Interventions: Statements of the Permanent Observer Mission of the Holy See to the United Nations

Remarks of H.E. Archbishop Bernardito Auza
Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations
at a Panel discussion:
The Family As Agent for Women's Equality and Human Rights:
Fulfilling the Promises of Beijing Defending Human Dignity in Reproductive Health

Excellencies, Colleagues, Distinguished Panelists, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great joy to join the co-Sponsors and organizers in welcoming all of you here this morning for this conference on the role of the family in promoting women's equality, dignity and rights.

These days, the United Nations premises in New York are welcoming thousands if not tens of thousands of mostly female members of delegations, of non-governmental organizations and guests, to discuss the status of women today. Within this context, it is fitting that we must talk also of the dignity of woman in the context of marriage, motherhood and family.

True respect for woman starts with accepting her according to all aspects of her humanity. It involves creating the conditions for her to live freely and fully. Pope John Paul II used the expression "feminine genius" to highlight woman's special wisdom in caring for the intrinsic dignity of everyone, in nurturing life and love and in developing others' gifts. When women are given the opportunity to thrive in full appreciation for all their talents and potential, the whole of society benefits.

We are thus called to foster that atmosphere in which men and boys – and women and girls themselves - can better appreciate the full greatness of woman, which includes not just the aspects she shares in common with man, but also the unique gifts that pertain to her as woman, like her capacity for motherhood understood not just as a reproductive act, but as a spiritual, educational, affective, nurturing and cultural way of life.

This work of fostering a wholesome atmosphere is ever more urgent, because we're living in a time when the unique value and dignity of motherhood in some societies is insufficiently defended, appreciated and advanced, leaving women culturally and legally in a position to choose between their intellectual and professional development and their personal growth as wives and mothers. Women's essential contributions to the development of society through their dedication to their family and to raising the next generation is inadequately acknowledged. Sometimes their invisible and often heroic service is even disparaged as an antiquated and unwholesome model of feminine life.

Such criticism does not come from a genuine appreciation of woman in her totality and her true equality, in complementarity and reciprocity, with man. A notion of womanhood that defines equality as "identity" in all things with man impoverishes all of humanity.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms that "motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance" and that the "family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State." A number of Conventions and Treaties, as well as non-binding documents, also enshrine this principle. When this "fundamental group unity of society" is ignored or attacked, we must stand and speak up for it candidly and with respect for all, and courageously advocate for better structures and policies that support working women who desire to have children or who want to dedicate themselves, partially or fully, to the care of their family.

Pope Francis is one of those speaking out. Last month, in a Vatican conference on "Feminine Cultures: Equality and Difference," among other themes he spoke about the importance of motherhood and praised especially those women who are working to renew institutions with their feminine genius. He exhorts all of us to direct "an intense gaze upon all mothers," and, I must add, to renew our personal devotion and gratitude to our own mothers.

Humanity owes its survival to the choice women make not just to welcome children, but raise them to be virtuous and authentically human: mothers give children the trust and security they need to develop their personal identity and positive social bonds. Could there be a greater bond among humans than that between the mother and child? Our future is already mirrored in how we, as individuals and as a society, support mothers to raise strong and healthy families. Studies indicate that behind cases of juvenile delinquency and children in distressed and distressing situations is often a weak or a broken family.

In this sphere, Pope Francis expressed appreciation for the contribution of so many women who work within the family, in the areas of teaching the faith, and in all areas of social, education and cultural development. He affirmed that "women know how to embody the tender face of God, his mercy, which is translated into a willingness to give time rather than to occupy space, to welcome rather than to exclude."

As Pope John Paul II stressed in his 1995 Letter to Women, we need "an effective and intelligent campaign for the promotion of women, concentrating on all areas of women's life and beginning with a universal recognition of the dignity of women." Women cannot flourish when they are the victims of prejudice and discrimination, in particular simply for the fact that they are women.
The twentieth anniversary of the Beijing Declaration is a propitious occasion for us to ponder all of these issues more deeply. I thank the co-sponsors and organizers of this event, and I thank you all for coming, so that together we might ponder and act, towards an ever fuller recognition and appreciation of the irreplaceable and enormous contributions women have to our past, to our present and to our future.

Thank you!