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VOYAGE APOSTOLIQUE DU SAINT-PÈRE XIV EN FRANCE
ET VISITE AU SIÈGE DE L'ORGANISATION DES NATIONS UNIES
POUR L'ÉDUCATION, LA SCIENCE ET LA CULTURE (UNESCO)
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VISITE À L'ORGANISATION DES NATIONS UNIES POUR L'ÉDUCATION, LA SCIENCE ET LA CULTURE (UNESCO)

DISCOURS DU PAPE LÉON XIV

Siège de l'UNESCO (Paris)
Vendredi 25 septembre 2026
[Multimédia]

Monsieur le Directeur général,
Monsieur le Président de la Conférence Générale,
Monsieur le Président du Conseil Exécutif,
Excellences,
Mesdames et Messieurs,

je suis heureux de me trouver aujourd'hui au sein de cette assemblée des Nations, où les langues et les cultures se rencontrent pour coopérer à un projet qui concerne l'ensemble de la famille humaine : « Contribuer au maintien de la paix et de la sécurité en resserrant, par l'éducation, la science et la culture, la collaboration entre nations, afin d'assurer le respect universel de la justice, de la loi, des droits de l'homme et des libertés fondamentales » (*Acte constitutif de l'UNESCO*, art. 1, al. 1). Construire ensemble un monde juste est, en effet, le fondement même de la coopération internationale. Nos expériences, nos aptitudes et nos compétences visent à édifier un espace accueillant pour tous et fécond pour chacun, afin que tous les peuples puissent grandir dans la paix.

En tant que témoin de la paix, je vous adresse mes salutations cordiales, Représentants des États membres et Observateurs, des Organisations internationales, du monde universitaire et de la société civile. Je remercie Monsieur Khaled El-Enany, Directeur Général de cette Organisation, pour son invitation chaleureuse et pour les paroles qu'il nous a adressées. En ma qualité de pasteur, je vous transmets la parole de l'Église, qui se fait sans cesse "message etconversation" à l'intention de tous les peuples, femmes et hommes de bonne volonté (cf. Paul VI, Lett. enc. *Ecclesiam suam*, n. 67).

Le projet de construire ensemble un monde juste coïncide avec une mission que nous avons appris à partager au fil de l'histoire. À cet égard, l'UNESCO représente à la fois un objectif et un outil pour poursuivre aujourd'hui, avec un engagement accru, cette tâche, selon nos multiples domaines d'activité. En 2027 [deux mille vingt-sept], nous célébrerons le 75^{e} [soixante-quinzième] anniversaire de la présence du Saint-Siège à l'UNESCO : une présence qui découle de la conviction que l'avenir dépend avant tout du respect et de la promotion de la dignité inaliénable de chaque être humain créé à l'image de Dieu. C'est pourquoi nous considérons cette Organisation comme un interlocuteur privilégié au service du bien commun, qui est la "forme sociale de la dignité" que nous partageons tous de manière originelle et égale (cf. Lett. enc. *Magnifica Humanitas*, n. 59). Depuis 1952 [mil neuf cent cinquante-deux], la Mission permanente d'observation du Saint-Siège discerne et accompagne, dans cette perspective, les initiatives de l'UNESCO, en apportant sa contribution au dialogue entre les nations, afin de soutenir un authentique développement humain, qui n'est tel que lorsqu'il est orienté à « promouvoir tout homme et tout l'homme » (Paul VI, Lett. enc. *Populorum progressio*, n. 14).

S'adressant à cette assemblée, mon vénéré prédécesseur saint Jean-Paul II rappelait que « *genus humanum arte et ratione vivit* ». Puisqu'en effet « l'homme vit d'une vie vraiment humaine grâce à la culture », [1] ce mot "culture" désigne la manière d'être par laquelle l'homme donne un sens à tout ce qu'il fait. Quarante-six ans plus tard, alors que je renouvelle parmi vous l'engagement de collaboration du Saint-Siège, je vous invite à considérer l'UNESCO non seulement comme une Organisation internationale illustre, mais aussi comme un lieu où l'humanité réfléchit sur elle-même, sur son histoire et sur son avenir. Promouvoir l'éducation, les sciences et la culture est en effet impossible sans promouvoir la vie de l'homme et de la femme, qui en sont les protagonistes.

