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Montreal Diocesan Convention, St. Ignatius Church Hall

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Thank you, Madam President, our Guest Speaker, Ladies and Sisters in Christ,

It's a little over a year since I was appointed Spiritual Advisor for the Montreal Archdiocesan Council. I carry you in prayer a lot, often reflecting on how I can better serve you, and reflecting on the Catholic Women's League and your place and vocation in the Church and in the world. One phrase that keeps coming back to me is that the CWL and its members are rooted in Christ by faith. I think of the women that Luke spoke about in his Gospel chapter 8. They were women disciples who accompanied the Lord, and they provided for Him and the other disciples out of their own means. I sometimes think that before the Gospels got written, the women, the ladies would have sent little messages to the disciples in other places who wanted to know what was going on; so when the evangelists did prepare the Gospels, they must have had lots of little scraps of parchment that would have had little bits and pieces of news that some of the women would have distributed around along with some of the men who could write.

In the Acts of the Apostles and in the letters of the Apostles in the New Testament, we read about a number of prominent women who were leaders in their community in their own right who also became leaders in the work of the Gospel and servants of the Lord and of the community. After the time of the Apostles there were many women who were prominent witnesses and among the martyrs who gave their lives for the Lord and for the Gospel. Even during the time of the desert fathers, there were women who went out into the desert and lived in solitude to ponder the Gospel and live lives of holiness. During the time of monasticism, women were not outdone by men, but created their own monasteries where women could pursue the Gospel and receive with hospitality every visitor as though they were Christ himself.

Later on was a time in Europe and other parts of the world where cities began to develop. There was urban development and development of the trades. There were many remarkable women at every level of society: some were rulers, queens or princesses, nobles; others were wives of merchants, others were celibate women. They distinguished themselves by their quest for holiness, their love of the Lord, their pondering of the Scripture, their prayer. They developed reputations for charity: caring for the sick, the poor, for orphans, for widows, or else they developed a reputation as peacemakers and were sought after to resolve disputes among families or other people in society. There were some who were even reformers of the Church, going to the Pope at Avignon and reminding him what his duty was, that he should be back in Rome – What was he doing in France? – like Catherine of Sienna.

In our own times some of these holy women have been declared doctors of the Church: Teresa of Avila, Therese of Lisieux, and others. Women have had their share of prophets as well and visionaries. So I've been thinking about all of that, and women in our own day, like Madam Vanier, Raissa Maritain, and Mother Teresa, and thinking about the CWL and all of you, acting as a leaven in the Church and in society. We sometimes don't have a sense of the effect we have, but if I can draw your attention to the movie "It's a Wonderful Life." What's true of George Bailey can also be true of you. He reached a breaking point in his life, seeing only the difficulties that he had, only the failures, and not realizing the impact, the positive impact, the life-giving impact he had on so many people. And so it's good to reflect on these things.

So, I think that what I'd like to do as your spiritual advisor is to continue this reflection from time to time, and to ask questions like: How can we make ourselves closer to women in the Church, throughout our Church, ordinary women out there, of all ages? How can we get closer to women in society; who are not necessarily in the Church? How can we come to know them, come to know what are their dreams, their hopes, their fears, their struggles, their sufferings? How can we defend, elevate, and restore womanhood to the full dignity that God intended as we struggle against the culture of death and try to continue to promote the culture of life? I believe that all that the CWL does in all of the spheres of activity do precisely all of those things, and so I commend you and want you to know that I will continue to pray for you; as all of our priests do. God bless you all.

Transcript of remarks from a few notes.

Fr. Gilles A. Surprenant, Archdiocesan Spiritual Advisor