



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO A GROUP OF BISHOPS FROM
THE FRENCH EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

*Consistory Hall
Saturday, 17 November 2012*

*Your Eminence,
Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,*

I thank you, Your Eminence, for your words. I cherish a very vivid memory of [my stay in Paris in 2008](#), which made possible some intense moments of faith and a meeting with the world of culture. In the [Message I addressed to you on the occasion of the gathering in Lourdes](#) that you organized last March I recalled that “the [Second Vatican Council](#) was and remains an authentic sign of God for our time”. This is particularly true in the context of the dialogue between the Church and the world, this world “and her life and activity there” (cf. [Gaudium et Spes](#), n. 40), on which she wishes to radiate the light that shines from the divine life (*ibid.*).

As you know, the more aware the Church is of her being and her mission, the better able she is to love this world, to turn a trusting gaze upon it inspired by that of Jesus, without succumbing to the temptation to discouragement or withdrawal. Moreover “in this way the Church carries out her mission and in that very act she stimulates and advances human and civil culture” (n. 58), the Council says.

Your nation is endowed with a long Christian history that cannot be ignored or diminished and that witnesses eloquently to this truth, which still today shapes its unique vocation. You may be quite sure that not only the faithful of your dioceses but also the faithful of the whole world have great expectations of the Church in France. As pastors, we are of course aware of our limitations but, trusting in the strength of Christ, we also know that it is our task to be “heralds of the faith” ([Lumen](#)

Gentium, n. 1), who with the priests and the faithful must witness to Christ's message, "in such a way that the light of the Gospel will shine on all activities of the faithful" (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 43).

The Year of Faith enables us to grow in confidence in the intrinsic power and richness of the Gospel message. Have we not often seen that it is the words of faith, these simple, direct words that are full of the vitality of the divine Word, which touch hearts and spirits most effectively and bring the most decisive illumination? Let us therefore not fear to talk about the mystery of God and the mystery of man with totally apostolic vigour and to expound tirelessly the riches of the Christian doctrine. There are in it words and realities, fundamental convictions and ways of reasoning which alone can bring the hope for which the world is thirsting.

In the important social debates, the Church must make her voice heard tirelessly and with determination. She does so with respect for the French tradition as regards the distinction between the spheres of competence of both the Church and the State. Precisely in this context the harmony that exists between faith and reason gives you a special assurance: the message of Christ and of his Church does not only bear a religious identity that asks to be respected as such; it bears a wisdom that makes it possible to envisage with rectitude practical responses to the pressing and, at times anguishing, issues of these times. In continuing, as you do, to exercise the prophetic dimension of your episcopal ministry, you will contribute to these debates an indispensable word of truth, which liberates hearts and opens them to hope. This word, I am sure, is awaited. It is always favourably received when it is presented charitably, not as the result of our own reflections but first of all as the word God wishes to address to every person.

In this regard I remember the meeting that took place in the Collège des Bernardins. France can consider herself honoured to count among her sons and daughters a number of eminent intellectuals, some of whom view the Church favourably and with respect. Whether or not they are believers, they are aware of the immense challenges of our epoch when the Christian message is an irreplaceable point of reference. Other intellectual or philosophical traditions may be exhausted, but the Church finds in her divine mission the assurance and courage to preach, in season and out of season, the universal call to salvation, the greatness of the divine plan for humanity, the responsibility of human beings, their dignity and their freedom — and, despite the injury of sin — their ability to discern in conscience what is true and what is good, and their openness to divine grace. At the Collège des Bernardins, I wanted to recall that monastic life, wholly oriented to the search for God, the *quaerere Deum*, wells up as a source of renewal and progress for culture. The religious and, especially, the monastic communities in your country which I know well can count on your esteem and attentive care, with respect for the charism of each one. Religious life, at the exclusive service of God's work to which nothing may be preferred (cf. *The Rule of St Benedict*) is a treasure in your dioceses. It contributes a radical testimony of the way in which Christian life, precisely when it is wholly devoted to following Christ, completely fulfils the human vocation to the blessed life. The whole of society, and not only the Church, is greatly enriched by this testimony. Offered in humility, gentleness and silence, it contributes, so to speak, to the proof that there is

more to man than man himself.

As the Council recalls, the Church's liturgical action is also part of her contribution to the work of civilization (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 58). Indeed the liturgy is the celebration of the central event of human history, the redemptive sacrifice of Christ. Thus it bears witness to the love with which God loves humanity, to the fact that human life has a meaning and that it is through their vocation that men and women are called to share in the glorious life of the Trinity. Humanity needs this witness.

People need to perceive, through the liturgical celebrations, that the Church is aware of the lordship of God and of dignity of the human being. She has the right to be able to discern, over and above the limitations that will always mark her rites and ceremonies, that Christ "is present in the sacrifice of Mass and in the person of the minister" (cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 7). Knowing the care with which you prepare your liturgical celebrations, I encourage you to cultivate the art of celebrating, to help your priests in this regard and to work ceaselessly for the liturgical formation of seminarians and of the faithful. Respect for the established norms expresses love and fidelity for the faith of the Church, for the treasure of grace that she preserves and transmits; the beauty of celebrations, far more than innovations and subjective adjustments, makes evangelization a lasting and effective work.

Today you are deeply concerned about the transmission of the faith to the young people. Numerous families in your country continue to guarantee it. I bless and encourage with all my heart the initiatives you are taking to support these families, surrounding them with your solicitude so as to encourage them to assume responsibility in the area of education. The responsibility of parents in this domain is a precious asset that the Church defends and promotes, both as an inalienable and essential dimension of the common good of all society and as a requirement of the dignity of the person and of the family. You also know that challenges are not lacking in this field: whether it is a matter of the difficulty linked to passing on the faith received — family, social — or that of faith taken on personally on the threshold of the adulthood or, further, of the difficulty of a real rupture in its transmission when several generations succeed one another, already distanced from the living faith. There is also the enormous challenge of living in a society that does not always share the teachings of Christ and sometimes seeks to ridicule or marginalize the Church, wishing to confine her solely to the private sphere. To tackle these immense challenges the Church needs credible witnesses. Christian testimony rooted in Christ can be lived authentically and consistently in multiform ways with no set plan. It is born and renewed ceaselessly under the action of the Holy Spirit. In support of this witness, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is a very useful tool, for it manifests the power and beauty of the faith. I encourage you to make it known far and wide, particularly this year as we celebrate the 20th anniversary of its publication.

In your rightful position, you also bear witness through the simplicity of your life, your pastoral care and above all your union with one another and with the Successor of the Apostle Peter. Aware of the power of example, you will also be able to find the words and actions to encourage the faithful

to embody this “unity of life”. They must feel that their faith engages them, that it frees them rather than being a burden and that adherence is a source of joy and fruitfulness (cf. Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, n. 17). This applies as much to their attachment and faithfulness to the moral teaching of the Church as for example to their courage in showing their Christian conviction without arrogance but with respect, in the various milieus in which they grow up. Those of them who entered into public life have a special responsibility in this domain. With the bishops, they will have at heart attention to projects of civil law that can undermine the norms protecting marriage between a man and a woman, the right to life from conception to death and the proper approach of bioethics, faithful to the documents of the Magisterium. It is more necessary than ever that Christians choose to serve the common good, deepening in particular their knowledge of the Church’s social teaching.

You can count on my prayers that your efforts in this sphere may bear abundant fruit. To conclude, I invoke the blessing of the Lord upon you, upon your priests and upon your deacons, upon the men and women religious, upon the other consecrated people who work in your dioceses and upon your faithful. May God accompany you always. Many thanks.