

ADDRESS - S.B. Fouad TWAL (Eng)

WUCWO IFCA and Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem

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

Your Royal Highness Princess Sumayya

Your Excellencies:

the Papal Nuncio in Jordan, Archbishop Lingua;

the Patriarchal Vicar in Israel, Bishop Marcuzzo;

Dear Priests;

My Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Your meeting has come at a crucial time in our region, when the search for peace and justice has become most important and requires the engagement and prayers of all individuals and groups. You come from many countries and from a great variety of backgrounds and cultures. In a spirit of respect for this diversity, may your gathering here, reaffirm your already strong identity and draw down from God many graces on your hearts, your homes and your communities.

I recall the joyful memory of your Jerusalem Assembly in 2010, a memory that remains vivid and cherished. Thank you for choosing Amman, as the host city for this year's Assembly.

We are living in exciting and dramatic times, when world events unfold rapidly, and with an almost vertiginous confusion. Therefore, your commitment to spreading the values of our faith, some of which, are common to all faiths, is greatly needed and highly commendable. I encourage you who have already given much, to continue your mission tirelessly. May your coming together in this Assembly, provide you with fresh vision, zeal and courage to persevere in your great work. You may not always see the fruit of your labors. Your work in the mission of the World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations (WUCWO), may never be recorded by the present or future generations. However, God knows your every effort, your every labor, your every sigh and your every frustration. His rewards are literally "out of this world!"

My specific focus is to bring before you relevant portions of the Pope Benedict's Apostolic Exhortation, on the Church in the Middle East and some lessons on Women, from the Popes of our time.

Apostolic Exhortations are commonly issued, in response to a Synod (gathering or assembly) of Bishops, in which case, the Exhortation is known as post-synodal apostolic exhortation. And that is what we have in Pope Benedict's Church in the Middle East (Ecclesia in Medio Oriente).

At a Synod, bishops, religious superiors and experts meet and vote on proposals or "propositions," to present for the Pope's consideration, and which he uses in his "post-synodal apostolic exhortation." The Assembly of Bishops expresses its collective wishes, however, it does not issue decrees.

In October 2010, the Bishops of the Middle East met in a Synod in Rome, and presented 44 propositions to the Pope. These expressed our hopes, our problems, our dreams and our vision. The subsequent Apostolic Exhortation on the Church in the Middle East, adopted all that the Bishops presented.

Today, I address the subject of the Laity and Women in the Middle East. We live in an unusual context for many reasons, but especially because of three old but also relatively new realities: secularization, religious fundamentalism and emigration of our faithful. In this new context, we are invited to live and practice our new Evangelization.

Regarding secularization, the Apostolic Exhortation advocates development of a healthy secularization. An unhealthy kind, it says, can have "undesirable extreme consequences in that it sometimes reduces religion to a purely private concern, seeing personal or family worship, as unrelated to daily life, ethics or one's relationships with others." (No. 29) On violent fundamentalism, the document says it tends "to look with suspicion upon secularity (laïcité) as something intrinsically atheistic or immoral" (idem).

It is against this background of secularization and radical fundamentalism that we live and work. Therefore, our people are challenged to reach into the market place, into businesses and various institutions, with the

Light of Truth. They are to go beyond the confines of Church buildings. As such, they are the hands, the feet, and the mouthpiece of the Gospel in the world. As the Apostolic Exhortation states: believers "translate the Gospel, the doctrine and social teaching of the Church, into concrete actions. Indeed, Christians, as fully-fledged citizens, can and must do their part with the spirit of the Beatitudes, becoming builders of peace and apostles of reconciliation to the benefit of all society." (No. 55)

Women all around the world are entering into vibrant and dynamic roles in the Church. The Church, Bride of Christ, is emerging in new splendor! Women are arising and shining. Being a woman, is not about opting out, giving up or sitting back. The Bible and our own Christian heritage, is packed full of women, who changed the hearts of kings and the outcomes of wars, freed prisoners and fed the poor, built hope and founded religious congregations, raised children and practiced faithfulness, loved and lived generously. They are both companions to men, and leaders of men in bringing God's love, to this broken world. What is most inspiring about many women, however, is the fact that they achieve so much against great odds and opposition.

In the Christian tradition two great women, above all, inspire me: the two Marys. Mary, the Mother of Jesus who "proclaimed the greatness of the Lord" and who recognized God as He Who "casts down the mighty from their thrones and raises up the lowly." The other Mary, Mary of Magdala, whose witness to the risen Christ on Easter morning, inaugurated the mission of the Church. Her love for Christ was scandalously intimate to the religious men of her day, and heroically tenacious, nonetheless.

When the family, which is the basic "cell" of society, is strong, then the general society is strong. Realizing this, the Apostolic Exhortation highlights the importance of a strong family unit.

