



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF POPE FRANCIS
TO THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE NATIONAL CONGRESS
SPONSORED BY THE ITALIAN WOMEN'S CENTRE**

*Clementine Hall
Saturday, 25 January 2014*

Dear Friends of the Italian Women's Centre,

On this occasion of the Congress of your Association, I welcome you and offer you my cordial greetings. I thank your President for the words with which she introduced our meeting.

I give thanks to the Lord with you for all the good which the Italian Women's Centre has accomplished during its almost 70 years of life, for the works you have implemented in the field of education and human advancement, and for the witness it has given on the role of women in society and in the ecclesial community. In fact, in the span of these last decades, along with other cultural and social transformations, the woman's identity and role in the family, in society and in the Church, have seen notable changes, and in general the participation and responsibility of women has been increasing.

The discernment by the Magisterium of the Popes has also been and is important in this process. In a special way we should mention Bl. John Paul II's Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* of 1988, on the Dignity and Vocation of Women, a document that, in line with the teaching of Vatican II, recognized the moral strength of woman, her spiritual strength (cf. n. 30); and we also remember the *Message for the 1995 World Day of Peace on the theme "Women: Teachers of Peace"*.

I recalled the indispensable contribution which women make to society, particularly through the sensitivity and intuition they show to others, the weak and the vulnerable. I congratulate you on

seeing that many women share pastoral responsibilities with priests, helping to guide people, families and groups and offering new contributions to theological reflection. Indeed, I hoped that increasing space may be offered to women for a more widespread and incisive presence in the Church (cf. *Evangelium Gaudium*, n. 103).

These new opportunities and responsibilities which have opened, and which I sincerely hope may further expand by the presence and work of women, both within the ecclesial and civil and professional spheres, cannot make us forget the woman's irreplaceable role in the family. The gifts of refinement, particular sensitivity and tenderness, with which the woman's spirit is richly endowed, represent not only a genuine strength for the life of the family, for spreading a climate of serenity and harmony, but a reality without which the human vocation cannot be fulfilled.

If in the world of work and in the public sphere a more incisive contribution of women's genius is important, this contribution remains essential within the family, which for we Christians is not simply a private place, but rather that "domestic Church", whose health and prosperity is a condition for the health and prosperity of the Church and of society itself. Let us think of Our Lady: Our Lady creates something in the Church that priests, bishops and Popes cannot create. She is the authentic feminine genius. And let us think about Our Lady in families — about what Our Lady does in a family. It is clear that the presence of a woman in the domestic sphere is more necessary than ever, indeed for the transmission of sound moral principles and for the transmission of the faith itself to future generations.

At this point one spontaneously asks: how can one increase an effective presence in so many areas of the public sphere, in the world of work and in the places where the most important decisions are taken, and at the same time maintain a presence and preferential and wholly special attention to the family? And this is the field for discernment which, in addition to the reflection on the reality of women in society, requires assiduous and persevering prayer.

It is in dialogue with God, that is illumined by his Word and watered by the grace of the sacraments, that the Christian woman seeks ever anew to respond to the Lord's call, in her practical circumstances.

Such prayer is always supported by Mary's maternal presence. May, she, who cared for her divine Son, who prompted the first miracle at the Wedding Feast of Cana, who was present on Calvary and at Pentecost, indicate to you the path to take in order to deepen the meaning and role of women in society in order to be completely faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ and to your mission in the world. Thank you!

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