



# The Holy See

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*ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI  
TO THE PARTICIPANTS  
IN THE INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION ON THE THEME  
"WOMAN AND MAN, THE HUMANUM IN ITS ENTIRETY"*

*Clementine Hall  
Saturday, 9 February 2008*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

It is a true pleasure to welcome and greet all of you taking part at the international convention on the theme: "Woman and Man, the *Humanum* in Its Entirety", organized on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the publication of the Apostolic Letter *Mulieris dignitatem*. I greet Cardinal Stanisław Ryłko, President of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, and I am grateful to him for expressing your common sentiments. I greet the Secretary, Bishop Josef Clemens, and the members and staff of the Dicastery. In particular I greet the women, who are the great majority of those present and who have enriched the Congress' work with their experience and competence.

The theme upon which you have been reflecting is highly topical: from the second half of the 20th century up to today the movement for the improvement of women in the various aspects of social life has given rise to countless reflections and debates, and has seen many initiatives multiply which the Catholic Church has often watched with close attention. The man-woman relationship in its respective specificity, reciprocity and complementarity certainly constitutes a central point of the "anthropological question", so decisive in contemporary culture and ultimately for every culture. Numerous events and Pontifical Documents have touched upon the emerging reality of the feminine question. I limit myself to recalling those of my beloved Predecessor John Paul II, who, in June of 1995, wished to write a *Letter to Women*, while on 15 August 1988, 20 years ago this year, published the Apostolic Letter *Mulieris dignitatem*. This text on the vocation and dignity of women, of great theological, spiritual and cultural richness, in its turn has inspired the *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the*

World, of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

In *Mulieris Dignitatem*, John Paul II wished to deepen the fundamental anthropological truths of man and woman, the equality of their dignity and the unity of both, the well-rooted and profound diversity between the masculine and the feminine and their vocation to reciprocity and complementarity, to collaboration and to communion (cf. n. 6). This "uni-duality" of man and woman is based on the foundation of the dignity of every person created in the image and likeness of God, who "male and female he created them" (Gn 1: 27), avoiding an indistinct uniformity and a dull and impoverishing equality as much as an irreconcilable and conflictual difference (cf. John Paul II, *Letter to Women*, n. 8). This dual unity brings with it, inscribed in body and soul, the relationship with the other, love for the other, interpersonal communion that implies "that the creation of man is also marked by a certain likeness to the divine communion" (*Mulieris dignitatem*, n. 7). Therefore, when men and women demand to be autonomous and totally self-sufficient, they run the risk of being closed in a self-reliance that considers ignoring every natural, social or religious bond as an expression of freedom, but which, in fact, reduces them to an oppressive solitude. To promote and sustain the real advancement of women and men one cannot fail to take this reality into account.

A renewed anthropological study is certainly necessary based on the great Christian tradition, which incorporates new scientific advances and, given today's cultural sensitivity, in this way contributes to deepening not only the feminine identity but also the masculine, which is often the object of partial and ideological reflections. Faced with cultural and political trends that seek to eliminate, or at least cloud and confuse, the sexual differences inscribed in human nature, considering them a cultural construct, it is necessary to recall God's design that created the human being masculine and feminine, with a unity and at the same time an original difference and complimentary. Human nature and the cultural dimension are integrated in an ample and complex process that constitutes the formation on one's own identity, where both dimensions, that of the feminine and that of the masculine, correspond to and complete each other.

Opening the work of the Fifth General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops' Conferences in May of last year in Brazil, I was able to recall how a masculine mentality still persists that ignores the novelty of Christianity, which recognizes and proclaims that men and women share equal dignity and responsibility. There are places and cultures where women are discriminated against or undervalued for the sole fact of being women, where recourse is made even to religious arguments and family, social and cultural pressure in order to maintain the inequality of the sexes, where acts of violence are consummated in regard to women, making them the object of mistreatment and of exploitation in advertising and in the consumer and entertainment industry. Faced with such grave and persistent phenomena the Christian commitment appears all the more urgent so that everywhere it may promote a culture that recognizes the dignity that belongs to women, in law and in concrete reality.

God entrusts to women and men, according to their respective capacities, a specific vocation and mission in the Church and in the world. Here I am thinking of the family, a community of love open to life, the fundamental cell of society. In it the woman and the man, thanks to the gift of maternity and paternity, together carry out an irreplaceable role in regard to life. Children from their conception have the right to be able to count on their father and mother to take care of them and to accompany their growth. The State, for its part, must uphold with appropriate social policies everything that promotes the stability and unity of matrimony, the dignity and responsibility of couples, their rights and irreplaceable duty as educators of their children. Besides, it is necessary to enable the woman to collaborate in the building of society, appreciating her typical "feminine genius".

Dear brothers and sisters, I thank you once again for coming and, while I wish the Convention's work may be successful, I assure you of a remembrance in prayer, invoking the maternal intercession of Mary, that she may help the women of our time to carry out their vocation and their mission in the ecclesial and civil community. With these wishes, I impart to you present here and to those dear to you, a special Apostolic Blessing.