

2025- Holy Year

Dr Bénédicte Halba, president of l'IRIV (www.iriv.net), January 2025

Pope Francis launched the Holy Year in Rome last December. The tradition of the Jubilee was proclaimed by Pope Boniface VIII in the 14th century (1300). It takes place every 25 years, a quarter of a century. All over France, parishes and shrines are mobilizing to accompany the faithful in their pilgrimage and conversion. Thirty-five specific events take place between the opening of the Holy Door in December 2024 and its closing in January 2026 - a Catholic “80-day round the world” (1).

From the first months of his pontificate in 2013, Pope Francis visited Lampedusa, a Sicilian island symbolic of the reception of exiles who cross the Mediterranean at risk of their lives, placing his magisterium under the sign of the defense of the rights of migrants. Many NGOs providing relief at sea have been warning for years about this deadly migratory route. The Catholic Church of France created a “Pastoral of migrants” which merged in 2020 with the “National Service for Mission and Migration (SNMM)”, placed under the responsibility of the Episcopal Commission for the Universal Mission of the Church (CEMUE). In the Vatican, the Migrants and Refugees Section is personally led by Pope Francis (2).

In France, the reception of migrants is provided by state services, with the support of many associations, which fulfil a mission of general interest, in a secular and ecumenical framework. The Catholic Relief is alongside the Popular Relief, associations committed since their origins to the side of the most vulnerable with the French NGOs Cimade, Gisti, or Utopia 56... wherever the rights of exiles are violated. A guarantee of secularism is required to benefit from public subsidies, since the law of August 24, 2021 whose purpose is to strengthen the principles of the Republic by fighting against any form of separatism (3).

Constitutionally, France is an indivisible, secular, democratic and social Republic which ensures the equality before the law, on its entire territory, of all citizens (4). It respects all beliefs. It organizes the separation between religions and the State which is neutral with respect to religious or spiritual convictions. There is no State religion. Secularism guarantees freedom of conscience for all. Everyone is free to believe or not to believe. It allows the free expression of one's convictions, with respect for those of others and within the limits of public order. Secularism (laïcité) allows the exercise of citizenship, reconciling the freedom of each with equality and brotherhood of all in the interest of the general. Based on the law of secularism of 1905, it allowed France to put an end to the religious quarrels that have entangled its history, tragically with the Wars of religion that have bloodied Europe for centuries, and more insidiously during the XIXth century when the parties of the order, viscerally anti-republican, wanted to restore institutions that had allowed them to establish a conservative power - Church («royal religion» catholic), Army...

After being lived as a “persecution” and after 16 years of conflict, the Catholic Church and the faithful finally understood and admitted in 1921, the year of reconciliation with the French Republic, that the 1905 law was both a protection and a bulwark (4). Curiously, when he came to Ajaccio on 15 December 2024, Pope Francis sent a message of distrust of the French secular

model. Arguing in favour of a «healthy secularism», which is «neither static nor rigid but evolving and dynamic» the Sovereign Pontiff repeated a criticism already expressed on the French secularism that would suffer from a «coloration inherited from the Enlightenment much too strong» devaluing for religions, of the «sub-cultures».

For Federico Lombardi (6), a specialist in Vatican communication, Pope Francis wants to tackle the “most pressing problems of today” with an “off-center” perspective, that of the poor and the peripheries that would allow him to broaden the gaze or to welcome with particular intensity critical questions (migration, prisons, slavery...) in order to stimulate reflection and the search for concrete solutions to the problems of humanity.” His magisterium would be "between continuity and innovation". His criticism of the French secularism is surprising in a country like France, which hosts the largest Jewish and Muslim communities in Europe. The coexistence between religions is harmonious in the country of Voltaire and Victor Hugo; it is expressed through intense interreligious dialogue and real solidarity, especially when members of a community are attacked or discriminated against (7).

Pope Francis did not want to come to the inauguration of Notre Dame, on December 7, 2024, in Paris, preferring to go to Corsica, “an island where 90% of the inhabitants say they are Catholic and where religious practice is fervent and embedded in political life” (8) to show his preference for the “peripheries”. However, Notre-Dame de Paris is “the parish of the nation”, this French singularity expressed by Maryvonne de Saint Pulgent (9) which “may seem disconcerting in a secular republic” because the French, like the Europeans, whether they are believers or not, Catholic or not, need a place that is long-term, a place marked by the sacred, where the nation is found.

