

Dear Maria,

Perhaps you have seen

this in Europe. I thought you'd be
interested. Will write soon. Love,
Bobby

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Issued by the Press Department, U.S. Catholic Conference

1312 Massachusetts Avenue, N. W.

Washington, D. C. 20005

Cable NACAWELCO, CATHCONF

WOMAN ADDRESSES ITALIAN EPISCOPATE ON ROLE OF WOMEN March 19, 1968

Following is the text of a translation (from the Italian) of an address delivered (Feb. 19, 1968) by Dr. Sitia Sassudelli to the Italian Bishops Conference. Dr. Sassudelli is head of the women's section of Catholic Action.

Laymen taking part in this assembly know by actual experience the problems it is planned to deal with. They have contributed the assistance asked of them during the preparatory phase and now follow the work with great interest, attentive to the guides which will be given by the hierarchy and ready to renew their collaboration with the pastors for the development of the lay apostolate in our country.

Fundação Cuidar o Futuro

But I am called to speak mainly on behalf of women. First of all, I must say that we were happy that the council did not reserve any special speech for us, except for the closing message, but dedicated to us, no less than to our brothers, the great discourse on the people of God in which men and women, laymen, priests and Religious have the same fundamental Christian identity and share the dignity of the same vocation and the responsibility for the same mission in the world. It is precisely because we know that we are an integrated part of this Church and the active subjects of its history that we are glad of the opportunity to tell the bishops how we feel and what we need in order to be able to fulfil our duty with a sense of maturity.

I do not claim to be speaking in the name of Italian women but I believe I may speak of them and for them, for the 26 million women in Italy who have received Baptism and with it the sense of Christian life, as well as those other few who are not in the Church but for whom the Church has been sent. To speak of "Italian women" amounts to speaking of the most heterogenous sociological entity that could be imagined. As an example I would like to point out that there are more than 2 million illiterates among them--far more than among men--that women with secondary education diplomas are only two-thirds the number of the men; that those with university degrees only one-third, and that of the millions of women at work in industry, half are married.

No simple statements can be made regarding a complex situation, but one factor can be cited which fits this situation more or less at every level--a state of transition. There is a transformation movement throughout the feminine world, which is probably the most affected by the profound evolution of society. Of this evolution, woman is partly the promoter, partly the beneficiary and partly the victim. In any case, she is compelled to review critically her entire situation and to verify the meaning of her role in society. Women are changing, more or less rapidly, in their awareness of themselves in their way of life, in the way they take part in civil life owing to the new experiences which modern life affords them. The experience of ever more widespread education in ridding them of ignorance and is developing new cultural capacities.

The ever wider experience of work outside the home, even though at times it is an occasion for bitter humiliation, is a valuable instrument for developing personal independence. Conjugal life, which is evolving toward a principle of equality, gives the woman greater scope in the family and exalts in a new way her dignity and responsibility as a wife and a mother. Participation in social events, made easier by the great means of communication and by direct activity in civil life, is broadening enormously the horizons of women's interests and leads to updating and reforms in the juridical statute itself.

Take for example the importance which the revision of family rights--now in progress--is bound to have. Naturally, not everything is perfect. These same phenomena and others can also have negative repercussions and can result for women in new occasions for disorientation and confusion, slavery and exploitation. But on the whole we may say that this is now the most favorable occasion we have ever had in history for the promotion of woman toward her full human stature, an opportunity which the majority of women are seizing with their efforts, their enthusiasm and their constructive impulse toward the future. It is an occasion which clearly foreshadows the advent of a society in which men and women will collaborate in every field, developing unexplored energies of a full reciprocal integration.

These are the signs of the times.

What is the significance of this sign, viewed in relation to that other great sign which is the renewal of the Church in accordance with the council? Should not a fruitful contribution, a vital confluence be sought between these two dynamisms which press simultaneously in Italian history in order to make it progress? Is there not an appeal, particularly for Christian women, in this historical coincidence?

