

**“IN AN EVER-CHANGING WORLD,
RESTORING A SENSE OF THE *POLITICAL*”**

**From the Permanent Council of the Bishops’ Conference of France (CEF)
to the residents of our country**

Introduction

If we are addressing you today, it is because we love our country, and we are concerned with the state it is in. Our wish is not to fuel the prevailing gloom with bleak statements; but rather, facing the challenges head-on, to contribute, with our thinking, to the discussion that our nation must have.

We are no experts on politics, but we share the same life as our fellow citizens. We listen to them, and see them live their lives, and what affects the lives of men is at the heart of the Church’s life. As the Second Vatican Council stated:

‘The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts¹’.

However, we would have to be blind or deaf not to acknowledge the weariness, the frustration, the fear, sometimes anger even, amplified by the attacks and aggressions, those feelings growing inside a large part of our country’s residents, and mirroring their high expectations and strong desire for change. We would have to be indifferent and insensitive not to be moved by the precariousness and the isolation from which many suffer in our country.

Over the past fifty years, our country has changed drastically, in terms of economics, culture, society, religion... Over a very short period of time, it has undergone a process of profound mutation which is not yet completed. These evolutions and transformations have brought about uncertainty in our society. The references and conditions for our togetherness as a community have changed. What seemed deeply rooted and stable has now become relative and unsettled. From a broader point of view, the entire world has been through great changes, and our country, within Europe, appears to be struggling to come as one on a shared vision, and imagine its future. The endlessly repeated narrative of France’s decline has finally taken its toll on our personal and collective enthusiasm, and, far from provoking a needed wake-up call, may only add to the generally grim climate.

Why speak out now?

For the simple reason that Catholics, as fully-fledged citizens who also live through these changes within the midst of their contemporaries, cannot lose sight of that which affects community life, dignity, and the future of mankind. If in the Judeo-Christian tradition, God calls every man by name, it is never as a single individual, but always as a member of a people and for the entire people which it is referred to. Therefore, the Christian notion of hope is not only personal, but collective as well.

¹ Second Vatican Council: *Gaudium et Spes Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, 1965, no.1

It is not the first time that the Bishops' Conference of France, one way or another, wishes to contribute to the societal debate. This desire also manifested itself in the 70s, through an important publication entitled "*A Christian Approach to Politics*²". Nearly twenty years later, they decided to speak out again in a different context. At that time, it was no longer about clarifying the framework and confines of political action, but rather to start addressing the disaffection towards public affairs, the retreat to the private sphere, and growing individualism. All this was addressed in the declaration entitled "*Politics: everyone's business*³". This was the first occurrence of the formulation that would be developed again a few years later: we need to "*rehabilitate politics*⁴".

Aside from these important publications, the Bishops of France have also expressed their views on multiple occasions, on subjects pertaining to community life and the search for the common good: protecting human life and dignity in the early and ending life, defending foreigners' rights, caring for those in need, solidarity, justice, peace, etc.

Today, the current state of our country compels us to speak out again. Now more than ever, we feel that our togetherness as a community is being compromised, fractured, attacked. The very foundations of community life are being questioned. The fundamental and traditional notions of Nation, Homeland and Republic are being shaken, and no longer hold the same meaning for everyone. Whilst the appetite for debate is strong, it appears that talking to each other has become increasingly difficult, people's sensitivities are heightened, and violence, in any shape or form, is never too far away.

As recently as last June, in view of the very important election year our country is about to step into, we wanted to "invite our fellow citizens to acknowledge certain challenges that, we feel, will have a significant impact on our future⁵". However, we must go even further now. Beyond the important electoral milestones to come, when fundamental discussions are always likely to be held hostage by political numbers games, it seems urgent to us to invite you to an even more in-depth reflection on politics themselves. To undertake such an important work, everyone must question themselves and take their responsibilities. We cannot afford to let the very core of our country break beyond repair, with all the consequences that a divided society may be faced with. What we must initiate, together, is a process of rebuilding. However, this initiative cannot succeed without a clear and objective look at the current situation.

