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**SPEECH MADE BY  
MICHEL ROCARD,  
THE FRENCH PRIME MINISTER,**

**in the presence of the Holy Father,**

**on May 1st 1989,  
on his arrival on the Island of Reunion.**

Holy Father,

This is the second time in less than a year that I have been called upon in virtue of my position as Head of Government to welcome and greet You Holiness on the territory of the French Republic. For me this is a source of heartfelt joy, as I see this as a sign of the interest and friendship you have for our country. I am pleased also to greet His Eminence Cardinal Casaroli, the Secretary of State, who is with you, and to thank His Eminence Cardinal Decourtray, President of the Bishops' Conference of France, and the Papal Nuncio to France, Monsignor Antonetti, for having made the long journey to meet you here and to accompany you on this apostolic visit.

I am pleased to greet you, Holy Father, in this part of France in the Indian Ocean, the Island of Reunion, whose very name suggests harmony and peace. You will find that the population here is young, enterprising, varied, tolerant, and for most part Catholic.

The visit of Your Holiness to beatify one of the evangelisers of this island, Father Scubilion Rousseau, cannot fail to receive a warm welcome here, accompanied by the fervour and devotion you have already noticed since your arrival at the airport.

Quite apart from any reasons of protocol, the French Government was anxious to be associated with your act of recognition of this son of Burgundy who for 35 years worked for the good and the emancipation of Reunion, and through him, of the Brothers of St. John Baptist de La Salle.

Our country is proud to have given to the world in the XVII century a great benefactor to humanity in the person of John Baptist de La Salle. If he was one of the great educationalists of modern times, because he reformed teaching methodology and replaced individual by group teaching, his great achievement was that he understood the importance of educating the children of the working classes. He involved himself personally in this and in 1682 founded the Brothers of the Christian Schools for this purpose also.

It is thanks to him and to them that the work of combating illiteracy began in pre-1789 France. His approach and his humanitarian concern opened the way for compulsory, free primary education, which successive French governments would subsequently proclaim (for the first time in 1793), and which Jules Ferry would finally introduce in 1881, upholding, as you are well aware, the principle of the freedom to teach, and the non-denominational character of State education.

The Brothers of St. John Baptist de La Salle did not restrict their love of the poor to mainland France. In the space of a short time they had spread throughout the world, and now there are more than 10.000 of them in 80 countries. It is as a part of this missionary work that we find the warm personality of Father Scubilion Rousseau.

This son of France, born, Holy Father, close to the famous historical and spiritual centre of Vezeley, added a new dimension to the work of the Brothers on this Island of Reunion. As I mentioned earlier on, Brother Scubilion Rousseau came to the Island in 1833: at the time it was still

called Bourbon and was governed as a colony. His role in its history was to be of crucial importance and would break new ground.

In fact, what he wanted to do was to gather on the same school benches in the primary school all children, irrespective of the colour of their skins, or whether they were the children of free people or slaves. This was not done without much opposition. By persevering, however, in his determination to achieve this, and by basing his teaching on the values of the Gospel that set people free, he prepared the slaves for freedom which the Second Empire granted them in 1848, thanks to the efforts of Victor Schoelcher.

The most recent biographer of Brother Scubilion in a book with a preface by Monsignor Gilbert Aubry has pointed out, and I quote: "*a surprising and staggering area of common agreement between the atheist mystic, Victor Schoelcher, and the holy Brother Scubilion*". The autor goes on to say: "*These were two lives devoted to the same cause, completely free of self-interest, and in my view, each one complementing the other in its concern for freedom, on a moral and spiritual plane as well as on that of political freedom. One obtained from the newly proclaimed Republic a decree*

*abolishing slavery, and a declaration in the constitution that slavery could no longer exist in any territory held by France. The other, here, prepared the slaves to take up their responsibilities as free men and citizens, helping them to live through the initial excitement of a new situation as responsible adults*". He contributed in this way to the present day situation, which rejects all discrimination between the citizens of this Department, whatever their origins. Victor Schoelcher has his place in our national Pantheon, a fitting tribute to the high regard in which he was held by all. Brother Scubilion lies here on this Island of Reunion to which he devoted his life and where he is held in veneration by everyone. Tomorrow, Holy Father, you will consecrate him as one of the Blessed to be an example for the Catholic faithful throughout the world. This cannot but be a source of rejoicing for France.

In my own name, in the name of the President of the Republic and in that of the French Government, in the name of all the men and women present here, in the name of the people of Reunion, I wish you, a very happy stay on this splendid corner of France in the Indian Ocean, the Island of Reunion.