

9 April 2018 - *Seul le prononcé fait foi*

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Address given by the President of the french Republic before the bishops of France.

Ministers,
Members of Parliament,
Your Excellency, Papal Nuncio,
Ambassadors,
Religious leaders,
Monseigneur,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to thank you most warmly, Monseigneur, and I would like to thank the Conférence des Evêques de France for this invitation to speak this evening, in such a special and beautiful place here at the Collège des Bernadins. I would like to thank managers and teams who work here.

In coming here tonight, Monseigneur, you and I have both braved the sceptics on all fronts. We chose to do this because we doubtless share the same vague feeling that the link between the Church and the State has been damaged and we both believe it is important to repair it.

The only means of achieving this is an open and honest dialogue.

This dialogue is essential and if I had to sum up my point of view, I would say that a Church which claims to be disinterested in worldly matters will not achieve its vocation; and a President of the Republic who claims to be disinterested in the Church and Catholics would not be doing his job.

The example of Colonel Beltrame with which you have just finished your address, Monseigneur, illustrates this point of view in a particularly enlightening way.

Many people tried to find the secrets behind his heroic gesture during the tragic day of 23 March: some believed it to be the acceptance of sacrifice rooted in military vocation; others believed it to be loyalty to the Republic fed by his Masonic background; while others, including his wife, interpreted his act as a translation of his ardent Catholic faith, ready for the ultimate trial of death.

In reality, these dimensions are so interlinked that it is impossible, and even futile, to untangle them, because this heroic behaviour reveals an individual in all their complexity who has committed.

But in France, which does not shy away from its mistrust of religions, I never heard a single voice protest against the obvious fact, etched into the core of our collective imagination, that when the most intense moment comes, when the challenge requires us to garner everything inside us to fight for France, the citizen aspect and the ardent catholic side burn with the same flame in a genuine believer.

I believe that the most indestructable ties between the French nation and Catholicism were forged in these moments where the true valour of men and women shone through. There is no need to go back to the cathedral builders and Jeanne d'Arc, recent history offers us thousands of examples from the Union Sacrée in 1914 to the resistance fighters of the 1940s, from the Justes to the refounders of the republic, from the Fathers of Europe to the inventors of modern unionism, from the eminently worthy seriousness which followed the assassination of Father Hamel to the death of Colonel Beltrame, France has indeed been strengthened by the commitment of Catholics.

I am not close-minded in saying this. Catholics wanted to serve and develop France, they accepted to die not just in the name of humanist ideals. Not just because of a secularised Judeo-Christian morality. But because they were carried by their faith in God and their religious practice.

Some might believe that by saying this I am going against the rules of laïcité. But at the end of the day, we also include martyrs and heroes from all faiths and our recent history has shown this once again, and including those without faith, who have found the source for complete sacrifice deep within them. Recognizing certain individuals does not mean diminishing others, and I believe that the aim of laïcité is definitely not to deny the spiritual aspects of life in favour of temporal aspects, nor is it to wrench from society the sacred aspect which

gives so much to our fellow citizens.

As Head of State, I am the guarantor of the freedom to believe and not believe, but I am neither the inventor nor the promoter of a State religion which substitutes divine transcendence with a Republican creed.

To voluntarily close my eyes to the spiritual dimension that the Catholics bring to their moral, intellectual, family, work and social lives would be to limit myself to a partial view of France; it would be to misunderstand this country, its history, its people; by remaining indifferent I would be failing to do my job properly. And I would be doing the same if I were to ignore all the religions that are present today in our country.

Indeed, it is because I refuse to be indifferent that I am aware to what extent the history that the State and the Church have shared for so long is now peppered with misunderstandings and reciprocal mistrust.

And not for the first time in our history. The Church naturally questions its relationship with politics on a constant basis, in this hesitation perfectly described by Marrou in his *Théologie de l'histoire*, and France's history has witnessed a series of moments where the Church was at the heart of the city of man and moments where it was outside the city gates.

But today, in this period of great social fragility, when even the fabric of the nation is at risk of falling apart, I believe it is my responsibility not to let Catholics' trust for politics and politicians erode away. I cannot accept such an abandonment. And I cannot let this disappointment get out of control.