1. Restoring a sense of the *political*

This is no new observation. For several years now, politics has been met with increasing disrepute in our country, causing the people's disinterest at best, and in the worst cases, their anger. As time passes, the gap between citizens and their representatives and rulers only widens. *The political crisis is primarily a crisis of confidence toward those entrusted with the pursuit of the common good and public interest.* Unrelenting personal ambitions, political maneuvers and numbers games, broken promises, the feeling of a resolutely out-of-touch political circle, the absence of long-term vision or projects, demagogic and partisan behavior... all these are unacceptable, and have

² Bishops' Conference of France, *Pour une pratique chrétienne de la politique*, Paris, Centurion, 1972

³ Social commission of the French episcopate, *Politique : l'affaire de tous*, La Documentation Catholique, 1^{er} Déc. 1991

⁴ Social commission of the French episcopate, *Réhabiliter la politique*, Paris, Centurion, Cerf, Fleurus-Mame, 1999

⁵ Declaration by the Permanent Council of the Bishops' Conference of France, "*2017, année électorale : quelques éléments de réflexion*" available via this link (French)

<http://www.eglise.catholique.fr/conference-des-veques-de-france/textes-et-declarations/422466-2017-annee-electorale-quelques-elements-de-reflexion/>

become insufferable. If dreaming of flawless social and political relations is purely wishful thinking, *the behavior and image of a few are casting discredit on all of those who do live their political commitment as a service to their country*. Certainly, we should acknowledge that, perhaps, our politicians are not so different from us, and are trying to serve our interests. In the past century, there have been several discrete and prominent figures like Robert Schuman, Edmond Michelet, and many more from various sides of the political scene, who have demonstrated the nobleness of political service. Today, we must show our support to all those ready to maintain that spirit through their political commitment. In this respect, the consideration with which many young people are questioning the meaning of politics and getting ready to commit themselves to change things for the greater good provides with a clear beacon of hope in these times of declining faith in politics.

If politics as a practice and a way of functioning are going through such a severe crisis today, it is because something crucial has been lost or corrupted - and it is not the political class' sole responsibility. *However, a sense of the political is essential to our society, and more generally, to the very notion of life as a community*. The political supersedes politics, its definition is not limited to the practice of politics. It states the existence of a collective "We" which is larger than all individual cases, it defines the modalities of life as a society, whereas politics designates the activities, strategies and concrete procedures pertaining to the exercise of power. In our democratic countries, this power is obtained through the citizens' vote. However, what must be at the core of this power is a sense of the *political*, the pursuit of the common good and the public interest, which must find its source in an in-depth debate on shared values and orientations. Today, words have too often been corrupted, used, discredited. Many wish to take the floor back, at times resorting to violence, because they fear they have lost it, and do no longer identify with those who, though supposed to represent them, have confiscated it.

2. A society under strain

Our society seems to be on edge, thin-skinned, a society under strain which reacts and overreacts. Of course, it is reflected in the way our feelings, emotions, joys and sorrows are expressed. We have all felt this when tragic terrorist attacks have plunged our country into mourning, and more generally, during the various marches and memorial services enabling our citizens to live together through the hardships afflicting everyone, and feel stronger in their unity. These moments of intense communion leave a strong mark in our country's history and our fellow citizens' minds. Of course, it is fair to wonder what becomes of this unity with the passing of time. It is as if our society, often caught up in image and appearances, lacks introspection, rooting and depth. However, these displays are a sign that *French people are not indifferent to what affects their fellow citizens*, and that they want to clearly express their desire to come together as one in spite of everything.

This great sensitivity is also manifested in times of social or societal crisis, when tensions may increase promptly. Contestation has become the standard mode of procedure, and the culture of conflict seemingly overtakes the culture of dialogue. Every individual and every group tends to turn in on themselves quickly, as accusations and mockeries tend to prevail over constructive conversation, enabling the fiercest protesters with the power of invective and one-upmanship. People no longer tolerate a single word uttered by any government of any kind. Quickly, our national cohesion is sorely tried.

In this strained context, social networks and media, broadcasts especially, play an important role. The latter, through the way they present facts, have an ability to influence, and have an impact

on the quality of the public debate when they choose to resort to slogans, catchphrases and simplistic notions instead of a serious analysis and respectful debate. We cannot rely so heavily on “buzz” and audience figures. The same goes for social networks, where information and opinions spread quickly. Online, one can easily find the very best and the very worst. Everyone must be held accountable for the effect their own words may have. These social networks can either be a greatly useful tool serving the public debate, or become an instrument of divide and conflict. The technological advancement of the last decades has had a strong impact on our way of living as a community. *Each of us should assess how these new technologies affect their level of freedom and judgement.*

