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My dear Brother bishops of the Conference of bishops of France,

GREETINGS AND THANK YOU

It was my pleasure to accept the invitation of Bishop Jean-Pierre Ricard, your President, to be here with you in the holy city of Lourdes for your General Assembly. I sincerely thank you for this mark of friendship and esteem in my regard.

I bring you the fraternal greetings of the Bishops of Haiti, as well as of all the Church that is in Haiti. On their behalf, I reiterate in person what I already communicated by e-mail. I said that Providence was indeed offering me, through your November assembly in Lourdes, the occasion to address directly to you the Bishops of France, our fraternal gratitude.

We, the Bishops of Haiti, were deeply touched by the gesture of sympathy and solidarity of the Bishops and Catholics of France, to our Church and to the people of Haiti.

Hurricane "Jeanne", I said, left the entire country desolate. But hope was being reborn.

In the name of a grieving population that has suffered many losses, I thank the Catholics of the Church of France for the prayers and the gestures of sharing that you proposed to them. May the Lord bless them!

Without going into too much detail, I would like to look at the topics suggested, which in fact cover the whole field of Church and social life in Haiti. In substance, I will repeat what we wrote in a message, last September 29.

A very long history links Haiti and France. It started with the Buccaneers of the 16th century, the first French to settle in Santo Domingo and who became identified with this remote island. This land was to become a crucible where the African and French would rub shoulders for nearly two centuries to forge the richest colony of France in the 18th century, a colony preferred to all the others. The revolt of the Slaves of Santo Domingo (1791-1803), which followed the French revolution in 1789, caused a great rupture. Haiti became an independent country on January 1, 1804. But major elements of French culture, such as the language, remained part of Haitian life and culture. Although only 12 % of the eight million Haitians currently speak French, "frenchness" remains however a characteristic of Haiti.

We pay homage to the French missionaries who evangelised our people, pioneers of a Church that has now become Haitian.

SOCIAL CONDITION OF HAITI

Today the social condition of Haiti is characterized by an extreme polarization of society. The gap between rich and poor is increasingly deeper, making the existence of an intermediate middle class more and more difficult. This does not make it any easier to breach the gap. Both sides have adopted a language of exclusion, each clinging to its own position and seeking to demonize the others, who are perceived as adversaries to be neutralized. It is also obvious that the extreme misery we face makes social relations very tense and fragile.

ECONOMIC SITUATION OF HAITI

Half of the population of our country, some four million people, live below the poverty line. They do not even have one euro per day. The human development index is in clear decline and the demographic growth rate is much higher than that of the production of goods. In addition, the country functions without a strict budget and does not have enough institutions strong enough to ensure its progress.

It is of course necessary to restore the economic basis, to create structures of production, to start again agriculture, to innovate in the field of tourism, and especially to recognize the need for time and persevering work. But such as the economic situation is today, we believe that at both the national as well as at the international level, we should avoid the traps of selfishness, from which are born violence, intolerance and contempt of the other, so that each one can give a place to his/her brother. We will be able thus to work together to build a nation that is increasingly just, where reconciliation, solidarity and peace reign.

POLITICAL SITUATION OF HAITI

At the political level, the country is in endless crisis. The years 1986-87 saw the fall of one regime and the beginning of an intermediate period that continues. Intolerance, the caustic and exaggerated antagonism between the social classes and political parties have led to political instability and to the interference of foreign forces, keeping the people under control by direct military occupation or by interventions under the banner of arbitration or the maintenance of peace. They will soon be six thousand soldiers from about thirty nations occupying the country, some say for ten years. But for how long will it be really?

SITUATION OF HUMANS RIGHT IN HAITI

In the area of human rights, we are fighting for the respect of life and of individuals. This is why we are saddened to see the respect and dignity of people trampled. Many of our brothers and sisters feel that their life is in danger because of the threats and persecution they undergo. Fear and mistrust reign everywhere.

One painful thing that I would like to mention is the condition of so many children reduced to dehumanizing living conditions. Who are they? Street children, children who live as servants, girls and increasingly many younger girls who are used in prostitution circles, children used for the sale of drugs or as objects of shady transactions at the Dominican border. In the midst of this disorder, one wonders where the future of our families is? How will the children, the young people and the adults of today discover tomorrow a sense of duty and responsibility?

Our heart still bleeds to see these situations of insecurity, impunity, corruption, of excessive exploitation for money and power, and the masquerade of justice continue in our country (Cf. the case of Fr. Jean-Juste).

CONSEQUENCES OF THE FLOODS AND THE CYCLONES

Severe natural disasters struck the country this year. Sunday, May 23, 2004, floods submerged whole villages (Mapou), while floodwaters transformed themselves into

impetuous torrents carrying others away (Fonds-Verrettes) in the southeast. Soon after, Sunday, September 19, Cyclone “Jeanne” struck the Northern part of the country. More villages were damaged (Chansolme). Gonaïves, the country’s third largest city had a tragic fate. The loss in human lives is considerable, nearly three thousand died and as many disappeared. After more than a month, the city is still under mud. Everything is destroyed: water, electric, telephone systems, roads, etc.

