



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE FINAL GROUP OF BISHOPS OF FRANCE
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

Friday, 27 February 2004

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, 1. I greet you with joy, Pastors of the Province of Besançon, as well as the Archbishop and Auxiliary Bishop of Strasbourg. My thoughts and prayers go to Bishop Pierre Raffin of Metz, who has been unable to take part in this *ad limina* visit. I thank Archbishop André Lacrampe for his reflections on the challenges and hopes of society and the pastoral life of your Dioceses, and on the European perspectives that you have at heart precisely because of your geographical location on the borders of several countries. 2. I was especially touched by the fact that in mentioning the Council of Europe you recalled the late Archbishop Michael Courtney, Apostolic Nuncio in Burundi, who was assassinated last December. When he was posted to Strasbourg as Permanent Observer of the Holy See, he was a convinced builder of cooperation between the States of the European Continent. Today I ask the local Churches to be ever more firmly committed to *European integration*. To achieve it, it is important to reread history, remembering that *the Christian anthropological, moral and spiritual values* contributed largely down the centuries to forging the different European nations and weaving deep bonds between them. The many beautiful churches, signs of the faith of our ancestors scattered across the Continent, clearly demonstrate and remind us that these values were and still are the basis of relations between individuals and peoples, and the mortar that binds them. Union, however, cannot be achieved to the detriment of these very values or in opposition to them. Indeed, relations between the different countries cannot be based solely on economic or political interests: the debate on globalization makes this plain. Nor can they be based on convenient alliances that would weaken the process of the enlargement under way and could lead to reverting to the ideologies of the past that mocked both the human being and humanity. These bonds must aim to build a Europe of Peoples, thereby making it possible to terminate the conflicts that have bathed the Continent in blood throughout the 20th century. This is the price of the birth of a Europe whose identity will rest on common values, a Europe of brotherhood and solidarity; only a Europe of this kind will be able to take the differences into account, since its perspective is the advancement of men and women, respect for their inalienable rights, the quest for the common good and the happiness and prosperity of all. The Church hopes to contribute more and more to the unity of the Continent through her centuries-old presence in the different countries of the Continent, her participation in the unity of peoples and cultures and in social life, especially in the fields of education, charitable aid, health care and social assistance (cf. *Ecclesia in Europa*, n. 113).

What is sought above all, as I recalled in my Address to the Presidency of the European Parliament (5 April 1979), is the service of the individual person and of peoples, with respect for their beliefs and profound aspirations.³ During the last Assembly of your Episcopal Conference, you tackled the question of *the Church's place in society* with a view to seeking a "better way of living together". The desire to take an active part in public life, individually or jointly at all levels of society in order to be at the service of their brothers and sisters, is one of the characteristics of disciples of Christ. Because of her vision of human beings and her love for them, the Church cannot ignore the life of anyone, and considers the world the theatre for her presence and action. I cannot encourage pastors enough to watch over the *integral formation of young people*, especially those who will be in charge and leaders of the nation in the future, to ensure that wherever they work and are involved they have the necessary elements for reflection on human and social situations and to be attentive to people to help them base their decisions on moral criteria. The Church hopes to offer them the enlightenment of the Gospel and of her Magisterium. In this domain, *Catholic Universities* have a specific role of reflection with all their social partners to help them analyze specific situations, always studying how to keep the human being at the centre of their decisions. This process is not only addressed to the Catholic faithful but also to all people of good will who hope to reflect in truth on the future of humanity. In this regard, I would like to pay a tribute to the work of the *Social Weeks of France*. You are deeply attached to this institution which is preparing to celebrate its centenary. During its annual meetings which are attracting more and more participants - a sign that its research responds to real expectations - those who take part in the meetings have the opportunity to question one another about the social issues that our world is facing, in the light of the Gospel and of the social doctrine of the Church. Since the publication of the Encyclical *Rerum Novarum* by my Predecessor Leo XIII, the Church's social teaching has been continuously enriched. I am delighted with the relations that *Social Weeks* is promoting and developing throughout Europe, thereby creating a movement for reflection on the increasingly complex questions of the contemporary world and uniting people in laying the foundations of our future society. Through this participation in all the forms of social life, the first field of their apostolate, Christians truly fulfil *their vocation and mission* in accordance with the spirit of the Second Vatican Council. In proclaiming Christ, Christians are also messengers of new hope for society; by promoting "deeper understanding of the laws of social living" (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 23), they invite society to a radical transformation. Apart from the right and duty to proclaim the Gospel to all the nations, the Church likewise claims the right to "make judgments on any human affairs to the extent that they are required by the fundamental rights of the human person or the salvation of souls" (*Code of Canon Law*, can. 747 2). In politics, in the economy, in workplaces and in the family, it is up to the faithful to make Christ present. They must also radiate the evangelical values that express with particular clarity the dignity of the human being and his or her central place in the world, thus recalling the primacy of the human being over any private interest and institutional mechanisms.⁴ *The participation of Christians in public life*, the visible presence of the Catholic Church and of other religious denominations, in no way questions the principle of secularity nor the prerogatives of the State. As I had the opportunity to recall at the time of the exchange of good wishes with the Diplomatic Corps last January, a properly understood secularity must not be confused with secularism; nor can it erase the beliefs of individuals or communities. To seek to eliminate this important dimension in the life of individuals and peoples from the social arena as well as the signs that express it, would be contrary to a properly understood freedom. Freedom of worship cannot be conceived of without the freedom to practise one's religion individually and collectively, or without the freedom of the Church. Religion cannot be confined to the private realm, at the risk of denying all its community aspects in its own life and its social and charitable action in society for everyone, independently of his or her philosophical or religious beliefs. In the name of religious freedom, which is one of the fundamental aspects of freedom of conscience, every Christian and every follower of any religion has the right to have his or her beliefs and practices respected, as long as this does not threaten the

