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Audience with participants in the Plenary of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue

At midday today, in the Consistory Hall of the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the Plenary of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue on the theme: “*The role of women in education towards universal fraternity*”.

The following is the Pope’s address to those present:

Holy Father’s Address

Dear Cardinals,
Dear brother bishops,
Brothers and sisters,

I welcome you with joy and thank Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran for the greeting he addressed to me also on your behalf. We meet at the end of your Plenary Assembly, during which you considered the “The role of women in education towards universal fraternity”. Certainly, there was a very enriching exchange on this theme, which is of primary importance for the path of humanity towards brotherhood and peace, a path that is not to be taken for granted, nor is it linear, but instead marked by difficulties and obstacles.

Unfortunately we see how today the figure of the woman as educator in universal fraternity is obscured and often not acknowledged, due to the many ills that afflict this world and which affect women in particular, in their dignity and in their role. Women, and even children, are indeed among the most frequent victims of blind violence. Where hatred and violence prevail, families and societies are torn, preventing women from carrying out, in a communion of intention and action with men, their mission of educator in a serene and effective way.

Reflecting on the theme you have considered, I would like to focus in particular on three aspects: *Valorising the role of women, educating in fraternity, and dialogue.*

1. Valorising the role of women. In today's complex society, characterized by plurality and globalization, there is a need for greater recognition of women's capacity to educate in universal brotherhood. When women have the possibility of fully conveying their gifts to the whole community, the way in which society understands and organizes itself will be positively transformed, arriving at the point of reflecting better on the substantial unity of the human family. Here resides the most valid premise for the consolidation of authentic fraternity. The growing presence of women in social, economic and political life at local, national, and international levels, and in the ecclesial context, is therefore a beneficial process. Women have the full right to be actively involved in all areas, and their right must be affirmed and protected also by legal means where necessary.

This means expanding the space for a more incisive female presence. There are very many women who, in the roles they perform on a daily basis with dedication and conscience, with at times heroic courage, have made and make fruitful their genius, their valuable traits in the most varied specific and qualified expertise linked to their real experience as mothers and formators.

2. *Educating in fraternity.* Women, as educators, have a particular vocation, capable of creating and nurturing new forms of acceptance and mutual respect. The woman has always been at the centre of family education, not only as a mother. The contribution of women in the field of education is inestimable. And education involves a wealth of implications both for the woman herself, her way of being, and for her relationships, her way of facing human life and life in general.

In conclusion, all people – men and women – are called to contribute to educating in universal fraternity which is, ultimately, education in peace in the complementarity of different sensibilities and roles. Therefore women, linked intimately to the mystery of life, can do much to promote the spirit of fraternity, with their care for the preservation of life and their conviction that love is the only force that can make the world inhabitable for all.

Indeed, women are often the only ones who accompany others, especially those who are the weakest in the family and in society, victims of conflicts, and those who must face everyday challenges. Thanks to their contribution, education in fraternity – by nature inclusive and generating bonds – can overcome the throwaway culture.

3. *Dialogue.* It is clear that education in universal fraternity, which also means learning to build ties of friendship and respect, is important in the field of interreligious dialogue. Women are engaged, often more than men, at the level of "dialogue of life" in the interreligious sphere, and in this way contribute to a better understanding of the typical challenges of multicultural life. But women can also be fully integrated in exchanges at the level of religious experience, as well as at theological level. Many women are well prepared to face encounters of interreligious dialogue at the highest levels, and not only on the Catholic side. This means that the contribution of women must not be limited to "feminine" issues or encounters only among women. Dialogue is a path that men and women must pursue together. Today, more than ever, it is necessary for women to be present.

Women, possessing specific characteristics, can offer an important input in dialogue, with their capacity for listening, acceptance, and opening up generously to others.

I thank all of you, members, consultants and collaborators with the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, as you perform a valuable service. I hope that you will continue to weave the delicate web of dialogue with all those who seek God and all people of good will. I invoke upon you the Lord's abundant blessings, and I ask you, please, to pray for me.
