

AN OPEN LETTER TO THE PRESIDENT:

Dear President Clinton,

As Catholic citizens of a great nation dedicated to religious toleration, we have noted with dismay the recent allegation by a State Department official that the Vatican's disagreement with the U.S. over the Cairo conference "has to do with the fact that the conference is really calling for a new role for women, calling for girls' education and improving the status of women."

Ms. Faith Mitchell's charge that the Church's positions on population and development are motivated by anti-woman sentiments not only defames an institution that has led the world in providing "girls' education," but is deeply offensive to millions of individual Catholics, especially Catholic women. The record shows that the Holy See has consistently insisted on addressing women's concerns in connection with development issues—from placing women's education on the agenda of the 1981 U.N. Conference on Least Developed Countries to John Paul II's call just two weeks ago for "every legitimate initiative which promotes the genuine emancipation of women." Ms. Mitchell's bigoted accusation shows remarkable ignorance—of the Church's contributions in education; of its advocacy and ministry on behalf of poor women; and of the everyday experience of modern Catholic women who find themselves respected and supported by their Church as they assume new roles in society.

We have no objection to responsible criticism. The Cairo conference can only benefit from full and free debate on the difficult issues relating to population, development, and the status of women. But Ms. Mitchell's baseless and biased charge neither acknowledges nor engages the Church's positions on these issues.

Regrettably, this is not the first time officials in your administration have publicly displayed bigotry toward Catholics. Your own Ambassador to the Holy See, moreover, has recently expressed concern about the extent of anti-Catholicism among your appointees. Therefore, in our individual capacities, and as members of organizations representing hundreds of thousands of Catholic women, we urgently request you, Mr. President:

- (1) to direct Ms. Mitchell to retract and apologize for her statement, and
- (2) to recommit your administration to religious tolerance.

Sincerely yours,

Mary Ann Glendon

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