



# The Holy See

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

*Apostolic Palace of Castel Gandolfo, Hall of the Swiss  
Friday, 21 September 2012*

*Your Eminence,  
Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,*

I thank you, Your Eminence, for your words. It is the first time we have met since my Apostolic Visit in 2008 to your beautiful country that is dear to my heart. At that time I chose to emphasize the Christian roots of France which welcomed the Gospel message from the very outset. This ancient heritage is a firm foundation. On it you can base your efforts to continue tirelessly to proclaim the word of God in the spirit that enlivens the new evangelization, which is the theme of the upcoming Synod Assembly. France has such a long spiritual and missionary tradition that Blessed John Paul II described as an “educator of peoples” (*Homily*, Le Bourget, 30 June 1980). Today the challenges of a broadly secularized society serve as an invitation to seek a response with courage and optimism by proposing the incorruptible newness of the Gospel with boldness and creativity.

It is in this perspective that I proposed the Year of Faith as an incentive to the faithful around the world in honour of the opening of the Second Vatican Council. “The Year of Faith is a summons to an authentic and renewed conversion to the Lord, the one Saviour of the world” (*Porta Fidei*, n. 6). The figure of the Good Shepherd, who knows his sheep, goes in search of the one that is lost and loves them so much that he lays down his life for them is one of the most evocative scenes in the Gospel (cf. Jn 10). It applies in the first place to bishops, in their concern for all the Christian faithful, but equally to priests, their assistants. The mountain of work that burdens your priests constitutes a greater obligation “to take the greatest interest you are capable of in their welfare

both temporal and spiritual” (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, n. 7). For you have been made responsible for the sanctification of your priests, knowing well, as I said to you in Lourdes, that “their spiritual life is the foundation of their apostolic life” and, subsequently, the guarantee of the fruitfulness of their entire ministry. The diocesan bishop is therefore required to show special solicitude to his priests (cf. *CIC, can. 384*) and especially to those who have recently been ordained or are in need or elderly.

I cannot but encourage you in your efforts never to tire of making them feel welcome, to have a father and mother’s heart for them and to “treat [them] as... sons and friends” (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 28). You will take care to make available to them the means they need to keep up their spiritual and intellectual life and also to find support in fraternal life. I acknowledge the steps you have taken in this regard, which are, as it were, an extension of the *Year for Priests*, placed under the patronage of the Holy Curé d’Ars. The Year afforded an excellent opportunity to contribute to developing this spiritual aspect of the priest’s life. Persevering in this direction cannot but be of great benefit to the sanctification of the entire People of God. There is no doubt that in our day, the Gospel workers are few. Hence it is urgent to ask the Father to send more labourers to his harvest (cf. Lk 10:2). It is necessary to pray and to have prayers said for this intention and I encourage you to pay the greatest attention to the training of seminarians.

You wish that the regrouping you have set up in the parishes will guarantee the quality of celebrations and a rich community experience, while calling for a re-evaluation of Sunday. You pointed this out in your note on “Lay People in the Church’s Mission in France”. On various occasions I myself have had the opportunity to stress this essential point for all the baptized. Yet the solution of the pastoral problems that arise in the diocese must not be limited to organizational matters, however important these may be. There is a risk of putting the accent on the quest for efficiency, with a sort of “bureaucracy of pastoral work”, focusing on structures, organization and programmes. These can become “self-referential” for the exclusive use of the members of these structures and will then have little impact on the life of Christians who have drifted away from regular practice. Evangelization, on the contrary, needs to start from the encounter with the Lord in a dialogue founded on prayer. It must then focus on the witness we must bear in order to help our contemporaries to recognize and rediscover signs of God’s presence.

I also know that times for adoration are proposed to the faithful, more or less everywhere in your country. I rejoice deeply at this and I encourage you to make Christ’s presence in the Eucharist the source and summit of Christian life (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, n. 11). Thus it is always necessary in pastoral reorganization to confirm the role of priests. “Because it is joined with the episcopal order the office of priests shares in the authority by which Christ himself builds up and sanctifies and rules his Body (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, n. 2).

I applaud the generosity of lay people who qualify for admittance to ecclesial offices and functions (cf. *CIC can. 228 § 1*), thereby demonstrating an availability for which the Church is deeply

grateful. It is nevertheless right to remember that the specific task of the lay faithful is the Christian animation of the temporal situations in which they act on their own initiative and autonomously, in the light of faith and of the Church's teaching (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 43). It is therefore necessary to ensure respect for the difference between the common priesthood of all the faithful and the ministerial priesthood of those who have been ordained for the service of the community. This difference is not only in degree but also in nature (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, n. 10). Moreover, it is necessary to preserve fidelity to the integral deposit of the faith as it is taught by the authentic Magisterium and professed by the whole Church. In fact, "profession of faith is an act both personal and communitarian. It is the Church that is the primary subject of faith" (*Porta Fidei*, n. 10). The loftiest expression of this profession of faith is in the liturgy. It is important that this cooperation always take place in the context of ecclesial communion around the bishop, who is its guarantor. It is a communion for which the Church shows herself as one, holy, catholic and apostolic.

This year you will be celebrating the sixth centenary of the birth of Joan of Arc. In speaking of her I emphasized that "one of the most original aspects of this young woman's holiness was precisely this link between mystical experience and political mission. The years of her hidden life and her interior development were followed by the brief but intense two years of her public life: a year of *action* and a year of *passion*" (*General Audience, 26 January 2011*). In St Joan you have a model of secular holiness at the service of the common good.

I should also like to emphasize the interdependence that exists between "the progress of the human person and the advance of society itself" (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 25), since "the family... is the foundation of society" (*ibid.*, n. 52). It is threatened in many areas, consequent on a conception of human nature that has proved defective. To defend life and the family in society is in no way old-fashioned; rather, it is prophetic, because it means promoting values that make possible the complete fulfilment of the human person, created in the image and likeness of God (cf. Gen 1:26). Here we have a real challenge to take up. Indeed, "the good that the Church and society as a whole expect from marriage and from the family founded upon marriage is so great as to call for full pastoral commitment to this particular area. Marriage and the family are institutions that must be promoted and defended from every possible misrepresentation of their true nature, since whatever is injurious to them is injurious to society itself" (*Sacramentum Caritatis*, n. 29).

Besides, the diocesan bishop "must protect the unity of the universal Church" (*CIC, can. 392 § 1*) in the portion of the People of God entrusted to his care, even though different ways of understanding are legitimately expressed within it, which deserve to be the object of the same pastoral solicitude. The special expectations of each new generation need to be offered an appropriate catechesis so that they may find their proper place in the believing community. I was glad to meet a large number of young French men and women during the World Youth Day in Madrid, together with many of their Pastors, a sign of a new impetus of faith which opens the door to hope. I encourage you to continue in your commitment which is so promising, despite the

difficulties.

To conclude, I would like once again to address my encouragement to you for the *Diaconia 2013* initiative, through which you wish to stimulate your diocesan and local communities, as well as every member of the faithful to restore to the heart of ecclesial dynamism their service to their brethren, particularly the frailest. May the service of their brothers and sisters, rooted in the love of God, inspire in all the members of your dioceses the concern to contribute, each one in accordance with his/her own capacity, to making humanity one brotherly and supportive family in Christ!

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, I know of your love and of your service to the Church and I thank God for the effort you make every day to proclaim the word of life of the Gospel and make it effective in your communities. Through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Patroness of your beloved country, and of the Holy Co-Patronesses, St Joan of Arc and St Thérèse of Lisieux, may God bless you and bless France!