



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO H.E. Mr JEAN GUÉGUINOU,
AMBASSADOR OF FRANCE TO THE HOLY SEE***

Saturday, 24 October 1998

Mr Ambassador,

1. It is a great pleasure for me to welcome Your Excellency as you present the Letters accrediting you as Ambassador of France to the Holy See. I appreciate the spirit in which you are beginning your mission, showing particular attention to the spiritual and diplomatic activity of the Apostolic See, and your concern to make a special contribution to the path offered by the Church for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000. Indeed, it is important that many pilgrims be welcomed to Rome, so that they can benefit from this Holy Year by having a deeper encounter with Christ, the source of life.

Your presence today joyfully reminds me of my two recent visits to your country; in particular I have touching memories of the last World Youth Day. By their warm welcome, your country's leaders and all your compatriots ensured the success of this gathering, which was exceptional for the number of participants and the human and spiritual quality of the meetings and celebrations. I am sure that the young people who came to France left for their own countries transformed by the Lord, ready to witness to the Good News they discovered during those especially intense days, and eager to continue living in the spirit of brotherhood and solidarity which enlivened all the meetings.

2. Mr Ambassador, you have emphasized the bonds of trust that exist between the Holy See and France by candidly recalling some important stages in the history of the last five centuries. Our current relations, the fruit of this long history, are marked by the principle of secularity. As I stated during my visit to the European Parliament on 11 October 1988, the principle, recalled by Christ, of

the distinction between “what is Caesar’s” and “what is God’s” (cf. Mt 22:21), fundamentally governs public life: “This essential distinction between the arranging of the external framework of the earthly city and the autonomy of the person becomes clear in light of the respective natures of the political community, to which all the citizens necessarily belong, and that of the religious community, to which believers freely adhere” (n. 9; *L’Osservatore Romano* English edition, 21 November 1988, p. 12). Secularity should be understood as the autonomy of civil society and of religious confessions each within its own domain, but at the same time as a recognition of the religious reality, of the ecclesial institution and of the Christian experience among the nation’s constituents and not merely as elements of private life. The very principle of secularity excludes neither people’s free adherence of faith, nor the acceptance of the religious dimension in the national heritage. Nor does the legitimate autonomy of earthly realities allow for disregard of the basic principles of personal and social life. Thus secularity leaves each institution the room it is due in its own sphere, in an honest dialogue for the sake of fruitful collaboration at the service of all humanity. A well understood separation between Church and State leads to respect for religious life and a proper consideration of the religious way and religious thought. Not only does it guarantee freedom to individuals and human groups, but it is also an appeal, so that what belongs to the Church can remain an object of reflection for everyone and be a positive contribution to society’s debates, in view of the advancement of people and respect for them, as well as consideration of the common good and human rights, which are objective elements that one can disregard in social decisions.

3. In the areas of philosophy, culture and art, the Christian religion has contributed and continues to contribute to civilization, particularly in a nation like yours where it is part of the centuries-old tradition. Humanism is a common ideal for all the French; it states that nothing is more beautiful nor greater than man, whose superiority lies in being a rational being who “has an absolute dignity, because it is in direct relationship with the absolute”, as one of your distinguished predecessors, Jacques Maritain, emphasized (*Les droits de l’homme et la loi naturelle*, p. 16). With regard to social life, Christian values, some of which were already present in the Greek and Latin world, belong to the common heritage. Through the reflections which it currently conducts, the cultural centre of your embassy presents this heritage in an eloquent way.

4. You are familiar, Your Excellency, with the Church’s concern for human life, especially for essential institutions such as the family, which can only exist when the natural principles and the good of society as a whole are respected, and which is an essential element of the nation. It is also necessary that those in positions of responsibility create conditions that conform to its specific nature and particular juridical status, and the necessary conditions for its stability, for strengthening the conjugal bond and for accepting the gift of life. Children are a country’s greatest wealth: therefore parents should be helped to fulfil their educational role by respecting their own responsibility and with the necessary subsidiarity, in this way strengthening the outstanding value of this service. This is a duty and a legitimate form of solidarity on the part of the entire national community.

5. In the area of education, I appreciate the reflection being conducted in your country on the issue of improving the school curriculum so that it will give young people a balanced education which respects their abilities and the progressive development of their personality, and will enable them to acquire learning and knowledge that will allow them to find their place in society. I am also aware of the efforts on the part of the numerous teachers, both in public and private schools, to provide the young people of France with the basics of a civic education and religious culture that are part of their heritage.

