



# The Holy See

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## ***LETTER OF POPE JOHN PAUL II TO THE BISHOPS OF FRANCE***

*To Archbishop Jean-Pierre Ricard of Bordeaux  
President of the Bishops' Conference of France  
and to all the Bishops of France*

1. Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, during your *ad limina* visits you informed me of your worries and joys as Pastors and emphasized your positive relations with the civil Authorities which is a cause for satisfaction. Our meetings gave me an opportunity to take up with you the subject of the relations with the civil Authorities in the context of the centenary of the law separating the Church and the State. Moreover, I directly recalled the issue of secularity in my Address to the Bishops of the Province of Besançon on 27 February 2004.

2. In 1905, the law of the separation of Church and State, which replaced the Concordat of 1804, was a painful and traumatizing event for the Church in France. The law regulated the way that the principle of secularity was to be lived in France. In this context the law provided for freedom of worship alone; at the same time it relegated the religious factor to the private sphere and failed to acknowledge the place of religious life and the Church institution in society. Thus, the religious journey of the human being was considered simply to be a personal sentiment, thereby overlooking the profound nature of the human being that is both personal and social in all its dimensions, including the spiritual. However, since 1920, we are grateful to the French Government itself for having recognized in a certain way the place of religion in social life, the personal and social religious dimension and the hierarchical composition of the Church that constitutes her unity.

Today, the centenary of this law affords us an opportunity to think about the religious history of France over the past century, reflecting on the efforts to maintain dialogue made by the different parties concerned; these efforts were crowned by the re-establishment of diplomatic relations and the Agreement sealed by the Church in 1924 and signed by the Government of the Republic then

described in the Encyclical *Maximam Gravissimamque* of my Predecessor, Pope Pius XI, dated 18 February of that same year. In 1921, after difficult years, at the initiative of the French Government new relations between the French Republic and the Apostolic See came into being. They paved the way for negotiation and cooperation. In this context, it was possible to start a process of pacification with respect for the juridical order, both civil and canonical. This new spirit of mutual understanding subsequently led to finding a solution to a certain number of difficulties and to involving all the forces of the Country for the common good, each in its own province. In a certain way, one might say that a sort of understanding was reached from day to day, which prepared the ground for a consensual de facto agreement on institutional questions of fundamental importance to the life of the Church. This peace, acquired little by little, has already become a reality to which the French are deeply attached. It enables the Church in France to carry out her own mission calmly and confidently and to take a more and more active part in social life with respect for the competence of each one.

3. Correctly understood, the principle of *laïcité* (secularity), to which your Country is deeply attached, is also part of the social teaching of the Church. It recalls the need for a clear division of powers (cf. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, nn. 571-572) that echoes Christ's invitation to his disciples: "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Lk 20: 25). For its part, just as the non-denominational status of the State implies the civil Authority's abstention from interference in the life of the Church and of the various religions, in the spiritual realm it enables all society's members to work together at the service of all and of the national community. Likewise, as the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council recalled, the management of temporal power is not the Church's vocation for: "The Church, by reason of her role and competence, is not identified with any political community nor bound by ties to any political system" (Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 76 2; cf. n. 42). Yet, at the same time, it is important that all work in the general interest and for the common good. The Council also stated: "The political community and the Church... each serves the personal and social vocation of the same human beings. This service will redound the more effectively to the welfare of all insofar as both institutions practise better cooperation" (*ibid.* 3).

4. Among other things, the application of the principles of the social teaching of the Church has made new developments possible in relations between the Church and the State in France, to the point that in recent years a forum for dialogue has been created at the highest level. On the one hand this has made it possible to regulate unresolved issues or those difficulties that can crop up in various areas; and on the other, to achieve a certain amount of collaboration in social life, with a view to the common good. Thus, trusting relations can develop that make it possible to deal with institutional matters concerning people, activities and possessions in a spirit of cooperation and mutual respect.

I also praise all the forms of collaboration that exist serenely and confidently in the municipalities, local groups and regions, thanks to the attention of those elected to positions of authority, of the clergy, faithful and men and women of good will. I know your high regard for the leaders of the

Nation and your ties with them, always ready as you are to contribute to reflection in areas that involve the future of human beings and society, and to greater respect for people and their dignity. With you, I encourage the lay faithful in their desire to serve their brothers and sisters through ever more active participation in public life, for as the Second Vatican Council said, "Christians cherish a feeling of deep solidarity with the human race and its history" (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 1). Because of their status as citizens, like their compatriots, it is the duty of French Catholics to take part, according to their abilities and with respect for their beliefs, in the different areas of public life.

