



The Holy See

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

*Consistory Hall
Friday, 30 November 2012*

Dear Cardinal,

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

I retain a vivid memory of my [Apostolic Visit to France](#) on the occasion of the celebrations for the 150th anniversary of the Apparitions of the Immaculate Conception in Lourdes. You are the last of the three groups of the Bishops of France to come on an *ad limina* visit. I thank you, your Eminence, for your kind words. On addressing your predecessors, I opened a sort of triptych of which the essential panel might be the [Discourse which I addressed to you in 2008 at Lourdes](#). The study of this inseparable text will certainly be useful to you and will guide your reflections.

You are responsible for regions where the Christian faith took root very early and bore praiseworthy fruit. Regions linked to distinguished names who worked very hard to implant and spread the Kingdom of God in this world: martyrs such as Photinus and Blandina, great theologians such as Irenaeus and Vincent of Lérins, teachers of Christian spirituality such as Bruno, Bernard and Francis de Sales and many others. The Church in France has a long line of saints, doctors, martyrs and confessors of the faith. You are the heirs of a great human experience and of an immense spiritual wealth, that without a doubt are a source of inspiration for you in your mission as Pastors.

These origins and this glorious past, ever present in your thoughts and very dear to our spirit, allow us to nourish a great hope, both firm and bold, in the hour of taking up the challenge of the third millennium and listening to the expectations of the people of our time, to whom only God can

give a satisfying answer. The Good News, that we have the duty to proclaim to the men and women of all times, of all languages and of all cultures, can be summed up in a few words: God, creator of man, in his Son Jesus, allows us to know his love for humanity: “God is love” (cf. 1 Jn 4:8). He wishes for the happiness of his creatures, for his sons and daughters. The Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* (cf. n. 10) takes up the key issues of human existence; the meaning of life and death, of evil, of illness and suffering, so present in our world. It recalls that in his fatherly goodness, God wanted to answer all of these questions and that Christ founded his Church so that all might understand them. Therefore one of the most serious problems of our time is ignorance of religious practice in which many men and women live, including some Catholic faithful (cf. Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici*, Chapter V).

For this reason the new evangelization, to which the Church has been resolutely committed since the *Second Vatican Council* and of which the Motu Proprio *Ubicumque et Semper* outlined the central modalities, is particularly urgent as underlined by the Fathers of the Synod which ended recently. The new evangelization calls all Christians to account for the hope that is in them (cf. 1 Pet 3:15), aware that one of the worst obstacles for our pastoral mission is ignorance of the content of the faith. In fact it is a dual ignorance: a lack of knowledge of the person of Jesus Christ and ignorance of the sublimity of his teachings, of their universal and perpetual value in the search for the meaning of life and happiness. Moreover this lack of knowledge results in an inability in the new generations to understand history and to feel that they are heirs to this tradition which has shaped the life, society, art and culture of Europe.

In the current *Year of Faith*, the *Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith* in a *Note dated 6 January 2012* gave useful pastoral instructions for mobilizing all of the Church’s energy, the action of her Pastors and her faithful in order to enliven society in depth. It is the Holy Spirit who, through “the power of the Gospel, permits the Church to keep the freshness of youth” (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, n. 4). This Note recalls that “every initiative for the Year of Faith should be designed to promote the joyous rediscovery of the faith and its renewed transmission. The recommendations provided here have the goal of inviting all of the members of the Church to work to make this Year a special time to share what is dearest to Christians: Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of mankind, universal King, ‘leader and perfecter of faith’ (Heb 12:2)”. The Synod of Bishops recently proposed to each and everyone the way to complete this mission successfully. The example of our divine Master is always the basis of all our reflection and action. Prayer and action, these are the means which our Saviour still and always calls us to implement.

The new evangelization will be effective if it can thoroughly involve the communities and parishes. Signs of vitality and the commitment of the lay faithful in French society are already an encouraging reality. In the past many lay people played a part; I am thinking of Pauline Marie Jaricot, the 150th anniversary of whose death we celebrated and of her work of spreading the faith, ever crucial for Catholic missions in the 19th and 20th centuries. The laity with their bishops and priests are the leaders in the life of the Church and her mission of evangelization. In various

documents (*Lumen Gentium*, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, among others), the Second Vatican Council underlined the specificity of their mission: permeating human realities with the Gospel spirit. The laity are the face of the world in the Church and at the same time the face of the Church in the world. I appreciate the quality and manifold apostolates of the laity, men and women. I join my voice to yours in expressing my appreciation to them.

The Church in Europe and in France must not remain indifferent to the decrease in vocations and priestly ordinations and in other types of vocations that God inspires in the Church. We must urgently mobilize all the energy available so that youth may hear the voice of the Lord. God calls whom he wants and when he wants. Nevertheless Christian families and fervent communities continue to be particularly favourable areas. These families, these communities and these young people are therefore at the centre of every initiative of evangelization, despite the cultural and social context marked by relativism and hedonism.

Since young people are the hope and the future of the Church and of the world I cannot fail to mention the importance of Catholic education. This plays an admirable and often difficult role, made possible by the tireless devotion of formators: priests, consecrated people and laity. Beyond the passed-on knowledge, the testimony of the lives of formation teachers must enable young people to imbibe human and Christian values in order to deepen their search for, and love of the truth and of beauty (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 15). Continue to encourage them and open them to new prospects so that they too may benefit from evangelization. Catholic institutes clearly hold the first place in the great discussion between faith and culture. The love of the truth which radiates from them is in itself evangelizing. They are places of learning and dialogue and even research centres which must be increasingly developed and ambitious. I understand well the contribution that the Church in France has made to Christian culture. I know of your attention — and I encourage you in this regard — to cultivate academic rigour and to weave stronger ties of communication and collaboration with universities in other countries, both so that they may benefit from your experience and that you may learn from them in order to better serve the Church, society and the whole person. I am grateful for the initiatives in some of your dioceses to promote the theological initiation of young students in secular disciplines. Theology is a source of knowledge, joy, wonder that cannot be reserved only for seminarians, priests and consecrated people. Proposed to numerous youth and adults, theology will comfort them in the faith and will make them without a doubt bold and convincing apostles. Thus it is a prospect which could be broadly proposed to higher institutions of theology, as an expression of the intrinsically missionary dimension of theology and as a service to culture in its deepest sense.

As regards Catholic schools which have shaped the Christian and cultural life of your country, today they have a historical responsibility. As places for the transmission of knowledge and the formation of the person, of unconditional acceptance and of learning, these schools often enjoy a well-deserved status. It is necessary to find ways to ensure that the transmission of the faith stays at the centre of the educational project. The new evangelization will pass through these schools and through the manifold work of Catholic education which underlies numerous initiatives and

movements, for which the Church is grateful. Educating in Christian values is the key to the culture of your country. Education, in opening to hope and authentic freedom, continues to contribute its dynamism and creativity. The ardour given to the new evangelization will be our best contribution to the development of human society and the best answer to the challenges of every kind which confront everyone at the beginning of the third millennium. Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, I commend you, with your pastoral work and the communities that have been entrusted to you, to the motherly care of the Virgin Mary that she may accompany your mission in the years to come! And as I stated before leaving France in 2008: "From Rome I shall remain close to you, and when I pray before the replica of the Lourdes Grotto which has been in the Vatican Gardens for a little over a century, I shall think of you. May God bless you!".