



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER TO THE 1999 SOCIAL WEEKS OF FRANCE

To Mr Jean Boissonnat

President of the 1999 Social Weeks of France

1. On the eve of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, it is particularly appropriate that the Social Weeks of France should address the theme, *From One Century to Another, the Gospel, Christians and the Challenges to Society*, at the 74th session being held in Paris from 25 to 28 November, almost 100 years after their foundation in 1904. I thank the Lord for the work accomplished by your institution throughout the 20th century in the spirit of Leo XIII's Encyclical *Rerum novarum*. I am joined in prayer with the organizers and those taking part in this meeting, as I ask the Holy Spirit to make the work of this new session fruitful.

Ten years after the fall of the Berlin Wall and in today's context of globalization, I am delighted that you are intending to reflect more broadly on the complex problems which the political, economic and social situation present to our society, basing yourselves on the Church's social teaching in the desire to take an innovative step in preparing for the future, especially in Europe. It is particularly important to develop a social culture centred on man as a person and as the member of a people.

2. The various Social Weeks have been a remarkable gathering that have brought about many changes in public life and have written a beautiful page in the history of social Catholicism, under the inspiration of Marius Gonin and Adéodat Boissard. They have inspired many of the faithful who, in their commitment, chose to live the principles which are at the root of the Church's social teaching.

The various presidents, such as Henri Lorin, Eugène Duthoit and many others who followed one another in succession, desired to serve the Church by spreading her social message. In 1954, my Predecessor Pope Pius XII wrote to Mr Charles Flory, president at the time: "Today as in the past, the *Social Weeks*, steadfast in doctrine, courageous in research, fraternal in the collaboration of all, must be for Catholics and for their different movements a living crossroads where, in the light of substantive reports, experiences are compared, convictions forged and plans of action

developed".

3. To exercise a truly fruitful Christian discernment of society's problems, one must first turn to the Gospel and thus to Jesus' own attitude; Christ is the model for all human conduct. "The social message of the Gospel must not be considered a theory, but above all else a basis and a motivation for action" (*Centesimus annus*, n. 57). The Lord has revealed to us the truth about man and calls us to be concerned about every person, especially the weakest and frailest in our society. Scripture and the Fathers of the Church continually invite human beings to create relationships of charity, brotherhood, solidarity and justice (cf. Phlm 16-17; *Didache*; *Letter to Barnabas*; St Justin, *Dialogues*, 11, 2). The life of the early Christian communities and those of the patristic period are also examples. Along these lines, we should certainly refer to authors like St Ambrose and St John Chrysostom, who knew how to stress the social consequences of what the Gospel requires and to respond to the different and new situations which Christians had to face at the time. Since the early centuries, Christians have been involved in social life, in order to meet the needs arising in their time. One thinks in particular of the social reflection and activity of the fourth century, due in particular to Melania the Elder and to Rufinus, Palladius and Innocent the Italian, to Melania the Younger and her husband Pinian in the vicinity of Jerusalem, as Basil of Caesarea tells us; and to St Jerome and to Paula in the vicinity of Bethlehem, as well as of the many activities in the region of Antioch and Damascus.

4. Political life is the largest field for charity and solidarity. However, "a charity that loves and serves the person can never be separated from justice" (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici*, n. 42), for, as St Louis stressed, justice is the most important quality of rulers (cf. *Instructions to his eldest son Philip*). For their part, the lay faithful "are never to relinquish their participation in 'public life', that is, in the many different economic, social, legislative, administrative and cultural areas which are intended to promote organically and institutionally the common good" (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici*, n. 42). This had already been stressed in a text of the early Church regarding Christians: "the place God has assigned to them is so noble that they are not allowed to desert it" (*Letter to Diognetus*, n. 6). In prayer before God, Christians become aware of their mission, discern what they should do and find the strength to do it. Involvement in the *res publica* also requires that particular attention be paid to every person and humble service rendered to the whole group of brethren, which means service to the common good, with a particularly keen concern for integrity and honesty. In fact, every social function presupposes the growth of one's interior life, which directs one's action and gives it depth and true meaning.