Dans le domaine de l'éducation, l'Église catholique apporte une expérience très ancienne : depuis des siècles, ses communautés ouvrent des écoles et des universités, enseignent à lire et à écrire, et sont présentes même dans les endroits les plus pauvres et les plus reculés. Avec le *Pacte éducatif mondial*, mon prédécesseur François a souhaité inscrire cette expérience dans une alliance éducative plus large, ouverte à la contribution de tous. Mais ce que je souhaite vous transmettre, ce ne sont pas d'abord les œuvres : c'est la conviction dont elles découlent. Aucune éducation n'est complète si elle ne parle pas de la question du sens. Dans ce même discours, saint Jean-Paul II le rappelait : éduquer, c'est aider l'homme à « être » davantage et non seulement à « avoir » plus, en reconnaissant en lui aussi cette transcendance de la personne qui appartient à la plénitude de son humanité (cf. *ibid.*, nn. 10-11).

In this assembly, then, a fundamental question deserves to be explored, one that urgently calls for a response: *What does it mean to be human?* Every culture is challenged by this question, which lies at the heart of every form of knowledge, every art and every religion. Even in the twenty-first century, after all, we cannot take for granted that we know who the human person is or what it means to live as a human being. Indeed, every generation is called to grapple with this question, especially in the face of tragedies that, regrettably, occur even today.

Before all else, the human person is *someone who is conceived and born*. Thus, first of all, to be human means to be a child. None of us chose to be so. None of us decided from whom, when or where to be born. This evident truth sheds light on something that is not merely biological but ethical: as children, we are all brothers and sisters. From the outset, our humanity is a gift and a trial, a promise and a responsibility. For every human being, birth establishes a primordial bond — a communion of life that has its source, and its first educational setting, in the family.

Secondly, we are all born naked and in need. We are poor by birth, in need of bread and words, of care and affection — that is, of all that nourishes body and spirit. We know this well, and yet, as we become adults, we risk forgetting it. It is precisely those in need who suffer the greatest consequences of this forgetfulness, whenever their humanity is betrayed or cast aside, exploited or deceived. Forgetting the circumstances of our birth obscures the very idea of human life, because it detaches life from the history common to us all. Thus, life is no longer understood as a gift, but as a commodity. It is no longer viewed as a summons to care and responsibility, but as a product to be exploited. Indeed, this tragic alternative reminds us that to be human is to be free by nature. Since all of us have been children, our freedom begins with our response to the freedom of the one who first turns to us — whether with gestures of affection or rejection, of loving welcome or neglect and cruelty.

Thirdly, to keep alive the memory of our common humanity is to recognize its grandeur — that is, its immense potential — even though it is diminished by many forms of evil and injustice. Those engaged in the fields of education, science and culture are called all the more to care for every person, so that the beauty of our freedom may shine forth. This beauty has a name: justice. Freedom is indeed beautiful when it is oriented toward goodness and truth; it is disfigured when it descends into arbitrariness, violence or the thirst for power. To be human, then, implies a responsibility before history: the human being is one who grows, learns and works with both hands and mind. By that labor, we may cultivate the earth or disfigure it, create works of art or destroy them. At this particular juncture, we must recognize that the most terrible of "human works" is war, for then science itself is placed at the service of an inhumane will to destroy and **to** kill.

In this regard, the Preamble of the Constitution of UNESCO opens with words that retain a striking relevance today – as we saw at the "Wall of Peace" –: "Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructe d" (*Constitution of UNESCO*, Preamble, 1945). These words were written in the aftermath of the Second World War, the most devastating tragedy of the past century. Humanity had come to realize that scientific progress, when severed from wisdom, can turn into a weapon of destruction; that culture, when subjected to ideology, can degenerate into falsehood and propaganda; and that education, when it abandons the truth, can become an instrument for manipulating consciences. The founding States of UNESCO understood that treaties are necessary, but not sufficient in themselves. They require a culture of peace and a shared commitment to peace, which sustain them. Peace cannot be built by treaties alone, nor by compromises between opposing forces. Peace is genuine when it springs from the virtue of justice rather than from a mere contract, and from an upright will rather than from an unstable balance of interests. Indeed, only an upright will can recognize in the other a brother or sister, a person like oneself.

