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Women Believers at the Service of LIFE, DIGNITY and the COMMON GOOD

Conference with Christian women in Middle East - Amman 24-27 October 2013

Amman, October 25, 2013

Greetings...

"Our Churches are to take the appropriate means to foster and reinforce the respect, dignity, role and rights of women. The competent and generous devotion of women at the service of life, the family, education and healthcare needs to be highly appreciated. Our Churches are to ensure their integration and participation in pastoral activities". The passage I have just read is Propositio Number 27 of the Special Assembly for the Middle East of the Synod of Bishops held in Rome from 10 to 24 October 2010. It expresses an ideal that, so far, has yet to be translated into a program for action.

While this might not be precisely the theme of your conference, I believe it is close. I now comment on the notion of "*integration and participation of women in pastoral activities*", because I see it as close to the task you describe for your conference of: "a service of life, dignity and common good".

When the Synod proposes "*integration and participation of women in pastoral activities*", this should not be considered as a concession made by men of Church (Bishops and priests in particular) or an appeal to women that is prompted by immediate practical needs. At the same time, it should not be considered as a right, because it must be understood as a service rather than a form of sharing the "power".

Women must bring their own original contribution to the pastoral work of the Church, just as they must to all other fields in society. Within the Church, pastoral activity will be incomplete without this contribution. Women must bring the feminine "genius", according to the well-known expression used by Blessed John Paul II in the Encyclical Letter *Mulieris dignitatem*, i.e. those features that are typical of their femininity. Among these characteristics, Pope Francis on the occasion of the XXV anniversary of that Encyclical Letter mentioned: *a particular sensitiveness for the "things of God", particularly in helping us to better understand the mercy, the tenderness and the love that God has for each of us*" (Address to the participants in a Seminar organized by the Pontifical Council for the Laity on the 25th anniversary of *Mulieris Dignitatem* the 12 October last).

What this actually means is still to be clarified. Pope Francis himself recognized this challenge on more than one occasion. Replying to journalists on the trip back from Brazil, on July 28, said: "*I would like to explain a bit more what I said about women's participation in the Church. It can't just be about their acting as altar servers, heads of Caritas, catechists... No! They have to be more, profoundly more, even mystically more (...) I have said it, but I repeat it. Our Lady, Mary, was more important than the Apostles, than bishops and deacons and priests. Women, in the Church, are more important than bishops and priests; how, this is something we have to try to explain better, because I believe that we lack a theological explanation of this*".

I suggest that it is up to women like you, in particular, to articulate and promote a "theology of the woman", a theology presented from the point of view of women, with their sensitivity, their intelligence, their methodology, with their diversity.

The same Pope Francis has already offered his personal contribution, when, on the same occasion, he added: "*A Church without women is like the college of the Apostles without Mary. The role of women in the Church is not simply that of maternity, being mothers, but much greater: it is precisely to be the icon of the Virgin, of Our Lady; what helps make the Church grow! But think about it, Our Lady is more important than the Apostles! She is more important! The Church is feminine. She is Church, she is bride, she is mother*".

Mary is more important than the Apostles. What does this mean from the pastoral point of view, in the areas of ecclesial and social life? It means that being a Christian is more important than the role, the function, one exercises within the community. It means that the "common priesthood" (the priesthood we all receive in baptism) is more important than the "ministerial priesthood". It means that "charity" is worth

more than "authority". It means that "testimony" is worth more than "words", it means that "being" is more important than "acting", "service" more than "power".

Perhaps a peculiarity of women in evangelization is precisely this: to communicate the Word of God through more than "words" but through life their witness of life. They realize what S. Francis was recommending to his friars: "*preach the Gospel always, if necessary with words*".

I wish that this conference will bring its contribution to the search of the "feminine genius" in the life of the Church and of society.