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Esplanade des Invalides
Holy Mass

Official translation - English

Dear Cardinal Vingt-Trois,
Dear Cardinals and Brother Bishops,
Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Jesus Christ gathers us together in this remarkable place, in the heart of Paris, on this day when the universal Church commemorates Saint John Chrysostom, one of the great Doctors of the Church, who, by the witness of his life and his teaching, effectively has shown Christians the road to follow. I greet with joy all the Authorities who have welcomed me to this noble city, especially the Archbishop of Paris, Cardinal André Vingt-Trois, whom I thank for the kind words addressed to me. I also greet all the Bishops, priests and deacons who have gathered around me for the celebration of Christ's sacrifice. I thank all the government officials who are here with us this morning, especially the Prime Minister. I assure them of my fervent prayers for the success of their noble mission in the service of their fellow citizens.

In the First Letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians, we discover, in this Pauline year inaugurated on 28 June last, how much the counsels given by the Apostle remain important today. "Shun the worship of idols" (*1 Cor 10:14*), he writes to a community deeply marked by paganism and divided between adherence to the newness of the Gospel and the observance of former practices inherited from its ancestors. Shunning idols: for Paul's contemporaries, this therefore meant ceasing to honour the divinities of Olympus, ceasing to offer them blood sacrifices. Shunning idols meant entering the school of the Old Testament Prophets, who denounced the human tendency to make false representations of God. As we read in Psalm 113, with regard to the statues of idols, they are merely "gold and silver, the work of human hands. They have mouths but they do not speak, they have eyes but they do not see, they have ears but they do not hear, they have nostrils but they do not smell" (*Ps 113:4-5*). Apart from the people of Israel, who had received the revelation of the one God, the ancient world was in thrall to the worship of idols. Strongly present in Corinth, the errors of paganism had to be denounced, for they constituted a powerful source of alienation and they diverted man from his true destiny. They prevented him from recognizing that Christ is the sole Saviour, the only one who points out to man the path to God.

This appeal to shun idols, dear brothers and sisters, is also pertinent today. Has not our modern world created its own idols? Has it not imitated, perhaps inadvertently, the pagans of antiquity, by diverting man from his true end, from the joy of living eternally with God? This is a question that all people, if they are honest with themselves, cannot help but ask. What is important in my life? What is my first priority? The word "idol" comes from the Greek and means "image", "figure", "representation", but also "ghost", "phantom", "vain appearance". An idol is a delusion, for it turns its worshipper away from reality and places him in the kingdom of mere appearances. Now, is this not a temptation in our own day – the only one we can act upon effectively? The temptation to idolize a past that no longer exists, forgetting its shortcomings; the temptation to idolize a future which does not yet exist, in the belief that, by his efforts alone, man can bring about the kingdom of eternal joy on earth! Saint Paul explains to the Colossians that insatiable greed is a form of idolatry (cf. *3:5*), and he reminds his disciple Timothy that love of money is the root of all evil. By yielding to it, he explains, "some have wandered away from the faith and pierced their hearts with many pangs" (*1 Tim 6:10*). Have not money, the thirst for possessions, for power and even for knowledge, diverted man from his true destiny?

Dear brothers and sisters, the question that today's liturgy places before us finds an answer in the liturgy itself, which we have inherited from our fathers in faith, and notably from Saint Paul himself (cf. *1 Cor 11:23*). In his commentary on this text, Saint John Chrysostom observes that Saint Paul severely condemns idolatry, which is a "grave fault", a "scandal", a real "plague" (*Homily 24 on the First Letter to the Corinthians, 1*). He immediately adds that this radical condemnation of idolatry is never a personal condemnation of the idolater. In our judgements, must we never confuse the sin, which is unacceptable, with the sinner, the state of whose conscience we cannot judge and who, in any case, is always capable of conversion and forgiveness. Saint Paul makes an appeal to the reason of his readers, to the reason of every human being – that powerful testimony to the presence of the Creator in the creature: "I speak as to sensible men; judge for yourselves what I say" (*1 Cor 10:15*). Never does God, of whom the Apostle is an authorized witness here, ask man to sacrifice his reason! Reason never enters into real contradiction with faith! The one God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – created our reason and gives us faith, proposing to our freedom that it be received as a precious gift. It is the worship of idols which diverts man from this perspective. Let us therefore ask God, who sees us and hears us, to help us purify ourselves from all idols, in order to arrive at the truth of our being, in order to arrive at the truth of his infinite being!

How do we reach God? How do we manage to discover or rediscover him whom man seeks at the deepest core of himself, even though he so often forgets him? Saint Paul asks us to make use not only of our reason, but above all our faith in order to discover him. Now, what does faith say to us? The bread that we break is a communion with the Body of Christ. The cup of blessing which we bless is a communion with the Blood of Christ. This extraordinary revelation comes to us from Christ and has been transmitted to us by the Apostles and by the whole Church for almost two thousand years: Christ instituted the sacrament of the Eucharist on the evening of Holy Thursday. He wanted his sacrifice to be presented anew, in an unbloody manner, every time a priest repeats the words of consecration over the bread and wine. Millions of times over the last twenty centuries, in the humblest chapels and in the most magnificent basilicas and cathedrals, the risen Lord has given himself to his people, thus becoming, in the famous expression of Saint Augustine, “more intimate to us than we are to ourselves” (cf. *Confessions*, III, 6, 11).

