

# Papal Directives For the Woman of Today



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Allocution of Pope Pius XII to the Congress of the  
International Union of Catholic Women's Leagues,  
Rome, Italy, September 11, 1947.

**Y**OU have come before Us, dear women, bearing the proudly daring name, *International Union of Catholic Women's Leagues*. We are happy to welcome you as such and to give you a few words of encouragement and counsel. This name certainly speaks for the militant character of your coalition, its universality, the harmonious and solid suppleeness of your collaboration.

Catholic women and girls, formerly you would have thought only of worthily playing your sacred and fruitful role in the management of a wholesome, strong, and radiant home; or you would have consecrated your life to the service of God in the composure of the cloister or in apostolic and charitable works. Beautiful ideals, where woman, in her proper place, and from her proper place, exercises quietly a powerful influence. But now you appear abroad, you enter the arena to take part in the battle: you have not sought to do so, but courageously you accept your new duties; not as resigned victims nor merely in a defensive spirit; you are determined to pass to the counter-attack and conquer.

Such is the thought which emerges from the substantial documents, in which your programs of action are set forth, and in which are clearly drawn the lines of discussion of your present congress. This rich documentation reflects, as in a mirror, the actual situation—one must say, alas, the actual drama of woman's world. Towards the center converge all the rays of activity of woman in her social and political life, an activity of which the object is above all else, to protect the dignity of the daughter, of the wife, of the mother; to preserve the home, the family, the child in their primordial order; to safeguard the rights of the family, and make all efforts bear toward the safekeeping of the child under the guardianship of his parents.

We Ourselves discussed, two years ago, this important subject of the role of woman in social and political life. For an evolution in the entire social order, and more particularly in a domain as many-sided and important as that of the role of woman, two years is a very short time and would seem insufficient, to bring about appreciable changes in the situation itself or in public opinion concerning it. And yet, witness the facts. We had pointed out the menacing dangers, and We then referred especially to what might be called the secularization, the materialization, the enslavement of woman, all the attacks directed against her dignity and rights as a person and as a

Christian. The dangers have become greater day by day, and the menace day by day more pressing. But on the other hand, God be praised, the efforts for defense, far from weakening, have been more and more intensified. Your meeting in Rome, your presence here before Us, are a solemn warrant both of the seriousness of those efforts and of their efficacy for this defense.

Strengthened by the experience of the past years, and going over the principal points of your program, We readily seize this opportunity to complete what We said then to the Catholic women of Italy. The years of World War II and the post-war years have presented and continue to present to woman, in entire groups of nations, in practically all parts of the world, a tragic picture without precedent. Never, We believe, never in the course of the history of humanity, have events required on the part of woman so much initiative and daring, so much sense of responsibility, so much fidelity, moral strength, spirit of sacrifice and endurance of all kinds of sufferings—in a word, so much heroism. The relations, the letters in which women reveal to Us what has been and still is, in these cruel times, their own fate and the fate of their family, are so impressing that one questions whether this be a nightmare, and asks oneself how such things can have happened in our time and in the world in which we live. In the course of these awful years, women, old and young, have been forced to practice more than manly virtues, and to practice them to a degree required of men only in extraordinary circumstances.

Now, who will pretend that all that is humanly possible has been done to enable woman to draw from the Christian faith, from Christian education, the energy, the patience, the perseverance, the supernatural help needed to keep without faltering under continual trials, conjugal fidelity, and a maternal solicitude? On the part of the Church, of the pastoral ministry, of charitable institutions much has been done, much has been accomplished. Despite a few individual failures, we can face with confidence the always severe judgment of history. Moreover, thousands of deeds have movingly shown and continue to show even in the midst of want, the boundless love of mothers and fathers for their children.

But here is the great tragedy: without the faith, without Christian education, deprived of the help of the Church, where can bewildered woman find the courage to face unflinching moral demands surpassing purely human strength? And that under blasting assaults against the Christian foundations of marriage, of the family, of all personal and social life, by enemies who know how to exploit in poor women and young girls the anguish and destitution which are theirs. Who could hope to see them always hold fast through their mere natural strength? Alas! how many have fallen! Only God knows the number of these poor waifs, left to their despair after the loss of their purity, their honor.

It is a sorrow and a shame to have to mention and confess that even among Catholics, false doctrines on the dignity of woman, on marriage, and the family, on conjugal fidelity and divorce, even on life and death, have stealthily infiltrated souls, and like gnawing worms have attacked the roots of the Christian family and of the Christian ideals of womanhood.

It seems opportune to Us to point out here, because their inoffensive and specious appearance hide their fatal consequences, the perils of the heart to which in our day, woman is particularly exposed. We are thinking of that generous tendency that makes us sympathize with others, and share in their sorrows, their joys and their hopes. So said St. Paul: "Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I am not inflamed?" (2 Cor. 11: 29). And how he advises us to have the feelings which filled Christ! (Phil. 2:5).