Eighty years later, the words of your founding Charter have lost none of their force. Yet we also see how profoundly this common principle is threatened by forms of barbarity that fuel rivalry and conflict. Among the challenges facing the worlds of science and education today, I would draw particular attention to those arising from the vast field of technology. Our efforts in this domain must ensure that new technologies remain at the service of the human person, rather than becoming yet another instrument of domination and injustice.

Over the centuries, many tasks once performed by human beings have been entrusted to machines, whose capabilities and applications have continued to expand. More recently, certain artificial systems have even been given the name of our human faculty of thought: intelligence. At the same time, however, our ideas and relationships risk being impoverished by a process of dehumanization. The paradox has become increasingly evident: while "intelligence" is attributed to computational systems, we struggle to recognize the inalienable dignity of human persons, whose lives are judged according to the criterion of efficiency and, when deemed no longer productive, are rejected and discarded.

This painful reality invites us to reflect both on the fragility of our human nature and on the immense dignity of every human person — a dignity that remains undiminished even in the most vulnerable circumstances, even to death itself. The human being is certainly one who is born, but also *one who dies*. Our dignity is not destroyed by illness or suffering, nor is it dependent upon our abilities. Rather, it calls for loving care at every stage of life.

For the Christian faith, the mystery of the human person finds its fullest light in Christ, who, "in the very revelation of the mystery of the Father and of his love, fully reveals humanity to itself and brings to light its very high calling" (SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 22). In his light, every person appears to us as a creature willed and loved by God. This light also helps us to grasp more deeply the meaning of our shared human experience.

Ladies and Gentlemen, as men and women of science, you are called to cooperate unremittingly in the name of our common history, so that, from a diversity of perspectives, a convergence of vision may emerge, and from this convergence, a harmony of action. This harmony is expressed in the work of UNESCO when it gives a symphonic voice to the highest aspirations for the good and the care of humanity. Where there is harmony, different voices find agreement, and the nations you represent are thus brought together in concord.

In this regard, I would like to appeal to two images from the Bible, the great cultural treasury of humanity. They are the tower of Babel and the public square of Pentecost. I offer them as ways of representing the unity of the human family, which, even today, is continually called to discern its proper direction and the meaning of the history in which it is immersed. These biblical narratives portray two forms of life in society that invite us to reflect upon the circumstances of our own time.

The tower of Babel represents a unity imposed through domination (cf. *Gen* 11:4). At the same time, this edifice reveals that the more power seeks to oppress, the more it weakens itself, exposing its inhumane face. We see this in the suffering and injustice caused by despotism, as well as in forms of exploitation that damage both society and the environment. As history teaches us, many empires have reveled in their power before being consumed by it and collapsing like a tower. The outcome of this pride, exalted and then brought low, is dispersion. The presumption of making oneself like God and subjecting peoples to a single yoke leads to a confusion of languages and a failure to understand one another. Instead of reaching heaven, as it presumed to do, the tower of Babel collapsed, with a twofold negative result. Since the unity it imposed was forced, the diversity that followed its collapse turned into a source of conflict. Today, the temptation of Babel reappears in a globalization pursued without fraternity, in rapacious forms of neocolonialism, in ideological impositions and in all those "contacts without bonds" that reduce human life to commerce (cf. INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION, *Quo Vadis, Humanitas?*, 42). Science itself, when reduced to a technique of power, no longer serves to elevate the human person, but instead risks degrading the fruits of human endeavor.

