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FRANCE - PARIS - 12.09.2008
Elysée
Meeting with Authorities of State

Official translation - English

Mr President,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Friends,

Standing here on French soil for the first time since Providence called me to the See of Peter, I am moved and honoured by the warm reception which you have extended to me. I am particularly grateful to you, Mr President, for the cordial invitation to visit your country and for the courteous words of welcome which you have just offered me. The visit which Your Excellency paid to me in the Vatican nine months ago is still fresh in my memory. Through you I extend my greetings to all the men and women who live in this country, which boasts a history of a thousand years, a present marked by a wealth of activity, and a future of promise. I wish them to know that France is often at the heart of the Pope's prayers; he cannot forget all that she has contributed to the Church in the course of twenty centuries! The principal reason for my visit is the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the apparitions of the Virgin Mary at Lourdes. It is my desire to join the multitude of countless pilgrims from the whole world who during this year are converging on the Marian shrine, filled with faith and love. It is this faith and this love that I will celebrate here in your land during these four days of grace which have been granted to me.

My pilgrimage to Lourdes has included a stop in Paris. Your capital city is familiar to me, and I know it well. I have stayed here often and over the years, because of my studies and in my former roles, developing good personal and intellectual friendships. I return with joy, glad to have this occasion to pay tribute to the impressive heritage of culture and faith that has shaped your country's outstanding history, and has nurtured great servants of the Nation and the Church, whose teaching and example have naturally reached far beyond the geographical borders of your nation, leaving their mark on the course of world history. During your visit to Rome, Mr President, you called to mind that the roots of France – like those of Europe – are Christian. History itself offers sufficient proof of this: from its origins, your country received the Gospel message. Even though documentary evidence is sometimes lacking, the existence of Christian communities in Gaul is attested from a very early period: it is moving to recall that the city of Lyons already had a Bishop in the mid-second century, and that Saint Irenaeus, the author of *Adversus Haereses*, gave eloquent witness there to the vigour of Christian thought. Saint Irenaeus came from Smyrna to preach faith in the Risen Christ. This Bishop of Lyons spoke Greek as his mother tongue. Could there be a more beautiful sign of the universal nature and destination of the Christian message? The Church, established at an early stage in your country, played a civilizing role there to which I am pleased to pay tribute on this occasion. You spoke of it yourself, during your address at the Lateran Palace last December. The transmission of the culture of antiquity through monks, professors and copyists, the formation of hearts and spirits in love of the poor, the assistance given to the most deprived by the foundation of numerous religious congregations, the contribution of Christians to the establishment of the institutions of Gaul, and later France, all of this is too well known for me to dwell on it. The thousands of chapels, churches, abbeys and cathedrals that grace the heart of your towns or the tranquillity of your countryside speak clearly of how your fathers in faith wished to honour him who had given them life and who sustains us in existence.

Many people, here in France as elsewhere, have reflected on the relations between Church and State. Indeed, Christ had already offered the basic criterion upon which a just solution to the problem of relations between the political sphere and the religious sphere could be found. He does this when, in answer to a question, he said: "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (*Mk 12:17*). The Church in France currently benefits from a "regime of freedom". Past suspicion has been gradually transformed into a serene and positive dialogue that continues to grow stronger. A new instrument of dialogue has been in place since 2002, and I have much confidence in its work, given the mutual good will. We know that there are still some areas open to dialogue, which we will have to pursue and redevelop step by step with determination and patience. You yourself, Mr President, have used the expression "*laïcité positive*" to

characterize this more open understanding. At this moment in history when cultures continue to cross paths more frequently, I am firmly convinced that a new reflection on the true meaning and importance of *laïcité* is now necessary. In fact, it is fundamental, on the one hand, to insist on the distinction between the political realm and that of religion in order to preserve both the religious freedom of citizens and the responsibility of the State towards them; and, on the other hand, to become more aware of the irreplaceable role of religion for the formation of consciences and the contribution which it can bring to—among other things—the creation of a basic ethical consensus within society.

The Pope, as witness of a God who loves and saves, strives to be a sower of charity and hope. All of human society needs hope. This hope is all the more necessary in today's world which offers few spiritual aspirations and few material certainties. My greatest concern is for young people. Some of them are struggling to find the right direction or are suffering from a loss of connection to family life. Still others are testing out the limits of religious communitarianism. Sometimes on the margins and often left to themselves, they are vulnerable and must come to terms on their own with a reality that often overwhelms them. It is necessary to offer them a sound educational environment and to encourage them to respect and assist others if they are to develop serenely towards the age of responsibility. The Church can offer her own specific contribution in this area. I am also concerned by the social situation in the Western world, marked sadly by a surreptitious widening of the distance between rich and poor. I am certain that just solutions can be found that go beyond the necessary immediate assistance and address the heart of the problems, so as to protect the weak and promote their dignity. The Church, through her many institutions and works, together with many other associations in your country, often attempts to deal with immediate needs, but it is the State as such which must enact laws in order to eradicate unjust structures. From a broader perspective, Mr President, I am also concerned about the state of our planet. With great generosity, God has entrusted to us the world that he created. We must learn to respect and protect it more. It seems to me that the time has come for more constructive proposals so as to guarantee the good of future generations.

Your country's Presidency of the European Union gives France the opportunity to bear witness—in accord with her noble tradition—to human rights and to their promotion for the good of individuals and society. When Europeans see and experience personally that the inalienable rights of the human person from conception to natural death – rights to free education, to family life, to work, and naturally those concerned with religion – when Europeans see that these rights, which form an inseparable unity, are promoted and respected, then they will understand fully the greatness of the enterprise that is the European Union, and will become active artisans of the same. The responsibility entrusted to you, Mr President, is not easy. These are uncertain times, and it is an arduous task to find the right path among the meanderings of day-to-day social, economic, national and international affairs. In particular, as we face the danger of a resurgence of old suspicions, tensions, and conflicts among nations—which we are troubled to witness today—France, which historically has been sensitive to reconciliation between peoples, is called to help Europe build up peace within her borders and throughout the world. In this regard, it is important to promote a unity that neither can nor desires to become a uniformity, but is able to guarantee respect for national differences and different cultural traditions, which amount to an enrichment of the European symphony, remembering at the same time that “national identity itself can only be achieved in openness towards other peoples and through solidarity with them” (*Ecclesia in Europa*, 112). I express my confidence that your country will contribute increasingly to the progress of this age towards serenity, harmony and peace.

Mr President, dear friends, I wish to express once again my gratitude for this gathering. Be assured of my fervent prayers for your beautiful country, that God may grant her peace and prosperity, freedom and unity, equality and fraternity. I entrust these prayers to the maternal intercession of the Virgin Mary, principal patron of France. May God bless France and all her people!
