

The Dignity of Woman and Domestic Labor

Following are excerpts from the text of Pope John Paul's address to more than 5,000 members of API-COLF (Italian Professional Association of Family Collaborators) on the occasion of their tenth national congress.

Beloved Sisters in the Lord!

It is particularly moving to meditate on the attitude of Jesus to women. He showed himself to be bold and surprising for those times in which woman was considered in paganism an object of pleasure, of possession and of labor, and was subordinated and humiliated in Judaism.



Jesus always showed the greatest esteem and the greatest respect for women, for every woman, and in particular he was sensitive to female suffering. Going beyond the religious and social barriers of the time, Jesus re-established woman in her full dignity as a human person before God and before men. How could we fail to recall his meetings with Martha and Mary, with the Samaritan woman, with the widow of Naim, with the adulterous woman, with the woman who suffered from a hemorrhage, with the sinner at the house of Simon the Pharisee? A mere enumeration of them stirs our hearts. And how could we fail to recall, above all, that Jesus willed to associate some women with the twelve. They accompanied him and served him, and were comfort to him during the painful way to the Cross. And after the resurrection Jesus appeared to the holy women and to Mary Magdalen, bidding her announce his resurrection to the disciples.

Jesus, wishing to become incarnate and enter our human history, willed to have a Mother, Mary, and thus raised woman to the highest and most wonderful peak of dignity, the Mother of God Incarnate, Mary Immaculate, Our Lady of the Assumption, Queen of Heaven, and of Earth. Therefore, you Christian women, like Mary Magdalen and the other women of the Gospel, must proclaim, testify that Christ really rose again, that he is our only true consolation. So look after your interior life, reserving every day a little oasis of time to meditate and pray.

Secondly, I say to you, let your ideal be the dignity of woman and of her mission.

It is sad to see how woman has been so humiliated and ill-treated in the course of the centuries. Yet we must be convinced that the dignity of man, as of woman, is only found completely and exhaustively in Christ!

Speaking to Italian women in the immediate postwar period, my revered predecessor Pius XII said: "In their personal dignity as children of God, man and woman are absolutely equal, as also with regard to the ultimate purpose of human life, which is eternal union with God in the happiness of heaven. It is the eternal glory of the Church that she highlighted and honored this truth once more, freeing woman from a degrading slavery contrary to nature."

And going on to the particular, he added: "Woman has to contribute with man to the good of the 'civitas,' in which she is in dignity equal to him. Either sex must take the part that belongs to it according to its nature, characteristics, physical, intellectual and moral attitudes. Both have the right and the duty to cooperate for the total good of society."

"However it is clear that if man is by temperament more inclined to deal with exterior affairs, public activities, woman has, generally speaking, greater insight, finer tact to know and solve the delicate problems of domestic and family life, the basis of all social life — which does not prevent some women from showing great skill also in every field of public activity."

Such also was the teaching of the Second Vatican Council and the continual haunting Magisterium of Paul VI. This doctrine, so clear and well-balanced, gives the cue to confirm also the value and dignity of domestic work.

Certainly this work must be seen not as an implacable and inexorable imposition, a form of slavery, but as a free choice, responsible and willed, which completely fulfills woman in her personality and her requirements. Domestic work, in fact, is an essential part in the smooth running of society and has an enormous influence on the community.

It calls for continual and complete dedication and therefore is a daily ascetical exercise, which calls for patience, self-control, farsightedness, creativity, spirit of adaptation, courage in unexpected occurrences; and it also collaborates to produce income and wealth, prosperity and economic value.

This gives rise also to the dignity of your work as family collaborators: your commitment is not a

humiliation but a consecration. In fact, you collaborate directly in the smooth running of the family; and this is a great task, one would say almost a mission. It is a whole world, extremely important and precious, that opens up to your eyes and to your responsibilities every day. I praise, therefore, all women engaged in domestic activity, and you, family collaborators, who give your ability and your labor for the good of the home.