Today, in particular, we possess the means to connect people and continents instantaneously, yet, at the same time, we are witnessing new forms of isolation, material and spiritual poverty, and abandonment. Communication has become much faster, but not necessarily more truthful. Information is abundant, but is not synonymous with wisdom. Without a shared ethical foundation, the many channels of communication risk multiplying false information and giving currency to words devoid of meaning, thereby hindering dialogue rather than fostering it.

Artificial intelligence amplifies this problem. Although such systems can correlate data, they cannot answer questions that concern the meaning of human life, which is rooted in lived experience. Yet human beings cannot live without meaning. Meaning is the oxygen of the mind. For this reason, the challenges of communication, which are always challenges of education as well, make the search for truth a matter of social justice and historical equity. That is why education in this area is essential, and I welcome UNESCO's initiative through its Media and Information Literacy (MIL) program, which promotes the responsible use of media and digital tools.

Indeed, without truth, language becomes subject to the logic of violence and to the arbitrary will of the powerful. Others are then excluded in the name of profit, and the innocent are killed in the name of freedom. Instead of respecting the law, those in power invoke it when it serves their interests and disregard it when it restrains them, treating even justice itself as though it were a commodity to be bought and sold. If we realize that the corruption of the law begins with the corruption of the heart, we can recognize how every science risks losing its proper meaning when pursued without ethics, and thus ceasing to serve and reflect human dignity.

In this regard, I encourage the international community as a whole to devote particular attention to the protection of children and young people. In the digital age, their vulnerability must never become an opportunity for exploitation. May these technologies support their growth, education and relationships, safeguarding their freedom to think and discern, and always remaining at the service of the dignity of the human person.

The corruption of culture which we are considering finds its redemption in the public square of Pentecost. There, a message of peace is received as good news by people of every nation. This message proclaims the resurrection of Jesus, that is, the victory of life over death and the salvation that gives hope to the world. On the day of Pentecost, the public square becomes a place where the peace that heals every offence against the human person is celebrated. Each one present heard the message "in his own native language" (cf. *Acts* 2:8). Communion in no way suppresses diversity. Rather, it enables diversity to flourish in the harmony of voices and faces. In the proclamation of peace, the richness of cultures becomes a bearer of a universal truth. Biblical teaching thus shows us the way to achieve what we all seek: "that unity which does not cancel out differences but values the personal history of each person and the social and religious culture of every people" (*Homily at the Mass for the Beginning of the Pontificate*, 18 May 2025). It is not the domination of Babel, but the peace of Pentecost, that makes such communion among all peoples possible. Every culture, therefore, realizes its highest wisdom when it speaks peace and the good of all, bearing witness to the authentic meaning of our humanity.

Those engaged in education know that only the truth sets us free. Those who teach and those who conduct research know that error enslaves us to ignorance and superstition. Whenever we encounter obstacles to our mission, let us remember that there is one earth for all and a common human nature. The human being cannot be understood by separating what belongs together: body and soul, personal life and relationships, our relationship with others and with the environment. All form part of the unity of our existence. For this reason, cultivating the earth also means cultivating the humanity that inhabits it. Education and science are called to this task. Indeed, it is no coincidence that every culture, according to the very etymology of the word, is an act of cultivation. I therefore renew the appeal of my predecessors to care together for the human person and for creation: Pope Benedict XVI spoke of the need for an ecology of the human person, while Pope Francis developed the perspective of integral ecology (cf. Benedict XVI, *Address to the Bundestag*, 22 September 2011; Francis, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'*, 137–162).

The touchstone by which we can assess our commitment is the care we show for the littlest and for the poor: children in their mothers' wombs andin the various theaters of war, persons with physical and intellectual disabilities, the elderly, migrants, refugees, and all those arrogantly excluded as unproductive. They are the true test of our claims to respect human dignity, and their protection and promotion extend also to creation. Opposed to this is a will to exploit and plunder, extracting as much as possible from every living being, consuming without safeguarding, destroying without cultivating. Thus, the present ecological crisis is an anthropological crisis; moreover, the Church is convinced that every culture bears within itself a wisdom that matures in an ecosystem of peoples. The human person's habitat is society — not a merely physical environment, such as the desert or the ocean for animals, but a moral and relational one. Where social peace prevails, peoples flourish in justice.

