



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO PARTICIPANTS IN THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
ON THE THEME: "LIFE, FAMILY AND DEVELOPMENT:
THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE PROMOTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS"
(VATICAN, 20-21 MARCH 2009)**

*To my Venerable Brother
Cardinal Renato Raffaele Martino*

I am pleased to extend cordial greetings to you and to all those taking part in the International Conference on the theme "Life, Family and Development: the Role of Women in the Promotion of Human Rights". This event, sponsored by the [Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace](#), with the cooperation of the World Women's Alliance for Life and Family, the World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations and other associations, is an exemplary response to my predecessor Pope John Paul II's call for a "new feminism" with the power to transform culture, imbuing it with a decisive respect for life (cf. [Evangelium Vitae](#), 98-99).

Every day we learn of further ways in which life is compromised, particularly in its most vulnerable stages. While justice demands that these be decried as a violation of human rights, they must also evoke a positive and proactive response. The recognition and appreciation of God's plan for women in the transmission of life and the nurturing of children is a constructive step in this direction. Beyond this, and given the distinctive influence of women in society, they must be encouraged to embrace the opportunity to uphold the dignity of life through their involvement in education and their participation in political and civic life. Indeed, because they have been gifted by the Creator with a unique "capacity for the other", women have a crucial part to play in the promotion of human rights, for without their voice the social fabric of society would be weakened (cf. [Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World](#), Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 13).

As you reflect on the role of women in the promotion of human rights, I invite you to keep in mind a

task to which I have drawn attention on several occasions: namely, to correct any misconception that Christianity is simply a collection of commandments and prohibitions. The Gospel is a message of joy which encourages men and women to delight in spousal love; far from stifling it, Christian faith and ethics make it healthy, strong and truly free. This is the exact meaning of the Ten Commandments: they are not a series of “noes” but a great “yes” to love and to life (cf. *Address to the Participants at the Ecclesial Convention of the Diocese of Rome*, 5 June 2006).

It is my sincere hope that your discussions over these next two days will translate into concrete initiatives that safeguard the indispensable role of the family in the integral development of the human person and of society as a whole. The genius of women to mobilize and organize endows them with the skills and motivation to develop ever-expanding networks for sharing experiences and generating new ideas. The accomplishments of WWALF and the UMOFC/WUCWO are an outstanding example of this, and I encourage their members to persevere in their generous service to society. May the sphere of your influence continue to grow at regional, national and international levels for the advancement of human rights based on the strong foundation of marriage and family.

I once more extend best wishes for the success of this conference and my prayers for the continuing mission of the participating organizations. Invoking the intercession of Mary, “the symbol and the most perfect realization of the Church” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 570), I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing.