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Hemicycle of Saint Bernadette's Church
Meeting with French Bishops

Official translation - English

Venerable Brother Cardinals,
Dear Brother Bishops,

This is the first time since the beginning of my pontificate that I have had the joy of meeting all of you together. I offer cordial greetings to your President, Cardinal André Vingt-Trois, and I thank him for the kind words he has addressed to me in your name. I am also pleased to greet the Vice-Presidents, as well as the General Secretary and his staff. I warmly greet each one of you, my brothers in the episcopate, who have come here from every part of France and from overseas. (I include here Archbishop François Garnier of Cambrai, who is today celebrating in Valenciennes the Millennium of Our Lady of Saint-Cordon).

I am happy to be among you this evening here in the hemicycle of Saint Bernadette's Church, where you habitually come together for prayer and for your meetings, where you express your concerns and your hopes, where you hold your discussions and your reflections. This hall is in a privileged location close to the grotto and the Marian Basilicas. Of course you regularly encounter the Successor of Peter in Rome on your *ad limina* visits, but this occasion that brings us together here has been given to us as a grace, to reaffirm the close links that unite us through our sharing in the same priesthood that issues directly from the priesthood of Christ the Redeemer. I encourage you to continue working in unity and trust, in full communion with Peter, who has come in order to strengthen your faith. Your concerns at present are manifold! I know that you are committed to working within the new framework established by the reorganization of ecclesiastical provinces, and I rejoice that it should be so. I would like to take this opportunity to reflect with you on some topics that I know are at the centre of your attention.

The Church – one, holy, catholic and apostolic – has given birth to you in Baptism. She has called you to her service; you have given her your lives, firstly as deacons and priests, then as Bishops. I express my deep appreciation for this gift of yourselves: despite the magnitude of the task, which underscores its honour – *honor, onus!* – you carry out with fidelity and humility the triple task towards the flock entrusted to you of teaching, governing, sanctifying, in light of the Constitution *Lumen Gentium* (nos. 25-28) and the Decree *Christus Dominus*. As successors of the Apostles, you represent Christ at the head of the dioceses which have been entrusted to you, and you strive to be true to the portrait of the Bishop sketched by Saint Paul; you seek to grow constantly in this path, so as to be ever more “hospitable, lovers of goodness, masters of yourselves, upright, holy and self-controlled; holding firm to the sure word as taught, able to give instruction in sound doctrine” (cf. *Tit* 1:8-9). The Christian people must regard you with affection and respect. From its origins, Christian tradition has insisted on this point: “All those who belong to God and Jesus Christ, stand by their Bishop”, said Saint Ignatius of Antioch (*Letter to the Philadelphians*, 3:2), and he added: “When someone is sent by the master of a house to manage his household for him, it is our duty to give him the same kind of reception as we should give to the sender” (*Letter to the Ephesians*, 6:1). Your mission as spiritual leaders consists, then, in creating the necessary conditions for the faithful to “sing aloud to the Father with one voice through Jesus Christ” (*ibid.*, 4:2), and in this way to make their lives an offering to God.

You are rightly convinced that, if every baptized person is to grow in desire for God and in understanding of life's meaning, catechesis is of fundamental importance. The two principal instruments at your disposal – the Catechism of the Catholic Church and the Catechism of the Bishops of France – are like precious jewels. They offer a harmonious synthesis of the Catholic faith and they ensure that the preaching of the Gospel is truly faithful to the riches that it contains. Catechesis is not first and foremost a question of method, but of content, as the name itself indicates: it is about an organic presentation (*kat-echein*) of the whole of Christian revelation, in such a way as to make available to minds and hearts the word of him who gave his life for us. In this way, catechesis causes to resound within the heart of every human being a unique call that is ceaselessly renewed: “Follow me” (*Mt* 9:9). Diligent preparation of catechists will allow integral transmission of the faith, after the example of Saint Paul, the greatest catechist of all time, whom we regard with particular

admiration in this bimillennium of his birth. In the midst of his apostolic concerns, he had this to say: “For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own likings, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths” (2 *Tim* 4:3-4). Recognizing the truth of his predictions, you strive with humility and perseverance to be faithful to his recommendations: “Preach the word, be urgent in season and out of season ... be unflinching in patience and in teaching” (2 *Tim* 4:2).

In order to accomplish this task effectively, you need co-workers. For this reason, priestly and religious vocations deserve to be encouraged more than ever. I have been informed of the initiatives that have been taken with faith in this area, and I hasten to offer my full support to those who are not afraid, as Christ was not afraid, to invite the young and not so young to place themselves at the service of the Master who is here, calling (cf. *Mt* 11:28). I would like to offer warm thanks and encouragement to all families, parishes, Christian communities and ecclesial movements, which provide the fertile soil that bears the good fruit (cf. *Mt* 13:8) of vocations. In this context, I wish to acknowledge the countless prayers of true disciples of Christ and of his Church. These include priests, men and women religious, the elderly, the sick, as well as prisoners, who for decades have offered prayers to God in obedience to the command of Jesus: “Pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest” (*Mt* 9:38). The Bishop and the communities of the faithful must play their part in promoting and welcoming priestly and religious vocations, relying on the grace of the Holy Spirit in order to carry out the necessary discernment. Yes, dear Brothers in the episcopate, continue inviting people to the priesthood and the religious life, just as Peter let down the nets at the Master’s order, when he had spent the whole night fishing without catching anything (cf. *Lk* 5:5).

It can never be said often enough that the priesthood is indispensable to the Church, for it is at the service of the laity. Priests are a gift from God for the Church. Where their specific missions are concerned, priests cannot delegate their functions to the faithful. Dear Brothers in the episcopate, I urge you to continue helping your priests to live in profound union with Christ. Their spiritual life is the foundation of their apostolic life. You will gently exhort them to daily prayer and to the worthy celebration of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist and Reconciliation, as Saint Francis de Sales did for his priests. Every priest should be able to feel happiness in serving the Church. In the school of the Curé d’Ars, a son of your land and patron of pastors throughout the world, constantly reiterate that the greatest thing a man can do is to give the body and blood of Christ to the faithful and to forgive their sins. Seek to be attentive to their human, intellectual and spiritual formation, and to their means of subsistence. Try, despite the weight of your onerous tasks, to meet them regularly and know how to receive them as brothers and friends (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 28; *Christus Dominus*, 16). Priests need your affection, your encouragement and your solicitude. Be close to them and have particular care for those who are in difficulties, sick or elderly (cf. *Christus Dominus*, 16). Do not forget that they are – as the Second Vatican Council teaches, quoting the magnificent expression used by Saint Ignatius of Antioch in his Letter to the Magnesians – “the spiritual crown of the Bishop” (*Lumen Gentium*, 41).

Liturgical worship is the supreme expression of priestly and episcopal life, just as it is of catechetical teaching. Your duty to sanctify the faithful people, dear Brothers, is indispensable for the growth of the Church. In the *Motu Proprio* “*Summorum Pontificum*”, I was led to set out the conditions in which this duty is to be exercised, with regard to the possibility of using the missal of Blessed John XXIII (1962) in addition to that of Pope Paul VI (1970). Some fruits of these new arrangements have already been seen, and I hope that, thanks be to God, the necessary pacification of spirits is already taking place. I am aware of your difficulties, but I do not doubt that, within a reasonable time, you can find solutions satisfactory for all, lest the seamless tunic of Christ be further torn. Everyone has a place in the Church. Every person, without exception, should be able to feel at home, and never rejected. God, who loves all men and women and wishes none to be lost, entrusts us with this mission by appointing us shepherds of his sheep. We can only thank him for the honour and the trust that he has placed in us. Let us therefore strive always to be servants of unity!