What does a heart so filled have to fear? Subtle illusions. It is not enough to be good, tender, generous; one must also be wise and strong. The indulgent weakness of parents blinds them, to the detriment of their children. In the social order, a similar sentimentality blinds the mind and leads it to hold monstrous theories and to extol immoral and fatal practices. Is it not such false pity which claims to justify euthanasia and to remove from man purifying and meritorious suffering, not by a charitable and praiseworthy help but by death, as if one were dealing with an irrational animal without immortality? Is it not again this misleading sentimentality which offers divorce as a remedy to unhappy wives? Is it not that deviation from a just solicitude for the victims of social injustice which, with vain and declamatory promises, snatches them from the maternal arms of the Church to throw them into the claws of an atheistic materialism, vulgar exploiter of their poverty.

From all parts of the world, the letters and visits of Our Episcopal Brethren bring Us from day to day heartrending confidences of their concern for the moral and spiritual distress of married and unmarried women. And, while each one in turn opens his heart to Us, the burden of all weighs upon Ours which carries before God the responsibility of the Supreme Shepherd *solicitude omnium ecclesiarum* (2 Cor. 11:28). That is why on many occasions, in Our messages during all these years, and recently again on the second of June in Our allocution to the Sacred College, We have warned, prayed and entreated all Christians, all upright souls, and in particular all those in public affairs, to give attention to the devastating work done during the war and after the war, toward the ruin of woman and of the family. At this moment, We experience much consolation and relief in expressing to you, dear women, gathered here from the whole Catholic world, Our concern and Our appeal, knowing well with what spirit of faith

and charity you listen and with what glowing zeal you will everywhere make it known.

Witnesses of such a grave crisis, We cannot be content with lamenting it or forming sterile wishes. What must be done is to unite and to direct the living zeal of all toward the saving of the education of women and of the Christian family. That is the object of your congress, here in Rome, at the very center of Christendom. You have wished to receive from Us some directions for the practical and efficacious carrying out of your resolutions. We shall express them and group them as follows:

### I. A Lively and Supernatural Faith

First of all, a faith proud, alert, fearless, firm and alive to truth, to the triumph of Catholic doctrine. The intellectual and political forces more or less impregnated with atheism are set to destroy Christian civilization. Facing them, we perceive the many for whom the specifically religious foundations of that Christian civilization are out of date and henceforth without objective value, but who would nevertheless preserve something of their prestige to safeguard a civic order which cannot survive without them. Lifeless or paralyzed bodies, they cannot block the subversive forces of atheism!

But you, you are completely otherwise! Surely the battle will be hard, especially the battle for the rights of the family, the dignity of woman, the child, and the school. But you have nature on your side, and consequently those of right mind and good sense, who are after all the majority—you have, above all, God. Bear witness then to the thought of St. Paul: Your faith has made of you heroes in the fight (Hebr. 11:33 ff).

We call firm faith: an absolute faith, without reservations or reticence, a faith which does not falter before the ultimate consequences of truth, which does not draw back from its most rigorous applications. Do not let yourselves be deceived, like so many others, after thousands of disastrous experiences, with the empty hope of winning over the adversary by walking in his wake and taking him as your model.

Your young generation expresses, in its charter<sup>1</sup> the hope of "rallying to your principles all the young women of the world who accept as a foundation the natural law which has its source in God, and even more surely, all those who, being Christian, believe in Christ the Redeemer." We applaud your spirit, your youthful optimism, and approve your intention. But take care: the great secret of winning others is, above all, to give them evidence that for a Catholic, her faith is a solid and living reality.

Furthermore, a firm and living faith is one which, day by day, is expressed in acts of humility, prayer, and sacrifice. Precisely because you in-

<sup>1</sup> Charter, Youth Section, I.U.C.W.L.

tend to battle the anti-Christian forces which are "totalitarian," the first condition is to oppose them by carrying out in your life the law of God, spontaneously, joyously, and fully accepted. To take this law lightly, would be a confession of a deplorable frivolity and a fatal instability. Do not forget it:—We now address those who because of their age and social environment are more especially exposed to these dangers—no matter how well intentioned you may be, you share like others the weakness of a fallen nature. Satan does not accept defeat: as in Eden, he continues to cajole woman to her downfall, playing upon her nature to seduce her. You know the world of today well enough, dear daughters, to realize that you yourselves who live in it, need strength and courage at each step, to triumph over the temptations and seductions of your own tendencies by an energetic "No!" But how can you say this "no" and repeat it tirelessly, unless you understand and humbly recognize, in the presence of God, that as human creatures you are powerless and need the grace of God. Now you cannot expect to obtain this grace without prayer and sacrifice.

You who so praiseworthy wish to lead an apostolic life, each according to her individual situation, know well enough the world of today to realize that in your battle against unbelief and immorality, natural resources and all purely human means are radically insufficient. What you absolutely need is an intimate union with Christ, and that intimate union absolutely presupposes prayer and sacrifice.