Especially because the current situation is less the result of a decision made by the Church and more the result of several years where politicians profoundly misunderstood France's Catholics.

From one perspective, therefore, part of the political class doubtless overplayed the attachment to Catholics, for reasons which were often purely electoral. In so doing, we reduced the Catholics to a strange animal that we call the "Catholic electorate" which is, in reality, a sociology. We therefore prepared a sectarian vision which contradicts the diversity and vitality of the Church of France, but we also bypassed Catholicism's universal aspiration – as its name indicates – in favour of a relatively mediocre categorization exercise.

And from a different perspective, we gave every reason for not listening to the Catholics, relegating them through acquired mistrust and calculation to a militant minority which upsets Republican unanimity.

For biographical, personal and intellectual reasons, I have a higher opinion of Catholics. And I do not think it is healthy or good for politics to strive so determinedly to instrumentalize or ignore them, when what we need is dialogue and cooperation of a completely different sort, a different scale of contribution to the understanding of our time and action to ensure things move in the right direction.

This is what your eloquent statements clearly showed, Monseigneur. The concerns that you raise – and I will try to respond to or provide greater clarity on some of them – these concerns do not come from the imagination of certain individuals. Your questions are not limited to the interests of a restricted community. They are questions for all of us, for the whole nation, for the whole of humanity.

These questions interest the whole of France not because they are specifically Catholic, but because they are based on an idea of humans, their destiny, their vocation, which are at the heart of our immediate future. Because they aim to give meaning and points of reference to those who too often lack such things.

It is precisely because I plan to respond to these questions that I am here tonight. And to solemnly ask you not to feel like you are on the fringes of the Republic, but to get back the zest for the role that you have always played in this Republic.

I know that the issue of Europe's Christian roots has been the subject of debates just as long and subtle as the debate in another age on the sex of angels. And that your notion has been pushed aside by members of the European parliament. But, after all, the historical evidence sometimes dispenses with such symbols. And these roots are not important to us because they could just as well be dead. What is important is the lifeblood. I am convinced that the Catholic lifeblood should still contribute to bringing our country to life and should continue to do so.

It is because I want to clarify this that I came here tonight. To tell you that the Republic has great expectations for you. That the Republic expects very precisely, if you allow me, to make three donations: to give your wisdom, to give your commitment and to give your freedom.

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Our contemporary politics urgently needs to refind its attachment to humans or, to use the words of Mounier, the person. With the world the way it is going, we can no longer be happy with economic or scientific progress which does not question its impact on humankind and the world. This is what I tried to explain at the United Nations forum in New York and again at Davos and the Collège de France where I spoke about artificial intelligence: we need to give our action a focus, and this focus is humans.

It is not possible, however, to make progress towards this goal without crossing paths with Catholicism which has patiently been exploring this issue for centuries. It has been exploring it in its own way and in dialogue with other religions.

This questioning process takes the shape of an architecture, painting, philosophy, literature, in which everyone tries, in thousands of ways, to express human nature and the meaning of life. Pascal once said of the Christian religion that it was "Venerable, because it has perfect knowledge of man". Of course, other religions and philosophies have explored the mystery of mankind. But the aim of secularisation is not to put an end to the long Christian tradition.

Monseigneur, you have placed two current issues, bioethics and migration, at the heart of this questioning on the meaning of life, the place of humans and the way we give humans dignity.

You have therefore established an intimate link between issues that normal politics and morality would have dealt with separately. You believe that it is our duty to protect life, particularly when that life is defenceless. You see a link between the life of an unborn child, that of a person close to death and that of a refugee who has lost everything: a link of deprivation, nudity and absolute vulnerability. These individuals are exposed. They are utterly dependant on others, the hand which reaches out, the goodwill which will take care of them. These two issues get to the heart of our humanity and our understanding of human beings and we should all see the link between these two.

I have understood, Monseigneur, ladies and gentlemen, the concerns coming from the Catholic world and I would like to try this evening to provide my answer to this and share my beliefs and convictions with you.

