



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS
TO PARTICIPANTS IN THE PLENARY ASSEMBLY
OF THE PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR CULTURE**

*Consistory Hall
Saturday, 7 February 2015*

[Multimedia]

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I am pleased to welcome you at the end of your Plenary Assembly, which you devoted to reflection and research on the theme “*Feminine cultures: equality and difference*”. I thank Cardinal Ravasi for his address on behalf of all of you. I would like to express my appreciation in particular to the women present, but also to all those — and I know there are many — who have contributed in many ways to accomplishing this work.

The topic that you chose is very close to my heart, and on many previous occasions I have been able to touch on it and call for it to be examined more deeply. It entails studying criteria and new methods in order that women may not feel like guests, but full participants in the various spheres of society and Church life. The Church is woman, *she* the Church, not *he* the Church. This challenge can no longer be deferred. I say this to Pastors of Christian communities, here representing the Universal Church, but also to lay women and men committed in different ways in culture, in education, in the economy, in politics, in the world of work, in families, in religious institutions.

The order of the themes you planned to develop in the work of these days — work which will certainly continue in the future as well — allows me to indicate an itinerary, to offer you a few guidelines for developing this work throughout the world, in the heart of all cultures, in dialogue with various religious confessions.

The first theme is: *Between equality and difference: finding equilibrium*. A harmonious equilibrium, not simply balanced. This aspect should not be addressed ideologically, because the “lens” of

ideology obstructs a clear vision of reality. The equality and difference of women — like men's — are perceived better from the perspective of *with* [inclusion], of relationships, rather than *against* [exclusion]. For quite some time, at least in western societies, the model of woman's *social subordination* to man has been surpassed; it is, however, an age-old model that has never completely exhausted its negative effect. We have even overcome a second model, that of pure and simple *parity*, applied mechanically, and of absolute *equality*. And thus a new paradigm has emerged, that of *reciprocity*, in equivalence and difference. The relationship man/woman must therefore recognize that both are necessary inasmuch as yes, they possess an identical nature, but each with its own modality. One is necessary for the other, and vice versa, for they truly complete the fullness of the person.

The second theme is: "*generativity*" as a *symbolic code*. It directs an intense gaze upon all mothers, and broadens the horizon of the transmission and protection of life — not limited to the biological sphere — which can be summarized with four phrases: *desire, bring into the world, care for and let go*.

In this ambit, I note and I encourage the contribution of so many women who work within the family, in the areas of teaching the faith, pastoral work, schooling, but also in social, cultural and economic structures. You women know how to embody the tender face of God, his mercy, which is translated into a willingness to give time rather than to occupy space, to welcome rather than to exclude. In this sense, I like to describe the feminine dimension of the Church as the welcoming womb which regenerates life.

The third theme, *the female body in culture and biology*, reminds us of the beauty and harmony of the body which God gave to woman, but also of the painful wounds inflicted upon her, at times with brutal violence, for simply being woman. A symbol of life, the female body is also, unfortunately, often assaulted and disfigured by those who should take care of her and be life partners.

The many forms of slavery, of prostitution, of mutilation of the female body, require us to set to work to defeat these forms of degradation which reduce it to purely an object to be sold on the various markets. I would like to call attention, in this context, to the plight of so many poor women, forced to live in dangerous conditions, exploited, relegated to the margins of society and rendered victims of a throwaway culture.

The fourth theme: *Women and religion: flee or seek to participate in the life of the Church?* Here believers are called upon in a particular way. I am convinced that it is urgent to offer places to women in the life of the Church and to welcome them, bearing in mind the particular and transformed cultural and social sensitivities. Therefore, a more widespread and incisive presence of women in communities is desirable, in order that we may see many women involved in pastoral responsibilities, in the accompaniment of people, families and groups, as well as in theological

reflection.

The irreplaceable role of the woman *in the family* cannot be forgotten. The qualities of delicacy, particular sensitivity and tenderness, which enriches the feminine soul, represent not only a genuine strength for the life of the family, to illuminate a climate of serenity and harmony, but also a reality without which the human vocation would be unattainable.

It is, moreover, a matter of encouraging and fostering the effective presence of women in many areas of the *public sphere*, in the world of work and in places where important decisions are made, and at the same time maintaining their presence and preferential and wholly special attention in and for the family. Women must not be left to carry this weight on their own and to make decisions, but all institutions, including the ecclesial community, are called to guarantee the freedom of choice of women, so they may have the opportunity to assume social and ecclesial responsibilities, in a manner in harmony with family life.

Dear friends, I encourage you to pursue this commitment, which I entrust to the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the true and sublime example of woman and mother. And please, I ask you to pray for me, and I bless you from my heart. Thank you.