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DE IUSTITIA ET PACE

The United States Embassy to the Holy See  
The Russell Berrie Foundation  
The John Paul II Center for Interreligious Dialogue

Conference on

*Women's Leadership in Conflict Resolution: Faith Perspectives*

Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas, 14 April 2015

*Opening remarks*

I am very glad to be here today to join in this important conference. I thank the organizers, the United States Embassy to the Holy See, the Russell Berrie Foundation and the John Paul II Centre for Interreligious Dialogue.<sup>1</sup> It is my honour to open the panel by sharing some experiences and some thoughts of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace on the engagement of women in conflict resolution, reconciliation and peace-building.

*Women in prominent roles*

Before I turn to their special attributes, I wish to begin by noting women's contributions generally. History books and many institutions seem to notice men more than women. But if we look, what do we find?

Saint John XXIII looked and he shared what he saw in *Pacem in Terris* – he devoted an entire paragraph to the growing participation of women in public and political life, consistent with “awareness of their natural dignity. Far from being content with a purely passive role or allowing themselves to be regarded as a kind of instrument, they are demanding both in domestic and in public life the rights and duties which belong to them as human persons.”<sup>2</sup>

But this was not only a phenomenon of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For example, three women of the Middle Ages whom the Church has canonized took contrasting stances to conflict in the public sphere: St. Catherine of Siena worked diplomatically to achieve peace; St. Joan of Arc led troops into battle; and St. Elizabeth of Portugal rode onto the battlefield to stop her son and her husband from fighting each other.

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<sup>1</sup> With sincere thanks to Dott. Livia Stoppa, Msgr. Bernard Munono and Mr. Robert Czerny for assistance in drafting and editing these remarks.

<sup>2</sup> *Pacem in Terris*, §41. This appears as one of three “Characteristics of the Present Day.”

I mention these three because of their relationship to conflict and peace, our topic today. If we look beyond this topic, accomplished women are everywhere, even in outer space! Starting in 1970, four women have been named Doctors of the Church<sup>3</sup>: Saints Teresa of Ávila, Catherine of Siena, Thérèse de Lisieux and Hildegard of Bingen. Three of the six patron saints of Europe are women: Saints Catherine of Siena, Bridget of Sweden and Edith Stein.<sup>4</sup> Within our Church, unnumbered women have carried on the healing and teaching ministry of Jesus. Outside the Church, of course, many more women of great learning and in prominent roles can be named; Angela Merkel of Germany and IMF head Christine Lagarde are two outstanding examples. So if I turn now to thoughts about women's special attributes, it is not with blindness to any other attributes and accomplishments.

### *Women teachers and witnesses to peace*

Twenty years have passed since St. John Paul II wrote "*Women: Teachers of Peace*" for the 1995 World Day of Peace. He affirmed that "Inner peace comes from knowing that one is loved by God and from the desire to respond to his love. History is filled with marvellous examples of women who, sustained by this knowledge, have been able successfully to deal with difficult situations of exploitation, discrimination, violence and war" (n.5).

To give visibility to *women of peace*, that same year the Pontifical Council organized a meeting on *Women Witnesses to Peace*. Several women came to Loreto from places of violence – Bosnia and Herzegovina, Burundi, Ecuador, Guatemala, Ireland etc. – to testify to their experience of the horrors of destruction and slaughter, deportation and rape; but also to how they found the strength to take up the difficult road of *reconciliation* and *peace-building* in these places of sorrow and violence.<sup>5</sup>

More recently, in May 2012, this Council collaborated with the *Catholic Peace-building Network* in a conference on the challenges that *peace-builders* face today. "Alongside the deplorable exploitation and victimization of women in conflicts, women exercise confident though hidden and unrecognized *leadership* in the practices of peace-building for which they are particularly talented."<sup>6</sup>

This stems from understanding the creation of new life as very special. All humans are made in the image and likeness of God,<sup>7</sup> and it is through women as mothers that each unique "image and likeness" enters into life. And while every parent can nurture new lives and mould young character, women still have primary responsibility more often than men. They act as teachers and witnesses to peace in the family first, and then in work-places, in the community, in the society, in the nation and in the family of nations. "When women are able to fully share their gifts with the whole community, the very way in which society understands and organizes itself is improved and comes to reflect in a

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<sup>3</sup> The first two by Pope Paul VI, the third by St. John Paul II, the fourth by Pope Benedict XVI.

