I am delighted to welcome you this afternoon to this event that will shine a spotlight on women promoting human dignity and exalt the often-unheralded efforts and achievements of the multitudes of women who do.

Whenever we speak about human dignity, we are referring to the intrinsic worth of every person, no matter how young or old, rich or poor, strong or vulnerable, healthy or sick, wanted or undesired, economically productive or incapacitated, worldly influential or insignificant. Every human person has such an intrinsic worth that our only fitting response is love.

All of us are called to give that loving response — and over the course of the centuries so many men and women have distinguished themselves in doing so. But most people recognize that women excel in this field beyond their male counterparts. I believe that most of us would agree that women spot faster than men do the needs and situations of others and respond to them more rapidly. I hope that no male present here would challenge me on this!

St. John Paul II referred to this special brilliance of women in caring for the intrinsic dignity of everyone and for nurturing others' gifts as the “feminine genius.”

Today we are here to ponder that feminine genius, to celebrate it, to thank God for it, and to thank and praise women for it, especially our mothers and all those women who with it have nurtured us, raised us, educated us, loved us and... disciplined us!

Moreover, in response to various forms of human suffering and to material, emotional, spiritual necessities, people need more than polite and efficient bureaucrats fulfilling their duties. They need loving personal concern. They need remedies that reach the soul. And they need our solidarity.

More than and beyond justice, they need recognition and a greater appreciation of this genius is key to fighting violence against women.

I would like to focus specifically on the connection between the feminine genius and solidarity in caring for the vulnerable and in creating a better world.

The fundamental aim of governments is justice, and a just social order is one in which each person has his or her rights guaranteed and respected. But even in the most just society, some members of our human family fall into cracks, or have disabilities and other risk factors that even well-ordered and just societies may overlook or pay less attention to. More than and beyond justice, they need our solidarity.

Moreover, in response to various forms of human suffering and to material, emotional, spiritual necessities, people need more than polite and efficient bureaucrats fulfilling their duties. They need loving personal concern. They need remedies that reach the soul rather than just the sickness, physical hunger, financial difficulties or material needs. In short, they need people who care, who treat them with the love that accords with the fullness of their human dignity.

Pope Benedict XVI wrote in his Encyclical on charity (Deus Caritas Est) in 2006, "While professional competence is a primary, fundamental requirement, it is not of itself sufficient. We are dealing with human beings, and human beings always need something more than technically proper care. They need humanity. They need heartfelt concern.”

For that reason, all of us, but especially those who work in institutions with direct contact with people, need, he said, a “formation of the heart.” We need a “heart that sees”: a heart that sees specifically where love is needed and acts accordingly; a heart that recognizes the person so that we never treat just the problems of a client, or patient, or constituent, but rather a person with dignity.

In this formation or education of the heart, women are the world’s professors. “A heart that sees” is another way of defining the “feminine genius”.

For those who accept the inspiration of the Hebrew Bible, God himself expresses his love in feminine terms. Through Isaiah, God says, "Can a mother forget her infant or be without tenderness for the child of her womb? Even should she forget" — something that in the text God implies would be impossible — "I will never forget you" (Is 49:14-15). Later, God adds through the same Prophet, “As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you” (Is 66:13).

For those who accept Christian revelation, we see the flourishing of the feminine genius in the woman whom God the Father chose to be the mother of his Son. We see it in Mary’s going with haste to care for her pregnant elderly relative Elizabeth. We see it in her care for the young married couple who had run out of wine at the wedding feast in Cana. We see it in her courage at the foot of the Cross. We see it in her guidance of the apostles and members of the early Church as they awaited God’s help to take the Gospel to all nations. For us who venerate her as our Mother, her whole life is a beautiful hymn to the hearts that see and a constant invitation to love and care for others.

While history books sing the victories of valiant emperors and warriors — and the defeat and the follies of some, as well! - all of civilization and certainly the Church owes an unpayable debt of gratitude to the less chronicled or even unknown contributions of women that have shaped civilizations, like the silent but constant flow of deep waters that shape rivers. Our textbooks normally
obsess about the names at the top of political hierarchies and are preoccupied fundamentally with economic and military trends. But genuine human progress happens more fundamentally in the relations human beings have with one another and the way human beings care for one another. Such progress often doesn’t make journalists’ radar screens, but it is perhaps more consequential to human flourishing than scientific and technological inventions. Indeed, we have become super technological and super informed, but have we become better persons?

Louise de Marillac, Francis Xavier Cabrini, Elizabeth Anne Seton, Dorothy Day and Mother Teresa of Calcutta are only a small sample of those women across the centuries who have played starring roles in this drama of loving and caring for humanity.

And I can hear you asking me: add my mother and my grandma to that list, please! Yes, I will: mothers give everything they have out of love for their children. And Sister Norma would ask: how about us, women religious? Yes, we remember all women religious with profound gratitude, especially in this Year of Consecrated Life. In more ways than one, they are the face of the Church, and Sister Norma represents all of them here this afternoon.

I’m very happy to host this event featuring several women who are such examples of the feminine genius I have been talking about. They not only have hearts that see, but hearts and minds that respond with creativity and compassion to what they see.

I’m so grateful that Dr. Carolyn Woo, the President and CEO of Catholic Relief Services, has been able to join us. Catholic Relief Services provides assistance to over 130 million people in more than a hundred countries. I look forward to hearing Dr. Woo’s stories of development and humanitarian assistance from her experience on the front lines.

I’m so happy to introduce you two friends whose feminine genius impacted me during my more than six years as Apostolic Nuncio to their country of Haiti, and whose witness I hope will have a similar effect on you.

Her Excellency Professor Michèle Pierre-Louis is a former Haitian Prime Minister, former Resident Fellow of Harvard’s Institute of Politics, and is Founder and President of the Knowledge and Freedom Foundation, popularly known as FOKAL. In Haiti, FOKAL provides educational, human development and economic activities in local communities. Her Excellency will be speaking to us about the women in governance and civic leadership, something that is needed all the more in societies that have weak institutional capacities.

Mrs. Magalie Dresse is the owner of Caribbean Craft Haiti whose entrepreneurial creativity, care for her employees and business success have not only won her multiple awards, but justifiably garnered the attention of many world leaders, popular television hosts, top newspapers and many others who have been helping Haiti rebuild. She will be speaking to us today about her experience managing a handicraft industry that gives work to hundreds of poor but highly talented women artisans, and on how women in difficult socio-economic conditions can help one another in the fight to lift themselves out of extreme poverty and ignorance.

I am likewise honored to welcome Sister Norma Pimentel, a member of the Missionaries of Jesus, Executive Director of Catholic Lawyers of the Rio Grande Valley, and a leader in defending human dignity and providing humanitarian assistance to tens of thousands of migrants at the border between the United States and Mexico. She will be speaking to us about her work with undocumented migrants crossing the border, and particularly about the scourge of the trafficking of human persons, above all women and children.

Then, we have bonuses for you: in between our four Speakers, we will hear from three young women who have come to the United Nations to help us understand the feminine genius.

Finally, at the end of the conference of the last principal Speaker, we will watch a short video entitled "Women of the World," which demonstrates various aspects of the feminine genius.

Earlier this month, on the International Day of Women, Pope Francis said in St. Peter’s Square that women “give us the ability to see beyond… to understand the world through different eyes, to hear things with more creative, more patient, more tender hearts.”

Today, our Speakers will help us develop hearts that see: creative, patient and tender.

I thank all of you for coming.