

## **Life, Family, Development: The Role of Women in the Promotion of Human Rights**

1<sup>st</sup> International Conference

Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace

World Women's Alliance for Life & Family (WWALF)

World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations (WUCWO)

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### **Introduction**

Karen M. Hurley, President General  
World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations (WUCWO)

It is my privilege to welcome you to this conference, co-sponsored by the World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations (WUCWO), which was founded in 1910, and now has a membership of almost 100 organizations, active in over 60 countries including all continents, and represents millions of Catholic women of every walk of life. For those of you who may be new to the World Union, I hope that I may speak with you personally over these 2 days and that you may meet some of our Board Members, as well as our incoming Secretary General, who are participating in the conference.

*The mission of WUCWO is to promote the presence, participation and co-responsibility of Catholic women in Church and society in order to enable them to fulfill their mission of evangelization and to work for human development. Our Priority for 2006-2010 is Building a Culture of Peace through education and the alleviation of poverty.*

The World Union's canonical status as a *public international association of the faithful* honors the tireless efforts of faithful Catholic women active in our Union at the parish, diocesan, national and international levels. WUCWO's "juridical personality" means that it speaks and acts in the name of the Church, as the voice of the Church as well as the voice of women in the Church. Any statement or document drafted by WUCWO is consistent with Church teaching, understandable and without ambiguous language sometimes used in society-- words with dubious interpretations that can be adapted to suit different purposes. Our clarity of purpose is vital as the World Union has held consultative status at various United Nations bodies since 1947.

WUCWO is intimately engaged in the exchange of gifts that takes place on so many levels of ecclesial life. Being nourished by the Holy Eucharist, availing ourselves of ongoing spiritual formation and continuing education in Church teachings are vital for our ability to transmit authentic Catholic Christian values to the world.

2008 WUCWO Regional Conferences were celebrated from August through October in Winnipeg, Canada; Verona, Italy; Mexico City; Hartbeespoort, South Africa; and Seoul, Korea. While the air miles traveled by this President over those few months were many, the blessings were even greater as I met so many women of faith whose lives give witness to their love of God and neighbor—a love which compels them to protect human dignity, promote human rights and work for development, justice and peace.

**Beloved Pope John Paul II told the participants of the 2001 WUCWO Assembly in Rome:**

"...Your Union... is present as a voice even in international forums, to insist that every life is a gift of God and deserves to be respected. Working together, you must seek to provide increasing material and moral support to women in difficulty, victims of poverty and violence. Never forget

that this important work is rooted in God's love and will bear fruit to the extent that your witness reveals his infinite love for every human person....

Catholic women who live by faith and charity and give honour to God's name in prayer and service have always had a supremely fruitful and indispensable role in transmitting the genuine sense of the faith and in applying it to all life's circumstances."

Two weeks ago I was in the Holy Land on pilgrimage and in meetings to prepare for the 2010 WUCWO Assembly which will be held in Jerusalem. Walking in the footsteps of Jesus brings about incredible spiritual blessings which are difficult to describe briefly. Talking with the "living stones" of the Church, I dare say a few modern day saints, we learned more about the plight of Christians in the Holy Land, where inadequate housing, high unemployment and greatly reduced educational opportunities are causing widespread suffering and a mass exodus of the indigenous Christian population, which is now less than three percent of the total population. Caught in the middle of an intense religious and ethnic power struggle, Christians in the Holy Land are examples of the forgotten victims of human rights abuses which deprive them of even basic needs. But the Christian men and women we met are people of faith, hope and love... as are the organizers, speakers and participants in this international conference which will study life, family, development and the role of women in the promotion of human rights.

The Second Vatican Council declared in its Closing Message: "The hour is coming, in fact has come, when the vocation of women is being acknowledged in its fullness, the hour in which women acquire in the world an influence, an effect and a power never hitherto achieved. That is why, at this moment when the human race is undergoing so deep a transformation, women imbued with a spirit of the Gospel can do so much to aid humanity in not falling". Today we gather to study how best to aid humanity.

Jesus "commits us to live for others, but only through communion with him does it become possible truly to be there for others...." (*Spe Salvi*, 28) Is there a deeper commitment "to be there" for another than that of motherhood?

