communion that it is an inescapable task of the pastors to encourage the participation of the laity and particularly Christian women within the ecclesial community. When referring to the mission of women in the Church, Pope Benedict XVI declared that throughout the history of the Church “women have done so much at a charismatic level”.¹⁶ However, he does not only concentrate on the charismatic mission of women but invites them to assume responsibilities within the structures of the Church by following in the wake of a continuous line of women since the time of the early Christian community. In one of his catecheses devoted to women, he pointed out how the apostle Saint Paul emphasised the significant responsibility and presence of women in the early community: “In the same epistolary context the Apostle outlines with delicate touches the names of other women: a certain Mary, then Tryphaena, Tryphosa and ‘the beloved’ Persis, as well as Julia, of whom he writes openly that they have ‘worked hard among you’ or ‘worked hard in the Lord’ (*Rom 16: 6, 12a, 12b, 15*), thereby emphasizing their strong ecclesial commitment”¹⁷. The Pope encourages women to make their space for a greater presence in the Church by contributing with their spiritual power: “I believe that women themselves, with their energy and strength, with their superiority, with what I’d call their “spiritual power”, will know how to make their own space”.¹⁸

In the same interview, the Holy Father not only invites women but calls on us as pastors to collaborate in this greater participation: “And we will have to try and listen to God so as not to stand in their way but, on the contrary, to rejoice when the female element achieves the fully effective place in the Church best suited to her”.¹⁹ We pastors must promote the presence of women in the structures of the Church which, thank God, has grown in recent decades. In the life of the Church it is the pastors who have to ensure the co-presence and active participation of men and women within the Christian community for the good and edification of all. Pastors should not only know how to do things but they

¹⁶ BENEDICT XVI, *Address to the clergy of Rome*, 13 May 2005

¹⁷ BENEDICT XVI, General Audience, 14 February 2007

¹⁸ *Interview with the Holy Father Benedict XVI before his journey to Bavaria*, 5 August 2006

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

should also know how to delegate.²⁰ They should not only give responsibilities to women, but should also support, appreciate and encourage the specific contribution that they offer to the whole Church.

Today we are witnesses to the fact that there is an increase in the number of women who collaborate in posts of responsibility in the departments of the Holy See, in presence in the Synods, in parishes, in diocesan offices and also in leadership of movements and new communities. Nevertheless, it is important that there should be more women in consultative structures: in diocesan pastoral councils, in parish pastoral councils, and in parish finance committees among others.

Let us also remember how after the Council a vast field was opened up for the active collaboration of the laity with the ministry of priests in their various ministries.²¹ We think of the participation of women in liturgical celebrations in the ministry of the word, and of the many women who are extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist²² or who dedicate themselves to the diaconate of charity towards the poor, sick and excluded. This varied collaboration with priests must be given while always respecting the corresponding norms in canon law that were recalled in the inter-dicastery document *Instruction on certain questions regarding the collaboration of the non-ordained faithful in the sacred ministry of priests*.²³

At this point it is important to emphasise that while we speak of the advancement of women in the sphere of Christian communities, we cannot forget the paradoxical fact that from the pastoral point of view it is men who are a real challenge, because for various reasons, many of them cultural as they live a more private and hidden religiosity, they commit themselves less than women in the life of our parishes and communities. Here a vast field of apostolate opens up for mothers, wives and sisters as they help men to participate more in the life and mission of the Church.

When we speak of the presence of women in the Christian community we cannot reduce it to a quantitative or numerical question. The Holy Father Benedict XVI in his book *Jesus of Nazareth* declares that “the difference between the discipleship of the Twelve and the discipleship of the women is

²⁰ Cf. BENEDICT XVI, *Meeting with the priests of the diocese of Albano*, 31 August 2006

²¹ JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici*, n. 23.

²² Cf. *Instruction on certain questions regarding the collaboration of the non-ordained faithful in the sacred ministry of priests*, Art. 8, Vatican City 1997.