Regarding migrants, we are sometimes criticized for not welcoming people with generosity and gentleness, and of letting worrying situations arise in retention centres or rejecting unaccompanied minors. We are even accused of letting police violence prosper.

But when we think about it, what are we actually doing? We are urgently trying to put an end to situations that we have inherited and which are developing due to the lack of rules, poor implementation of rules, or poor quality rules – and slow administrative processes also come to mind together with the conditions for refugee permits.

Our work, carried out every day by the Ministre d'État, is to get ourselves out of the legal fog in which people feel lost and hope in vain, who try to rebuild something here and are then deported, while others who could make their lives in France suffer from poor conditions in overcrowded centres.

We are trying to find the balance between law and humanity. The Pope has given a name to this balance, he called it "prudence", making this Aristotelian virtue, the virtue of the government, confronted of course with the human necessity to welcome people but also the political and legal need to accommodate and integrate. This is the aim of realistic humanism that I set. There will always be difficult situations. Sometimes there will be unacceptable situations and every time we must all do all we can to resolve them.

But I cannot forget that we also carry the responsibility of the often difficult territories where these refugees arrive. We know that the arrival of new populations plunge the local population into doubt, push them towards extreme political options and often lead to increasingly inward-looking attitudes due to people's natural self-protection instincts. This has given rise to a sort of daily worry of competing levels of misery.

We set ourselves the task, which is under permanent ethical tension, of respecting these principles, the principle of our humanism and not giving up especially to protect refugees. This is our moral duty and is part of our Constitution. We must clearly commit to maintain the Republican order and to ensure that this protection for the weakest does not lead to lack of standards and lack of judgement because there are also rules that must be respected and to ensure places are found, as was mentioned earlier, in reception centres. And in the most difficult situations, we must also accept that in playing our role in this misery, we cannot tackle it all without differentiating between situations. We must also ensure the national cohesion of the country where sometimes certain individuals no longer talk about this generosity that we are talking about this evening but only want to see the disturbing part of the other, and they foster this to advance their own projects.

It is precisely because we must uphold these sometimes contradictory principles in constant tension, that I wanted us to support realistic humanism and this is a decision I fully assume before you.

Your wisdom is needed to maintain this discourse of realist humanism in all areas, to involve those who can help us, to avoid discussions about worst-case scenarios and the rising fear which will continue to feed on this part of us because the massive influxes that you spoke of and which I mentioned just now will not go away anytime soon, they are the result of large-scale world imbalances.

Such imbalances, be they political conflicts, social and economic misery or climate challenges, will continue in the coming years and decades to drive mass migration which we will be forced to face up to. We must relentlessly keep focused on this objective, constantly try to keep to our principles in reality and I will not give precedence to either side of the debate on this issue. This would be to fall short of my responsibility.

As regards bioethics, we are often suspected of having a hidden agenda, of already knowing the outcome of a debate which will give new opportunities for assisted procreation. Opening the door to practices which will later become impossible to refuse, like surrogacy. Some believe that including representatives of the Catholic Church together with representatives of all faiths as I promised to do at the beginning of my term in office is a lure designed to dilute the Church's voice or take the Church hostage.

As you know, President, I decided that the opinion of the National Consultative Ethics Committee was not sufficient and that the opinions of religious leaders were necessary to complete the picture. And I also wanted this work on bioethical laws, which our legal system requires us to review, to be fed by a debate organized by the National Consultative Ethics Committee for all philosophical, religious and political families, a forum where our society can fully express itself.

I am convinced that this is not a simple problem which can be decided by a single law and as such we sometimes face deep moral and ethical debates which affect us all in the most intimate of ways. I hear the Church when it takes a stringent approach to the human basis of any technical progress; I hear your voice when you call for us not to distill everything down to purely technical methods whose limits you have clearly shown; I understand the key importance that you give in our society, family – or should I say families –, I also understand the need to reconcile the process of having children with plans that parents may have for their children.

We are also faced with a society where family structures are radically changing, where the child's status sometimes gets lost and where our citizens dream of having traditional-style family units from family models that are less traditional.

