



The Holy See

**LETTER OF HIS HOLINESS
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF VENEZUELA**

*Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,
Priests, Religious and
Faithful of Venezuela,*

1. It gives me great joy to address a cordial greeting to you and to join spiritually in the Eucharistic celebration which has brought you together in Cumaná to commemorate the fifth centenary of the evangelization of Venezuela. It is right that so significant an event should be remembered and this is why I feel particularly close to you in giving thanks to the Lord for the abundant gifts received during these five centuries and for the copious response to Christian life which he has continued to inspire in your country's different ecclesial communities. This commemoration, of which Holy Mass is the high point, is a new call from the Lord to take part, duly prepared, in his banquet (cf. Lk 14:15ff.) to which we are all invited.

2. The evangelization of Venezuela was a colossal task, achieved with a scarcity of means and persons, but it so deeply penetrated the heart of the nation that its fruit has made the Catholic faith an essential feature of the Venezuelan identity. Christopher Columbus was not mistaken when, contemplating the broad flow of the Orinoco River and seeing the riches and luxuriant vegetation of these lands, he thought he was in "another world where our faith could be increased" (*Carta a los Reyes Católicos sobre su tercer viaje*). Thus, with the arrival of the Gospel, began a glorious phase of its national life. The Catholic hierarchy was very soon established with Rodrigo de Bastidas (1532-1542), the first Bishop of Venezuela, who from the Episcopal See of Santa Ana de Coro was the first of the series of Pastors who inspired the life of the communities which were established in this nation. Thus the Church, guided by the Bishops with the irreplaceable help of the priests and the valuable contributions of the religious orders and congregations, fulfilled her mission with distinction and continued it to the present time in fidelity to the mandate received from the Lord.

3. Today, dear Pastors and faithful of Venezuela, as heirs to the faith, hope and apostolic zeal of your fathers in the faith, it is your task to perpetuate it in the new historical context. Therefore be impassioned witnesses to Jesus Christ, like the agents of the first evangelization, sensitive to the surrounding culture and sympathetic to the problems and worries of those who live there. Like them, reinforce the genuine moral values and be the artisans of a new and authentic Christian culture.

I would like, with this in mind, to encourage you to keep alive always the spiritual heritage which you have received from your forebears and from the first evangelizers as a precious gift. Your ecclesial communities are called to discover the grace of the present time. Seek the essential and dedicate your best energies to it in deep unity of spirit, so that the world may believe (cf. Jn 17:21): unity among Pastors and faithful; unity among the various particular Churches; unity in hierarchical communion. In this way the Holy Spirit, to whom we are dedicating this second year of preparation for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, will enliven and illumine you in this new phase of Christian renewal which you are undertaking.

4. With these fervent wishes and affectionately remembering my two Apostolic Visits, in 1985 and 1996, in which I had the opportunity to see the Gospel's presence among this beloved people and to encourage them to live it with greater fullness, I invoke upon each one of you the constant protection of Our Lady of Coromoto and the intercession of Bl. Mary of St José, the first Venezuelan to be raised to the honour of the altars, that she may help you to be faithful followers of Christ, ever united by the bond of charity, and I impart my Apostolic Blessing to you with affection.

From the Vatican, 22 July 1998.

IOANNES PAULUS PP. II

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