
Vatican

'Genius of women' must be issue in Beijing

In a papal letter released on July 10 at the Vatican and addressed "directly to every woman," John Paul II sets straight what the issues at the United Nations-sponsored Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing should be, according to the Catholic Church. While world media have focused on the pontiff's condemnation of "aggressive male behavior," other key aspects have been disregarded by the press. The pope rejects the feminist irrationalist conception of women and resituates woman's liberation in the context of *imago Dei* (the image of God) and reason, which are the common gifts of men and women.

The Beijing conference "provides an auspicious occasion for heightening awareness of the many contributions made by women to the life of whole societies and nations. This contribution is primarily spiritual and cultural in nature, but socio-political and economic as well. The various sectors of society, states, national cultures and, the progress of the all humanity, are certainly deeply indebted to the contribution of women!"

Later on, the pope writes: "You can see, then, dear sisters, that the Church has many reasons for hoping that the forthcoming U.N. conference in Beijing will bring out the full truth about women. Necessary emphasis should be placed on the 'genius of women,' not only by considering great and famous women of the past or present, but also those ordinary women who reveal the gift of their womanhood by placing themselves at the service of others in their everyday lives."

"I think," the pope writes in the third chapter of his letter, "particularly of those women who have loved culture and art, and devoted their lives to them in spite of the fact that they were frequently at a disadvantage from the start, excluded from equal educational opportunities, underestimated, ignored and not given credit for their intellectual contributions. . . . To this great, immense 'feminine' tradition, humanity owes a debt which can never be repaid."

Declaring that both "justice" and "necessity" require the removal of all obstacles which prevent the full integration of women into social, political, and economic life, the head of the Catholic Church underlines, "We need only think of how the gift of motherhood is often penalized rather than rewarded, even though humanity owes its very survival to this gift."

The pope then praises the fight for women's liberation

which, "not without its share of mistakes," is judged "substantially a positive one." The "journey must go on!" he proclaims, "through an effective and intelligent campaign for the promotion of women" starting with a "universal recognition of the dignity of women. Our ability to recognize this dignity, in spite of historical conditioning, comes from the use of reason itself, which is able to understand the law of God written in the heart of every human being. More than anything else, the Word of God enables us to grasp clearly the ultimate anthropological basis of the dignity of women, making it evident as part of God's plan for humanity."

Mandate of Genesis to both sexes

"The Book of Genesis," the pope writes in the sixth chapter, "speaks of Creation in summary fashion, in language which is poetic and symbolic, yet profoundly true: 'God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him: male and female He created them' (Gn 1:27). The creative act of God takes place according to a precise plan. First of all, we are told that the human being is created 'in the image and likeness of God' (cf. Gn 1:26). This expression immediately makes clear what is distinct about the human being with regard to the rest of creation."

The letter implicitly refutes efforts led by Britain's Prince Philip to reshape Christianity and other major religions as Mother Earth-worship. In chapter 8, the pope writes: "After creating man male and female, God says to both: 'Fill the earth and subdue it' (Gn 1:28). Not only does he give them the power to procreate as a means of perpetuating the human species through time, but He also gives them the earth, charging them with the responsible use of its resources. As a rational and free being, man is called to transform the face of the earth. In this task, which is essentially that of culture, woman and man alike share equal responsibility from the start."

The "genius of women" is God's plan, writes the pope in chapter 10. "It is thus my hope, dear sisters, that you will reflect carefully on what it means to speak of the 'genius of women,' not only in order to be able to see in this phrase a specific part of God's plan which needs to be accepted and appreciated, but also in order to let this genius be more fully expressed in the life of society as a whole as well as in the life of the church." He pointed to Christ's mother as "the highest expression of the 'feminine genius'" and "a source of constant inspiration"; the pope explains that the Virgin Mary is invoked as "queen of heaven and earth" by "many nations and peoples" because "for her, 'to reign' is to serve" and "her service is 'to reign.'"

"This is the way," he writes, "in which authority needs to be understood both in the family and in society and in the church. Each person's fundamental vocation is revealed in this 'reigning,' for each person has been created in the 'image' of the one who is Lord of the Heaven and earth."