²³ Cf. *Instruction on certain questions regarding the collaboration of the non-ordained faithful in the sacred ministry of priests*, Vatican City 1997.

obvious; the tasks assigned to each group are quite different. Yet Luke makes clear - and the other Gospels also show this in all sorts of ways - that ‘many’ women belonged to the more intimate community of believers and that their faith-filled following of Jesus was an essential element of that community, as would be vividly illustrated at the foot of the Cross and at the Resurrection.”²⁴ The Holy Father therefore affirms the difference not only in the discipleship of the Twelve and the discipleship of the women but also the difference in tasks and mission. In this sense one can understand how the reservation of the ministerial priesthood to men is not an obstacle to the greater participation of women. This arrangement is based on Jesus’ will as he freely chose twelve men to be the foundation of his Church²⁵ and expressed the difference in mission of men and women without ever minimising the value of the latter. On the contrary, women must assume responsibilities within the Church community, not in a passive way, but with their own style and approach. With the aim that women’s participation may grow in quality and not only quantity, it should not be limited to tasks of an administrative kind. It must be the fruit of patient and long instructive work within the Christian communities so that women can discover their dignity and identity and especially their mission in the Church and in the world as baptised persons and disciples of Christ.

Significant participation of women in the Church depends in great part on the preparation they receive in the dioceses and parishes as well as in the many lay associations and ecclesial movements. In this regard, the associations and movements contribute very much nowadays. I would like to repeat once more: lay people, women in particular, must receive a human and Christian preparation as well as a solid doctrinal education in the faith as well as in the Social Teachings of the Church. Education should also be directed towards leadership training for Catholic women so that they can cultivate their abilities in various spheres in order to develop, understand and assume personally an active participation and co-responsibility in the Church community. As *Christifideles laici* reminds us, education is not “the privilege of a few, but a right and duty of all”.²⁶

As President of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, because of my area of competence, I limit myself to speaking about lay women in the Church. This does not mean that I am unaware of the importance and wonderful contribution of consecrated women in both ecclesial and social life. We must point out that

²⁴ BENEDICT XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, New York 2007, 181

²⁵ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter *Ordinatio sacerdotalis*

²⁶ JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Christifideles laici*, no. 63

consecrated women today are affected by the profound cultural changes that directly affect all women. It is true that religious women have grown in their awareness of their dignity as women and of their high vocation as women (“feminine genius”), but at the same time there are negative effects brought about by an exasperated kind of feminism that undermine the true identity and profound nature of consecrated life. It is an important topic, but it should be dealt with separately.

VI. Woman’s mission in the family

The presence of women in the family is also of vital importance. The Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici* invites women to “the task of bringing full dignity to the conjugal life and to motherhood” (cf. no. 51). Each one has the mission of making her home a domestic Church. Wives and mothers are essential to the first proclamation of faith in the Christian education of their children. When we speak of motherhood we consider it to be a feature of every woman, for each one is created to protect life, to watch over it and to care for individual people. Here we see motherhood in its wider sense. It is through this characteristic that “God entrusts the human being to her in a special way”.²⁷ Nevertheless, motherhood is not a reason to limit a woman to domestic roles nor for fathers to limit their involvement within the family. The fatherhood role should be re-examined. Men should be encouraged to feel equally responsible for family life and for the upbringing of their children. In order to understand the woman’s mission to motherhood, we must also reflect on the man’s mission to fatherhood. Nowadays it actually seems that there is a greater crisis in male identity than in female identity. The very process of secularisation that eliminates God the Father from the horizon is consequently also eliminating the importance of the human father as progenitor and parent who helps the child to look towards his/her own destiny and future.²⁸ It seems that we are facing a crisis with respect to the father figure. It is therefore important to study fatherhood and the importance of a greater presence of fathers at home and of more sharing of household responsibilities in communion.²⁹ It is a case of rethinking maleness and femaleness in the perspective of greater reciprocation and complementarity between the man and woman in a family, and a greater

²⁷ JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter *Mulieris dignitatem*, no. 30.

²⁸ Cf. C. RISÉ, "Il costituirsi della personalità umana e dell'io. La società "grande madre" e i figli senza padre", a talk given at a conference for the Association "Amici del Sindacato delle famiglie".

