



The Holy See

***LETTER OF HIS HOLINESS PAUL VI
TO Mrs. H. SIPILA, SECRETARY-GENERAL OF THE WORLD CONFERENCE
OF THE INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S YEAR****

It is a pleasure for us to greet the World Conference of International Women's Year which is opening in Mexico City and to express our best wishes for its work, which can happily contribute to the future of humanity.

We have already had the opportunity – on the occasion of your visit – to emphasize the goodwill and attention with which we intended to follow the International Women's Year proclaimed by the United Nations. We recognized, in fact, in the threefold theme of the Year – equality, development and peace – the synthesis of a vast network of problems that the world community must face today and which expresses aspirations with which the Church herself manifests her solidarity. The present Conference, however, marks a genuinely new stage in progress of nations in their constant search for more just and more human conditions of life.

On the one hand, it is a question of doing justice to women, who too often in the course of history and still today have found or find themselves relegated to a position of inferiority with regard to men, and the victims, to a greater degree than men, of the scourges of underdevelopment and war. But on the other hand, as we have been happy to note in the goals assigned to the International Women's Year, it is also a question of ensuring concretely the full integration of women in the global effort for development and of recognizing and encouraging their contribution to the strengthening of peace. What a great hope for humanity it would be, if, by the concerted effort of all people of goodwill, the hundreds of millions of women in all parts of the world could finally place at the service of these great causes and of the "reconciliation in families and in society" not only the strength of their numbers but also the irreplaceable contribution of their gifts of mind and heart! This hope we evoked still more recently, on the occasion of the World Day of Peace.

It is not only in recent times that the Catholic Church has called for the accomplishment of these

goals assigned to International Women's Year. Already nearly twenty years ago (not to mention still earlier periods), our predecessor Pius XII said to the women of the whole world: "You can and must make your own, without restriction, the programme of the advancement of women – programme which upholds with an immense hope the unnumbered throng of your sisters who are still subjected to degrading customs or who are the victims of poverty, of the ignorance of their milieu and of the total lack of means of culture and formation" [Address to the World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations, 29 September 1957: AAS 49(1957), p. 907]. This advancement was to be conceived "in Christian terms, in the light of faith"; but this was certainly not in order to diminish its scope. On the contrary, for it is in this light that there emerges most clearly the true equality between man and woman, each in his or her proper way endowed with the dignity of the human person and created in the image of God.

Thus it is that, in his Encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, Pope John XXIII hailed as a "sign of the times" the fact that "women are gaining an increasing awareness of their natural dignity...they are demanding both in domestic and public life the rights and duties which belong to them as human persons" [AAS 55(1963), pp. 267-268]. At the same time, the Second Vatican Council, recognizing the solidarity of the whole Church with "the joys and hopes, the sadnesses and anxieties" of the modern world, hastened to condemn the injustices of a discrimination based on sex and to vindicate for women, with reverence for their rights and duties in accordance with their own specific aptitudes, a responsible and fuller share in the whole of the life of society (cf. Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 29 and 60).

It is not possible to recall here all the efforts whereby the Catholic Church seeks to contribute effectively to the integration of women into the works of development and peace. It will suffice for us to mention just one sphere which we have particularly at heart: the campaign against illiteracy, the illiteracy which plays an evil role, especially among women in rural areas, constituting an obstacle to development and offending essential rights, for, as we recalled in our Encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, "hunger for education is no less debasing than hunger for food: an illiterate is a person with an undernourished mind" [35; AAS 59(1967), p. 274].

Emphasizing the disinherited masses' elementary need for teaching does not imply forgetting the importance for the goals of International Women's Year of education in all its forms – the education of men as well as of women – and of the action to be undertaken at the level of public opinion. It is, moreover, by a healthy effort of education that it will be possible to bring into operation the necessary discernments in order that "liberation" may not lead to new and worse forms of servitude, and in order that the struggle against discrimination may not base itself upon a "false equality which would deny the distinctions laid down by the Creator himself" [Octogesima *Adveniens*, 13; AAS 63(1971), p. 411], or which would risk attenuating the exact idea of the privileged mission of women.

In order to promote and orientate this action for a salutary change of attitudes, we have made it

our task to set up a Committee of the Holy See for International Women's Year. We have also suggested to the local Churches throughout the world that they should make use of this occasion in order to examine themselves regarding the effective participation of women in the Church's life and regarding the Catholics' contribution to every effort aimed at the harmonious collaboration between men and women in the great tasks facing society.

We wish in this way to make our contribution towards ensuring that International Women's Year may truly be, in accordance with the happy idea of its promoters, the point of departure for long-term action.

We finally turn to Almighty God. It is He who created woman, no less than man, in His own image (cf. Gen. 1:27); it is also He who wished to call a woman, the Virgin Mary, in order that she might give "her active and responsible consent" [Marialis Cultus, 37; AAS 66 (1974) p.148] to the decisive event of the coming of Christ into the world, the good news of the fullness of life and of true liberation for all mankind. May Almighty God bless the work of this Conference, may He grant strength and enlightenment to all those responsible for it, in the service of the human family.

The Vatican, 16 June 1975.

*ORa n.27 p.5;

Paths to Peace p.381-382.