However, for parents who desire it, catechesis is something quite different. It consists essentially in introducing the child to the Christian mystery and to a relationship with God. Religious formation is an integral part of the human, spiritual and moral formation of young people to whom their parents desire to teach Christian values and to make Christ known. This requires that each family be given the support and positive means to fulfil their legitimate desire to give their children the catechetical instruction they need. In this regard, one can only hope that national leaders will continue to be vigilant about the place of religious instruction among the extracurricular activities offered to children and about the suitable time allotted to it. Therefore, I wholeheartedly call for the renewed attention of those in various positions of responsibility, that “all useful measures be taken to ensure that pupils in public schools enjoy freedom of worship and religious instruction”, in accordance with the law of 1959 and the circular of 24 April 1991, without penalizing children and families who choose catechetical formation.

6. You know the Church’s desire to contribute to the formation of the young in trustful collaboration with other institutions which have the same goal, and through dialogue with all the parties concerned. The Catholic community feels actively involved in this great national cause, since the school is one of the most important institutions for building society, by encouraging social peace and curbing the phenomena of violence. In this spirit I am familiar with the support the French authorities give to Catholic education, which hopes to continue offering an educational service to the nation by welcoming all young people whose families wish to entrust them to it, without distinction of origin, opinion or belief, but with a legitimate respect for the specific nature and vocation of its establishments. As their statutes clearly state, Catholic schools cannot in fact “renounce their freedom to offer the Christian message and make known the values of Christian education”. For this mission it is necessary that society does not allow excessively high fees to burden families who choose Catholic teaching. It is only right that a legitimate equality be maintained within the framework of national education, since disparities can only create harmful divisions in society, since the educational system plays an important community role of integration for all young people, one that is particularly necessary in underprivileged situations.

7. France has a tradition of social harmony, openness, assistance, respect and acceptance towards developing countries and towards displaced or forcibly exiled persons and families. I appreciate the willingness made by those responsible for public life to offer land to those who request it, while respecting the principles on which national unity is based. It is important that the

richest countries mobilize themselves to receive with discernment, humanity, concern and a spirit of solidarity, in view of sometimes tragic situations, those who come from other places and are obliged to seek food for themselves and their families, or refuge in a country other than their own; foreigners are first of all brothers and sisters, and no one can be excluded for racial or religious reasons. I hail the many associations in your country which help those who are often society's outcasts by attending to their essential needs.

8. As we are preparing to enter the third millennium, France, which is the seat of an important European authority, has a particular place in the construction of the great Europe where the nations which so wish can gradually join in building a common house, in order to create the conditions necessary for the development of all and to make the most of their particular riches. This new European society can only encourage peace and understanding among all peoples, while respecting their particular characteristics put at the service of all, so that the wars and divisions that have marked the 20th century will never happen again. Therefore, I can only share your hope that the French authorities, in close union with the other countries on the continent and the international community, will redouble their efforts to use all legitimate and peaceful means to find a lasting solution to the various conflicts you have mentioned, for every State must be concerned with the sufferings of those whose basic dignity is scorned and who are forced to wander. In these different centres of tension, the parties concerned must have an ardent desire and prophetic courage to seek solutions, or, even if each side is necessarily obliged to renounce his prerogatives, the common good is the element that should prevail over partisan considerations.

I implore the Lord that the approaching end of the millennium will encourage conversion of heart and revive the love for peace in all men and women. Everyone, whatever his race or origin, must be able to benefit from a land where he can live peacefully with those for whom he is responsible. The Holy See cannot but encourage patient and persistent steps towards the legitimate recognition of peoples and the strengthening of peace among nations. These are the priority objectives for the years to come, in Europe and on every continent. In the desire to maintain peace, I acknowledge the courageous attitude of France and other nations in their decisions concerning anti-personnel landmines, so that innocent beings will no longer be unjustly mutilated and that the earth will be able to nourish those who live on it.

9. At the end of our meeting, I would be grateful if you would kindly convey my best wishes to President Jacques Chirac, whom I had the joy of greeting here two years ago. In your country as in many others, people are confronted with serious economic and social crises, particularly unemployment, which affects entire families. In adversity it is important for every member of the national community to show an ever greater solidarity and charity by opening to respond to human distress. Thus I would like to say again to all your compatriots that I continue to be personally close to them and am particularly conscious of the difficulties of all who are affected by this crisis. Lastly, through you I would like to greet all the Catholics of France.

Mr Ambassador you have now taken your place in a long and prestigious tradition. Therefore, may I express once again my deep esteem and offer you my cordial wishes for the fulfilment of your mission. Be assured that you will always receive the attention and support you may need from those who assist me. I pray God that the people of France will meet the challenge lying before them: to enter the third millennium with a renewed awareness of their human and spiritual vocation by deepening their philosophical and Christian roots. I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing to you and to all who are called to assist you with your responsibilities.

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