3. Ambivalences and paradoxes

Our society is full of diversity and potential, which could lead to many opportunities if the society was not, often, overwhelmed by the paradoxes it lives in. It is unendingly demanding all sorts of additional protection, ready to protest against its authorities’ slightest, alleged shortcomings, while simultaneously complains, often rightly so, about the constraints increasingly impacting everyone’s lives, and discouraging many initiatives. *The growing juridification of our society has been a significant trend in the past years.* While on one hand, we complain, legitimately so, about lawless zones where the law is not being enforced, we are, on the other hand, a country that relentlessly creates additional norms and regulations, often precipitously in a highly emotional context, resulting in complex legal entanglements, which are usually ineffective and contradictory. There have never been more legal, regulatory and administrative norms of all sorts in effect, in spite of many promises to simplify the law. It is necessary to steer away from the rationale of juridification and all-inclusive contracts in order to find some new space for creativity, initiative, exchange, gratuity... Thus, the precautionary approach, though necessary, is not without its adverse effects when it results in rigid and inflexible norms. We must stop believing that a total absence of risk in our personal and collective lives is achievable. Looking ahead in life always involves making considered choices, which entail a degree of risk and uncertainty. *Therefore, there is a need to find balance between an idealistic maximum of security, and a crucial protection of freedoms.*

France has a great potential for dynamism. It is visible in many areas of society. It is the case in terms of its economy, with an increasing number of innovative start-up companies being launched. But it also shows in the many initiatives of intergenerational solidarity, aimed at the homeless, refugees, etc. There is a reservoir of creativity and ingeniousness in our country. However, the difficulty to initiate reform is another interesting depiction of the paradoxes in our country. Everyone is in agreement on the strong need to reform, but any project acting on this need seems to be met with resistance. Making the first step is always the others’ responsibility. Corporatism and personal interest always prevail in our country, and nobody manages to create a momentum that is inclusive of everyone. *The potential for dynamism is at a stall, unable to identify its anchor, the catalyst that will enable it to flourish and bear fruit.* The common good seems difficult to achieve, and the means to pursue it even more so. The State’s authority is slowly shrinking, and many people feel like they have lost all control over the course of events.

The social and democratic contract ruling over community life in our country does not seem to have resonance any more. Why is that? Because the promises made by this contract have been broken. Therefore, it needs to be reestablished, reaffirmed. It needs to be redefined.

4. A social contract in need of redefinition

The conditions of life in our society no longer match the individuals' expectations. In a society where the individual has become the reference point rather than the collective, *there is a feeling of disappointment in the welfare State which fails to meet its people's expectations.*

For instance, the sense of security and social progress that has largely prevailed in our society ever since the end of the Second World War – even when the following generations were promised better lives than their parents had had – has diminished today. It is fair to speak of a sense of societal insecurity, which makes the French people, more than any of their European neighbors, fear a degradation in the quality of their lives. This insecurity is sometimes substantiated, other times merely a sensation and an anxiety. Thus, having work is no longer as strong a protection as it used to be, and it is not uncommon to see families suffering from unemployment across two or three generations, with all the resulting consequences one can imagine. The insurance, social security and benefit systems are showing their limits. Even the key features of social life are being shaken. This trend is shown, for instance, in the disappearance of local services in villages: convenience stores, post offices, medical centers, priests, etc.

A sense of insecurity, but also, a sense of injustice. In this respect, the findings of a recent poll speak volumes⁶. From these it appears that a majority of French people feel that they are living in an increasingly unfair society. A country worried by injustices, and that has a hard time coming to terms with the indecent salaries paid to the top executives of large companies, while the modest entrepreneurs are struggling to make their companies survive and thrive. But the grossest injustice – which should be the absolute priority of our life as a community – is unemployment.

The latest yearly report published in November 2015 by the French NGO *Secours Catholique* makes the alarming statement of an ever-increasing poverty in our country, along with the consequences it entails in terms of exclusion, loss of life structure and stigmatization of the poor.

In this climate of social insecurity, the future seems impossible to read. Very little seems reliable and certain. There is a prevailing sense of insecurity related to violence – mostly urban violence but not exclusively, and the occurrences of violence, ranging from incivility to aggression, albeit relatively infrequent when considered on the scale of the total population, fuel this sense of insecurity. Lastly, of course, the geopolitical state of the world brings little reassurance. The horizon is overcast with uncertainty: the questions prompted by Islam, its presence in our country, the fear of terrorism, migratory flows... but the deep questioning prompted by the urging climate and ecological evolutions, contribute to the anxiety and the instability of a great many.

The situation is even more dire for all those who, one way or another, no longer feel included in the social contract. They are all the people excluded by the system, the unemployed people no longer eligible for unemployment benefit, the homeless, those who live a precarious life, who find themselves – to paraphrase the title of a documentary published in 2013 – *“living at the edge of the world”*. *Reintegrating all those who, silently and removed from the public eye, were cast away from the national community is the daily fight of a great number of charities, Christian or otherwise.* Some of them, like *Secours Catholique*, work to steer away from a logic of simple assistance, trying to go from “working for” to “working with” the people they help, by including them to the decision-making process. This is a very significant way of helping people restore their dignity, and helping them realize that everyone is an important part of the community.