All men and women of goodwill are needed to defend an essential cause that goes beyond religious, political or social affiliations, that of the exiles. In defense of the rights of migrants, it is a shame to oppose a “Center” to “Peripheries”. Pope Francis has often denounced the «instrumentalization of religion», again in Corsica. In times when religious fundamentalisms are instrumentalizing religion and migration around the world, opposing a “supposedly dominant Center” to “oppressed Peripheries” in order to better attack Western values, is Pope Francis not playing with fire?

Will the 80 days announced to celebrate the 2025 Jubilee be enough to build bridges and dispel misunderstandings? To illustrate a «universalism enlightened», biting and mocking but full of humanity, we suggest reflecting on the humanistic message of the «Chanson pour l'Auvergnat», written by a French composer, frondeur spirit, decidedly secular and republican, George Brassens. He expresses with sad irony that the most decisive and humane help does not always come from “all well-intentioned people” (10). Hell is paved with good intentions...

Posted on LinkedIn on the 7th of January 2025- <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/2025-holy-year-dr-b%25C3%25A9n%25C3%25A9dicte-halba-rmwve>

Bénédicte Halba runs a research institute (iriv) that has been working on migration since 2003, she has hosted a club at the Cité des Métiers for a migrant audience (2012-2022) and published a weblog dedicated to migration (since 2024)- <https://actions-migration.blogspot.com/>.

- (1) Conference of Bishops of France, 2 January 2025
- (2) Eglise and Migrations – Friday 3 January 2025 <https://migrations.catholique.fr/qui-sommes-nous/le-saint-siege/>
- (3) French law against separatism of the 24th August 2021- <https://www.vie-publique.fr/loi/277621-loi-separatisme-respect-des-principes-de-la-republique-24-aout-2021>
- (4) Article 1 of the Constitution of the 4th of October 1958- <https://www.conseil-constitutionnel.fr/le-bloc-de-constitutionnalite/texte-integral-de-la-constitution-du-4-octobre-1958-en-vigueur>
- (5) words used by Father Bernard Ardura, President of the Pontifical Committee for Historical Sciences, quoted by Manuella Affejee “100 years ago, reconciliation between the Holy See and France”, interview with Father Bernard Ardura - Vatican City, <https://www.vaticannews.va/fr/vatican/news/2021-02/centenaire-retablissement-relations-saint-siege-france-ardura.html>
- (6) Lombardi, F., translated from Italian by Armogathe, J. (2018) . Pope Francis' magisterium, between continuity and innovation *Communio*, N° 255(1), 95-104. <https://doi.org/10.3917/commun.255.0095>. . ; since 2016, President of the Vatican Foundation Joseph Ratzinger – Benedict XVI, Communications Officer at the Vatican, in all positions of the main vectors of Vatican communication (Journal of the Catholic Civilization, Vatican Radio, Vatican Television Centre, Holy See Press Room),
- (7) Christian, Jewish and Muslim cults united in prayer after the terrorist attacks of January 2015 against the supermarket “Hyper Cacher” after attacking the editorial office of “Charlie Hebdo”. The pretext of «blasphemy against Islam» for the satirical newspaper, which had violently criticized Pope John Paul II during his entire pontificate, does not fit with the supermarket. The main goal was to attack the republican and secular France as will confirm the attacks of November 2015 against the Bataclan where French people of all faiths were killed
- (8) Editorial, *Le Monde*, « The Pope’s Debatable Lesson in Secularism », 17 décembre 2024
- (9) quoted by Cyprien Mycinski, « Notre Dame de Paris, de l’édifice catholique la « paroisse de la nation », *Le Monde*, 7 décembre 2024 ; former director of Heritage at the French Ministry of Culture, author of « La Gloire de Notre Dame. La foi et le pouvoir », Paris : Gallimard, 2023.
- (10) George Brassens, « Chanson pour l’Auvergnat », Paris : Éditions Seghers, 1954