C'est donc là que l'UNESCO trouve la synthèse de ses hautes missions éducatives et scientifiques : dans le travail patient de construction de la paix. Face aux nombreuses et complexes urgences de notre époque, le monde considère les institutions internationales avec des sentiments contrastés. D'une part, celles-ci sont appelées à relever des défis qu'aucun État ne peut affronter seul. D'autre part, ces mêmes institutions traversent une crise d'efficacité, surtout lorsque le dialogue est considéré comme un frein à l'action au lieu d'une ressource pour la paix ; comme une forme d'hypocrisie plutôt que comme une occasion de rechercher ensemble le bien. Face à ces dérives, il faut promouvoir une vertu, aussi rare que désirée : la confiance ; confiance que les différences ne constituent pas nécessairement une menace ; confiance que le dialogue sincère peut engendrer un bien plus grand que celui que chacun pourrait obtenir seul. Le Saint-Siège souhaite insuffler cette confiance à l'UNESCO, comme aux autres organisations internationales, conscient que chaque peuple possède une richesse à partager dans la recherche de ce progrès authentique que seule la paix peut garantir. Il ne s'agit pas de prôner un optimisme naïf, qui ignore les difficultés, mais de persévérer dans l'espoir que le bien est toujours possible. Chaque enfant qui naît apporte de l'espérance. Chaque homme et chaque femme qui consacre sa vie à la recherche de la vérité accomplit un acte d'espérance. Que l'UNESCO témoigne donc de cet espoir en favorisant l'entente entre les nations, par le dialogue entre leurs cultures respectives. Nous croyons, en effet, que l'éducation est l'instrument qui permet de surmonter les peurs réciproques et que la science peut être au service de la vie de chaque être humain, en semant aujourd'hui les graines d'une bonne récolte pour l'avenir. Cette confiance nourrit notre espérance dans la charité, c'est-à-dire dans le service pour le bien du prochain : en nous consacrant tous, avec cohérence, à notre magnifique humanité, la paix pourra enfin s'épanouir.

Alors que nous coopérons à cette œuvre, les traditions religieuses jouent un rôle culturellement nécessaire et irremplaçable, et les religions expriment nos interrogations face à l'origine de la vie et à sa fin, en élaborant le sens premier et ultime de l'existence, qui se reflète dans les choix quotidiens. En effet, lorsque les hommes et les femmes de bonne volonté orientent leurs actions vers Dieu, le pluralisme des cultures ne se disperse pas dans le désordre de Babel. L'humanité se retrouve au contraire dans une recherche commune de sens, et vers une destinée qui n'est pas la mort. Nous ne sommes pas en chemin vers le néant. C'est pourquoi l'âme humaine, dans sa relation avec Dieu, ressent encore mieux l'appel à cultiver la paix au moyen d'une alliance entre des peuples qui se reconnaissent comme enfants du même Père et comme frères et sœurs.

Je souhaite donc que notre rencontre renforce l'engagement de chacun à œuvrer sans relâche pour que la conscience d'appartenir à une seule famille humaine devienne plus vivante, plus active et plus juste. À cet égard, je tiens à exprimer mes sincères remerciements à l'ensemble du personnel de l'UNESCO, qui accomplit avec compétence et dévouement cette mission si noble : édifier la paix en cultivant toutes les sciences et tous les arts de l'homme.

Je vous adresse ces paroles à vous tous, aux peuples que vous représentez, et tout particulièrement aux jeunes. Ce sont en effet les nouvelles générations qui observent avec le plus d'attention notre action. Tout en soutenant leurs aspirations à la justice, c'est avec gratitude et estime que j'invoque sur vous tous et sur vos nations l'abondance des bénédictions de Dieu, Créateur tout-puissant et miséricordieux. Merci.

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[1] *Discours à l'UNESCO*, 2 juin 1980. Cf. Thomas d'Aquin, *In Aristotelis Posteriora Analytica*, 1.

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