

**“Female Doctors of the Church and Patron Saints of Europe
in Dialogue with Today's World”**

Brief introduction

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Your Excellencies,

Dear Professors,

Dear participants following us here and from afar,

I am truly pleased to be here today, in this international academic assembly, to celebrate some important anniversaries for the universal Church: the recent 50th anniversary from the declaration as Doctors of the Church of Catherine of Siena and Teresa of Jesus (1970), who also celebrates the 400th anniversary from her canonization (12 March 1622), as well as the 25th anniversary of the declaration of Teresa of Lisieux (1997) and the 10th anniversary of Hildegard of Bingen (2012) as Doctors of the Church. With them, let us also recall the Co-patronesses of Europe: Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein), Bridget of Sweden and Catherine of Siena.

I would like to thank the Scientific Committee for the wonderful job done in coordinating the organization of these days and, in particular, the Rector of the Pontifical Urban University, Prof. Leonardo Sileo, who is hosting us, and the Rector of the Catholic University of Avila, Prof. Maria del Rosario Sáez. I would also like to especially thank all those who have generously contributed to the literacy and education projects for girls in Lebanon.

The purpose of our meeting is to gather the unending fruitful legacy of these extraordinary women of the Church, who, although they lived in very different eras, continue to *irrigate* the world with the gifts of the divine Spirit and, surprisingly, have so much to propose and reveal to the women and men of our time.

They are holy women who, through their intimate and profound love for Christ and their hard work in serving the Church and society, were able *to bind the earth to Heaven*. Still today these women shine and continue to fulfill the desire that St. Therese of Lisieux expressed to “spend my heaven doing good on earth”¹.

¹ Saint Therese of the Child Jesus, *Story of a Soul*, Preface to the first edition by Mother Marie de Gonzague, Prioress (<https://www.archives-carmel-lisieux.fr/english/carmel/index.php/story-of-a-soul-in-the-making-1897-1898/preface-to-the-first-edition-of-story-of-a-soul>)

Recalling the words of Pope John Paul II in 1999 in the apostolic letter for the proclamation of the Co-Patrons of Europe, the following expressions have special importance in today's world “the decision to choose this “feminine” model of holiness [...] to recognize ever more clearly the dignity and specific gifts of women”².

In fact, the Holy Father Pope Francis entrusts a considerable part of the conversion that the Church is called to make today to the contribution of women: by listening to the voice and heart of women, learning to think "with the categories of women", who are always also mothers. In other words, this is possible by adopting the logic of a way of thinking that is capable of "bringing to life" Christ and those Gospel values that can challenge the hard hearts of this historical era, so full of paradoxes and contradictions. This is what these Saints were capable of doing. Starting from a profound intimacy with Christ, through their writings, works and reforms, they were able to translate some of the fundamental demands of Christian life in an effective and fruitful way, activating a harmonious and diachronic dialogue in the Church and in the world with the people of every age.

So today, let us try to take a step together and try to learn "integrating the woman as the image of the Church into our thinking," as Pope Francis said on February 22, 2019. In this sense, proclaiming the figure of St. Teresa of Jesus, "first among women" as Doctor of the Church, is extraordinary³.

Why a doctorate? John Paul II explained: “when the Magisterium proclaims someone a doctor of the Church it intends to point out to all the faithful, [...] that the doctrine professed and proclaimed by a certain person can be a reference point, [...] because it sheds new light on the mysteries of the faith, [...] With the help of the Holy Spirit, understanding of the "*depositum fidei*" continually grows in the Church, to [...] contribute to this growth process, but also that "*profound understanding of spiritual things*" which is given through experience, with the wealth and diversity of gifts, to all those who let themselves be docilely led by God's Spirit (cf. *Dei Verbum*, n. 8). [...] God himself "speaks to us" in his saints. (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 50)”⁴.

² Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Letter issued Motu Proprio *Spes Aedificandi* proclaiming Saint Bridget of Sweden and Saint Catherine of Siena and Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross Co-Patronesses of Europe, 1 October 1999.

³ Paul VI, Apostolic Letter *Multiformis Sapientia Dei*, Saint Teresa of Jesus, virgin of Avila, is proclaimed Doctor of the Church, 27 September 1970: “So with the great desire that the holiness and doctrine of such a great woman may be of greater use to all, it seemed good to us that we can attribute to her the cult of doctor of the Church which until now has been attributed only to holy men”. So in “1967 [it was] proposed that the point on which it was undecided should be examined, whether the title and the cult of Doctor of the Church could be attributed not only to men but also to women who had contributed to the common good of the faithful for holiness and excellent doctrine.” On the originality of these women as the first Doctors of the Church, cf. Eva Carlota Rava, *A new way of being Doctors of the Church Teresa of Avila, Catherine of Siena, Thérèse of Lisieux*, in *Pontificium Consilium pro Laicis*, Woman and man the *humanum* in its entirety on the 20th anniversary of the Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988-2008), International Congress, Rome, 7-9 February 2008, LEV, 2009, pp. 199-227.

⁴ John Paul II, Homily. For the proclamation of Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face as a Doctor of the Church, 19 October 1997.