<sup>4</sup> As named by St. John Paul II in 1999.

<sup>5</sup> Seventh Centenary of the Holy House of Loreto, Women witnesses to peace, Message of Loreto, 14-15 October 1995.

<sup>6</sup> Cfr. Pontificio Consiglio della Giustizia e della Pace, *Il Concetto di Pace, Attualità della Pacem in Terris nel 50° Anniversario della Pacem in Terris* (1963-2013), pag.611; the role of the Luo women of Kenya; Liberian women in the I&II Civil wars of Liberia that propelled Elen Sirleaf to power.

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 1:27

better way the substantial unity of the human family. Here we see the most important condition for consolidation of authentic peace.”<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, women have a role in *building bridges* among those in conflict; in alleviating suffering without discrimination; in educating belligerent parties to say no to violence; and in fostering a *positive peace*. For it is not enough (although of utmost importance) for wars to end. It is also crucial to rebuild society within the countries emerging from deadly conflicts in order to plot the trajectory of sustainable peace for society.<sup>9</sup> Building new relationships between wartime enemies – a great challenge for which women have a particular aptitude – favours the rebuilding of the “social fabric”<sup>10</sup> in places of conflict.

Women have this capacity because “in God’s plan they have been created to welcome new life and to be the creative echo of love that gives all.”<sup>11</sup> This divine love is impartial; it recognizes the inherent dignity of each person, from which flow rights and obligations that are universal, inviolable and inalienable. All this can be a matter of daily practice in families, and the learning can be carried into workplace and social relationships that respect the dignity of every human person. This is the ultimate impact of wonderful teaching of peace in families, starting at birth.

#### *Consolidating Roles of Women in conflict resolution:*

Beyond absence of war, positive peace provides the *opportunity of a new life*, a life that accepts neither violence nor injustice, hunger, thirst, exploitation at work or absence of work. Women’s peace-building should also aim for a better world order. To this end *peace* is a *common good* whose pursuit cuts across cultural, faith and confessional, party-politics lines etc. That is why it becomes necessary sometimes that “*the Christian community, with the help of the Holy Spirit, -in communion with Bishops- in- charge, and in dialogue with other Christian brothers and all men of good will – identify the choices and the tasks that must be undertaken to effect the political, economic and social transformations that are deemed/considered urgent and necessary in many cases.*”<sup>12</sup>

Accordingly, working for peace in conflict situations requires that women *work together: in solidarity*; and their efforts must be *inter-ethnic, inter-cultural, inter-religious and ecumenical*.

- Solidarity:

It is crucial that women *work together* for peace.<sup>13</sup> Let the spirit of collaboration and solidarity replace all attention-seeking behaviour. Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta said “I can do things you cannot, you can do things I cannot; together we can do great things.” Women need to help women to become fully aware of their dignity and of their strengths; they need, moreover, to find support in

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<sup>8</sup>Message for the 1995 World Day of Peace, January 1, 1995, n.9.

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. Appleyby S., *Challenges to Peacebuilding. Closing Statement*, [http://cpn.nd.edu/assets/70299/appleby\\_closing\\_talk\\_final.pdf](http://cpn.nd.edu/assets/70299/appleby_closing_talk_final.pdf).

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup>Seventh Centenary of the Holy House of Loreto, Women witnesses to peace, Message of Loreto, 14-15 October 1995.