⁶ CSA-La Croix survey, february 2016

To a lesser extent, but nonetheless alarming for our future, there is also the great difficulty for young workers to enter the labor market. Many of them feel as if this society has no need for them, and offers them no role, except that of financing their elders' retirement. Our current system fuels a great frustration in many of them. This idea of civic volunteer service helps address this perception, and is well received by many young people aged 16 to 25, who volunteer more and more. This enables young people to contribute to national unity through actions of various nature: educational, humanitarian, environmental, etc. If civic volunteer service helps foster their sense of community life, it is not rewarded with a diploma or guaranteed work, therefore it should not exempt societal actors from their responsibilities to the young generations.

Lastly, among the categories of people who have trouble feeling included in the social contract, there is, of course, the case of people of foreign origins, who have lived in France for a short or long time, and struggle to find their place.

Thus, in all these situations, *the republican values of "liberty, equality, fraternity", often declaimed like a chant, appear to resonate with a rather hollow ring for our fellow residents of this country.*

5. Cultural difference and integration

Among the difficulties of establishing a new social contract, there is the issue raised today by cultural difference. Indeed, if globalization has prompted the creation of a new economic space and a new perception of space and time, it has also seen the emergence of a complex reality, where the increasing interpenetration of societies has allowed for interesting and enriching crossovers, but also contributed to a growing sense of cultural insecurity and identity *malaise*, which can culminate in the outright rejection of those who are different.

France has long upheld a rather specific definition of national identity, which posits that French citizens are molded in the republican melting pot, from which they derive and appropriate the idea of a country with shared cultural and historical references. This idea of a homogeneous Nation, which is a political construct often forcefully built through centralizing, unifying in an overriding way and often removing references, has been shaken by the rise of globalization. It implied that community specificities, religious ones especially, should not be put in foreground. But today, not only does our melting pot, which has worked reasonably well for centuries, no longer integrate or not swiftly enough, but the mere idea of a unifying "national narrative" is being largely questioned and contested. Identities and differences are openly displayed, and communitarian claims threaten the idea of a homogeneous Nation. *It then becomes much harder to clearly define what being a French citizen means*, a citizen who appropriates and shares a history, values, and a common project. Thus, some live outside the French model, foreigners to their destined community. Others have trouble dealing with the loss of identity. All this offers fertile ground for reciprocal, racist postures.

Increasingly, the Arab-Muslim world has become cause for worry for our fellow citizens: terrorism, proselytizing, international tensions, but also woman's rights, the oppression of Eastern Christians... There is a risk of resorting to considering legitimate security questions only through the prism of cultural difference. Incivility, violence, communitarianism, radicalization: all those notions are being blended into a confused mix of fears, then focused and crystallized in the notion of stranger.

Therefore, it is crucial for the future of our society to redefine the meaning of being a French citizen, and to promote a way of living as a community that makes sense to everyone. In other words, how should we process diversity in our society? How can our national identity be maintained, with stronger communitarian claims and specific identities? In the face of this challenge, which requires a profound debate to which all members of society must be able to contribute, Christianity can share its experience of over two millennia, always renewed through welcoming and integrating new populations and different cultures, and creating an identity that does not reject other affiliations.

6. Education in response to more fragile and exacerbated identities

The interpenetration of societies has become a major component of the globalization which characterizes our era. This new reality underlines the deeply rooted reflex that urges men to reaffirm their differences every time their identities are challenged or threatened. The question of identity is one that deeply affects the French society. And many of our fellow citizens, some out of confusion, wonder: who am I really? What do I believe in? What are the values which made me and matter to me? Where do they come from? Where do I belong, what are my allegiances? More broadly, on the scale of an entire people, the questions are along the same lines: what is our true identity? What is national identity made of? But also, what is the meaning of living as a community, for what reward, what social purpose? These are important questions, for we know that identity provides rooting, includes the individual in a common story, and also facilitates the inclusion to a group. It is very important that our society start addressing these questions, both to better understand what had built and fostered our country, but also to take measure of the wealth that plural identities can provide it with by creating bonds of unity in the very midst of this diversity. Questioning and affirming one's identity should not lead to isolationism. *More than shields, our contemporaries need a backbone to live in today's world.*

In this respect, the journey that led these young French nationals to Syria or Iraq to fight for Daesh is alarming to us. Several elements can be used to explain this phenomenon. However, it seems quite clear that we are dealing with young people in lack of structure, who have not managed to find their place in our society, and for some, had already dabbled with petty criminality. They find, in a turnkey packaged narrative and radical engagement, an opportunity to give immediate meaning to their existence, to lift it out of mediocrity, and revolt against the society in which they were unable to find a place. Without taking anything away from their responsibility nor that of their sponsors who manipulated their destiny, it makes sense to wonder why their integration to the society was unsuccessful, and how our society led part of its youth to engage in such deadly, murderous adventures.