This is how the excellence of the teachings of these six women, by penetrating the mystery of Christ and the knowledge of the human soul, are revealed in the perennial authority of their doctrine, which “extends beyond the confines of the Catholic Church and reaches even those who do not believe”⁵.

Their holiness was expressed through historical circumstances and in "geographical" contexts that make them, especially in our day, decisive figures for the European continent, with their ability to establish powerful relationships and dialogue, capable of introducing into the world a completely original way of understanding and translating the mystery of Christ into reality.

In fact, Christianity continues to represent a central and qualifying element in European history, and in difficult times like the ones we are living, it constitutes an irreplaceable anchor to universal human values, such as respect for the dignity and life of every human being and justice, freedom and peace among peoples.

So then, how can we not quote Teresa Benedicta of the Cross who “built a kind of bridge between her Jewish roots and her commitment to Christ, taking part in the dialogue with contemporary philosophical thought with sound intuition, and in the end forcefully proclaiming by her martyrdom the ways of God and man” in the horrendous atrocity of the “Shoah”, embodying the deepest hopes of Europe⁶? And St. Bridget, who, in total obedience to the Spirit, played a crucial role in building the ecclesial communion of her time; and St. Catherine, who offered counsel to kings and popes, considering herself a "daughter of the Church" until the very end.

These were women from all walks of life and social backgrounds, to whom the Lord “granted to understand *“the breadth and the length, and height and the depth... knowing the love of Christ, which is beyond all knowledge”* (Eph 3:18)”⁷.

They were saints who put their feminine nature into action in the Church, as the ability to radically welcome and entrust themselves completely to others⁸; they were mothers, because they were able to and continue to give new life in Christ to the men and women of all times, and who at the same time were able to live their virginity as a sign of a style that belongs to every state of life: the supreme "form of love", that has

⁵ Paul VI, Apostolic Letter *Multiformis Sapientia Dei*, Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus, Virgin of Avila, is proclaimed Doctor of the Church, 27 September 1970.

⁶ John Paul II, Apostolic Letter Proclaiming Saint Bridget of Sweden Saint Catherine of Siena and Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross Co-patronesses of Europe, 1 October 1999.

⁷ Paul VI, Apostolic Letter *Multiformis Sapientia Dei*, Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus, Virgin of Avila, is proclaimed Doctor of the Church, 27 September 1970.

⁸ B. Forte, *Maria, la donna icona del Mistero*, Saggio di mariologia simbolico-narrativa, Paoline, Milan, 1989, p. 191: “No human act is more humanizing than the act for which man commits himself completely.” [Free translation]

no need to possess the other"⁹, a "sign of the integrity of the heart", said Maritain¹⁰, and "reflection of the fullness of Heaven"¹¹.

It is our hope that after these days the testimonies of these saints will possibly help us to shed light on the only original way in which the Lord calls each of us to holiness since "the Holy Spirit bestows holiness in abundance among God's holy and faithful people"¹², «each in his own way», says the Second Vatican Council¹³, "allotting his gifts to everyone according as He wills (1 *Cor* 12:11)", He distributes special graces [...] which contribute toward the renewal and building up of the Church»¹⁴. Therefore, in this sense Saint Thérèse of Lisieux's explanation is brilliant: "perfection consists in doing His will, in being that which He wants us to be...": therefore just as "the splendour of the rose" makes "the daisy of its simple charm" no less important, so "He has created the great saints, [...] but He has also created much lesser saints"¹⁵. Each according to the measure of faith that God has apportioned (cf. *Rm* 12:3).

Therefore, thank you to all of you who have accepted this challenge, seeking, through the life and teachings of these great women, the inspiration to address some of the fundamental themes of our time: the pursuit of "heavenly things"¹⁶, evangelization, care for creation, the common good, educating the youth, and unity and justice in Europe and throughout the world. In the current synodal journey that we have embarked upon, may the strength of these Mothers make us feel in a renewed manner as children and brothers loved by a heavenly Church that accompanies us.

Let us therefore entrust this meeting to them, so that it may shed light on the path and the concrete commitment of young people, especially women today, in order that they may know how to make the dialogue within the Church and with the world fruitful, in order to build a culture and an ethic of unity and peace.

⁹ *Amoris Laetitia*, n. 161.

¹⁰ J. Maritain, *Matrimonio, amore e amicizia*, Italian translation G. Galeazzi, Ancora, Milan, 1994.

¹¹ *Amoris Laetitia*, n.159.

¹² *Gaudete et Exsultate*, n. 6.

¹³ *Lumen Gentium*, n.11.

¹⁴ *Lumen Gentium*, n.12.

¹⁵ Therese of Lisieux, *The Autobiography of Saint Therese by Saint Therese of Lisieux*; translated by John Beevers, Chapter 1 (<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.ca/books/10749/the-autobiography-of-saint-therese-by-saint-therese-of-lisieux-translated-by-john-beevers/9780385029032/excerpt>)

¹⁶ Paul VI, Apostolic Letter *Multiformis Sapientia Dei*, Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus, Virgin of Avila, is proclaimed Doctor of the Church, 27 September 1970.