



The Holy See

**LETTER OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO MRS. GERTRUDE MONGELLA
SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE FOURTH WORLD CONFERENCE
ON WOMEN OF THE UNITED NATIONS***

*To Mrs. Gertrude Mongella
Secretary General of the Fourth World Conference
on Women of the United Nations*

1. It is with genuine pleasure that I welcome you to the Vatican, at a time when you and your collaborators are engaged in preparing the *United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women*, to be held in Beijing in September. There, the attention of the world community will be focused on important, urgent questions regarding the dignity, the role and the rights of women. Your visit enables me to express deep appreciation for your efforts to make the Conference, on the theme of "Action for Equality, Development and Peace", the occasion for a serene and objective reflection on these vital goals, and the role of women in achieving them.

The Conference has raised high expectations in large sectors of public opinion. Conscious of what is at stake for the well-being of millions of women around the world, the Holy See, as you are aware, has taken an active part in the preparatory and regional meetings leading up to the Conference. In this process, the Holy See has discussed both local and global issues of particular concern to women not only with other Delegations and organizations, but especially with women themselves. The Holy See's Delegation, which has itself consisted mostly of women, has heard with keen interest and appreciation the hopes and fears, the concerns and demands of women all over the world.

2. Solutions to the issues and problems raised at the Conference, if they are to be honest and permanent, cannot but be based on *the recognition of the inherent, inalienable dignity of women*, and the importance of women's presence and participation in all aspects of social life. The Conference's success will depend on whether or not it will offer *a true vision of women's dignity*

and aspirations, a vision capable of inspiring and sustaining objective and realistic responses to the suffering, struggle and frustration that continue to be a part of all too many women's lives.

In fact, the recognition of the dignity of every human being is the foundation and support of the concept of *universal human rights*. For believers, that dignity and the rights that stem from it are solidly grounded in the truth of the human being's creation in the image and likeness of God. The United Nations Charter refers to this dignity in the same instance as it acknowledges the equal rights of men and women (Cf. *United Nations Charter*, Preamble, par. 2), a concept prominent in almost every international human rights instrument. If the potential and aspirations of many of the world's women are not realized, this is due in great part to the fact that their human rights, as acknowledged by these instruments, are not upheld. In this sense, the Conference can sound a needed warning, and call governments and organizations to work effectively to ensure the legal guarantee of women's dignity and rights.

3. As most women themselves point out, *equality of dignity* does not mean "sameness with men". This would only impoverish women and all of society, by deforming or losing the unique richness and the inherent value of femininity. In the Church's outlook, women and men have been called by the Creator to live in profound communion with one another, with reciprocal knowledge and giving of self, acting together for the common good with the complementary characteristics of that which is feminine and masculine.

At the same time we must not forget that at the personal level one's dignity is experienced not as a result of the affirmation of rights on the juridical and international planes, but as the natural consequence of the concrete material, emotional and spiritual care received *in the heart of one's family*. No response to women's issues can ignore women's role in the family or take lightly the fact that every new life is *totally entrusted* to the protection and care of the woman carrying it in her womb (Cf. John Paul II *Evangelium Vitae*, 58). In order to respect this natural order of things, it is necessary to counter the misconception that the role of motherhood is oppressive to women, and that a commitment to her family, particularly to her children, prevents a woman from reaching personal fulfilment, and women as a whole from having an influence in society. It is a disservice not only to children, but also to women and society itself, when a woman is made to feel guilty for wanting to remain in the home and nurture and care for her children. A mother's presence in the family, so critical to the stability and growth of that basic unity of society, should instead be recognized, applauded and supported in every possible way. By the same token society needs to *call husbands and fathers to their family responsibilities*, and ought to strive for a situation in which they will not be forced by economic circumstances to move away from the home in search of work.

4. Moreover, in today's world, when so many children are facing crises that threaten not only their long-term development, but also their very life, it is imperative that the security afforded by responsible parents – mother and father – within the context of the family be re-established and reaffirmed. Children need the positive environment of a stable family life that will ensure their

development to human maturity – girls on an equal basis with boys. The Church historically has demonstrated in action, as well as in word, the importance of educating the girl-child and providing her with health care, particularly where she may not otherwise have had these benefits. In keeping with the Church's mission and in support of the goals of the Women's Conference, Catholic institutions and organizations around the world will be encouraged to continue their care and special attention to the girl-child.

5. In this year's "World Day of Peace Message", on the theme of "Women: teachers of peace", I wrote that the world urgently needs "to heed the yearning for peace which they [women] express in words and deeds and, at times of greatest tragedy, by the silent eloquence of their grief" (John Paul II, *Message for the World Day of Peace 1995*). It should in fact be clear that "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" (*Ibid.* 9). This is a recognition of *the unique role which women have in humanizing society* and directing it towards the positive goals of solidarity and peace. It is far from the Holy See's intentions to try to limit the influence and activity of women in society. On the contrary, without detracting from their role in relation to the family, the Church 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.