The Pope writes: "Christian families of the Middle East, I invite each of you to be constantly reborn, through the power of God's Word and the Sacraments, so as to become more fully a domestic Church, which is a place of formation in faith and prayer, a seedbed of vocations, the natural school of virtues and ethical values, and the primary living cell of society. Always look to the Holy Family of Nazareth, which had the joy of receiving life and demonstrating its piety by the observance of the Law and the religious practices of the time (cf. Lk 2:22-24, 41). Look to this family which knew anxiety when the child Jesus was lost, and which knew the pain of persecution, emigration and hard daily labor (cf. Mt 2:13ff.; Lk 2:41ff.). Help your children to grow in wisdom, in stature and in grace under the watchful eye of God and of men (cf. Lk 2:52); teach them to trust the Father, to imitate Christ, and to let themselves be guided by the Holy Spirit."(No. 59) These are really powerful words from the Pope. It is a message that we must not only grasp, but a message that must grasp us so that it becomes a lived reality.

Pope Francis has spoken during his General Audience on April 3, 2013 that "in the Gospels, women play a fundamental lead role(...) they were the first witnesses of the Resurrection (...) This is part of the mission of women; of mothers, witnessing to their children and grandchildren, that Jesus is alive, is living, is risen. Mothers and women carry on witnessing to this!" What matters to God is our heart, if we are open to Him, if we are like trusting children. (...) This makes us think about how women in the Church and on the journey of faith, had and still have today, a special role in opening the doors to the Lord, in following him, and in communicating his Face, because the eyes of faith, always need the simple and profound gaze of love."

Two months ago, a Syrian Christian woman came begging for a job. She is an architect and her husband, an engineer. Her family lost everything in Syria, house, office, farm, jobs, everything, and maybe some family members as well. She pleaded for any kind of work with any form of compensation, expressing that they have nothing, but cannot simply wait and receive food rations and other basic life necessities without doing anything. The only thing they have not lost is their dignity and they intend to keep it. Jobs are hard to find in Jordan at this time, and people complain that jobs are given to Syrian refugees, while the locals remain jobless in the midst of all the social problems in the country. This woman is a mother, one in thousands of Christians and Muslims, who have fled Syria, who recognizes the dignity of every human being.

Therefore, my dear friends, know that you have been empowered by God, to help save the world, one soul at a time, starting with your own. You who are married are empowered to be the domestic Church. You have the very power of GOD within you, and because of that, you can do anything of God's Will that you choose to do.

As Blessed John Paul II wrote in *Mulieres Dignitatem*, "God entrusts the human being to a woman."(MD30) In his Letter to Women, he "thanks the Lord for His mysterious plan regarding the vocation and mission of women in the world. I thank you, "for all that you represent in the life of humanity," and in the Pope's words:

"Thank you, women who are mothers! You have sheltered human beings within yourselves in a unique experience of joy and travail. This experience makes you become God's own smile upon the newborn child, the one who guides your child's first steps, who helps it to grow, and who is the anchor as the child makes its way along the journey of life.

Thank you, women who are wives! You irrevocably join your future to that of your husbands, in a relationship of mutual giving, at the service of love and life.

Thank you, women who are daughters and women who are sisters! Into the heart of the family, and then of all society, you bring the richness of your sensitivity, your intuitiveness, your generosity and fidelity.

Thank you, women who work! You are present and active in every area of life: social, economic, cultural, artistic and political. In this way you make an indispensable contribution to the growth of a culture, which unites reason and feeling, to a model of life, ever open to the sense of "mystery", to the establishment of economic and political structures ever more worthy of humanity.

Thank you, consecrated women! Following the example of the greatest of all women, the Mother of Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word, you open yourselves with obedience and fidelity to the gift of God's love.

Thank you, every woman, for the simple fact of being a woman! Through the insight, which is so much a part of your womanhood, you enrich the world's understanding and help to make human relations more honest and authentic." (Blessed John Paul II, Letter to Women, June 29, 1995)

My dear sisters in Christ, you have come here from many nations. You are a powerful sign of the universality of the Church. And as such, I renew my invitation to you, to take fully to heart the mission of the Church in the Holy Land. Our mission, like yours, is first of all, to be witnesses to Jesus Christ, witnesses to the Truth. Intimately tied to this mission, is working for the unity of all Christians in the world. It is the prayer of Jesus "that all may be one." Let us confidently place all our prayers, little though they may seem, in our hands, in the hands of the great Lord, Who took five loaves and two fishes and fed the multitudes. We realize, therefore, that our little, becomes much, when placed in the hands of God.

May all your experiences, here, strengthen your faith, increase your hope, deepen your union with the Lord, renew you in prayer and make you truly one in and with His desire, that you are to be His witnesses to the ends of the earth. Be a strong presence wherever you live, and wherever you go. Never fail to look to the Author and Perfecter of our faith; follow Him, keep His Word in your hearts. In this way, your hope will not fail.

I once more assure you of my closeness in prayer, confident that this Assembly will be an occasion for you, to find fresh energy and enthusiasm for your mission. Entrusting all of you to the protection of Mary, Mother of the Redeemer.