<sup>12</sup> Paul VI, *Octogesima Adveniens*, §4

<sup>13</sup> Cf. WUCWO, WWLAF, Ecumenical Forum of European Christian Women (a creative energy in Europe for peace). Last meeting in Tinos, Greece.

the valuable contributions that associations, movements and groups, many of them of a religious character, have successfully made for peace.<sup>14</sup>

o A Case for Solidarity:

Indeed, the year 2015 is a crucial year. The Member States of the United Nations are detailing a post-2015 development agenda, which will be carried out through a new set of SDGs. Catholic women want to participate in this process; they have expressed their desire to carefully discuss the proposed SDGs under negotiation, with women of other confessions and persuasions, and to submit comments and suggestions on the most important social issues affecting women and life. This will be the purpose of the above-mentioned Conference.

In support of this initiative, the Pontifical Council is organizing an International Conference in May on “*Women and the post-2015 Development Agenda: The challenges of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)*”.

*Mary, Model of Peace*

Mary, the mother of God, conceived, bore and raised Jesus Christ and walked with him to his death on the Cross. Closeness to Mary in prayer is the authentic source of women’s engagement for peace and reconciliation. “Mary, queen of peace, is close to women of our day because of their motherhood, her example of openness to others’ needs and her witness of suffering. Mary lived with a deep sense of responsibility the plan which God willed to carry out in her for the salvation of all humanity.”<sup>15</sup> Mary can teach us all the importance of *accompaniment*, of walking with people caught in the dehumanizing dynamics of deadly conflicts.<sup>16</sup>

Through her nearness to Mary and her Son, Blessed Mother Teresa became an apostle of peace in the world. She was a life-long peace-builder through her service to the poorest of the poor. As she said, “everybody today seems to be in such a terrible rush, anxious for greater developments and greater riches and so on, so that parents have very little time for their children. Parents have very little time for each other, and in the home begins the disruption of peace of the world”.

*Conclusion*

I would like to conclude by expressing my wish for a renewed and lasting commitment of women to peace at all levels and in all spheres of human existence, alongside their special agency in the creation of new life and their participation in all spheres of human activity. As Jesus refused to send Mary to assist her sister Martha in the household chores,<sup>17</sup> we must resist the unfortunate old tendencies to limited ideas of women’s roles.

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<sup>14</sup>Message for the 1995 World Day of Peace, January 1, 1995, n.5.

<sup>15</sup> Message for the 1995 World Day of Peace, January 1, 1995, n.12.

<sup>16</sup>Cfr. Appleby S., *Challenges to Peacebuilding. Closing Statement*, [http://cpn.nd.edu/assets/70299/appleby\\_closing\\_talk\\_final.pdf](http://cpn.nd.edu/assets/70299/appleby_closing_talk_final.pdf).

<sup>17</sup> Luke 10:38-42.

At the Angelus on the 2015 International Day of Women, Pope Francis underlined the great need for women's presence in our lives: "A world where women are marginalized is a barren world because women not only give life but they also transmit the ability to see beyond, to see beyond themselves. They transmit the ability to see the world with different eyes, to feel things with a more creative, patient and tender heart."<sup>18</sup> Let these different eyes include a fresh ability of men to recognize women's special capacities and collaborate with them: let there be no competition between man and woman when trying to build peace; let all aspire to complementarity, collaboration and cooperation.

I wish also that all women may be helped always to choose life and to take their place on the side of life, since "the violation of the individual human being's right to life contains the seeds of the extreme violence of war."<sup>19</sup> And finally, let us think of grandmothers, aunts, mothers, daughters and sisters and all consecrated women who, in their daily lives, work quietly and anonymously for peace. *We do not know your face but your face is the face of love!* Thank you!

Cardinal Peter K.A. Turkson  
President

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<sup>18</sup> Pope Francis, Angelus, 8 March 2015.

<sup>19</sup> Message for the 1995 World Day of Peace, January 1, 1995, n. 10.