To answer this question, it is not enough to look at our society and acknowledge that it has become plural in nature: it is necessary to evoke the crisis that our education system has been going through over the last decades. Family, as the first environment of education, has a responsibility to open the child's mind and provide it with the necessary tools to facilitate its insertion into a community of humans always broader than one's cultural background. This educational duty is not solely discharged by the family: it is furthered within the school system, the ideal place to begin the socialization process and exercise violence. But there is more to this educational mandate: beyond the necessary transmission of knowledge and the equally important acquisition of skills, the school system has a duty to introduce the students to universality through culture, the only way to make intercultural dialogue possible.

In our society, which owes key elements of its heritage to its Christian history, Christian faith coexists with a great variety of religions and spiritual inclinations. The danger would be to forget where we come from, or in the contrary, to dream of a return to an illusory golden age, or aspiring to a “Church of the pure”, a counterculture removed from society, posing as a judge from above. The Christian revelation shall not lead to such a counterculture, for it has always walked in pair with reason, and recognizes “seeds of the Word” in culture, which was defined by Pope John Paul II as that through which “man lives a really human life” (UNESCO, June 2nd 1980).

7. The question of meaning

Redefining the social contract cannot be achieved through simple addendums or quick patches preserving everyone’s personal interests. Community life cannot only amount to the total sum of individuals and their personal interests. It cannot simply be managed. And this may be the reality we have to face. The French society is faced with a profound crisis of meaning. However, the political cannot function without the notion of meaning, and must be clearly defined in that respect – not, of course, in order to tell people what to think or believe, but to offer a horizon of meaning, to allow for a continuously updated debate on what holds a country together, and make sure nobody is excluded from this debate, for any reason whatsoever.

For the last five decades, the question of meaning has been increasingly left out of the political debate. Politics has focused on its administrative role, focusing more on granting and protecting ever increasing individual and personal rights than on collective projects. Our country’s advance, growth and development have been articulated around a managerialist approach, but without addressing the purpose of it all. Economic wealth and our consumer’s society have contributed to distancing the question of meaning from our perception. Since the second half of the seventies, the economic difficulties, reduced wealth, rising unemployment and globalization-induced uncertainty have rendered this administrative and regulatory duty much harder to discharge, as it was no longer capable of providing answers to the more fundamental questions around community life. An ideal of consumption, personal gain, productiveness, gross domestic product and 7/7 stores cannot fulfil a human being’s core aspirations, which are to realize oneself as a person inside an interdependent community.

On top of this came another important evolution that impacted our relationship to the political community. Progressively, modernity has given birth to a new way of life where everyone builds their own ecosystem of meaning, functioning outside of the social authorities traditionally responsible for establishing shared references. Networks, as previously stated, have taken a predominant role in our society. The normative order is no longer defined from above, but from a mutualisation of horizontal networks. Political parties can no longer organize the public debate and judge on their own. Sitting behind their screen, everyone thinks they can make their own mind on all subjects, and share their opinion on the new forums of community life when and how they see fit.

Thus, what observation can we make? That our society increasingly struggles to mediate the “I” and the “We”. Despite a strong effort to argue otherwise, a collective vision seems harder to achieve. The “I” seems to be taken into account, but it has a hard time finding its place in a “We” devoid of a real collective project or horizon. How to give birth to a “We” that does not discard the “I”, but rather offers real space for both to coexist? In other words, *a solely managerialist approach does not allow for people to truly live together as a community.*

As evidence of this is the example of the European project. At its origin, and for a long period time, it was a mobilizing project, even though one might be opposed to it. It was envisioned by a few men, both realist and visionary, who believed in it, and built it through debate, negotiation and respect. Today, it seems to have lost itself in a maze of administrative, commercial and regulatory norms that nobody is interested in anymore. The risk we face is that we forget what the European construction has made possible, not only achieving peace in a region torn by countless, endless wars, but also creating a new space of openness and mutual enrichment, through the free flow of people, products and ideas. We must revisit the European project, and restore its democratic and political purpose. A nation cannot face its challenges on its own, and an amended European project must be precisely aimed at respecting and affirming national and regional identities. A true union does not suppress plural identities, but helps them work towards a common purpose. Expressing this view goes against many of the current narratives. To face this challenge, we will need to be true Europeans, politically brave and creative, who neither favor their national identity over the European one, nor oppose them to each other. We are convinced that *only in a strong Europe, aware of its history and its responsibilities to the world, can there be a future for our country.*

