



*To His Eminence Cardinal Peter Kodwo Appiah Turkson
President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace*

Your Eminence,

I offer cordial greetings and encouragement to the participants of the Second International Conference on Women, meeting in Rome from 22 to 24 May 2015. This Conference, organized by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, in cooperation with the World Union of Women's Catholic Organizations and the World Women's Alliance for Life and Family, has for its theme *Women and the Post-2015 Development Agenda: The Challenges of the Sustainable Development Goals*.

I was pleased to learn of this timely initiative, which highlights the concerns of Catholic women's organizations in the international discussions leading to the drafting of a new Post-2015 Development Agenda at the level of the United Nations. Many women and men wish to contribute to this Agenda, as they work to defend and promote life, and to combat the poverty, the

forms of enslavement and the many injustices which women of all ages, and throughout the world, too often experience.

Women face a variety of challenges and difficulties in various parts of the world. In the West, at times they still experience discrimination in the workplace; they are often forced to choose between work and family; they not infrequently suffer violence in their lives as fiancées, wives, mothers, sisters and grandmothers. In poor and developing countries, women bear the heaviest burdens: it is they who travel many miles in search of water, who too often die in childbirth, who are kidnapped for sexual exploitation or forced into marriages at a young age or against their will. At times they are even denied the right to life simply for being female. All of these problems are reflected in the proposals for the Post-2015 Development Agenda presently being discussed in the United Nations.

Issues relating to life are intrinsically connected to social questions. When we defend the right to life, we do so in order that each life – from conception to its natural end – may be a *dignified life*, one free from the scourge of hunger and poverty, of violence and persecution. Pope Benedict XVI, in his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, highlighted how the Church “forcefully maintains this link between life ethics and social ethics, fully aware that a society lacks solid foundations when, on the one hand, it asserts values such as the dignity of the person, justice and peace, but then, on the other hand, radically acts to the

contrary by allowing or tolerating a variety of ways in which human life is devalued and violated, especially where it is weak or marginalized" (No. 15).

I encourage you, who are engaged in defending the dignity of women and promoting their rights, to allow yourselves to be constantly guided by the spirit of humanity and compassion in the service of your neighbour. May your work be marked first and foremost by professional competence, without self-interest or superficial activism, but with generous dedication. In this way you will manifest the countless God-given gifts which women have to offer, encouraging others to promote sensitivity, understanding and dialogue in settling conflicts big and small, in healing wounds, in nurturing all life at every level of society, and in embodying the mercy and tenderness which bring reconciliation and unity to our world. All this is part of that "feminine genius" of which our society stands in such great need.

With renewed gratitude for your work, I send cordial good wishes for the Conference that you have organized and whose theme is so urgent. I pray for all of you, and I ask you to pray for me and my intentions. To you and your loved ones, I willingly impart my Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, 22 May 2015

Francis