security and legitimate authority of the State (cf. *Declaration on Religious Freedom*, nn. 2-3).⁵ It is important that young people grasp the impact of the religious process in personal and social life, that they be acquainted with the religious traditions they encounter and have a kindly approach to interpreting religious symbols and recognizing the Christian roots of cultures and of European history. This leads to a respectful recognition of others and their beliefs, to a positive dialogue, to overcoming collectivism and to a better social understanding. Many Muslims live in your Country and you make the effort to maintain good relations with them through the mediation of the leaders or local communities and the promotion of *interreligious dialogue* which is, as I have had the opportunity to say, a dialogue of life. Such a dialogue must also revive in Christians the knowledge of their faith and their attachment to the Church: any form of relativism can only do serious damage to interreligious relations. It is up to you to pursue and intensify, perhaps in some cases by going through the authorized channels, *relations with the civil Authorities and with the various categories of elected members in your Country* in the national and European Parliaments, especially with Catholic members of Parliament and with international institutions. I am delighted with the new forms of dialogue that have recently been established between the Holy See and the Leaders of the Nation to settle undecided matters. Through his specific mission, the Apostolic Nuncio, on behalf of the Holy See, is called to play an active role and to follow attentively the life of the Church and her situation in society.⁶ In accordance with her noble tradition, France has numerous *links with Third World Countries*, especially on the African Continent. Today more than ever, if the peoples of Africa are to emerge from the poverty and bloody conflicts that do not cease to devastate their land, it is right to continue to give assistance to these peoples, aiming at providing for their basic needs and especially to help them to assume responsibility for their own development, particularly through a good education in civic and political affairs. This must enable them to overcome group opposition, so that each one may truly acquire a sense of the State and all citizens join forces to construct a future of peace and prosperity. In these educational areas, the Church has an experience that she is more than ever required to transmit for the good of persons and peoples.⁷ As my meetings with the different Provinces of France are coming to an end, I give thanks for the courageous commitment of the Pastors and faithful in proclaiming the Gospel. May they not be discouraged in the face of the difficulties and, to human eyes, the meagre results obtained! We must all consider ourselves primarily as God's cooperators (cf. II Cor 6: 1), carrying out our mission in fidelity to the gift received, proclaiming in season and out of season the Word of God that the world needs in order to allow it to hope and to find a new dynamism. The Holy Spirit will know how to make human work fruitful. Christ, Redeemer of man, comes to open the path of life to each one. Do not be afraid to cry to the world that God is humanity's only lasting happiness, and to guide men and women in the discovery of Christ and in building a world in which it is good to live! As I entrust you to the Virgin Mary, Patroness of France, I impart to you and to all the Pastors and faithful of your Dioceses an affectionate and fatherly Apostolic Blessing.