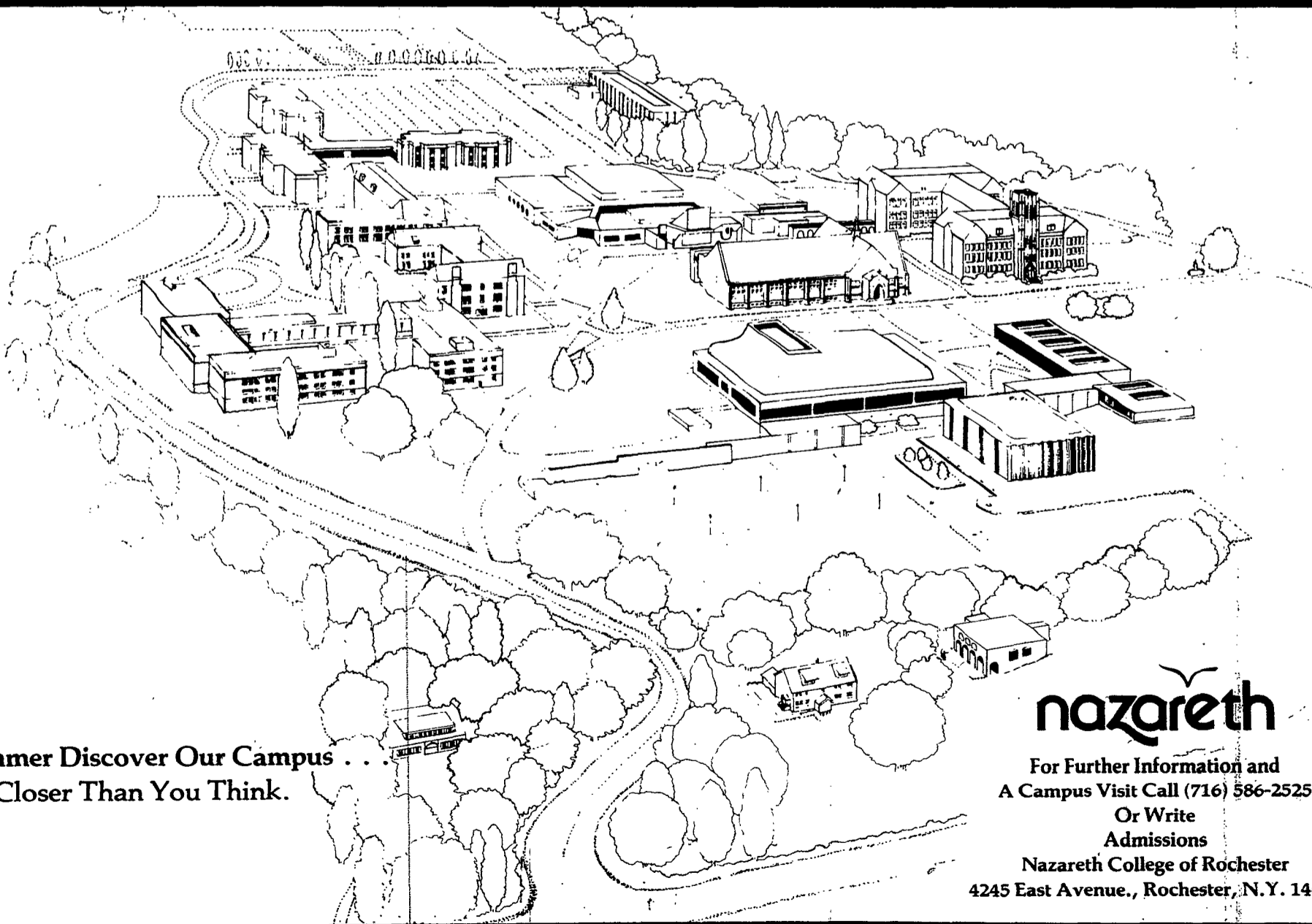
Finally I say to you, be sowers of goodness.

After so many years of just demands and of increased respect for the person, you have seen your rights recognized, standards fixed for remuneration, accommodation, care and assistance in illness, social security, weekly and annual rest, rightful allowances, certificates of work, etc.

Many things still remain to be done, many realities to be tackled; and you will study them at your congress, especially for the defense of the rights and personalities of collaborators coming from abroad. But I would like to urge you to work above all with love in the families in which you are engaged. We are living in difficult and complicated times. Grandiose phenomena, which cannot be eliminated, such as industrialization, urbanism, culturation, the internationalization of relations, social instability, intellectual affectation, have caused confusion in families; so you can bring with your presence, serenity, peace, hope, joy, comfort, encouragement to good, especially where there are elderly, sick, and suffering persons, handicapped children, young people who have been led astray or are confused. There is no law which lays it down that you must smile. But you can make a gift of your smile; you can be the leaven of kindness in the family. Remember what St. Paul wrote to the first Christians: "Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him;" and, "Whatever your task, work heartily, as serving the Lord and not men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward." Love your work. Love the persons with whom you collaborate. From love and goodness there will spring also your joy and your satisfaction.

May you be assisted by St. Zita, your heavenly patroness, who was sanctified by serving humbly and with loving and complete dedication.

May you be helped and comforted above all by Mary, who dedicated herself completely to care of the family, setting an example and teaching where true values are.



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