5. Christianity has played and still plays an important role in French society in the political, philosophical, artistic and literary spheres. The Church in France in the 20th century also had numerous great Pastors and great theologians. One might say that this has been a particularly fruitful period for social life as well. Henri de Lubac, Yves Congar, Marie-Dominique Chenu, Jacques et Raïssa Maritain, Emmanuel Mounier, Robert Schuman, Edmond Michelet, Madeleine Delbrêl, Gabriel Rosset, Georges Bernanos, Paul Claudel, François Mauriac, Jean Lacroix, Jean Guittou and Jérôme Lejeune are so many names that have marked French thought and experience and live on as great figures, recognized not only by the Ecclesial Community but also by the Nation. These men and women, as well as many other Catholics, have had a crucial influence on social life in your Country and some of them also on the construction of Europe. They all based their intellectual approach and action on Gospel principles. In loving Christ they also loved men and women and were eager to serve them. It is the duty of Catholics in your Country today to walk on the paths of their precursors. Nor can we forget the important place of Christian values in the construction of Europe and in the life of the peoples of the Continent. Christianity largely shaped the features of Europe. It is up to the people of our day to build European society on the values that prevailed when it was born and that are a part of its richness.

France cannot but rejoice to have in its midst men and women who draw anthropological principles and elements from the Gospel in their spiritual approach and in their Christian life, fostering a lofty ideal of man; these principles help them to fulfil their mission as citizens at all levels of social life, to serve their brothers and sisters in humanity, to share in the common good, to spread harmony, peace, justice, solidarity and good understanding among all and, eventually, to joyfully contribute their stone to the building of the social body. In this regard, today it would be right for you to take pains to develop further the formation of the faithful in the social teaching of the Church and in serious philosophical reflection. Especially important is the formation of young people who are training to take on important responsibilities in decision-making posts in society; they will thus have at heart to make Gospel values and reliable anthropological foundations reach the different areas of social life. In this way the Church in your Country will meet her commitment to history. Christians are aware that they have a mission to fulfil at the service of their brethren, as one of the oldest texts of Christian literature says: "The post that God has assigned to them is so noble that they are not permitted to desert it" (*Epistle to Diognetus*, VI, 10). For the faithful, this mission also entails a personal commitment because it implies witnessing with their words and deeds, while living the moral and spiritual values and proposing them to their fellow citizens with

respect for the freedom of each.

6. The crisis of values and the lack of hope observed in France, and more generally in the West, are part of the identity crisis that is affecting modern societies today. These societies often propose only one sort of life, a life founded on material well-being, which is unable to indicate the meaning of life or provide the fundamental values necessary for making the free and responsible choices that are a source of joy and happiness. The Church is studying this situation and hopes that the religious, moral and spiritual values that are part of France's patrimony will not fall into oblivion, for they have fashioned its identity and forged generations of people since the early centuries of Christianity. I therefore ask the faithful of your Country, in the follow-up to the *Letter to the Catholics of France* that you addressed to them a few years ago, to find in their spiritual and ecclesial life the strength to participate in the *res publica* and give a new impetus to social life and renewed hope to the men and women of our time. "One is entitled to think that the future of humanity is in the hands of those men who are capable of providing the generations to come with reasons for life and optimism" (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 31). In this perspective, trusting relations and collaboration between Church and State cannot but have positive effects for building together what Pope Pius XII termed "legitimate and healthy secularity" (*Alla vostra filiale*, Address to Residents in Rome from The Marches, 23 March 1958: *La Documentation Catholique* 55 [1958], col. 456), and, as I said in my Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa*, would not be "a type of ideological secularism or hostile separation between civil institutions and religious confessions" (n. 117). Instead of being antagonistic, therefore, the social forces will be more and more at the service of the entire population of France. I am confident that such an approach will make it possible to confront the new situations in French society today, particularly in the multiethnic, multicultural and multiconfessional context of recent years.

Recognizing the religious dimension of people and of the members of French society means seeking to coordinate this dimension with the other dimensions of national life so that it can contribute its own dynamism to building up society and prevent religions from the tendency to withdraw into sectarianism which could become a threat to the State itself. Society must be able to permit individuals, with respect for others and for the laws of the Republic, to state their religious membership. If it were not to do so, there would be a constant risk of sectarian withdrawal into their own identity and of an increase in intolerance that could not but damage friendly and harmonious coexistence in the Nation.