There should be no doubt that on the basis of their equal dignity with men "women have a full right to become actively involved in all areas of public life, and this right must be affirmed and guaranteed, also, where necessary, through appropriate legislation" (*Ibid.*). In truth, in some societies, women have made great strides in this direction, being involved in a more decisive way, not without overcoming many obstacles, in cultural, social, economic and political life (Cf. *Ibid.*). This is a positive and hopeful development which the Beijing Conference can help to consolidate, in particular by calling on all countries to overcome situations which prevent women from being acknowledged, respected and appreciated in their dignity and competence. Profound changes are needed in the attitudes and organization of society in order to facilitate the participation of women in public life, while at the same time providing for the special obligations of women and of men with regard to their families. In some cases changes have also to be made to render it possible for women to have access to property and to the management of their assets. Nor should the special difficulties and problems faced by single women living alone or those who head families be neglected.

6. In fact, development and progress imply access to resources and opportunities, *equitable access* not only between the least developed, developing and richer countries, and between social and economic classes, but also *between women and men* (Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 9). Greater efforts are needed to eliminate discrimination against women in areas that include education, health care and employment. Where certain groups or classes are systematically excluded from these goods, and where communities or countries lack basic social infrastructures and economic

opportunities, women and children are the first to experience marginalization. And yet, where poverty abounds, or in the face of the devastation of conflict and war, or the tragedy of migration, forced or otherwise, it is very often women who maintain the vestiges of human dignity, defend the family, and preserve cultural and religious values. History is written almost exclusively as the narrative of men's achievements, when in fact its better part is most often moulded by women's determined and persevering action for good. Elsewhere I have written about man's debt to woman in the realm of life and the defence of life (Cf. John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 18). How much still needs to be said and written about man's enormous debt to woman in every other realm of social and cultural progress! The Church and human society have been, and continue to be, measurelessly enriched by the unique presence and gifts of women, especially those who have consecrated themselves to the Lord and in him have given themselves in service to others.

7. The Beijing Conference will undoubtedly draw attention to *the terrible exploitation of women and girls* which exists in every part of the world. 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, with little or no recompense, no labour rights, no security. And what about the sexual exploitation of women and children? The trivialization of sexuality, especially in the media, and the acceptance in some societies of a sexuality without moral restraint and without accountability, are deleterious above all to women, increasing the challenges that they face in sustaining their personal dignity and their service to life. In a society which follows this path, the temptation to use abortion as a so-called "solution" to the unwanted results of sexual promiscuity and irresponsibility is very strong. And here again it is the woman who bears the heaviest burden: often left alone, or pressured into terminating the life of her child before it is born, she must then bear the burden of her conscience which forever reminds her that she has taken the life of her child (Cf. *ibid.* 14).

A radical solidarity with women requires that the underlying causes which make a child unwanted be addressed. There will never be justice, including equality, development and peace, for women or for men, unless there is an unflinching determination to *respect, protect, love and serve life* – every human life, at every stage and in every situation (Cf. *Evangelium Vitae*, 5 and 87). It is well known that this is a primary concern of the Holy See, and it will be reflected in the positions taken by the Holy See Delegation at the Beijing Conference.

8. The challenge facing most societies is that of upholding, indeed strengthening, woman's role in the family while at the same time making it possible for her to use all her talents and exercise all her rights in building up society. However, women's greater presence in the work force, in public life, and generally in the decision making processes guiding society, on an equal basis with men, will continue to be problematic as long as the costs continue to burden the private sector. In this area the State has a duty of subsidiarity, to be exercised through suitable legislative and social security initiatives. In the perspective of uncontrolled free-market policies there is little hope that women will be able to overcome the obstacles on their path.

Many challenges face the Beijing Conference. We must hope that the Conference will set a course that avoids the reefs of exaggerated individualism, with its accompanying moral relativism, or – on the opposite side – the reefs of social and cultural conditioning which does not permit women to become aware of their own dignity, with drastic consequences for the proper balance of society and with continuing pain and despair on the part of so many women.

9. Madame Secretary General, it is my hope and prayer that the participants in the Conference will appreciate the importance of what is to be decided there, and its implications for millions of women throughout the world. A great sensitivity is required in order to avoid the risk of prescribing action which will be far removed from the real-life needs and aspirations of women, which the Conference is supposed to serve and promote. With Almighty God's help may you and all involved work with enlightened mind and upright heart so that the goals of equality, development and peace may be more fully realized.

From the Vatican, 26 May 1995.

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