

MaterCare International Conference
Rome, November 5-9, 2008

The Hope of Women and of Motherhood

(20th Anniversary of *Mulieris Dignitatem*)

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

It is my privilege to accept Dr. Walley's gracious invitation to speak with you as President General of 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 66 countries including all continents, and represents millions of Catholic women of every walk of life.

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.

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."

This year marks the 20th anniversary of *Mulieris Dignitatem (On the Dignity and Vocation of Women)*, the Apostolic Letter given to us by our Beloved Pope John Paul II and affirmed by Pope Benedict XVI during an international celebration held in Rome this past February.

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”.

Pope Paul VI said: “Within Christianity, more than in any other religion, and since its very beginning, women have had a special dignity, of which the New Testament shows us many important aspects...; it is evident that women are meant to form part of the living and working structure of Christianity in so prominent a manner that perhaps not all their potentialities have yet been made clear”.

In our Catholic Christian tradition Mary is “the new beginning” of the dignity and vocation of women, of each and every woman. The dignity of every human being and the vocation corresponding to that dignity find their definitive measure in union with God. Mary as “Woman - Mother of God” is the most complete expression of this dignity and vocation. For each human being, male or female, created in the image and likeness of God, can attain fulfillment only through this image and likeness.

“When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of woman”. With these words of his Letter to the Galatians (4:4), Saint Paul links together the principal moments which lead to the turning point of salvation history. Because of Mary’s “yes” to God she gives birth to the Savior of the world.

The words which are on Mary's lips during her visit to Elizabeth proclaim, “The Almighty has done great things for me.” (*Luke 1:49*) While these words certainly refer to the conception of her Son, they can also signify the discovery of her own feminine humanity. God “has done great things for me,” Mary declares, as she personifies the richness and resources of femininity, all the eternal originality of the woman, just as God wanted her to be, a person for her own sake, who discovers herself “by means of a sincere gift of self”. (*Mulieris Dignitatem*, 3)

God loves us and sent Jesus to save us so we might have life and have it in abundance. 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) The love of God is revealed in responsibility for others. Is there much greater responsibility for another than that of motherhood?

Motherhood is the fruit of the marriage union of a man and woman created in God's image, of that biblical "knowledge" which corresponds to the "union of the two in one flesh" (*Genesis 2:24*). This brings about - on the woman's part - a special "gift of self", as an expression of that spousal love whereby the two are united to each other so closely that they become "one flesh". Biblical "knowledge" is achieved in accordance with the truth of the person only when the mutual self-giving is not distorted either by the desire of the man to become the "master" of his wife or by the woman remaining closed within her own self.

This mutual gift of spousal love opens to the gift of a new life, a new human being, who is also a person in the likeness of his/her parents. 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 .

God's gift of parenthood is shared by both the father and the mother. But even though parenthood belongs to both it is realized much more fully in the woman, especially in the prenatal period when the child absorbs the energies of the mother's body and soul. Motherhood involves a special communion with the mystery of life as it develops in the woman's womb. The mother accepts and loves the child developing within her and this shapes her attitude towards other human beings and profoundly marks the woman's character and vocation.

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*)

A woman's dignity witnesses to the love which she receives from God, in order to love in return. The example of Mary reveals the true order of love which constitutes woman's own vocation. Vocation is meant here in its fundamental and universal significance which is actualized and expressed in women's many different vocations in the Church and in the world.

Our faith, the model of Mary and other women in the Holy Scriptures, and Church teaching, all raise women's awareness of our mission, vocation, dignity and spirituality.

Women are strong because of our awareness of the fact that God entrusts humanity to us, always and in every way. Our awareness of the fundamental dignity bestowed on us by God makes us strong, and fills us with hope, so we can embrace our God-given vocation.

“If you knew the gift of God” (*John 4:10*), Jesus says to the Samaritan woman during one of those remarkable conversations which show his great esteem for the dignity of women and for the vocation which enables us to share in his mission. The “gift of God” is entrusted to every woman. In the Spirit of Christ we can discover the entire meaning of our femininity and be able to make a “sincere gift of self” to others and, in doing so, find ourselves.

In the appreciative and hope-filled words of Pope John Paul II:

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)

This affirmation of Pope John Paul II continues today through his successor Pope Benedict XVI, both of whom have personally reiterated to me their gratitude for the faithful witness and Christian vocation of women throughout the world.

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 women, motherhood and life:

"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.

A special sign of hope for women and motherhood is the increasing collaboration of MaterCare International and the World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations. Two of our member organizations, Catholic Women's Leagues of Australia and Canada, actively support MCI's efforts to assure safe birthing for mothers and babies. Please God this level of support will increase and spread throughout the world.

The words of Pope John Paul II to the World Union echo true for this MaterCare Conference, "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."