I understand these recommendations from Catholic bodies and associations, but once again, certain principles evoked by the Church come up against a contradictory and complex reality which divides Catholics themselves; every day the same Catholic associations and priests support single-parent families, divorced families, homosexual families, families that have used abortion, IVF and MAP, families who have a family member in a vegetative state, families where one believes and the other doesn't, bringing difficult spiritual and moral choices to families and I know that this is part of your daily life, too.

The Church tirelessly supports these delicate situations and tries to reconcile these principles and the reality. This is why I am not saying that the experience of reality defeats or invalidates the positions taken by the Church; I am simply saying that we should find a balance because society is open to all possibilities, but the manipulation and creation of living things cannot be extended infinitely without bringing into question humankind and life.

Politics and the Church therefore have a shared mission to get involved in reality, to face up to, I could say, the most temporal aspects of temporality, every day.

This is often hard, difficult and demanding and imperfect. And the solutions do not come from nowhere. They come from the frontier between this reality and a thought, a value system, a point of view on the world. They are often the result of an always precarious choice between the lesser of two evils which is also demanding and difficult.

This is why, by listening to the Church on these issues, we are not just shrugging our shoulders. We are listening to a voice which draws its strength from reality and the clarity from its thinking where reason dialogues with a transcendent image of humankind. We are listening to the Church with interest, with respect and we can even take on board many of its ideas. But this voice of the Church, we know it deep down, I know it deep down, that it cannot be injunctive. Because it is made from the humility of those who deal with the temporal. So this voice can only pose questions. And on all these issues and particularly the two issues that I have just spoken about, because they are the deep-rooted result of ethical tensions between our principles, sometimes our ideals and reality, we are brought back to the deep humility of our condition.

The State and the Church belong to two different institutional orders which do not carry out their missions on the same level. But both have an authority and even a jurisdiction. We have thus both forged our convictions and we have the duty to express them clearly, to set out the rules, because this is our duty of state. The path that we share could be reduced to a simple sharing of convictions.

But we are both aware that our duty goes beyond this. We know that our duty is to breathe life into the situations we serve, to grow the flame, even if it is difficult and especially when it is difficult.

We must constantly resist the temptation to act as simple managers of our responsibilities. This is why our discussions must be based not on the strength of certain convictions, but on the fragility of our doubts and what sometimes makes us feel helpless. We must dare to base our relationship on the sharing of uncertainties, the sharing of doubts and issues of humanity.

This is where our discussions have always been the most fruitful: in crisis situations, when faced with the unknown, with risk, in the shared knowledge of the next step, of the gamble to take. This is where the nation is most often benefitted by the wisdom of the Church, because the Church has been taking gambles, daring to take risks over the last centuries and millennia. This is how it has enriched the nation.

If you allow me to say so, this is the Catholic part of France. It is this part that, in the secular context, instills nevertheless the uneasy question of salvation, that each individual, whether they believe or not, will interpret in their own way, but for which each individual feels that this question puts their entire life on the line, the meaning of their life, its importance and the footprint that it will leave behind.

This perspective of salvation has, of course, totally disappeared from the daily life of contemporary societies, but this is not right and many signs show that it continues to exist deep down. Everyone has their way of talking about it, transforming it, dealing with it but the uncertainty of salvation is both at the root of meaning and the absolute aspects of our societies and makes even the most resolutely material lives tremble in the pictorial sense of the term. This is clear.

If you will allow me, I would like to cite Paul Ricoeur, who found the right words in a conference in Amiens in 1967: "keeping a distant goal for men and women, let's call it an ideal, in a moral sense and a hope in a religious sense".

That evening, in front of a public of both believers and non-believers, Paul Ricoeur invited his audience to go beyond what he called the "future without perspectives" with this sentence which I have no doubt will unite all of us here tonight: "Aiming for more, demanding more. That is hope; it always expects more than what can be done."

I therefore believe that the Church is not this entity that we too often caricature as the gatekeeper of good morals. It is this source of uncertainty that runs through life, and which has made discussions, questions, searches the heart itself of meaning, even among those who do not believe.

This is why the first gift that I ask of you is the humility to question, the gift of this wisdom which finds its roots in the question of humankind and thus in the questions that humankind asks.

Because this is the Church at its best; it is the Church that says "knock and it shall be opened unto you", which offers sanctuary and a friendly voice in a world where doubt, uncertainty and change are all around; where meaning always gets away from us and always reasserts itself; it is a Church which doesn't give lectures but which gives this wisdom of humility especially on these two issues that you wanted to talk about and that I am trying to tease out an answer to because we can only have a shared future and by looking to improve every day and accept a base constant of "disquiet" which goes with our action.

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Questioning does not mean refusing to act; on the contrary, it involves trying to ensure action is in line with the principles upon which it is based and it is this coherence between thought and action that is the key asset of this involvement that France expects you to have. This is the second gift that I wanted to talk about.

What aggrieves our country – I have already spoken about this – is not just the economic crisis, but relativism or even nihilism, everything that makes us think that it is no longer worth it. It is not worth studying, not worth working and especially not worth holding out a hand and getting involved in helping those that are bigger than us. Gradually, the system has enclosed our citizens in an attitude of "what is the point" by failing to genuinely pay for work done. by discouraging initiative. by poorly protecting the most fragile. by keeping the poorest

pay, not from love, by recognizing injustice, by freely processing the most negative, by keeping the poorest under house arrest and believing that the post-modern era in which we have all arrived is the era of great doubt in which we have given up on any absolute assurances.

It is in this context of reduced solidarity and hope that huge numbers of Catholics have turned towards associative work, towards action. You are now a major component of this part of the Nation which has decided to look after the other part – we saw this in the every moving first-hand accounts earlier – the part of society made up of the ill, the isolated, the relegated, the vulnerable, the abandoned, the handicapped, the prisoners, regardless of their ethnicity or religion. Bataille called this the “ill-fated part” terms which have sometimes been misused but which is an essential part of society because it is by this part that a society, a family, a life is judged, on its ability to recognize those who have taken a different route through life and have a different destination and to take action for these individuals. The French people do not always notice the scale of this change in Catholic action; you have changed from doing work similar to that of social workers to that of militant activists working with the fragile part of our country, regardless of whether the associations are explicitly Catholic or not, like the Restos du Coeur.

I fear that for too long politicians have behaved as if this commitment was taken for granted, as if it was normal, as if the sticking plaster placed over social suffering by the Catholics and many others cleared a certain public powerlessness.

I would like to commend with infinite respect all those who have chosen to get involved without counting the time or energy spent and I would also like to commend all those priests and clergy who have made this work their life-long mission and who work day in day out in France’s parishes to welcome, discuss and work in close quarters with the distress or woe or share in families’ joy during happy events. They also include the chaplains in our armed forces and prisons and I would like to commend their representatives; they too are committed individuals. And if you will allow me, I would like to welcome all those from other religions whose representatives are present here today who are also committed and share this committed community with you.

This commitment is vital for France and beyond the calls, injunctions and questions telling us to do more, to do better, I know, we all know, that the work that you do is far from a stop-gap solution but a part of the cement of our national cohesion. This gift of commitment is not only vital but exemplary. But I have come here to call upon you to go further still because as we all know, the energy given to this work in associations has also been largely taken away from political action.

I believe, however, that politics, despite how disappointing it may have been for some, how dry others may feel it is, needs the energy of committed individuals, your energy. It needs the energy of those who give meaning to their work and who put a form of hope at its centre. Now more than ever, political actions needs what philosopher Simone Weil called effectiveness or the ability to bring to life the fundamental principles which hold up moral and intellectual life and spiritual beliefs.

This is what the key figures of General de Gaulle, Georges Bidault, Robert Schuman, Jacques Delors and the great French minds who shed light on political action such as Clavel, Mauriac, Lubac or Marrou and I am not talking about a theocratic practice or a religious view of power but a Christian set of standards imported into the secular field of politics. This place today should be taken not because French politics needs its quota of Catholics, Protestants, Jewish or Muslims, no, nor because high-quality political leaders can only be recruited from people of faith but because this shared flame that I talked about before when I spoke about Arnaud Beltrame is part of our history and what has always guided our country. The withdrawing or putting this life under a bushel is not good news.

This is why, from where I am standing, from the point of view of a Head of State, from a secular point of view, I am concerned that those who work at the heart of French society, those who work to heal its wounds and console its sick, also need a voice on the political scene, on both the national and European political stage. What I want to call for tonight is your political involvement in our national debate and in our European debate because your faith is part of commitment that this debate needs and because, historically, you have always brought your ideas to the table because effectiveness means not disconnecting individual action from political and public action.

On this issue, I must mention the utmost clarity of the text proposed by the conference of bishops in November 2016 in the lead-up to the presidential election entitled “Restoring the meaning of politics”. I had founded En Marche several months previously and without wanting to start a debate, Monseigneur, about copyright, I read this sentence which struck me because it was so close to what led me in my work - I quote: “We cannot let our country see what it is based on risk being worn down badly, with all the consequences that a divided society can bring; we need to work together to refound society”.

The search for meaning, new examples of solidarity but also hope in Europe; this document lists everything that may lead a citizen to take action and it is addressed to Catholics by simply connecting faith with political

commitment in the following quote: "It would be dangerous to forget what built us or inversely, to dream of going back to an imaginary golden age or aspire to a Church of pures and a counter-culture located outside the world, looking down and judging".

For too long, the political field has become a place of shadow puppetry and still today, the political script too often uses the most stale and simplistic ideas, seemingly ignoring the winds of time and the demands placed on us by the return of the tragic to our contemporary world.

I think that we can create an effective form of politics, politics which gets away from ordinary cynicism to set out in real terms the first duty of politics: the dignity of humankind.

I believe in a political commitment which serves this dignity, which rebuilds it in places where it has been violated, which preserves it where it is under threat and which makes it the asset of each citizen. I believe in this political commitment which helps to restore the most important of dignities, the dignity of being able to live from one's work. I believe in this political commitment which helps to restore the most fundamental dignity, the dignity of the most fragile members of society; the dignity which refuses any social fatalism – and you heard of six fantastic examples earlier – a dignity which believes that political work and commitment also involves changing practices in society and its views.

The six individuals that we heard at the beginning of the evening are the voices of commitment, individuals who embody political commitment, individuals for whom it is enough to continue this path to reach other opportunities and I believe they are refusing fate, they have a desire to take care of others and above all we can tell from the way they speak a desire change points of view; that's what I mean by commitment in society, it's about giving your time, your energy, it's about believing that society is not just a dead body which can only be changed by public policies or texts or is only going in one direction as time passes; it's about believing that everything can be changed if we decide to work for it and to change perspectives through that work, to give others a chance but also to learn more about ourselves as we are changed by those we have in front of us.

We talk a lot today about inclusiveness; it isn't a particularly nice word and I am not sure that everyone really understands it. But it means this: in the work we are trying to do for autism, for handicap, what I want us to do to restore the dignity of our prisoners, what I want to work on for the dignity of the most fragile members of our society, we simply need to understand that there always others around us, for reasons within or without their control, who can above all contribute something to society. Go and look in a classroom or a crèche where we were a few days ago, where we look after children with autistic problems and you will see what they bring to the other children; and I want to tell you Sir, do not just think that we help you... we saw just now your brother's emotions for everything you have given him that no one else could have. This change in perspective can only be achieved by commitment and at the core of this commitment there is a profound, humanist, ethical indignation and our political society needs that. This commitment that you bring, I need it for our country just as I need it for our Europe because our main risk at the moment is anomie, lethargy, apathy.

Too many of our fellow citizens think that our progress can be taken for granted; they are forgetting the great changes currently facing our society and continent; they want to think that things were never any other way, forgetting that our Europe is just at the beginning of a golden period which only has just over 70 years of peace behind it following year upon year of disruptive wars; too many of our fellow citizens think that the fraternity that we are talking about is a question of public funds and public policy and that they do not have a key role to play.