5. In its long history, from St Martin of Tours to St Vincent de Paul, your country was able to discover in its midst many instances of admirable dedication to the good of the poor and the most disadvantaged. With the new challenges to be faced in the coming millennium, once again France will be sure to inspire people who are aware that they must make full use of their Christian ability to work in "their own field of evangelizing activity ... the vast and complicated world of politics,

society and economics, but also the world of culture, of the sciences and the arts, of international life, of the mass media. It also includes other realities which are open to evangelization, such as human love, the family, the education of children and adolescents, professional work" (Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi*, n. 70). Building this world and imbuing social relations with new vitality are a responsibility entrusted to men and women by God; they open people to hope, for the building of the earthly city is an active preparation for the coming of a new world, a sign of the kingdom to come (cf. *Didache*, 16).

6. Human beings are called to work in ever closer collaboration at all levels of society and to promote the fundamental rights of every human being. Everyone has his place in the city and must have his share of responsibility in building the common house, in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity which the Popes have considerably developed (cf. Leo XIII, *Rerum novarum*, n. 2; Pius XI, *Quadragesimo anno*). In this regard, how can we forget the primordial value of the married couple and the family, which is the basic cell of society? When fundamental principles are not observed, when positive law is no longer based on the natural law, it is clear that "the life of society itself is gradually jeopardized, threatened and doomed to decay" (Encyclical *Veritatis splendor*, n. 101). It is up to the lawful authorities to ensure the proper functioning of State structures, openness in public administration, impartiality in public service, the just and honest use of public funds, the rejection of illicit means to gain or preserve power, in virtue of the value of the person and objective moral demands (cf. *ibid.*). One notes that "in too many societies, including in Europe, those in positions of responsibility seem to have abdicated in the face of the demands of a political ethic which takes into account man's transcendence and the relative nature of systems of social organization. It is time that they joined together and conformed to certain moral demands which concern the public powers just as much as the citizens" (*Address to the Diplomatic Corps*, 15 January 1994, n. 8; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 19 Jan. 1994, p. 8). Our contemporaries must be able to have new trust in the value of political life, which is a bulwark against financial and economic totalitarianism.

7. On the eve of the coming millennium, Christians are called to play a leading role in this new world by striving to break new ground in the promotion of justice and human dignity, and in building with all people of good will a society that respects every human being. Their duty is to show that human and Christian values are the basis of the social structure, and that the freedom of religion and the Church are primordial liberties paving the way to respect for the other freedoms, which must serve the betterment of individual lives and not the unbridled search for power or money. The danger of ideologies, from communism to liberalism, which paralyze societies and constantly increase the disparities between individuals and peoples, should also be stressed.

Christians are called to be watchmen on the ramparts

8. The century now ending has seen an important development of Christian social commitment in your country; one need only think of such great Christian figures as Jean Le Cour Grandmaison,

Émile Marcesche, Robert Garrie, Joseph Folliet, Madeleine Delbrêl, Frs Godin, Daniel and Guérin, Raoul Follereau, Edmond Michelet, Robert Schumann, Jacques Maritain, Fr Gaston Fessard, Mons. Jean Rodmain and Bl. Frédéric Ozanam. I encourage you to continue the work undertaken by your precursors, and to continue to play an active role in public life; thus our contemporaries will be provided with what they need to analyze the present situation and to find new energy to fulfil their mission in present-day society. The Church is also counting on you to participate in the formation of consciences and to give young people the civic education that will make them responsible citizens who will be ready one day to assume their commitments in serving their country.

Like the prophet (cf. *Is* 21: 11-12), Christians engaged in social life are called to be watchmen on the ramparts who must discern the expectations and hopes of people in these times and always have the courage to defend human beings and the essential values for building society. Vigilance is necessary so that individuals and peoples are not subjected to oppressive political, economic or social structures. Likewise, each Christian is called to fidelity in carrying out his civic duty and his daily mission, thereby showing the value of service to one's brethren inherent in every action in the earthly city.

As I entrust the meeting of the *1999 Social Weeks* to the intercession of the saints of your land, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing to the organizers, all the participants and all their loved ones.

From the Vatican, 17 November 1999.

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