

## Official translation - English

Mr Prime Minister,  
 Dear Brother Cardinals and Bishops,  
 Civil and Political Authorities,  
 Ladies and Gentlemen!

As I depart – not without regret – from French soil, I am most grateful to you for coming to bid me farewell, thereby giving me the opportunity to say one last time how much this journey to your country has gladdened my heart. Through you, Mr Prime Minister, I greet the President of the Republic and all the members of the Government, as well as the civil and military Authorities who have spared no effort to contribute to the smooth progress of these grace-filled days. I hasten to express my sincere gratitude to my brothers in the episcopate, especially to Cardinal Vingt-Trois and Bishop Perrier, as well as to all the members and staff of the Bishops' Conference of France. It is good to be here among friends. I also thank warmly the mayors and the municipalities of Paris and Lourdes. I remember too the members of law enforcement and all the countless volunteers who have offered their time and expertise. Everyone has worked devotedly and whole-heartedly for the successful outcome of my four days in your country. Thank you very much.

My journey has been like a diptych, the first panel of which was Paris, a city that I **know rather** well and the scene for several important meetings. I had the opportunity to celebrate Mass in the prestigious setting of the *Esplanade des Invalides*. There I met a vibrant people, proud of their firm faith; I came to encourage them to persevere courageously in living out the teaching of Christ and his Church. I was also able to pray Vespers with the priests, men and women religious, and with the seminarians. I wanted to affirm them in their vocation in the service of God and neighbour. I also spent an all too brief yet intense moment with the young people on the square in front of Notre Dame. Their enthusiasm and affection are most encouraging. And how can I fail to recall here the prestigious encounter with the world of culture at the *Institut de France* and the *Collège des Bernardins*? As you know, I consider culture and its proponents to be the privileged vehicles of dialogue between faith and reason, between God and man.

The second panel of the diptych was an emblematic place which attracts and fascinates every believer. Lourdes is like a light in the darkness of our groping to reach God. Mary opened there a gate towards a hereafter which challenges and charms us. *Maria, porta caeli!* I have set myself to learn from her during these three days. The Pope was duty bound to come to Lourdes to celebrate the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the apparitions. Before the Grotto of Massabielle, I prayed for all of you. I prayed for the Church. I prayed for France and for the world. The two Eucharistic celebrations in Lourdes gave me an opportunity to join the faithful pilgrims. Having become one of their number, I completed all four stages of the Jubilee Way, visiting the parish church, the *cachot* and the Grotto, and finally the Chapel of Hospitality. I also prayed with and for the sick who come here to seek physical relief and spiritual hope. God does not forget them, and neither does the Church. Like every faithful pilgrim, I wanted to take part in the torchlight procession and the Blessed Sacrament Procession. They carry aloft to God our prayers and our praise. Lourdes is also the place where the Bishops of France meet regularly in order to pray and celebrate Mass together, to reflect and to exchange views on their mission as pastors. I wanted to share with them my conviction that the times are favourable for a return to God.

Mr Prime Minister, Brother Bishops and dear friends, may God bless France! May harmony and human progress reign on her soil, and may the Church be the leaven in the dough that indicates with wisdom and without fear, according to her specific duty, who God is! The time has come for me to leave you. Perhaps I shall return some day to your beautiful country? It is indeed my desire, but a desire I leave in the hands of God. 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!

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