²⁹ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Christifideles laici*, no. 51. BENEDICT XVI, Message for the celebration of the World Day of Peace 2008, no. 5

awareness of the necessary collaboration of women not only through motherhood but also in the building up of culture and the world together with men. Just as we have had the apostolic letter *Mulieris dignitatem* and the *Letter to Women*, we should also ask if it might be necessary to have a similar letter about men. We must be aware that the issue of women in postmodern society is closely linked to the issue of men.

In addition to the family, we should also mention the specific mission of those women called to consecrate their lives to God. As John Paul II pointed out in *Mulieris dignitatem*, consecration is also a characteristic of the “Gospel innovation” that was brought by Jesus Christ and associated with the Incarnation of God (cf. no. 20). Celibacy for the Kingdom reminds physical motherhood of its basically spiritual dimension. It becomes a journey in which a woman fulfils her personality and femininity by giving her spiritual motherhood to all humankind, for in them she recognises God, her Spouse.

VII. The mission of woman in society

Women as lay-people are called to evangelisation. Their mission is of a secular nature, and it is to take the Gospel to the temporal world. For this reason, another essential sphere for Christian women is their mission as apostles to other women who are in search of their identity and mission. The witness given by a woman of faith who lives in responsible motherhood, who accepts life and defends it bravely, is something essential that is so very attractive. How important it is to see the witness of so many women who demonstrate to the world the importance of marriage and family! They show that love that lasts forever is not an illusory ideal but something that is real and possible. How edifying it is to see a woman who is aware of her personal dignity, who is committed to Jesus Christ, conscious of her gifts and talents, and through her specific mission she personally plays her role in advancing society and the course of history.

With respect to their mission, there are two characteristics inherent in women: one is the call to motherhood to which we have referred, and the other is the special way in which they take part in building culture and society. As the Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici* points out, “women have the task of assuring the moral dimension of culture” (cf no. 52). Today more than ever, the call to evangelise culture is particularly challenging in a world that rejects God and the possibility of arriving at the truth. Women through their motherhood are

linked to the generation of life and to education and training, and therefore they are very capable of generating and awakening the desire for truth in others. Cardinal Caffarra (Archbishop of Bologna in Italy) states that “true generation consists in education”.³⁰ Women are called to present the truth with deep respect for freedom. With their gentleness and their maternal touch they can teach and help individuals to adhere to the transcendent truth. At the same time their presence is essential in the areopagi of today in order to generate cultural spheres where the values of the Gospel can be lived out. Their presence in the workplace, in public life and their participation in political life is indispensable.

If they are to play a genuine role in the building up of society, creative and original ways must be found in order to achieve a healthy and humane balance between professional life and family life for women. In most cases nowadays women and men have to combine family life and work. I think it is important here to overcome the contradictions found in societies that are organised on the basis of criteria of practicality and efficiency and therefore have family policies that do not support and protect working mothers. In this sense, the Social Doctrine of the Church can offer principles to help the laity support actions and initiatives that advance women and men in the field of work in respect for personal dignity and mission within the family.

Specifically in Asia, the commitment of the Church to the dignity and vocation of women in the sphere of the evangelisation of culture is particularly appreciated. In our globalised world Asia has become in a special way an “arena” of agreements and clashes between traditional Asian cultures and Western postmodern culture where basic values like family and marriage are questioned. The role of Christians is crucial in the defence of these basic values. It is true that Christians are a minority in India, but this is not a reason for discouragement. Salt is a minority but nevertheless gives taste to the food. Leavening is a minority but it causes the dough to rise. Christians in Asia must be salt of the earth and the leaven of the Gospel in order to transform the world from within (cf *Mt* 5:13-16). Pope Benedict XVI, when he was still Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, often spoke of the concept of “creative minorities”, a concept coined by Arnold Toynbee to denote those minorities who are the determining factor for the future of humanity. With this awareness, we are called to build a new civilisation that fully respects the vocation of men and women.

³⁰ C. CAFARRA, *Creati per amare* [Created to love], Siena 2006, 157

I conclude by saying that I sincerely hope that your Plenary Assembly may bring about many benefits for the local Churches and for society in this great country.