



The Holy See

***DISCOURS DE SA SAINTETÉ JEAN-PAUL II
ÀS. EXC. M. JACQUES CHIRAC,
PRÉSIDENT DE LA RÉPUBLIQUE FRANÇAISE****

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1. It is a particular pleasure to me to welcome in the person of Your Excellency the Head of State of the French Republic. Your nation's history and culture have closely linked France to the Catholic Church and the Holy See. Since the first centuries of Christianity the children of the provinces of Gaul and later of France, have never ceased to have a prominent place in the life of the Church: they have been saints, martyrs and pastors who have given the Church in France her deepest roots; they have been builders, artists and writers with a creative influence; down the centuries, they have been thinkers, theologians and philosophers who have contributed, with their own genius, to building up Christianity's intellectual and spiritual patrimony.

In every field of learning, the French contribution has aroused widespread esteem throughout the world. Your compatriots have frequently made decisive breakthroughs in scientific research and in the knowledge of the universe, in industry and economic organization, in the development of law and in political reflection. In a word, one need only recall your country's contribution to the awareness of human rights. I would like to recall the spread of the French language, which I like to use and which remains a valuable tool of thought and exchange for very different contexts and in many countries.

2. Of course, a society's growth and the prosperity which we believe are within reach are never acquired once and for all. On the contrary, in every age new challenges and complex phenomena arise, in which real progress produces negative results. Present economic conditions are causing the terrible setback of unemployment. We are witnessing regrettable rifts in the social fabric. The fundamental institution of the family is weakened and debased. All too often homes experience poverty or breakdown, so that they refrain from giving life or no longer succeed in fulfilling their

educational role fully. Part of the population finds it difficult to withstand the scourges that bring violence, such as the spread of drugs or the lowering of moral standards.

Political office is truly noble when the evils of society are clearly and courageously faced at both the national and global level. Jacques Maritain said that society is «a task to accomplish and a goal to attain» (Man and the State p. 2). The first condition is to allow every individual to become aware of the values that cannot be denied for a use of freedom which respects human truth and dignity, and for an exercise of the equal rights of each citizen which takes into account the natural brotherhood of all. And so at this basic level, as I have already had the opportunity to say, the motto of the French Republic is largely inspired by Gospel values.

3. Mr. President, the Church's esteem for civil institutions is based on her conception of the State's role. Reflection on political activity comes within the framework of her social teaching and presupposes constant moral reflection. In this regard it is good that your country's juridical and social tradition gives the State a leading role in guaranteeing respect for the basic rights of all, as well as in bringing together the legal and material conditions necessary for the exercise of liberties.

Some of these rights are still called into question too often, in various ways, in the most privileged and in the most underprivileged societies. I am thinking, of course, of people's right to life from conception until death, a right that must always be protected. I am also thinking of the right to freedom of religion which, to be fully guaranteed, presupposes satisfactory conditions for religious education and also the opportunity for all believers to express their convictions and see them publicly respected.

Through its institutions and services, the State can also play a considerable role in facilitating dialogue among all the members of society, whatever their background, origin, personal capacities or means. This dialogue is a first step towards a solidarity that is generous enough to ensure that the weakest are provided with a roof, and do not go without food, care, safety or education. This is equivalent to saying that a nation's duty is to show true solidarity, so that it may enable the most deprived of its members not to lose hope and to find a positive meaning for their life. May I say in this regard that a country like yours has a very special vocation to be faithful to the lofty concept of human dignity whose incalculable value it has shown the world?

4. Today man's principal expectations cannot be satisfied without broad international co operation. I am pleased to describe the concert of nations as a "family". Naturally, this notion applies to Europe. It has made great strides towards peace in overcoming its former divisions and conflicts. I appreciate the efforts made by the present authorities to reinforce its unity, while at the same time preserving each nation's specific character, and to make its activity more effective in solving the tensions which have recently torn it apart.

A Europe of greater solidarity will also contribute to supporting underprivileged peoples. France

has established special links with Africa. It makes its contribution to many countries on this continent, and it is to be hoped, despite economic or other problems, that positive and disinterested co operation may continue. In today's world, encouraging development is everyone's duty towards the human family. France also has a decisive role to play in the Mediterranean and in the Near East where, for centuries, it has been a stabilizing factor, while respecting cultures and religions.

5. Mr. President, as you know, the Church claims no temporal power; she fulfills her spiritual mission which is a mission of service. Seeking to be faithful to Christ's Gospel, Catholics take their place as partners in the national dialogue with humility but also with the assurance of their faith. They desire to help discern what is good for the human person, to recall the meaning of destiny and the value of generosity, and to nourish the hope of each individual.

The activity of the faithful, communities, movements and Catholic associations takes place within the framework of the nation's overall effort to contribute to the common good, to greater justice and solidarity between citizens, in loyal collaboration with the other authorities in the country. I will merely mention two areas where the Church has a long experience. On the one hand, she would like to encourage a social practice that is favourable to the family, the basic cell of society and the school of solidarity, in order to guarantee the nation's future. On the other hand, thanks to her institutions and educational movements I am thinking in particular of the network of Catholic schools she hopes to help give young people a formation that will enable them to develop their personality to the full, in fidelity to the spiritual and cultural heritage which has given France her particular features.

6. In a few months, during a new Pastoral Visit to France, I will have the joy of visiting several regions and of celebrating two great anniversaries: Tours, that of St Martin, and in Reims, that of the Baptism of Clovis, King of the Franks, an act which proved essential for the ties between your nation and the Church. Mr. President, at this time I would like to thank you for welcoming me to the land of France for this event. Likewise, I am particularly pleased that the French authorities have agreed to host the celebration of the 1997 World Youth Day in Paris.

I give you my best wishes personally, Mr. President, for the accomplishment of your lofty mission in service to your country. I extend these wishes to your loved ones, to the dignitaries who have accompanied you and to all your compatriots. I wholeheartedly invoke God's Blessing on them all.

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