

EMBARGO

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SEPTEMBER 12, 2008

WELCOME ADDRESS, BERNARDINS COLLEGE

Most Holy Father,

Before all, I want to express our deep gratitude, since your visit to Paris means that you generously accepted to come over twenty-four hours early on your pilgrimage to Lourdes for the jubilee of the 150th anniversary of the Blessed Virgin Mary's apparitions to Bernadette.

You will also accept, I am sure, my mentioning and recollecting the figure of the late Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger to open this meeting. The project of the Bernardins College truly is his brainchild. He thought about it for a very long time. He spared nothing to make its implementation possible. With the substantial support of the State, of the city of Paris and of the Ile de France Region, this wonderful historic monument has been rehabilitated and restored in its original mission as a high place of culture. I believe that this would not have been achieved without Cardinal Lustiger's insight, determination and personal involvement.

Yet, if I have invited you to visit this splendid building and if it is a great joy that you should have accepted, this is obviously not only in order to congratulate ourselves on the legacy received from our fathers in the faith. The Bernardins project does not aim at resuscitating a medieval enterprise. Our goal is not to preserve a historic heritage, however attractive and prestigious it may be. The demand we have to meet at the beginning of the 21st century is not to replicate the University of the 13th century—or that of the 19th for that matter. The question rather is: how can our philosophical and theological heritage, as beautifully symbolized by this architectural masterpiece, help today's humankind formulate the fundamental questions that it cannot dodge? How can we contribute to shaping up answers to these questions through ceaseless dialogue with our contemporaries?

Please allow me to interpret your presence in this magnificent building as a sign that is given to us all on the place and role of Christian religions in the specific context of the European societies. The history of the growing awareness of the continent's identity, the successive experiments in communication between the nations of Europe as well as the experiences of divisions and confrontations—all this cannot be separated from the development of Christian life and thought, or from the dark hours of the division between East and West, or from the specifically occidental split at the time of the Reformation.

Over the last half-century Europe has been looking for its identity and more or less laboriously building itself up. But as it is becoming larger by accommodating ever more nations, cultural differences appear ever more profound and the question of a common ultimate goal turns out to be ever more pressing. What future for our continent? On what

anthropological and ethical bases can our union be strengthened? How is this going to help humankind?

We are convinced that Christian Wisdom can be of service in taking up this major challenge. Since your book, *The Christian Faith, Yesterday and Today*, was published here some forty years ago, many French people have known, most Holy Father, that these reflections are at the heart of your reflections and work. This is why we are happy to be given the opportunity to listen to you.

Among the people gathered here are the Minister of Culture, the Mayor of Paris, and numerous personalities. You can see an important delegation of the academies of the Institut de France, of which you have long been a prominent member, and whose Chancellor will presently greet you in the name of his colleagues. Also with us are representatives of the Muslim communities in France, to whom I am most grateful for their participation in this event, and a number of people involved in reflection on our society: academics, writers, artists, communicators, etc. I am happy that they should have all accepted my invitation.

How could we have dreamed of a better and more significant way to launch the Bernardins College on its mission?

+ André Cardinal VINGT-TROIS