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Pope wants 'capillary and incisive' role for women in church

John L. Allen Jr. | Jan. 25, 2014 The Francis Chronicles
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In an address Saturday to an Italian women's group, Pope Francis once again expressed a "vivid hope" that women will play a "more capillary and incisive" role in the Catholic church as well as in all the venues in which "the most important decisions are adopted."

Francis made the comment in an address to the Centro Italiano Femminile, originally founded in 1944 to promote the involvement of women in Italy's post-World War II reconstruction and inspired by the Christian tradition.

Though reaffirming the ban on female priests, Francis has voiced a desire for a greater role for women in the church on a number of occasions, including his airborne press conference in July while returning from Brazil and in his apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*.

Francis did not offer any new specifics Saturday in terms of what those roles might look like, but the repetition of the point arguably suggests that it's a papal priority.

"I'm happy to see many women sharing certain pastoral responsibilities in accompanying persons, families and groups, and in theological reflection," Francis said, "and I've voiced hope that spaces for a feminine presence that's more capillary and incisive in the church will be enlarged."

The following is the full text of the pope's address, in a rush *NCR* translation from the Italian.

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I thank the Lord with you for all the good that the Centro Italiano Femminile has carried out during its almost 70 years of life, for the works that it's performed in the area of human formation and promotion, and for the witness that it's given regarding the role of the woman in society and in the ecclesial community. In fact, in the arc of these decades, alongside other cultural and social transformations, the identity and role of the woman, in the family, in society and in the church, have seen notable mutations, and in general the participation and responsibility of women has grown.

In this process, the discernment of the Magisterium of the popes has been, and is, important. In a special way the Apostolic Letter of Blessed John Paul II *Mulieris Dignitatem* from 1988 should be mentioned, on the dignity and vocation of the woman, a document which, in line with the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, recognized the moral force of the woman and her spiritual force (see n. 30); and we also remember the Message for the World Day of Peace in 1995 on the theme "The Woman: Educator of Peace."

I, too, have recalled the indispensable role of the woman in society, in particular with her sensitivity and intuition for the other, the weak and the defenseless. I'm happy to see many women sharing certain pastoral responsibilities in accompanying persons, families and groups, and in theological reflection; and I've voiced

hope that the spaces for a feminine presence that's more capillary and incisive in the church will be enlarged (see the exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 103).

These new spaces and responsibilities that have opened, and I vividly hope they can be expanded even more to the presence and activity of women, both in the ecclesial ambit and in that of civil society and the professions, cannot make us forget the irreplaceable role of the woman in the family. The gifts of delicacy, of a special sensibility and tenderness, which are a richness of the feminine spirit, represent only a genuine force for the life of the family, for the irradiation of a clime of serenity and harmony, but a reality without which the human vocation would be unrealizable.

If in the world of work and in the public sphere it's important to have a more incisive role for the feminine genius, that role also remains essential in the ambit of the family, which for us Christians is not simply a private place, but the "domestic church" whose health and prosperity are a prerequisite for the health and prosperity of the church and of society itself. The presence of the women in the domestic ambit thus shows itself to be more necessary than ever, for the transmission solid moral principles to future generations and for the transmission of the faith itself.

At this point it's natural to ask: How is it possible to grow the effective presence [of women] in so many ambits of public life, in the world of work and in the venues where the most important decisions are adopted, and at the same time maintain a presence and a preferential attention, which is extremely special, in and for the family? This is an area where discernment, as well as reflection on the reality of the woman in society, presupposes assiduous and persistent prayer.

It's in dialogue with God, illuminated by his Word and irrigated by the grace of the Sacraments, that the Christian woman always seeks anew to respond to the call of the Lord, in the concrete context of her personal situation. This prayer is always sustained by the maternal presence of Mary. She who took care of her divine Son, who gained the favor of his first miracle at the wedding in Cana, who was present on Calvary and at Pentecost, shows the way to walk in order to deepen the meaning and the role of the woman in society and for being fully faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ and to your mission in the world.

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