SITUATION OF THE CHURCH IN HAITI

In this context of crises – institutional, political, social, values – the Church, which journeys with the people, seeks to live more deeply in communion with them and gives thanks to God with them for the conquest of freedom during this year of the bicentenary of independence. It shares their joys and hopes, their sorrows and anxieties (*Gaudium et Spes* 1). Faithful to the demands of the Gospel, the Church is close to the people, particularly the poor, the abandoned, following the example of the Good Samaritan in the Gospel.

For this reason, attentive to its pastoral mission in Haiti, the Church discovers the face of Christ, the Suffering Servant, in the painful features of this people. Conscious of human dignity, it reiterates its commitment to serve the Haitian people, the poor and all without distinction, in accordance with the Word of God and the Church’s social teaching. It strives to build a society and a civilization of peace and love whose “foundation is truth, whose measure and objective is justice, whose driving force is Love, and whose method of attainment is freedom,” as Blessed Pope John XXIII said in his encyclical *Pacem in Terris*. These four fundamental requirements, we wrote, must impregnate our personal behaviour and our collective commitments: to be present in the institutions of society, to promote the common good, to exert from within an influence on these structures.

GREAT CONCERNS OF THE CHURCH

The Church however has some great subjects of concern. Within the corps of bishops, we seek to build a real and more perceptible unity. In some dioceses, there is still a way to go to achieve a good cohesion within the presbyterium. The Church created a new Episcopal commission for peace and reconciliation in February 2004, after having noted the extent of conflict and violence in our society. Other areas of concern for the Church are: the promotion and respect of the basic rights of all human beings; reconciliation and the promotion of a spirit of fraternity, of sharing and solidarity between Haitians and with others; the reign of right over revenge and corruption; the re-establishment of moral values; the promotion of the common good; ecology; public finances, etc.

A particular case of concern is that of Father Gerard Jean-Juste:

- Plainclothes policemen, without warrant, arrested Father Gerard Jean-Juste, a priest of the Archdiocese of Port-au-Prince, while he was serving food to the children and the poor on Wednesday October 13, 2004.
- They arrested him under the pretext of questioning him and then kept him in police custody for seven days (280 hours) instead of the two days (48 hours) envisaged by law, with the charge of distributing money and weapons – a charge that was never proven. (*Le Matin*, Thursday Oct. 14. 2004).

- Without ever having seen a judge or being able to present a defence, the priest was then transferred from the Police station of Pétiion-Ville on Tuesday October 19, 2004, and imprisoned at the National Penitentiary, under the fallacious pretext of betraying national security.
- The national “Justice and Peace” Episcopal Commission presented a note of protest.
- Archbishop Joseph Serge Miot, coadjutor Archbishop of Port-au-prince, spoke out about the arrest of Fr. Jean-Juste (*Haïti en Marche*, October 20-26, 2004).

“Bishop Miot deplores the fact that Fr. Jean-Juste was not brought before his rightful judge to be heard, even one week after his arrest at the presbytery of the St. Claire’s church in Petite Place Cazeau in Port-au-Prince... Unfounded charges and the destructive practices of denigration must cease and give place to dialogue, which alone can help set the country on the path of reconciliation and development.”

TOPICS BEING TAKEN UP BY THE CEH

In the area of *pastoral care*, among the principal topics taken up by the Episcopal Conference of Haiti, one can mention the following: the training of priests, catholic education, schools in underprivileged areas, schools in countryside known as “presbytral” schools, university education; catechesis.

In the socio-economic and political field, we can list: national reconciliation; peace, for which we created an Episcopal Commission on peace and reconciliation; migration; the participation in State affairs (a Representative at the CEP; a representative on the Council of Elders (“Conseil des Sages”); an observer in the Group of Civil Society); assistance to the poor (by such bodies as Caritas, Catholic Relief Services, Food for the Poor, etc.)

Within the dioceses, the topics of reflection recently taken up concern the ongoing education of the priests, reflection on the Eucharist, diocesan congresses on mission and the family, popular and Marian devotion, the question of social security for the clergy. The National Congress of Native Priests, postponed because of the floods caused by cyclone “Jeanne” and the October riots, which made travel to Port-au-Prince impossible, is again in the process of realization.

THE RELATIONS BETWEEN FRANCE AND HAITI

As a consequence of our colonial past, and thanks particularly to the maintenance of the French language as an official language of the country besides Creole, there is an undeniable cultural proximity between Haiti and France. That is what constitutes a base for bringing together our two nations and our churches. However if there has been some uneasiness in relations recently, it is due to contingencies....

WHAT TO FURTHER IN THE COMING MONTHS OR YEARS?

As regards the Church in Haiti, as well as the nation, we believe that it is important and essential to promote and maintain good relations between the two countries and the two

churches. By becoming proactive, we can look forward to a time of more effective and closer fraternity. I have no doubt that initiatives like the present one, your invitation and my presence here, will have certainly an impact on the future.

But I remain convinced that we must find a way for communication, consider the creation of a channel of exchange between the Church of France and the Church of Haiti. Perhaps could we set up some group visits to bring us closer, co-operation between priests or institutions, for example, twinning of dioceses or parishes, of which there are already some small examples? Short formation seminars at various levels, cultural exchanges between our young people, the granting of scholarships for young Haitians, and the like, could help to promote dialogue and closer pastoral cooperation. Thank you!

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