Dear Bishops and Sisters,

I extend a warm welcome to this First South Asia Meeting on Women co-organized by the FABC Office of Laity and the Commission for Laity in the Bishops Conference of Sri Lanka, in this beautiful complex near the basilica of Our Lady of Sri Lanka.

From the very beginning of the history of the FABC, when Pope Paul VI invited the Bishops of Asia gathered in Manila in 1970 "To Discover the Asian Face of the Church", the concerns of Women in Asia have been among the foremost of our concerns.

The 4th Plenary Assembly of FABC in Tokyo in 1986 addressed the issue of women and acknowledged: “It is therefore, not just a human necessity but a Gospel imperative that the feminine half of the world’s population be recognized and their dignity restored, and that they be allowed to play their rightful role in the world and in the Church.” And “The Church cannot be a sign of the Kingdom and of the eschatological community if the gifts of the Spirit to women are not given due recognition, and if women do not share in the ‘freedom of the children of God.’” And concluded the paragraph on the Plight of Asian Women with the assertion “The Church could then speak powerfully about the plight of Asian women and become their voice, with an authority unlike any other.”

The Consultation on Women “Realities and Experiences of Women in Asia”, in November, 1993, at Petaling Jaya, Malaysia, recommended the setting up of a Women’s
Commission jointly in the OHD and Office of Laity and encouraged the National Bishop’s Conferences to do the same with one of the objectives being “to promote encounters and dialogue between women and men in the Church especially in decision-making”.

The 6\textsuperscript{th} Plenary Assembly of FABC in Manila in 1995 in its final statement reasserted “An urgent pastoral imperative is for women to exercise their right to coresponsibility and mutuality with men – in society and in the Church.”

The Women’s Desk was formed following the 6\textsuperscript{th} Plenary Assembly in Manila in 1995. Ms. Virginia Saldanha has been in charge of the Women’s Desk in the Office.

BILA I in 1995 and BILA II in 1998 brought together Bishops and women from countries in Asia to discuss and dialogue on the problems facing women. The Bishops listened to the cries of pain of women in Asia and responded with recommendations to the local churches in the final statements of both these meetings. Responding to the recommendations, some Bishops’ Conferences set up a Women’s Committee/Commission/Desk/Organization to address the problems of women as well as to empower them to take their rightful place in Church and Society. In many other countries the women await this decision to strengthen their efforts to liberate women in Asia from the ‘tragic realities of Asian women that cry out for transformation’

BILA on Women III was planned as a follow up of the recommendations of BILA I and II, where the area of Feminist Theology was given special mention, as it is seen as 'vital' for changing attitudes and promoting the
inclusion of women in decision-making and full partnership in the Mission of the Church. This decision was also encouraged by Ecclesia in Asia No.34 which suggests, "The Church in Asia would more visibly and effectively uphold women's dignity and freedom by encouraging their role in the Church's life, including her intellectual life, and by opening to them ever greater opportunities to be present and active in the Church's mission of love and service". The theme of this meeting "Women's God Experiences Rooted in Life" was inspired by the fact that Women's life is intrinsically connected with human and life and nature as well. We are well aware that God speaks to us through life, and therefore God speaks to women through her experiences of life. This meeting was dedicated to listening to the experiences of women, and together with the Bishops the delegates searched for ways to see how Women can be given "ever greater opportunities to be present and active in the Church's mission of love and service".

At BILA on Women III a decision was taken to meet at the regional level. The South Asian group met and decided on the theme "Role of Women in Church and Society", for this meeting. Thanks to the efficiency of Sr. Immaculate and the gracious hospitality of the Commission for Laity in the Bishops Conference in Sri Lanka, the first South Asian Meeting on Women was made possible beginning today.

During these days, I invite you to pray, reflect and plan how best women can be made aware of their important role in Church and Society in the context of our reality in South Asia. With the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the intercession of Mary, we hope to achieve to some extent the aims set out for this important meeting.

God Bless you!

1 FABC IV Plenary Assembly, Tokyo, Final Statement The Vocation and Mission of the Laity...# 3.3.3, 5 & 6,