What are the other areas that require particular attention? The answers probably vary from one diocese to another, but there is certainly one problem which arises with particular urgency everywhere: the situation of the family. We know that marriage and the family are today experiencing real turbulence. The words of the Evangelist about the boat in the storm on the lake may be applied to the family: “waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already filling” (*Mk* 4:37). The factors which brought about this crisis are well known, and there is no need to list them here. For several decades, laws in different countries have been relativizing its nature as the primordial cell of society. Often they are seeking more to adapt to the *mores* and demands of particular individuals or groups, than to promote the common good of society. The stable union of a man and a woman, ordered to building earthly happiness through the birth of children given by God, is no longer, in the minds of certain people, the reference point for conjugal commitment. However, experience shows that the family is the foundation on which the whole of society rests. Moreover, Christians know that the family is also the living cell of the Church. The more the family is steeped in the spirit and values of the Gospel, the more the Church herself will be enriched by them and the better she will fulfil her vocation. I recognize and encourage warmly the efforts you are making to support the various associations active in assisting families. You have reason to uphold firmly, even at the cost of opposing prevailing trends, the principles which constitute the strength and the greatness of the sacrament of marriage. The Church wishes to remain utterly faithful to the mandate entrusted to her by her Founder, her Master and Lord, Jesus Christ. She does not cease to repeat with him: “What God has joined together, let not man put asunder!” (*Mt* 19:6). The Church did not give herself this mission: she received it. To be sure, none can deny that certain families experience trials, sometimes very painful ones. Families in difficulty must be supported, they must be helped to understand the greatness of

marriage, and encouraged not to relativize God's will and the laws of life which he has given us. A particularly painful situation concerns those who are divorced and remarried. The Church, which cannot oppose the will of Christ, firmly maintains the principle of the indissolubility of marriage, while surrounding with the greatest affection those men and women who, for a variety of reasons, fail to respect it. Hence initiatives aimed at blessing irregular unions cannot be admitted. The Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* has indicated a way open to the fruit of reflection carried out with respect for truth and charity.

Young people, I know well dear Brothers, are at the centre of your concerns. You devote much of your time to them, and you are right to do so. As you know, I have recently encountered a great multitude of them in Sydney, in the course of World Youth Day. I appreciated their enthusiasm and their capacity to dedicate themselves to prayer. Even while living in a world which courts them and flatters their base instincts, and carrying, as they do, the heavy burdens handed down by history, the young retain a freshness of soul which has elicited my admiration. I appealed to their sense of responsibility by urging them always to draw support from the vocation given them by God on the day of their Baptism. "Our strength lies in what Christ wants from us", Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger used to say. In the course of his first journey to France, my venerable Predecessor delivered an address to the young people of your country which has lost none of its relevance, and which was received at the time with unforgettable fervour. "Moral permissiveness does not make people happy", he proclaimed at the *Parc des Princes*, amid thunderous applause. The good sense which inspired the healthy reaction of his hearers is still alive. I ask the Holy Spirit to speak to the hearts of all the faithful and, more generally, of all your compatriots, so as to give them – or to restore to them – the desire for a life lived in accordance with the criteria of true happiness.

At the Élysée Palace on Friday, I spoke of the uniqueness of the French situation, which the Holy See wishes to respect. I am convinced, in fact, that nations must never allow what gives them their particular identity to disappear. The fact that different members of the same family have the same father and mother does not mean that they are undifferentiated subjects: they are actually persons with their own individuality. The same is true for countries, which must take care to preserve and develop their particular culture, without ever allowing it to be absorbed by others or swamped in a dull uniformity. "The Nation is in fact"—to take up the words of Pope John Paul II—"the great community of men who are united by various ties, but above all, precisely by culture. The Nation exists 'through' culture and 'for' culture, and it is therefore the great educator of men in order that they may 'be more' in the community" (Address to UNESCO, 2 June 1980, no. 14). From this perspective, drawing attention to France's Christian roots will permit each inhabitant of the country to come to a better understanding of his or her origin and destiny. Consequently, within the current institutional framework and with the utmost respect for the laws that are in force, it is necessary to find a new path, in order to interpret and live from day to day the fundamental values on which the Nation's identity is built. Your President has intimated that this is possible. The social and political presuppositions of past mistrust or even hostility are gradually disappearing. The Church does not claim the prerogative of the State. She does not wish to take its place. She is a community built on certain convictions; she is aware of her responsibility for the whole and cannot remain closed within herself. She speaks freely, and enters into dialogue with equal freedom, in her desire to build up a shared freedom, so that, with due regard for their legitimate diversity in nature and function, the ethical forces of State and Church can work together to allow the individual to thrive, for the sake of building a harmonious society. I congratulate you on the existence for some time of the forum for dialogue, which facilitates relations with the State. A number of issues, preparing the ground for others to be added as the need arises, have already been studied and resolved to universal satisfaction. Thanks to a healthy collaboration between the political community and the Church, made possible through an acknowledgment and respect for the independence and autonomy of each within their particular spheres, a service is rendered to mankind which aims at his full personal and social development. Several points—as well as others in development which will be added as the need arises—have already been studied and resolved within the "Appeal for Dialogue between the Church and the State". The Apostolic Nunzio, in virtue of his own mission and in the name of the Holy See, naturally takes part in these initiatives, as he is called to follow actively the life of the Church and its situation within society.