Today, in our globalized world where boundaries, borders and many reference points seem to have disappeared, where identities are weakened, where future is inauspicious and makes it difficult to cast a positive look ahead in life, it is not surprising that the question of meaning is posed with urgency, and that the weakness of the political thinking and narrative has come to light. However, it is to this level of reflection that the political project and narrative must be based. In fact, to think even further, is not the only question worth asking this one: *today, what makes it worth living a dedicated life? What am I ready to dedicate my life to?* The answer to these questions is undoubtedly personal and intimate, but it characterizes a life lived with the others, and the values required by community life. In this respect, to determine the sanity of a society, and whether it is loyal to its foundations, it is always good to see how it treats its weakest, most frail members. Indeed, it is through them that we can remember the fundamentals, and the sense of humanity that all societies must protect.

Embarking on this personal and collective journey implies stepping outside ourselves, courageously, having people to turn to for help along this quest, and start building at our level. Of course, there is a risk of keeping the dialogue between yourself, when you act and think like others do. There can also be a legitimate fear of committing yourself alone, and thinking that you are unable to effect any change. But that is oblivious of the fact that it does not necessarily take a great many to unlock situations, to give a new direction and instill a new dynamic to seemingly stalled situations. It also requires us to rethink our relationship to time. There may be impatience in this world of immediacy, thinking that our will alone can make things move forward quickly. We must accept that the time of harvest may not coincide with the time of planting. It takes time to change perceptions and behaviors, to build projects, communicate on them and make them come true. *We must accept to consider our actions in a long-term vision.*

8. A crisis of the word

Is this crisis of the political not essentially a crisis of the word above all? We know that community life is based on trust in the word that was given, and that choosing the forums – in various forms - for the civic debate, exchange, dialogue, arbitration, etc. with care can help restore credit to the political. Words enable people to tell one another what has value in their eyes. No durable project can be built without establishing a process of dialogue. Thus, politics is a primary

platform for the use of the word. Where conflicts are not disclosed, where truth is hidden or distorted, there may violence appear. A debate is a privileged space where different assertions, sometimes opposed, collide and influence one another. Positions change, and become aware of themselves. Therefore, *all that impairs the word, lies, corruption, broken promises, bears severe consequences*. And that is where we are today: between the discouragement of those who have lost faith in the public life and turn their back on it, and those who, full of anger, wish to change the state of play and turn to the far side of the political scene, there is decreasingly less room for maneuver to restore the public word's credit.

How can we handle the opposition, the violence inherent to all political fights? How can we assert our convictions with the opposition of a society which does not understand them, and no longer takes them into account? Convictions are necessary, but how can we integrate them to the discussion – which is a needed and mandatory one – without eventually indulging in an undemocratic posture? How can we uphold a prophetic word that does not result in being little more than mere lobbying, or fruitless, vociferous opposition? Exchanging words and choosing privileged forums for dialogue, if urgently needed now more than ever, requires a tremendous amount of tact, flexibility and adaptability, even though the temptation to force through and stick to one's positions is strong. We no longer live in a time where debates, or even confrontations, are based on a shared set of cultural historical or anthropological references. Today, as outlined by the debate on same-sex marriage and all the conversation surrounding abortion or end-of-life care, there is no, or decreasingly little, shared anthropological vision in our society. Everything seems questionable and debatable. All positions want to be heard, respected and considered as equally legitimate. One of the challenges lies in managing to speak and be heard in a context of freedom of opinion where everything – even anthropology – is subject to vote. The same notions are used by everyone, but without attaching the same content, reality or implications to them. A good example would be the word “dignity”, frequently used lately. There is a plethora of different perceptions behind this word.

The politician will endlessly be called upon to achieve momentary balance between different interests at a given time in the life of the society. The problem is that a compromise, if often a lesser evil allowing the overwhelming majority to live together, is also perceived by some or others as an unsatisfactory solution, too radical or not radical enough, far from representing or reflecting any noble cause, and followed by further confrontation. Thus, the compromise, always suspected of compromising, is often what compels us to cast discredit on the political. This is a misinterpretation of what a real compromise, which is an essential and especially noble component of the political debate, must be. A real compromise is more than a mediated settlement, the mere outcome of a power struggle. It means, starting from different positions, engaging in real dialogue where no one party seeks to take over the other, but rather seek to build something new together, which excludes no one, but leads to a result which differs from the initial positions. It must not be a clash of truths, but rather the pursuit of a shared truth, together.

