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Pope Francis, seated next to Cardinal Marc Ouellet, president of the Center for Research and Anthropology of Vocations and retired prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops, speaks at an international congress titled, "Man-Woman: Image of God. For an Anthropology of Vocations," in the Synod Hall at the Vatican March 1, 2024. (CNS/Vatican Media)

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The gifts of men and women are "fruitful" together, and to erase the difference between men and women "is to erase humanity," Pope Francis said.

"Today the worst danger is gender ideology, which erases differences," he said, underlining that he has asked for studies to be done "about this ugly ideology of our time, which erases differences and makes everything equal."

"To erase difference is to erase humanity. Man and woman, on the other hand, stand in fruitful 'tension'" with each other, he said March 1.

The pope made his remarks as he opened an international congress in the Vatican Synod Hall titled, "Man-Woman: Image of God. For an Anthropology of Vocations."

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The congress March 1-2 was sponsored by the Center for Research and Anthropology of Vocations, which was founded in 2020 by Cardinal Marc Ouellet, retired prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops, to promote and support research in the social sciences on vocations in society.

The pope greeted the attendees and told him that he would have an aide, Msgr. Filippo Ciampanelli, an official of the Vatican Secretariat of State, read his prepared text because "I still have a cold and I get worn out from reading" out loud after a while.

However, he continued speaking off-the-cuff, saying, "I would like to emphasize one thing: It is very important that we have this meeting, this meeting between men and women, because today the worst danger is gender ideology, which erases differences."

As he often has done in the past, the pope referenced the dystopian science fiction novel, "Lord of the World," written in 1907 by Msgr. Robert H. Benson, a former Anglican vicar, encouraging his audience to read it. He reiterated that he considers the novel to be "prophetic because it shows this trend of erasing all differences."

In his prepared remarks read aloud by the aide, the pope wrote that a basic truth needs to be rediscovered "in all its beauty: the life of the human being is vocation."

Every person needs to discover and express himself or herself "as called, as a calling, as a person who finds fulfillment in listening and responding, sharing his or her being and gifts with others for the common good," he wrote.

People today sometimes "forget or obscure this reality, with the risk of reducing the human being to his or her material needs or basic needs alone, as if he or she were an object without a conscience or will, simply pulled along by life like a gear in a machine," he wrote.

"Instead, men and women are created by God and are the image of the Creator; that is, they carry within themselves a desire for eternity and happiness that God himself has sown in their hearts and which they are called to realize through a specific vocation," he wrote. "We are called to happiness, to the fullness of life, to something great for which God has destined us."

"We are part of a plan of love, and we are invited to go outside of ourselves and realize it, for ourselves and for others," he wrote.

After the aide finished reading the prepared remarks, Francis told participants to "not be afraid during these rich moments in the life of the church."

"The Holy Spirit asks us for one important thing: fidelity. But fidelity is being on a journey, and fidelity often leads us to take risks," he said.

He urged them to keep pressing ahead "with the courage to discern and risk seeking God's will" and "without losing your sense of humor!"