All these fights that are at the heart of contemporary political commitment, the members of Parliament present here tonight are doing their best to bring them to fruition, be it fighting climate change, fighting for a Europe which protects and reviews its goals, for a fairer society. But this is not possible if they are not supported by a deep-rooted political commitment at all levels of society and I call upon the Catholics to take up this political commitment for our country and for our Europe.

The gift of commitment that I am asking from you is this: do not stay on the fringes, do not give up on the Republic that you tried so hard to create, do not give up on the Europe to which you have given meaning, do not leave fallow the land that you have sowed, do not take away from the Republic the precious propriety that so many anonymous worshippers bring to their lives as citizens. At the heart of this commitment which our country needs there is a part of indignation and trust in the future that you can bring.

However, I would like to reassure you, I have not come to sign you up, I came to ask you for a third gift to the nation, the gift of your freedom.

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Sharing a path does not always mean walking at the same pace; I remember a lovely text where Emmanuel Mounier explains that the Church has always been both ahead and behind, never completely contemporary, never quite of its time; that causes some tensions but you have to accept this mis-timing; you must accept that everything in our world does not move at the same speed and the first freedom that the Church can give is to be untimely.

Some might think it's reactionary; others might find it far too audacious on other issues. I simply believe that it must be one such fixed point that our humanity needs in today's world that has become ever shifting, one of those points of reference that do not give in to the opinions of the time. This is why Monseigneur, ladies and gentlemen, we must tolerate your untimely side and the necessity that people like me have to live in sync with the country. And it is this constant imbalance that we will channel together.

As Gregory said, "Active life is service; contemplative life is freedom". This evening, I would like to recall the importance of this untimely side and this fixed aspect that can characterize the Church, this evening, I wanted to mention all those who are living a life within a closed order or in society, a life of prayer and work. Even if some see it as an inconvenience, this type of life is also about exercising freedom; it shows that the Church's time is not the same as that of the rest of the world and definitely not that of politics as we know it - and it is very good that way.

What I expect the Church to offer is also its freedom of speech.

We have spoken about the warnings given by associations and the episcopacy; I would also like to touch on the warnings given by the Pope who is always attached to reality and as such reminds us of the demands of the human condition; this freedom of speech in an age where rights are prospering often has the particularity of reminding humans of their duties to themselves, those around them and our planet. Just mentioning the duties which we must carry out can sometimes be irritating; this voice which knows how to say the annoying things, our citizens hear it even if they are distanced from the Church. This is a voice which is not devoid of this "sometimes tender, sometimes glacial irony" that Jean Grosjean mentioned in his commentary on Paul, a faith that knows like few other how to subvert life's certainties even in its own ranks. A voice which is both revolutionary and conservative, often both at the same time, as Lubac said in his "Paradoxes" this voice is important for our society.

You must be very free to dare to be paradoxical and you have to be paradoxical to be truly free. We are reminded of this by the best Catholic writers, from Maurice Clavel to Alexis Jenni, from Georges Bernanos to Sylvie Germain, from Paul Claudel to François Sureau, from François Mauriac to Florence Delay, from Julien Green to Christiane Rance. In this freedom of speech, this particular view on the world, there is an element that can enlighten our society.

And in this freedom of speech, I am also talking about the Church's desire to initiate, maintain and bolster the open dialogue with Islam that you spoke about and that the world so badly needs.

Because understanding of Islam cannot come solely from the clergy, just as interfaith dialogue cannot be achieved without religious involvement. This building is the proof; religious pluralism is a fundamental aspect of our time. Monseigneur Lustiger had a strong intuition when he decided to bring the Collège des Bernardins back to life to welcome all dialogues. History has proven him to be right. There is nothing more urgent today than increasing mutual understanding between peoples, cultures, religions; there are no other means of achieving this other than through meetings but also through books, through shared projects. These are all things that are rooted in Cistercian thought as Benedict XVI recalled during his visit here in 2008.

