

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

October 25, 2013 at 12:29pm

Defense of family must not justify women's oppression, speakers say

by Cindy Wooden by Catholic News Service

Vatican City — The Catholic church must defend the traditional family without perpetuating the subjugation of women or forcing them to bear the greatest burden for keeping the family going, said speakers at a Vatican conference.

Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia, president of the Pontifical Council for the Family, said a renewed approach to the pastoral care of the family must involve the participation of married men and women.

The council, which was holding its plenary assembly at the Vatican, sponsored a public conference Thursday about church teaching on the identity of the family. The conference also considered topics likely to be discussed at the extraordinary Synod of Bishops on the family Pope Francis has convoked for October 2014.

As the church deepens the theological foundation of its programs for the family, Paglia said, the church must also recognize modern social realities, "considering them as the point of departure."

"Trying to elaborate a new culture of the family is impossible without involving women," he said. "Women today will not accept anything they aren't part of formulating."

He also said women are central to the "culture of caring for others, a culture which must be considered the basis of every form of family tie."

"The problem of gender identity, of what it means to be a man or a woman, also must be taken into account in any discussion about the family," the archbishop said, warning that such discussions should avoid a "facile discourse about complementarity, which almost always ends up assigning the woman more

responsibility and work" within the family.

Paglia said the church must find "convincing responses and not just defensive criticisms" to the growing ideology of gender, which tries to paint differences between men and women as simple social constructs and not something based on human nature.

Lucetta Scaraffia, a professor of contemporary history and a frequent contributor to the Vatican newspaper, told the conference that the Vatican's 1983 "Charter of the Rights of the Family" insisted that the family is a natural institution and that spouses enjoy equal rights and dignity, with complementary roles.

Many feminists, she said, would argue that a "family" is not an automatic result of nature, but a social bond, which has changed with changing social situations. For many women, she said, the definition of "natural" has almost always been "used to justify and reinforce their oppression."

"The family has a natural basis that tied to procreation, but history -- or rather culture -- also has intervened and the Christian tradition has made essential contributions," she said. It was thanks to Christianity that the "celebration of matrimony required the consent of both spouses and that husband and wife enjoy the same rights and have the same obligations."

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But Scaraffia noted that "for centuries, the masculine authority of the father prevailed over the concrete realization of these norms without the church's opposition."

Denying a difference between the sexes and substituting "the neutral concept of gender is baseless and dangerous," she said, "but it is also true that underlining complementarity alone risks perpetuating the oppression of women."

Scaraffia said a healthier approach would emphasize how husbands and wives should share domestic chores, child rearing and responsibility for keeping ties strong with the extended family and the wider community.

"A partial overlapping of masculine and feminine roles could be just as positive for the family as complementarity," she said, "and would guarantee that the woman would not be constrained in roles considered inferior."

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