We have the intuition that here is a great possibility and a precise duty. That is to say, it seems to us that the active participation of women could be a decisive factor for the renewal of the Church in Italy. Naturally, so long as conditions mature in their own awareness and in the attitude of the entire Christian community toward them. It seems to us that a threefold effort should be made together to this end as regards education, understanding and effort.

Understanding is a necessary premise. Woman needs to be regarded in the Church for what she is, in the truth of her concrete existence. Many abstract images of womanhood, even when they tend to idealize her, represent her as an impediment. She tries to be understood in her genuine aspirations, to be understood in her true weaknesses, which are always those attributed to the so-called "weaker sex," and to be recognized as still capable of working to the point of sacrifice for the sake of things of which she has understood the value.

It seems to her that too frequently recourse is made to preconceived ideas to interpret and explain her, while in actual fact they impede and distort understanding of her. She feels the necessity of a true dialogue with the clergy, an earnest, clear, simple, trusting dialogue in which she can express herself or receive what she needs, a dialogue containing the grace of ecclesial communion. In its turn, the clergy needs this dialogue for the exercise of its pastoral ministry which must meet the requirements of all the Christian people.

The question of the education of woman in the Church--whether she is lay or Religious--presents itself today in terms which are necessarily more exacting than in the past and demands an orientation in keeping either with ecclesial vocation or with the new historical situation. Demands come to the fore for a full personal development, founded on the essential values of liberty and responsibility. In the Church, we see clearly today that the elements of the formation of woman cannot be derived from a narrower framework than the one which defines the human person in its dignity and in its mission. Nor can the ideal environment for its growth continue to be that of separation and isolation.

As regards Christian education it is clear today that all the faithful nourish their faith at the same fount of God's Word; that in the sacraments they draw their vitality from the mystery of Christ and share their values in the life of the community. Scripture is opening up for women too. Woman's piety is being centered on liturgy, her faith thrives on doctrine, her model is the Christ of the Gospel, the Christian community is her natural environment. This, at least, is what we believe and what we intend to do. But we are still very far from realizing in practise this kind of basic education which demands commitment from woman and a great effort on the part of the clergy in order to create appropriate educational premises and to give proper assistance to this formation of Christian personality.

It is only in the frank and free encounter with essential Christian values, in the open and fraternal atmosphere of a community which receives them naturally, that present day women will be able to experience Christianity as a fully satisfying answer for their profoundest needs and will, therefore, choose it with a sense of awareness and commitment. It is necessary for woman, too, to attain a religiosity experienced with great lucidity and interior liberty, a spirituality which is the foundation of her morality and not vice versa, a oneness of religious awareness which draws from faith the reality of her present-day life and directs it with strength from within.

At a time when the Pope feels for the first time that he can give explicit recognition as "doctor of the Church" to two saintly women, we believe that we too will be able to find ample occasion and the necessary help for acceding to the riches of theological thought. We have education at heart because it is the condition for commitment. Commitment in the implementation of the mission of the Church in full collaboration and indeed in communion with our brothers. Here, too, the time has passed of roles reserved and of tasks assigned by preference.

Those who are married have the grace of marriage to place in the service of the community, often together with the husband and the children, thus proving how the family itself can be a most effective field of apostolate. The unmarried and widows have a charism which is known to the Church and which disposes them to the most varied tasks of education, charity, study and information. Those who have the grace of consecration to God now want more than ever to be an intelligible and strong sign of the Kingdom to come, for everyone's support.

There are wide reserves in the world of women, available for any Church service, from the most hidden and internal to the most evident in pastoral advice and to the most open in temporal commitments. These reserves are trustingly waiting to be utilized. Confidence placed in woman in the Church is a contribution which the world needs to overcome prejudices which still exist against woman in society. It is a sign, particularly perceptible for present-day people, which can express in present-day terms the truth which in Christianity is the highest measure of the promotion of the human being. Woman has always responded to trust with faithfulness.

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