By virtue of your mission, you are called to intervene regularly in public debates on important social issues. Likewise, in the name of their faith, Christians, personally or in associations, must be able to speak in public to express their opinions and manifest their convictions, thereby making their own contribution to the democratic debates, challenging the State and their fellow citizens on their responsibilities as men and women, especially in the field of fundamental human rights and respect for human dignity, for the progress of humanity but not at any price, for justice and equity, as well as for the protection of our planet. These are some of the areas that involve the future of

the individual and of humanity and the responsibility of each generation. In this context, secularity, far from being an area of confrontation, is the true place for constructive dialogue in the spirit of the values of freedom, equality and fraternity, to which the people of France are, justifiably, deeply attached.

7. I know that you are very attentive to the Church's presence in places where the great and formidable questions on the meaning of human existence are being asked. I am thinking, to name but a few that are particularly significant, of the hospital context where spiritual assistance to the sick and to the staff is a priority, as well as in the educational sector where it is important to open young people to the moral and spiritual dimensions of their lives, to enable them to develop their whole personality. In fact, education cannot be limited to scientific and technical training but must always cater to the whole being of the young person. Catholic teaching, for which you are responsible in your Dioceses, works with this in mind. I know of its concern to be a partner in the educational process of which the civil Authorities are in charge; I am also aware of its desire to preserve its own specific character in the teaching body and in its teaching. It is the duty of the State, for its part, out of respect for the established rules, also to guarantee to the families who so desire the opportunity to give their children the catechesis they need, especially by planning convenient times for it. Moreover, without a moral dimension, young people can only be tempted by violence and by forms of conduct that do not do them justice, as is regularly seen. In this regard, I would like to pay a tribute to the many holy educators who have marked the history of your particular Churches and of French society. I would like to recall your two compatriots whom I recently had the opportunity to canonize: Marcellin Champagnat, who made a major contribution to the education of youth in the French countryside, and Léonie Aviat, who was eager to go to the aid of the poor and set up schools for young girls in towns. I know that you are taking pains to form priests, men and women religious and lay people to be witnesses and the companions of their brethren, attentive to their questions and able to accompany them in their human and spiritual progress. In this regard, I congratulate the teachers and educators on their courageous work with the young people in your Country, aware of the delicacy and importance of their mission.

8. I expressed the hope that 2005 would be a Year of the Eucharist for the whole Ecclesial Community. In the Apostolic Letter which I wrote on this topic, I recalled that "the 'culture of the Eucharist' promotes a culture of dialogue, which here finds strength and nourishment. It is a mistake to think that any public reference to faith will somehow undermine the rightful autonomy of the State and civil institutions, or that it can even encourage attitudes of intolerance" (Apostolic Letter *Mane Nobiscum Domine*, n. 26; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, Insert, 13 October 2004, p. IV). I therefore invite all of you, dear Brothers in the Episcopate, as well as all the clergy and Catholics of France, to find in the Eucharist the strength to give a renewed witness to authentic moral and religious values, to pursue a trusting dialogue and serene collaboration with every member of civil society, and to put yourselves at the service of all.

At the end of this Letter, I would like to express to you and to all your compatriots my gratitude for

all you have already done in the social field, and my confidence in the future of good understanding among all the members of French society, to which you are already witnessing. May all your fellow Countrymen know that the members of the Catholic community in France are hoping to live their faith among their brothers and sisters and to make their skills and talents available to all! May no one be afraid of the religious outlook of individuals and social groups! Lived with respect for healthy secularism it cannot but be a source of dynamism and human promotion. I encourage French Catholics to be present in all the domains of civil society, in the neighbourhoods of the large towns as well as in rural society, in the worlds of finance, culture and the arts, as well as in politics, in relief agencies, in the educational, health-care and social systems, with concern to maintain a calm and respectful dialogue with all. I hope that all the French are working, hand in hand, for the growth of society, so that all may benefit. I pray for the People of France: my thoughts go in particular to the persons and families affected by financial and social difficulties. May ever greater solidarity be built up so that no one is left out! May greater attention be paid in this period to the people who are homeless and hungry!

I cherish my memories of the various Visits I have had the joy of making to the beloved land of France, especially my unforgettable pilgrimage to Lourdes, a place particularly dear to the faithful of your Country and more generally, to all who desire to entrust themselves to the Virgin Mary. I was able to note the human and spiritual depth of the men, women and children who visit the Grotto of Massabielle. It bears witness to the pastoral work you carry out in your Dioceses with the priests, men and women religious and lay people committed to the Church's mission.

As I entrust you to the intercession of Our Lady of Lourdes, whom we honour especially on this day and who is venerated in many shrines in your Country, and to the intercession of all the saints of France, I impart an affectionate Apostolic Blessing to you and to all the faithful of your Dioceses.

*From the Vatican, 11 February 2005*

**JOHN PAUL II**

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