

Beijing Conference Ends But Debate Doesn't

The U.N.'s Fourth World Conference on Women ended without the virulent Catholic bashing that was evident at the 1994 Cairo Conference. Nonetheless, there was another attempt by Catholics for a Free Choice to unseat the Holy See from the U.N. And a press conference by pro-life groups was disrupted by lesbian activists.

It was expected that Catholics for a Free Choice would raise the question of the Holy See's status at the U.N., but it was surprising, as well as disconcerting, to learn that senior U.N. officials also addressed this issue. According to Marlene Gilletteln, a Catholic League member and attorney who works in Puerto Rico, an incident took place at a press conference that cast a shadow on the work of Jacques Lang, an advisor to the United Nations Secretary General Boutros Boutros Ghali.

Mr. Lang wondered aloud why the Vatican delegation was remaining for the UN conference's deliberations, considering that its status was that of an observer. Fortunately, Therese Gastaut, press coordinator for the UN conference, responded by saying that Switzerland, which has the same status as the Holy See, was also allowed to participate in the conference's proceedings. Following the advice of Marlene Gilletteln, who went to Beijing as part of the team from Human Life International, the Catholic League registered a protest with Secretary General Boutros Boutros Ghali over this incident.

The Holy See delegation, effectively led by Mary Ann Glendon, succeeded in stopping a challenge to the proposition that the family is the basic unit in society. Those who railed against the Vatican wanted to elevate alternative life styles such as cohabitation and homosexual liaisons to the status of the family.

The final document proclaimed something that most people all over the world would see as unexceptional: "The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and by the state." The fact that the Holy See's delegation had to join with the delegations from many non-European nations to ward off attacks on this position shows how ideologically driven the Western nations have become.

The Holy See also secured language that spoke to the positive effect of religion on women, notwithstanding the caveat that extremism in any form can have a deleterious effect. The cooperation between Catholics and Muslims on this issue should prove to have good, long-term consequences.