Every step you have taken here in Rome must have left a profound impression on your minds and in your hearts, recalling to you the lives of the early Christians. Those Christians were men and women who understood what is meant by sacrifice; otherwise they could not have won over hatred, irreligion, and lust, the splendid triumphs the telling of which fills you with admiration, as it fills with amazement even the unbeliever. Are conditions today so different? As has been well said: to live today in our great cities without loss of faith and purity requires no less heroism than was needed in the days of bloody persecution.

## II. No False Spirituality

If We mention this subject it is not that We believe that you personally need to be put on your guard. We can have, thank God, full confidence in you on that score.

But under the pretense of saving the Church from the risk of being led astray in the "temporal" sphere, a slogan launched some ten years ago, continues to gain acceptance: return to the purely "spiritual." And by that is understood that the Church should confine her activities to a purely dogmatic teaching, to the offering of the Holy Sacrifice, the administration of the sacraments, and that all incursion into, or even the right of examination

in the domain of public life, all intervention in the civil or social order, should be denied her. As if dogma did not have a bearing upon every aspect of human life, as if the mysteries of the faith with their supernatural wealth, were not to maintain and invigorate the lives of individuals and, as a logical consequence, to harmonize public life with the law of God, to impregnate it with the spirit of Christ! Such vivisection is nothing short of being anti-Catholic.

The slogan should be the very opposite: be present everywhere for the faith, for Christ, in every way and to the utmost possible limit, wherever vital interests are at stake, wherever laws bearing on the worship of God, marriage, the family, the school, the social order are proposed and discussed. Be there, on guard and in action, whenever through education the soul of a people is being forged. Unfortunately, too often in such crises Catholic organizations are conspicuous only by their absence. Consequently, there is a heavy responsibility on everyone, man or woman, who has the right to vote, especially when the interests of religion are at stake; abstention in this case is in itself, it should be thoroughly understood, a grave and a fatal sin of omission. On the contrary, to exercise, and exercise well, one's right to vote is to work effectively for the true good of the people, as loyal defenders of the cause of God and of the Church.

### III. Fidelity in Social Activity to the Social Program of the Church

Many times recently We have emphasized this recommendation because, even among Catholics, there have been tendencies to identify the doctrine of the Church with theories irreconcilable with Christian thought.

In drawing exactly the line of demarcation between Christian thought and such theories, the Church always has in mind the good of all the people, the genuine common good. When questions of just social demands arise, she is always in the vanguard of their promotion. This is especially true for those which you, dear daughters, set forth expressly in your program: a more equitable distribution of wealth has always been and will always remain a chief objective of Catholic social doctrine. We can say as much for "equality of salary, for men and women, provided there be equal work and output." The Church has long made that demand her own.

### IV. The Place and Role of Woman in Political Life

There remains to be considered the domain of political life. In many circumstances, We have already touched upon it. This domain has several distinct aspects: the safeguard and care of the sacred interests of woman, by means of legislation and administration that respects her rights, dignity, and social function—the participation of some women in political life for the good, the welfare, and the progress of all.

Your own role is, in general, to work toward making woman always more conscious of her sacred rights, of her duties, and of her power to help mold public opinion, through her daily contacts, and to influence legislation and administration by the proper use of her prerogatives as citizen. Such is your common role. It does not mean that you are all to have political careers as members of public assemblies. Most of you must continue to give the greater part of your time and of your loving attention to the care of your homes and families. We must not forget that the making of a home in which all feel at ease and happy, and the bringing up of children are very special contributions to the common welfare. So we rejoice in the fact, which you yourselves rightly recorded, that among rural families, which are still such a large part of society, woman's work in the home still goes hand in hand with her contribution to the social and national economy.

Those among you who have more leisure and are suitably prepared, will take up the burden of public life and be, as it were, your delegated representatives. Give them your confidence, understand their difficulties, the hard work and sacrifices their devotion entails; give them your help and support.

Little need be added, in closing, to emphasize what We first noted: the universality, the harmonious and solid suppleness of your collaboration. It is universal, without distinction of nationality, class, or condition. It is supple and harmonious because it is made up of works, organizations, and institutions which, though varied, individually keep their character, their specific activities, their integrity, and their proper sphere of action, without absorption, domination or subjection, but all united in a federation freely accepted for common action. Nothing could be more in keeping with Our intentions.

And this special contribution of each to the common purpose, is further extended, made more cohesive and effective through your *Bureau of Information*, a happy undertaking requiring no doubt much work from those in charge but unquestionably most fruitful.

Three days ago, We celebrated the Nativity of Her whose coming brought to the whole world the dawn of joy. Tomorrow We shall celebrate Her glorious Name and the memory of the victories won in that Name over the enemies of Christendom. May Mary *Auxilium Christianorum* be your strength in the battle for the restoration of a healthy and prosperous society, for the triumph of God and of the Church. We invoke Her with all Our heart in your behalf.

We give to you all, and to all who are united with you, to your works and institutions, as well as to your families, and to all who are dear to you, Our Apostolic Blessing.

**NATIONAL CATHOLIC WELFARE CONFERENCE**  
1312 MASSACHUSETTS AVENUE, N. W.  
WASHINGTON 5, D. C.