

Pope praises contributions of women to humanity

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — In a letter addressed to the women of the world, Pope John Paul II praised women's historic contributions as mothers, wives and social leaders, and said they need greater protection against persistent forms of violence and exploitation.

The letter, made public July 10, endorsed women's liberation as a substantially positive process that must go forward. At the same time, he said men and women rightly have a "diversity of roles" — in society and in the church — that reflect their complementary natures.

The all-male priesthood, for example, does not detract from the role of women and is not a sign of male domination, he said.

He condemned abortion as a grave sin, but stressed that responsibility for abortion can extend far beyond the woman involved.

The pope said his unprecedented letter was an attempt to speak "directly to the heart and mind of every woman" before the start of the United Nations' Fourth World Conference on Women, to be held in Beijing in September.

Vatican officials expect tough debate during the conference over issues of abortion, gender difference and women's role in the family. The papal letter, however, avoided controversy and took a strictly positive tone.

It included thanks for all that women have done, an apology for the church's failure to always recognize these contributions, and a condemnation of what the pope called the "long and degrading history" of sexual violence against women.

"The time has come to condemn vigorously the types of sexual violence which frequently have women for their object and to pass laws which effectively defend them from such violence," he said.

In a reference to prostitution and sex tourism, he blamed the "widespread he-

donistic and commercial culture" for encouraging systematic exploitation of sexuality and corrupting "even very young girls into letting their bodies be used for profit."

The pope then discussed rape and the questions it raises about abortion. He said the issue presents itself not only in cases of war but in permissive societies marked by "aggressive male behavior."

He praised "those women who, with a heroic love for the child they have conceived, proceed with a pregnancy resulting from the injustice of rape."

Even in cases of rape, he said, the

choice to have an abortion always remains a grave sin.

"But before being something to blame on the woman, it is a crime for which guilt needs to be attributed to men and to the complicity of the general social environment," he added.

The pope urged changes to make women's equality a reality in today's world, calling for equal pay for equal work, protection for working mothers, fairness in career advancement and equal family rights for men and women.

But in listing the obstacles to women's equality, he also said that "the gift of

motherhood is often penalized rather than rewarded."

"Certainly, much remains to be done to prevent discrimination against those who have chosen to be wives and mothers," he said.

The pope opened his letter with a series of "thank you's" — to women as mothers, wives, daughters and sisters, professionals in various fields and religious.

Their contributions in all these areas, he said, reflect the "genius of women." He elaborated on this term throughout the letter, attributing to women some specific gifts:

— An ability to "see persons with their hearts," independent of ideological or political systems.

— A willingness to give themselves generously to others, particularly in education and especially in serving the weakest and most defenseless. This in effect provides a "cultural and spiritual motherhood" for societies, he said.

— A natural "insight" that helps make human relations more honest and authentic.

"I know of course that simply saying thank you is not enough," the pope wrote, opening a brief analysis of how women's dignity has been unappreciated at times by the church and the rest of humanity. He said this was largely a product of historical conditioning.

In various times and places, he said, women have been unacknowledged, misrepresented, relegated to the margins of society and even reduced to servitude. He said assigning blame for this is not easy, considering how people's attitudes are shaped by their culture.

"If objective blame, especially in particular historical contexts, has belonged to not just a few members of the church, for this I am truly sorry," he wrote. These shortcomings do not reflect the church's teaching about women's equal dignity, he said.

The pope said it is time to examine the past and look at how women have influenced the history of humanity.



Reuters/RNS

Angry protesters

About 500 angry environmentalists marched to the French consulate in Hong Kong July 10, protesting French plans to resume underground nuclear testing in the Pacific.

Letter should help set agenda for conference in Beijing

By Nancy Frazier O'Brien
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — Pope John Paul II's new letter to women should help set the agenda of the upcoming Beijing conference to focus "more on what matters to the great majority of women, rather than on what matters to a few," according to the U.S. bishops' pro-life spokeswoman.

Helen Alvare, director of information and planning in the bishops' Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities, said the letter released July 10 "affirms women in a huge variety of roles" and would probably be welcomed by all but those who see motherhood as "nothing but enslavement."

The pope recognizes the error of those who "desire to reduce all questions about women to whether they have access to abortion," she said.

Pope John Paul said his unprecedented letter was an attempt to speak "directly to the heart and mind of every woman" before the start of the Fourth World Conference on Women, sponsored by the

United Nations and scheduled for Sept. 4-15 in Beijing.

The letter praised women's historic contributions as mothers, wives and social leaders and said they needed greater protection against persistent forms of violence and exploitation. It also apologized for times when the church has failed to recognize the contributions of women.

Rita Greenwald of Springfield, Ill., president of the National Council of Catholic Women, said the letter confirmed her long-held view that Pope John Paul is "especially sensitive to the very complex world in which women have to live today."

She said that her organization was pleased to see the pope emphasize many of the issues that the NCCW has made its own — such as equal pay for equal work, an issue raised by the group in the 1960s, and domestic violence, which the NCCW has been fighting as part of its "New Directions" program.

Greenwald said the NCCW also felt af-

firmed by the pope's use of the phrase, "the genius of women," which she said was the same idea used by the U.S. bishops when they founded the Catholic women's group 75 years ago to "help the government address the tremendous needs that faced the world after World War I."

Bishop John J. Snyder of St. Augustine, Fla., chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Women in Society and in the Church, said the papal letter expresses the pope's "deep appreciation and esteem for all that women have contributed to the world through the centuries" and could open "a much needed dialogue about a new feminism."

Pope John Paul's apology "for whatever role members of the church may have played in the oppression of women is an example to all of us of the kind of humility necessary if we are to grow into the full stature of Christ, mature men who can admit mistakes," he added.

Bishop Snyder said the pope shares with many U.S. women, Catholic or not,

such "legitimate concerns" as "equal pay for equal work, protection for working mothers, fairness in career advancement, recognition of spouses with regard to family rights, (and) recognition of the value of motherhood."

Cardinal William H. Keeler of Baltimore, president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, said the contents of the letter and its tone should not surprise anyone. But Pope John Paul's "position on women's issues has so often been misunderstood that many may indeed be surprised," he said.

The cardinal called the letter "very affirming, as have been other documents of the Holy Father on the dignity of women, of the initiatives of the NCCB in upholding the rights and dignity of women."

The new document summarizes "the broad range of issues on which the church and society have worked and still can work in harmony to assure the dignity of women and of each and every human being," Cardinal Keeler added.

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