As you know, my predecessors – Blessed John XXIII, who was once Nuncio in Paris, and Pope Paul VI – decided to establish Secretariats which, in 1988, became the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. Quickly added to these were the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews and the Commission for Religious Relations with Muslims. These structures in some sense constitute the institutional and conciliar recognition of countless earlier initiatives and accomplishments. Similar commissions or councils exist within your Episcopal Conference and your dioceses. Their existence and activity demonstrate the Church's desire to move forward by developing bilateral dialogue. The recent Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue has highlighted the fact that authentic dialogue requires, as fundamental conditions, good formation for those who promote it, and enlightened discernment in order to advance step by step in discovering the Truth. The goal of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, which naturally differ in their respective nature and finality, is to seek and deepen a knowledge of the Truth. It is therefore a noble and obligatory task for every believer, since Christ himself is the Truth. The building of bridges between the great ecclesial Christian traditions, and dialogue with other religious traditions, demand a real striving for mutual understanding, because ignorance destroys more than it builds. Moreover, only the Truth makes it possible to live authentically the dual commandment of Love which our Saviour left us. To be sure, one must follow closely the various initiatives that are undertaken, so as to discern which ones favour reciprocal knowledge and respect, as well as the

promotion of dialogue, and so as to avoid those which lead to *impasses*. Good will is not enough. I believe it is good to begin by listening, then moving on to theological discussion, so as to arrive finally at witness and proclamation of the faith itself (cf. *Doctrinal Note on certain aspects of Evangelization*, no. 12, 3 December 2007). May the Holy Spirit grant you the discernment which must characterize every Pastor. As Saint Paul recommends: “Test everything; hold fast what is good!” (1 Th 5:21). The globalized, multicultural and multireligious society in which we live is a God-given opportunity to proclaim Truth and practice Love so as to reach out to every human being without distinction, even beyond the limits of the visible Church.

The year preceding my election to the Chair of Peter, I had the joy of coming to your country to preside at the ceremonies commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of the Normandy landings. Seldom as on that occasion have I sensed the attachment of the sons and daughters of France to the land of their ancestors. France was then celebrating its temporal liberation, at the conclusion of a cruel war which had claimed countless victims. Now, and above all, it is time to work towards a genuine spiritual liberation. Man is always in need of liberation from his fears and his sins. Man must ceaselessly learn or relearn that God is not his enemy, but his infinitely good Creator. Man needs to know that his life has a meaning, and that he is awaited, at the conclusion of his earthly sojourn, so as to share for ever in Christ’s glory in heaven. Your mission is to bring the portion of the People of God entrusted to your care to recognize this glorious destiny. Please be assured of my admiration and my gratitude for all that you do in order to achieve this. Please be assured of my daily prayers for each of you. Please believe that I unceasingly ask the Lord and his Mother to guide you on your path.

With heartfelt joy, I entrust you, dear Brothers in the episcopate, to Our Lady of Lourdes and to Saint Bernadette. God’s power has always been manifested in weakness. The Holy Spirit has always cleansed what is soiled, watered what is arid, straightened what is crooked. Christ the Saviour, who has chosen to make us instruments for communicating his love to men, will never cease to make you grow in faith, hope and love, so as to give you the joy of bringing to him a growing number of the men and women of our day. In entrusting you to the power of the Redeemer, I impart to all of you, from my heart, an affectionate Apostolic Blessing.
