



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF THE HOLY FATHER
ON THE OCCASION OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY
OF THE WORLD UNION
OF CATHOLIC WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS**

To Mrs María Eugenia Díaz de Pfennich

President of the World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations

1. With joy I greet the participants in the General Assembly of the World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations, taking place in Rome from 17 to 21 March 2001. Since 1910 your movement has brought Catholic women together from all the continents and from a great variety of backgrounds and cultures. In a spirit of respect for this diversity you now form a large and dynamic family within the Catholic Church. Your meeting at the heart of the universal Church is a special opportunity to reaffirm your identity and to draw on the graces of the Jubilee to open wide to Christ the doors of your hearts and of the homes and communities in which you live, pray and follow the vocation which God has entrusted to each one.

2. At the beginning of a new millennium, the six hundred delegates at this Assembly have the opportunity to thank God for all that being a woman signifies in the divine plan, and to ask his help in overcoming the many obstacles which still hinder full recognition of the dignity and mission of women in society and within the ecclesial community. The journey travelled in the course of the past century has been remarkable. In many countries women today enjoy freedom of movement, of decision and of self-expression, a freedom which they have achieved with clear-mindedness and courage. They express their characteristic *genius* in many spheres. In today's world there exists a growing awareness of the need to affirm women's dignity. This is no abstract principle for it involves a concerted effort at every level to oppose vigorously "all practices that offend woman's freedom or femininity. . . so-called 'sexual tourism', trafficking in young girls, mass sterilization and, in general, every form of violence" (*General Audience*, 24 November 1999, No. 2). However, women also face many impediments to their genuine fulfilment. The prevailing culture spreads and imposes models of life which are contrary to women's deeper nature. There have been serious

aberrations, some arising from individual selfishness and a refusal to love, others from a mentality that stresses each individual's rights to such an extent that respect for the rights of others is weakened, and particularly those of defenceless unborn children who in many cases are deprived of all legal protection.

3. Your Union exists to help you to acquire a deeper understanding of your mission and to live it to the full. It 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.

Feminine holiness, to which each one of you is called, is indispensable to the life of the Church. "The Second Vatican Council, confirming the teaching of the whole of tradition, recalled that in the hierarchy of holiness *it is precisely the 'woman', Mary of Nazareth, who is the 'figure' of the Church. She 'precedes' everyone on the path to holiness*" (*Mulieris Dignitatem*, 27). Women who live in holiness are "a model of the *'sequela Christi'*, an example of how the Bride must respond with love to the love of the Bridegroom" (*ibid.*, 27).

4. The theme of your Assembly, *The Prophetic Mission of Women*, should offer an occasion for you to engage in a broad reflection on your commitment. The world and the Church need your specific witness. Christ's prophetic office is shared by the whole People of God and consists above all in listening to God's word and understanding it (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 12). Catholic women who live by faith and charity and give honour to God's name in prayer and service (cf. *ibid.*) 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. Today, at a time of a deep spiritual and cultural crisis, this task has assumed an urgency that cannot be overstated. The Church's presence and action in the new millennium passes by way of woman's capacity to receive and keep God's word. In virtue of her specific charism, woman is uniquely gifted in the task of passing on the Christian message and mystery in the family and in the world of work, study and leisure.

5. The recent Jubilee of the Laity was an opportunity to renew the Second Vatican Council's call to all the lay faithful to proclaim the Good News of Christ by word and witness. In the family and in society you work "for the sanctification of the world from within" (*Lumen Gentium*, 31). Every task, even the most ordinary, provided it is carried out with love, contributes to the sanctification of the world. This is an important truth to recall today, in a world fascinated by success and efficiency, but in which many people have no share in the benefits of global progress and are becoming poorer and more neglected than ever.

The Jubilee brought new energies to the whole Church. Let us go forward in hope! (cf. *Novo Millennio ineunte*, 58). Today, as the Church sets out again on her journey to proclaim Christ to

the world, she needs women who contemplate the face of Christ, who keep their gaze fixed on him and recognize him in the weakest members of his Body. "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (*Mt 25:40*). 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.

I once again assure you of my closeness in prayer, confident that this Assembly will be an occasion for you to find fresh energies for your mission. Entrusting all of you to the protection of Mary, Mother of the Redeemer, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, 7 March 2001

IOANNES PAULUS II