During the – sometimes convoluted – debates of our society, clearly expressing what seems to serve the purpose of community life is everyone's responsibility. We Catholics cannot turn a blind eye to all that, one way or another, affects mankind. This means we need to remain interested in the aspirations of our contemporaries, but also maintaining an inner freedom, which we must be able to manifest with the bravery of the Spirit, even and especially if it is contrary to the current narratives and packaged ideologies from all sides of the political table. This commitment can take many shapes, matching the challenges faced, but must always supported by true respect for those who do not think along the same lines. *If at times, the word must be spoken firmly, let it never turn into*

inflexibility and stubbornness. It must be a resolute suggestion, mirroring the unending, patient trust that God never ceases to have for men.

9. For a fair understanding of laicity

If it is well known that the phenomenon of secularism has largely shaken and spread over western Europe, diminishing the influence that religion exerted on societies, the situation is still a little more complicated in our country. It is obviously very difficult to engage in a peaceful conversation about religion in the public space. Religious dialogue struggles to find its place in the individual and the citizen's culture. What is more, people have difficulty considering that religion may still have a positive contribution to make to community life, and doubt that it is an essential component of social welfare.

On this subject, laicity is at the center of the debate in our country, for everyone attaches different perceptions to this notion. In the strict and original meaning of the word, laicity defines the separation of Church and State. *The Church does not control the State, the State does not control the Church*. Public schools, open to all, are protected from any religious influence. If laicity solved a number of issues in the past, it is necessary to see how it can be useful face the challenges of today.

This topic has become an undeniable catalyst for tension, mostly linked to the trend of religious reaffirmation, Islam especially. In our society, where, in fact, religions are no longer structuring the lives of a majority of the population. Our country is shaken by a debate opposing the advocates of a restrictive laicity, who see any religion as a potential threat to the Republic and human freedom, to the defenders of an inclusive laicity, who hold the Republic responsible for protecting space for religions in the society, allowing the expression of convictions and beliefs, and acknowledging the positive contribution religions can make to the life of our society. *State secularism is a legal framework which should enable everyone, believers and non-believers, to live together as a society*. It should not exceed its purpose by turning into a social project, aiming at changing our nation into a religion-free space, rejecting religion from the public space and confining it to the private sphere where it should remain hidden. This perception would be harmful to our society. It does not respect the people, and fuels the frustration that in turn strengthens communitarianism. Finally, it deprives public sphere from a precious contribution to community life. In a time where the French society is in dire need of unity, it is necessary to resume this debate peacefully, staying away from the tasteless political recuperations.

Nevertheless, this crisis of the political, of which we have just highlighted certain aspects, must not be reduced to its most somber and inauspicious features, for it does, as all crisis do, cast light on certain expectations and resources.

10. A country full of expectations and opportunities

Seeing how strongly our fellow citizens aspire to change, sometimes in an unspecific way, is striking. Many people despair when they see our country stalled in his inability to revive its spirit of unity and dynamism. The disaffection that the French people have for the way politics are handled does not necessarily amount to a waning interest in the challenges of community life, but rather to their desire for new forms of civic commitment⁷. Restoring the true nature of the political and

⁷ Cf. Viavoice-La Croix survey, may 2016, stating 60% of French people are interested in politics

reestablishing its necessity to foster the community life means making ourselves available, committing to it, making it possible. Nothing will fall from the skies directly in our hands, or through providential intervention. *This work and this responsibility falls down to every one of us.* Each of us, in their place, is part of the national fabric, and we all have to assess our own positions. We must make ourselves available to change behaviors and thinking patterns.

Our country is generous, but it is waiting with expectation. For instance, it is one of the European countries with the most developed associative life. It is home to skills and energies waiting to be unleashed and take action in service of the public interest. For this to happen, it is time for our country to come back together. All around the country, the desire to commit civically and exchange is flourishing (for instance, the gatherings organized by *Les Veilleurs, Nuits debout, les Cercles du Silence*⁸, etc.). They are sometimes clumsy, inexperienced, recuperated... but they all are manifestations of the desire to live, and be heard. They often echo the underlying questioning around new ways of life in our society. On the topic of intercultural dialogue, there are many new groups and organizations, such as Coexister, who are working passionately to defuse cultural conflicts and misconceptions. On another subject, we feel that *the rising ecological and environmental challenges are driving a deep transformation in our perception of social life, and are encouraging the rise of a culture of simplicity, sobriety and sharing.* That is what Pope Francis meant last year in his encyclical letter *Laudato si'*⁹, which resonated well outside the Catholic world. He links social, ecological and spiritual crises directly together, calling for a rebuild of our ways of living social life. These mutations are undoubtedly limiting, but they are in the spirit of a durable, personal and common good, provided we can consider and support them together. There again, many are those who are willing to investigate, experiment and try new ways of living.

