

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY
OF THE HOLY FATHER BENEDICT XVI
TO CAMEROON AND ANGOLA
(MARCH 17-23, 2009)

**MEETING WITH CATHOLIC MOVEMENTS
FOR THE PROMOTION OF WOMEN**

ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER BENEDICT XVI

Parish of Saint Anthony in Luanda
Sunday, 22 March 2009

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

“They have no more wine,” said Mary, begging Jesus to intervene so that the wedding-feast could continue, as was only right and fitting: “As long as the wedding guests have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast” (*Mk 2:19*). The Mother of Jesus turns to the servants and implores them: “Do whatever he tells you” (cf. *Jn 2:1-5*). Her maternal mediation thus made possible the “good wine”, prefiguring a new covenant between divine omnipotence and the poor but receptive human heart. This, in fact, had already happened in the past when – as we heard in the first reading – “all the people answered together and said: ‘all that the Lord has spoken, we will do’” (*Ex 19:8*).

These same words well up in the hearts of all gathered here today in Saint Anthony’s Church: a building which we owe to the commendable missionary efforts of the Capuchin Friars Minor, who wanted to provide a new Tent for the Ark of the Covenant, the sign of God’s presence among his pilgrim people. To them, to those who work alongside them, and to all who benefit from their spiritual and social assistance, the Pope imparts his blessing with warm words of encouragement. I greet with affection all those present: Bishops, priests, religious men and women, and particularly the lay faithful who consciously embrace the duties of Christian commitment and witness that flow from the Sacrament of Baptism and also – in the case of spouses – from the Sacrament of Marriage. Moreover, given the main purpose of our gathering today, I extend greetings of great affection and hope to all women, to whom God has entrusted the wellsprings of life: I invite you to live and to put your trust in life, because the living God has put his trust in you! With gratitude in my heart I also greet the leaders and facilitators of ecclesial movements that have made the promotion of Angolan women a priority. I thank Archbishop José de Queirós Alves and your representatives for their kind words and for drawing attention to the aspirations and hopes of so many of the silent heroines among the women of this beloved nation.

I call everyone to an effective awareness of the adverse conditions to which many women have been – and continue to be – subjected, paying particular attention to ways in which the behaviour and attitudes of men, who at times show a lack of sensitivity and responsibility, may be to blame. This forms no part of God’s plan. In the Scripture

reading, we heard that the entire people cried out together: “all that the Lord has spoken, we will do!” Sacred Scripture tells us that the divine Creator, looking upon all he had made, saw that something was missing: everything would have been fine if man had not been alone! How could one man by himself constitute the image and likeness of God who is one and three, God who is communion? “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him” (*Gen 2:18*). God went to work again, fashioning for the man the helper he still lacked, and endowing this helper in a privileged way by incorporating the order of love, which had seemed under-represented in creation.

As you know, my dear friends, this order of love belongs to the intimate life of God himself, the Trinitarian life, the Holy Spirit being the personal *hypostasis* of love. As my predecessor [Pope John Paul II](#) once wrote, “in God’s eternal plan, woman is the one in whom the order of love in the created world of persons takes first root” ([Mulieris Dignitatem](#), 29). In fact, gazing upon the captivating charm that radiates from woman due to the inner grace God has given her, the heart of man is enlightened and he sees himself reflected in her: “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (*Gen 2:23*). Woman is another “I” who shares in the same human nature. We must therefore recognize, affirm and defend the equal dignity of man and woman: they are both persons, utterly unique among all the living beings found in the world.

Man and woman are both called to live in profound communion through a reciprocal recognition of one another and the mutual gift of themselves, working together for the common good through the complementary aspects of masculinity and femininity. Who today can fail to recognize the need to make more room for the “reasons of the heart”? In a world like ours, dominated by technology, we feel the need for this feminine complementarity, so that the human race can live in the world without completely losing its humanity. Think of all the places afflicted by great poverty or devastated by war, and of all the tragic situations resulting from migrations, forced or otherwise. It is almost always women who manage to preserve human dignity, to defend the family and to protect cultural and religious values.

Dear brothers and sisters, history records almost exclusively the accomplishments of men, when in fact much of it is due to the determined, unrelenting and charitable action of women. Of all the many extraordinary women, allow me to mention two in particular: Teresa Gomes and Maria Bonino. The first, an Angolan, died in 2004 in the city of Sumbe after a happily married life in which she gave birth to seven children; she was a woman of unswerving Christian faith and exemplary apostolic zeal. This was particularly evident during the years 1975 and 1976 when fierce ideological and political propaganda invaded the parish of Our Lady of Grace of Porto Amboim, almost forcing the doors of the church to close. Teresa then became the leader of the faithful who refused to bend under pressure. Teresa offered support, courageously protecting the parish structures and trying every possible means to restore the celebration of Mass. Her love for the Church made her indefatigable in the work of evangelization, under the direction of the priests.

Maria Bonino was an Italian paediatrician who offered her expertise as a volunteer in several missions throughout this beloved African continent. She became the head of the paediatric ward in the provincial hospital at *Uije* during the last two years of her life. Caring for the daily needs of thousands of children who were patients there, Maria paid the ultimate price for her service by sacrificing her life during the terrible epidemic of

Marburg Haemorrhagic Fever, to which she herself succumbed. She was transferred to Luanda for treatment, but she died and was laid to rest here on 24 March 2005 – the day after tomorrow is her fourth anniversary. Church and society have been – and continue to be – enormously enriched by the presence and virtues of women, and in a particular way by consecrated religious who, relying on the Lord’s grace, have placed themselves at the service of others.

Dear Angolans, since the dignity of women is equal to that of men, no one today should doubt that women have “a full right to become actively involved in all areas of public life, and this right must be affirmed and guaranteed, also, where necessary, through appropriate legislation. This acknowledgment of the public role of women should not however detract from their unique role within the family. Here their contribution to the welfare and progress of society, even if its importance is not sufficiently appreciated, is truly incalculable” (*Message for the 1995 World Day of Peace*, 9). Moreover, a woman’s personal sense of dignity is not primarily the result of juridically defined rights, but rather the direct consequence of the material and spiritual care she receives in the bosom of the family. The presence of a mother within the family is so important for the stability and growth of this fundamental cell of society, that it should be recognized, commended and supported in every possible way. For the same reason, society must hold husbands and fathers accountable for their responsibilities towards their families.

Dear families, you have undoubtedly noticed that no human couple, alone and on its own strength, can adequately offer children love and a genuine understanding of life. In fact, in order to say to someone, “your life is good even though you don’t know what the future will bring”, there needs to be a higher and more trustworthy authority than parents alone can offer. Christians know that this higher authority has been given to the larger family which God, through his Son Jesus Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit, has established within human history, namely the Church. We find at work here the eternal and indestructible love which guarantees to each of us that our life will always have meaning, even if we do not know what the future will bring. For this reason, the building up of every Christian family takes place within the larger family, the Church, which sustains the domestic family and holds it close to her heart, giving it the assurance that it is protected, now and in the future, by the “yes” of the Creator.

“They have no more wine” – Mary says to Jesus. Dear women of Angola, accept Mary as your advocate with the Lord. This is precisely how we see her at the wedding-feast of Cana: a tender woman, full of motherly care and courage, a woman who recognizes the needs of others and, wanting to help, places those needs before the Lord. If we stay close to her, we can all – men and women alike – recover that sense of serenity and deep trust that makes us feel blessed by God and undaunted in our struggle for life. May Our Lady of Muxima be the guiding star of your lives. May she keep all of you united in the great family of God. Amen.