This process of exchange must take place in total freedom, each individual with their own terms and references; it is the indispensable basis for the work that the State must carry out to always considering with a fresh perspective the place of religions in society and the relations between religion, society and public power. And to achieve this, I am counting heavily on you, all of you, to foster this dialogue and root it in our shared history which has its own particular features one of which has always been to give the French nation this ability to think about universal issues.

We are carrying out this process of sharing, this work, with conviction after so many years of hesitation or abandoning and the months ahead will be decisive in this.

This process of sharing that you maintain is even more important because Christians are paying for their attachment to religious pluralism with their lives. I am thinking, of course, of the Christians of the East.

Political leaders and the Church share the same responsibility to these persecuted individuals not only because we have historically inherited the duty to protect them but because we know that wherever they are, they are the symbol of religious tolerance. I would like to take the opportunity to commend the admirable work by

movements such as Œuvre d'Orient, Caritas France and the Sant'Egidio community, which has enabled refugee families to be given safety in France and provided help on the ground with the State's support.

As I said during the inauguration of the Christians of the East exhibition at the Institut du Monde Arabe on 25 September last year, the future of this part of the world cannot be decided without the participation of every minority, every religion and especially the Christians of the East. To sacrifice them as some wish, to forget about them, would do away with all stability and mean that no long-term projects may be built in the region.

There is, lastly, a final freedom that the Church must gift us and that is spiritual freedom.

Because we are not made for a world where only materialistic goals exist. Our contemporaries, whether they are believers or not, need to hear about another perspective on humankind other than the material perspective.

They need to quench a different thirst, a thirst for the absolute. I am not talking about conversion but a voice which, together with others, still dares to talk about man as a living thing with a spirit. Which dares to talk about something beyond the temporal, without departing from reason or reality. Which dares to go into the intensity of hope and which, sometimes, enables us to put our finger on the mystery of humanity that we call holiness, which Pope Francis described today in his latest apostolic exhortation as the "most attractive face of the Church".

This freedom is the freedom to be yourself without trying to please or seduce. But by going about your work fully conscious of its meaning, in accordance to its own rules and which have always brought us strong thinking, a human theology, a Church which knows how to guide the most fervent as well as those who are not baptised, the established and the excluded.

I will not ask any of France's citizens not to believe or to believe moderately. I do not know the meaning of this. I want each of our citizens to be able to believe in their own religion, their own philosophy, a form of transcendence or not. I want them to be able to do this freely but ensure that each of these religions, these philosophies may provide for this need for absolute held deep down inside.

My job is to ensure that everyone is completely free to believe or not believe but I will always ask each individual to ensure that all the laws of the Republic are thoroughly and uncompromisingly respected. This is no more and no less than laïcité, an established rule for our society which should not be compromised in any way and ensures absolute freedom of thought and the spiritual freedom that I have just spoken about.

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"Should a Church that is triumphant among mankind not be concerned about having compromised its election by compromising with the world?"

This is not my question but a question posed by Jean-Luc Marion which should console the Church and Catholics in times of doubt about the place of Catholics in France, the Church's audience and the consideration that is given to them.

The Church is not completely part of the world and it shouldn't try to be. Those of us who struggle with the temporal are aware of this and we should not try to bring the Church or any other religion completely into the real world. This is not our role nor our place.

But that does not mean that there should not be trust and dialogue. Above all, it does not mean that there should not be mutual recognition of our strengths and weaknesses, our institutional and human imperfections.

Because we are living in an age where the alliance of good will is too precious for them to lose time judging each other. We must, once and for all, admit that a dialogue based on the disparity of our natures is uncomfortable but necessary because each of us is aiming, in our own ways, for the common goals of dignity and meaning.

Political institutions do not of course provide promises of eternal life after death; but the Church itself cannot risk before the time has come to separate the wheat and the chaff. And this in-between period where we have received the weight of the heritage of man and the world, yes, if we know how to judge things realistically, we can accomplish great things together.

This is perhaps giving the Church of France to an exorbitant responsibility, but it is in accordance with our history, and our meeting this evening is proof, I think, that you are ready for this.

I want you to know Monseigneur, ladies and gentlemen, that I am ready also.

Thank you very much.