The mutual gift of spousal love opens to the gift of a new life, a new human being. Motherhood implies a special openness to this new person. In conceiving and giving birth to a child, the woman "discovers herself through a sincere gift of self." Mary's response at the Annunciation, "Let it be done to me according to your word," signifies the woman's readiness for the gift of self and her readiness to accept a new life through God's gift of a child .

Motherhood "according to the Spirit" (*Romans 8:4*) or "spiritual motherhood" can take many different forms. In the life of consecrated women or single women, it can express itself as concern for people, especially the most needy: the sick, the handicapped, the abandoned, orphans, the elderly, children, young people, the imprisoned and, in general, people on the edges of society. "Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me." (*Matthew 25:40*) Spousal love always involves a special readiness to be poured out for the sake of those whom God sends into one's life. In marriage this readiness, even though open to all, consists mainly in the love that parents give to their children. In virginity, the single life, or forms of spiritual motherhood, this readiness is open to all people, who are embraced by the love of Christ the Spouse. (*Mulieris Dignitatem*, 21)

Women are called to be signs of God's love by sharing our faith and offering hope to a world in need. The model of our Blessed Mother Mary and other women in the Holy Scriptures, and Church teaching, all raise women's awareness of our mission, vocation, dignity and spirituality. Our prayerful discernment increases this awareness and helps us embrace our God-given role in protecting the dignity of all human life and promoting human rights.

In the appreciative and hope-filled words of Pope John Paul II in *Mulieris Dignitatem*:

Therefore the Church gives thanks for each and every woman: for mothers, for sisters, for wives; for women consecrated to God in virginity; for women dedicated to the many human beings who await the gratuitous love of another person; for women who watch over the human persons in the family, which is the fundamental sign of the human community; for women who work professionally, and who at times are burdened by a great social responsibility; for "perfect" women and for "weak" women - for all women as they have come forth from the heart of God in all the beauty and richness of their femininity; as they have been embraced by his eternal love; as, together with men, they are pilgrims on this earth, which is the temporal "homeland" of all people and is transformed sometimes into a "valley of tears"; as they assume, together with men, a common responsibility for the destiny of humanity according to daily necessities and according to that definitive destiny which the human family has in God himself, in the bosom of the ineffable Trinity.

The Church gives thanks for all the manifestations of the feminine "genius" which have appeared in the course of history, in the midst of all peoples and nations; she gives thanks for all the charisms which the Holy Spirit distributes to women in the history of the People of God, for all the victories which she owes to their faith, hope and charity: she gives thanks for all the fruits of feminine holiness.

The Church asks at the same time that these invaluable "manifestations of the Spirit" (cf. 1 Cor 12:4ff.), which with great generosity are poured forth upon the "daughters" of the eternal Jerusalem, may be attentively recognized and appreciated so that they may return for the common good of the Church and of humanity, especially in our times. Meditating on the biblical mystery of the "woman", the Church prays that in this mystery all women may discover themselves and their "supreme vocation". (*Mulieris Dignitatem*, 31)

Before his election as Pope, then-Cardinal Ratzinger wrote a "*Letter to the bishops of the Catholic Church on the collaboration of men and women in the Church and in the world*". This excerpt expresses great hope for the role of women in the promotion of human rights:

"Among the fundamental values linked to women's actual lives is what has been called a "capacity for the other". Although a certain type of feminist rhetoric makes demands "for ourselves," women preserve the deep intuition of the goodness in their lives of those actions which elicit life, and contribute to the growth and protection of the other.... It is women, in the end, who even in very desperate situations, as attested by history past and present, possess a singular capacity to persevere in adversity, to keep life going even in extreme situations, to hold tenaciously to the future, and finally to remember with tears the value of every human life."

Each day women demonstrate an amazing "capacity for the other," through life-giving actions which reflect Christian love and offer hope to the world. By your presence and participation each of you who have gathered here from around the world offer hope for life, family and development.

The words of Pope John Paul II to the World Union echo true today, "Keep watch, be an attentive and strong presence, never fail to look to Christ, follow Him, keep His word in your hearts. In this way, your hope will not fail; it will spread throughout the world at this promising and challenging time."