Brothers and sisters, let us give the greatest veneration to the sacrament of the Body and Blood of the Lord, the Blessed Sacrament of the real presence of the Lord to his Church and to all humanity. Let us take every opportunity to show him our respect and our love! Let us give him the greatest marks of honour! Through our words, our silences, and our gestures, let us never allow our faith in the risen Christ, present in the Eucharist, to lose its savour in us or around us! As Saint John Chrysostom said magnificently, “Let us behold the ineffable generosity of God and all the good things that he enables us to enjoy, when we offer him this cup, when we receive communion, thanking him for having delivered the human race from error, for having brought close to him those who were far away, for having made, out of those who were without hope and without God in the world, a people of brothers, fellow heirs with the Son of God” (*Homily 24 on the First Letter to the Corinthians*, 1). “In fact”, he continues, “what is in the cup is precisely what flowed from his side, and it is of this that we partake” (*ibid.*). There is not only partaking and sharing, there is “union”, says the Doctor whose name means “golden mouth”.

The Mass is the sacrifice of thanksgiving par excellence, the one which allows us to unite our own thanksgiving to that of the Saviour, the Eternal Son of the Father. It also makes its own appeal to us to shun idols, for, as Saint Paul insists, “you cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons” (*1 Cor* 10:21). The Mass invites us to discern what, in ourselves, is obedient to the Spirit of God and what, in ourselves, is attuned to the spirit of evil. In the Mass, we want to belong only to Christ and we take up with gratitude – with thanksgiving – the cry of the psalmist: “How shall I repay the Lord for his goodness to me?” (*Ps* 116:12). Yes, how can I give thanks to the Lord for the life he has given me? The answer to the psalmist’s question is found in the psalm itself, since the word of God responds graciously to its own questions. How else could we render thanks to the Lord for all his goodness to us if not by attending to his own words: “I will raise the cup of salvation, I will call on the name of the Lord” (*Ps* 116:13)?

To raise the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord, is that not the very best way of “shunning idols”, as Saint Paul asks us to do? Every time the Mass is celebrated, every time Christ makes himself sacramentally present in his Church, the work of our salvation is accomplished. Hence to celebrate the Eucharist means to recognize that God alone has the power to grant us the fullness of joy and teach us true values, eternal values that will never pass away. God is present on the altar, but he is also present on the altar of our heart when, as we receive communion, we receive him in the sacrament of the Eucharist. He alone teaches us to shun idols, the illusions of our minds.

Now, dear brothers and sisters, who can raise the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord in the name of the entire people of God, except the priest, ordained for this purpose by his Bishop? At this point, dear inhabitants of Paris and the outlying regions, but also those of you who have come from the rest of France and from neighbouring countries, allow me to issue an appeal, confident in the faith and generosity of the young people who are considering a religious or priestly vocation: do not be afraid! Do not be afraid to give your life to Christ! Nothing will ever replace the ministry of priests at the heart of the Church! Nothing will ever replace a Mass for the salvation of the world! Dear young and not so young who are listening to me, do not leave Christ’s call unanswered. Saint John Chrysostom, in his *Treatise on the Priesthood*, showed how sluggish man could be in responding, but he is nonetheless the living example of God’s action at the heart of a human freedom that allows itself to be shaped by his grace.

Finally, if we turn to the words that Christ left us in his Gospel, we shall see that he himself taught us to shun idolatry, by inviting us to build our house “on rock” (*Lk* 6:48). Who is this rock, if not he himself? Our thoughts, our words and our actions acquire their true dimension only if we refer them to the Gospel message: “Out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks” (*Lk* 6:45). When we speak, do we seek the good of our interlocutor? When we think, do we seek to harmonize our thinking with God’s thinking? When we act, do we seek to spread the Love which gives us life? Saint John Chrysostom again says, “now, if we all partake of the same bread, and if we all become this same substance, why do we not show the same charity? Why, for the same reason, do we not become utterly one and the same? ... O man, it is Christ who has come to seek you, you who were so far from him, in order to unite himself to you; and you, do you not wish to be united to your brother?” (*Homily 24 on the First Letter to the Corinthians*, no. 2).

Hope will always remain stronger than all else! The Church, built upon the rock of Christ, possesses the promises of eternal life, not because her members are holier than others, but because Christ made this promise to Peter: “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it” (*Mt* 16:18). In this unflinching hope in God’s eternal presence to the souls of each of us, in this joy of knowing that Christ is with us until the end of time, in this power that the Holy Spirit gives to all those who let themselves be filled with him, I entrust you, dear Christians of Paris and France, to the powerful and merciful action of the God of love who died for us upon the Cross and rose victorious on Easter morning. To all people of good will who are listening to me, I say once more, with Saint Paul: Shun the worship of idols, do not tire of doing good!

May God our Father bring you to himself and cause the splendour of his glory to shine upon you! May the only Son of God, our master and brother, reveal to you the beauty of his risen face! May the Holy Spirit fill you with his gifts and grant you the joy of knowing the peace and light of the Most Holy Trinity, now and for ever! Amen!