



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

***LETTER TO BISHOP OF VALENCE
DIDIER-LÉON MARCHAND***

*To the Most Reverend Didier-Léon Marchand
Bishop of Valence*

Pope Pius VI died in Valence 200 years ago on 29 August 1799. Wishing to pay homage to this great Pope and, at the same time, to preserve the memory of this painful period, you have taken the initiative of commemorating the event so that the present generation can learn from it. I extend my cordial greetings to you, as well as to my Special Envoy in your Diocese, Cardinal Roger Etchegaray. With my thoughts and prayers I join everyone gathered to commemorate my Predecessor, who loved and served the Church of Christ.

Pius VI's last months were his Way of the Cross. Over 84 years old and seriously ill, he was torn from the See of Peter. Although he was able to enjoy a brief period of relative freedom in Florence, which allowed him to continue to exercise his responsibility as universal Pastor, he was forced to cross the Alps on snow-covered paths, and reached Briançon and then Valence, where death put an end to his earthly journey, giving some the impression that this would be the end of the Church and the papacy. One remembers Christ's words to Peter, which parallel what Pope Pius VI experienced that year, 1799: "When you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go" (*Jn 21: 18*).

Pius VI accepted his trial with serenity and prayer, and forgave his enemies at the moment of his death, thereby gaining their admiration. However, in addition to his physical suffering, he was morally tormented by the Church's situation. Despite the upheavals in France, he received many touching marks of respect, compassion and communion in faith from ordinary people all along the

way in Briançon, Grenoble and Valence. However humiliated he may have been, the common father of the faithful, as the poet Paul Claudel said, was recognized and revered by the sons and daughters of the Church. The simple and attentive welcome in those dramatic circumstances is comforting to all.

This page in the history of the Church and of France is very instructive. Throughout her 2,000-year history, the Church has never ceased to suffer a multitude of trials. She is called to maintain her courage, for her mission comes from the Lord who never abandons her: as he promised, Christ is with us to the end of time (cf. *Mt 28: 20*). At difficult moments, we should above all welcome the grace of God who increases our faith, keeps hope alive and firmly maintains communion among all Christ's disciples. It is the Holy Spirit who is at work, and it is God who causes the growth of the task undertaken by all Gospel missionaries, Bishops, priests, religious and lay people (cf. *1 Cor 3: 6*).

The pontificate of Pius VI calls to mind the merits of the papacy which, down the centuries, was eager to defend the Church's freedom from the claims of civil powers. This is why many Popes fought and suffered to the point of giving their lives. Indeed, religious freedom is a right of every human person by reason of his very dignity, as the Second Vatican Council reasserted (cf. Declaration on Religious Liberty *Dignitatis humanae*, n. 2).

Spiritual and religious freedom are particularly important in all nations. Without them the other personal and social freedoms are impossible. Freedom of worship is an indispensable condition for building a nation, as well as for cooperation and friendship between peoples. In this spirit, down through history Christianity has always been concerned to gather together and unite individuals and peoples, tirelessly helping them to build a more just and fraternal society and to achieve peace, which is essential for the integral growth of human beings and human communities.

On the other hand, we should acknowledge the place given to human rights, for they remind us that the human being is the centre of social life. This legitimate quest must not let us forget that human rights rest on moral and spiritual values, and that no one can consider himself the master of his brothers and sisters. The Creator is the only master of time and history. Thanks to the natural law, he has instilled the desire for good in human hearts. France's motto, *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*, appropriately links the concern for individual freedom with the necessary attention to all our brethren, especially the lowliest and the weakest, from conception until natural death.

The Catholic community in France has a rich history. In expressing their loyalty to the Pope, the Catholic faithful openly demonstrate their faith in Christ and their membership in the Church; they find in their spiritual life the strength to carry out their mission and to serve their homeland and compatriots. They are devoted to their country and tirelessly pursue dialogue with all the nation's members, especially the numerous Protestant communities in your region, whom I cordially greet. I therefore encourage Catholics to take an active part in their country's life at the local, regional

and national levels. As the Epistle to Diognetus said: "What the soul is to the body, Christians are to the world. The soul is spread through all the members of the body, as are Christians in the world....

The place God has assigned to them is so beautiful that they should not desert it". In collaboration with all their brethren, they have a service to render their country, and the French must continue to carry out together their commitments at the service of the human being, society and brotherhood among all people. Refusal to recognize the spiritual and religious dimension of human beings and human communities would be an impoverishment of individuals and of society's dynamism.

On the threshold of the third millennium, it is important that Christ's disciples recognize their bonds of communion and strive to rediscover their unity round the Successor of Peter. These bonds of affection, freely expressed, show the need to build Europe and international relations with the irreplaceable contribution of religious freedom and respect for consciences which Pope Pius VI sought to defend in the language and mentality of his time. Indeed any political, social or economic process that fails to take individuals and peoples into account creates grave risks for all nations, for peace between countries, for the recognition of peoples and for the indispensable freedom of individuals.

As I entrust you to the intercession of the Virgin Mary, Mother of Christ and Mother of the Church, and of the holy Bishops of Die, Saint-Paul-Trois-Châteaux and Valence, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing to you, to all the members of your Diocese and to everyone who will be taking part in the various events commemorating the death of Pope Pius VI in your city.

Castel Gandolfo, 25 August 1999.