The new challenges of today compel us to think and take action. They may turn into an opportunity for us to determine the kind of society we want to live in. On all these subjects, we must, on all levels, make sure we commit to sharing our word and listening, to make sure that violence does not get the final word.

Conclusion

There is a measure of sadness in our country today. A sadness to see us in this state, unable to come together and unleash the dynamism of which we are capable, while the trials and the uncertainty call for our unity. There is also the risk of only being able to see the negative side of our community life, forgetting how fortunate we are to live in this country, and that many envy our quality of life. Are we going to keep on despairing, facing each other, doubting our abilities, and also deny all that, mostly in silence, brings happiness and good in this country's life: work well done, our availability to those in suffering, family life...? There is an abundance of riches hiding in our hearts, great hope stemming from the actions of a large number of our fellow citizens. And for us Christians, there is the unwavering hope, given to us by Christ, of a light that conquers all manners of darkness.

Then, are we choosing to let years go by without rising up to the challenges of responsibility and meaning that community life requires us to conquer? Are we ready to face the situation and take act of the consequences for personal and collective behaviors? *Each of us, at their own level, is*

⁸ French protest groups

⁹ H.H. Pope Francis, Encyclical letter *Laudato Si'*, *On Care for our Common Home*, May 25, 2015

http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

responsible for the life and future of our society. This will always require us to be brave and daring – qualities who have always been at the heart of our country.

These few thoughts, far from being exhaustive, aim to contribute to the debate, and call for discussion, expansion, refinement. On the basis of this text, we invite you to speak with others, non-Christians included, and share your thoughts on the challenges facing our social life. We believe that the real solutions to the profound trouble of our time will not be determined by the economical or financial circles, though potent they may be, or by the postures and acts of a few. They will be found through a personal and collective effort to listen to the deep desires of mankind, and the commitment of us all.

**SOME POINTS TO START THE CONVERSATION AFTER READING THE TEXT
FROM THE PERMANENT COUNCIL OF THE BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF FRANCE (CEF)
TO THE RESIDENTS OF OUR COUNTRY**

Below are a few questions relating to each part of the text. They may help you guide the conversation around this text and share your own thoughts. These are only a few points, which do not prevent you from touching on other questions.

Overall impression:

- What struck you in this text? (both in content and style)
- Which feelings did it leave you with?

Introduction

- In your opinion, should the Bishops' Conference voice their opinion on this topic?
- What do the words "Nation", "Republic", "Homeland" mean to you?

1. Rediscovering a sense of the political

- What is your opinion of politics in France?
- What should change?

2. A society under strain

- Do you believe that our society is in a state of heightened sensitivity?
- What do you think of the role of the media and social networks? What personal use do you make of them?

3. Ambivalences and paradoxes

- Which paradox is the most striking to you?
- Do you believe in this country's potential for dynamism and creativity?

4. A social contract in need of redefinition

- In your opinion, what is the biggest threat to the social contract in our country?
- Do you personally feel this sense of insecurity and social injustice?
- What do the values "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity" mean to you?

5. Cultural difference and integration

- How would you define the notions of national identity and French citizenship?
- How can integration be facilitated? What are the obstacles?

6. Education in response to more fragile and exacerbated identities

- How would you define your identity?
- What should the place of Christians in the society? How can they contribute to it?

7. The question of meaning

- Do you think that the political is related to the question of meaning?
- How you consider the place of the individual and the collective in social life?
- What does our society lack?

8. A crisis of the word

- How would you rate the quality of the political debate in our country?
- What must be the Christian's conduct in a social debate?

9. For a fair understanding of laicity

- According to you, what should be the role of religions in the public space?
- What meaning does the notion of laicity have in your view?

10. A country full of expectations and opportunities

- What political, associative, religious initiatives, local or national, seem to be going in the right direction in your view?
- Do you believe that our country, our society is going through deep change, and is at a crossroads?

Conclusion

- What gives you Hope, in spite of everything?
- Do you believe that things can change? Under which conditions?
- Do you believe that you can contribute to these changes, even in a humble way?