



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON
"WOMEN'S HEALTH ISSUES"**

Friday 20 February 1998

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. I wish to express my appreciation to the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, represented here by the Rector, Prof. Adriano Bausola, to the Director of the Institute of Bioethics of the same university, Bishop Elio Sgreccia, and to the Director of the Center for Medical Ethics of Georgetown University, for having organized this international conference on such a timely theme for society and for the Church: women's health issues. To reflect on this topic is in fact a duty and a debt of recognition not only for the dignity of every woman, whose right to treatment and access to means for improving health must be acknowledged, but also in relation to the special role that women are called to exercise in the family and in society. In this respect we cannot fail to remember a great number of women — children, adolescents, wives, mothers of families, the elderly — who live in conditions of poverty, with a total lack of health services, and who are burdened by the difficulties involved in supporting a family in vast areas of the world, often aggravated by disaster and war.

2. In my Message to the Secretary General of the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing, I mentioned the "terrible exploitation of women and girls which exists in every part of the world". And I added: "Public opinion is only beginning to take stock of the inhuman conditions in which women and children are often forced to work, especially in less developed areas of the globe" (n. 7, 26 May 1995; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 31 May 1995, p. 2). No true development without respect for life at every stage. It is essential for every society that such rights be guaranteed and that societies which enjoy full economic development and sometimes a superfluous level of goods turn their attention and their assistance to these people. This cannot be done without an appropriate and corresponding recognition of the role of women, of their dignity and of the importance of their specific contribution to the society in which they live: "When women are able fully to share their gifts with the whole community, the very way in which society understands and organizes itself is improved" (*Message for 1995 World Day of Peace*, n. 9; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 14 December 1994, p. 2).

3. In particular, I consider it significant that at your international conference you wished to examine all aspects of women's health: the prevention and treatment of illness, respect for their integrity and their procreative capacities, the psychological and spiritual aspects of the various situations in which they find themselves. In fact, an idea of health is spreading that, paradoxically, exalts and at the same time impoverishes its meaning and this particularly applies to women. Indeed, health has been defined as a striving for "complete physical, psychological and social well-being and not just the absence of illness". When, however, well-being is taken in a hedonistic sense without any reference to moral, spiritual and religious values, this aspiration, in itself noble, can be confined to a narrow horizon that stifles its zeal with negative consequences for health itself. Interpreted in this reductive sense, the quest for health as well-being has reached the point that, even in important political documents, motherhood itself is regarded as a burden and illness, thus creating the pretext, in the name of health and quality of life, for the justification of contraception, sterilization, abortion and even euthanasia. This distortion must be rectified because "there will never be justice, including equality, development and peace, for women or for men, unless there is an unfailing determination to respect, protect, love and serve life — every human life at every stage and in every situation" (*Message for the Fourth World Conference on Women*, n. 7; cf. Encyclical *Evangelium vitae*, n. 87).

4. Promoting the authentic, balanced, overall health of women means helping them to harmonize their physical, psychological and social well-being with moral and spiritual values. In this perspective of personal and specifically feminine fulfilment, in which spousal and maternal self-giving is lived in the family or in consecrated life and a sense of social solidarity is expressed, health represents both a fundamental condition and a dimension of the person. For this reason the concept of health must be based on a complete anthropological vision that considers respect for life and for the dignity of every person to be indispensable values. The quest for health cannot, therefore, ignore the ontological value of the person and his personal dignity: even where physical and mental health are deficient, the person still preserves his full dignity.

5. In promoting women's health, procreation has a special role from the standpoint of the fulfilment of both the feminine personality and possible motherhood. To promote the procreative health of women will therefore imply the primary prevention of those illnesses that can jeopardize fertility, as well as treatment, counseling and assistance aimed at preserving the female organism in its integrity or at restoring its functionality; but it can never mean offending the personal dignity of the woman or the dignity of the newly conceived life. Church recognizes women's contribution to society. In this regard the moral commitment of the woman herself will always have great importance: in her daily conduct she must assume and respect the values of her own corporality, trying to assure their conformity with the demands of health. This promotion of woman's overall health must also involve society and this will only take place with the contribution of women themselves: "The Church", I wrote to the Secretary General of the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, "recognizes that women's contribution to the welfare and progress of society is incalculable, and the Church looks to women to do even more to save society from the deadly virus of degradation and violence which is today witnessing a dramatic increase" (n. 5).

6. The whole dimension of culture and society, and in the first place health care, must be measured against the dignity of women, in joint responsibility with men and for the good of families and the human community itself. I wish here to repeat the gratitude I expressed to women in the Letter addressed specifically to them in 1995 during International Women's Year: thank you to women who are mothers, to women who are wives, to women who are daughters, to working women

and to consecrated women. Today I would also like to thank women who practise medicine: more and more of them help to promote the health of others, becoming guardians of life in a special capacity. I hope that all people, society as a whole and political authorities will make their contribution to the achievement of health for every woman and every man, as a guarantee of a civilization that conforms to the dignity of the human person.

With these wishes, I impart my Blessing to all.

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