



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF CUBA
ON THEIR AD LIMINA VISIT**

Friday, 6 July 2001

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

1. I receive you with great pleasure today, Pastors of the pilgrim Church of God in Cuba, who during these days are making your *ad limina* visit; thus you renew your communion with the Successor of Peter and venerate with devotion the tombs of the Princes of the Apostles, pillars of the Church and faithful to Christ to the point of shedding their blood for him. Likewise, you have had important meetings with the offices of the Roman Curia and, in an atmosphere of prayer and reflection, you have expressed the causes of joy and hope, grief and anguish, lived by that part of the People of God entrusted to your pastoral care.

I am deeply grateful for the kind words addressed to me by Archbishop Adolfo Rodríguez Herrera of Camagüey, President of your Bishops' Conference, clearly showing your allegiance and that of your ecclesial communities. Indeed, I am well aware of your deep communion with the See of Peter, and you can be sure of my affection and closeness in all the circumstances of your pastoral work.

2. Your presence here renews the memory of my Pastoral Visit to Cuba in 1998. Those were intense days in which I could appreciate the warmth and welcome of the Cuban people. On that memorable occasion, I left behind a pastoral Message, which continues to be a help, supporting the Church's existence and urging everyone to hope. I am pleased to know that since then certain important things have been improved for you, such as for example, the restoration of Christmas, the possibility of holding processions - which are part of your rich popular piety - a greater participation of Catholics in the country's life, the presence of some young Cubans at the 15th World Youth Day in Rome, during the last Jubilee Year and a notable increase in the number of

the faithful who receive the sacraments. Nevertheless, there are other difficulties that have not had satisfactory solutions, but let us hope that with the good will of one and all, suitable and timely solutions will be found.

3. At the end of the Great Jubilee of the Incarnation, I invited the whole Church to set out anew from Christ, who "is the same yesterday, today and for ever" (Heb 13,8), to receive his words: "*Duc in altum*" (Lk 5,4) with fresh enthusiasm, and to open herself confidently to the future. Following my words, dear Bishops of Cuba, you approved the Global Pastoral Plan 2001-2006 with a missionary enthusiasm closely attuned to the thirst for God of your people which, as I said to you in Havana, "*has a Christian soul*" (*Homily*, 25 January 1998, n. 7; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 28 January 1998, p. 2). The faith and values proclaimed by the Gospel are a treasure that must be jealously guarded, because they are at the root of your national cultural identity, threatened today, as in other places, by a neutral mass culture, drawing on globalization for its forms of entertainment.

In putting this Plan into practice, meeting centres for the Catholic community were opened in many homes, especially in the sections where for years it was impossible to build new churches. This has proved to be a method of evangelization that closely complies with the above-mentioned Pastoral Plan, with families opening their doors and wanting to be lively and enthusiastic communities. These "Homes of Mission or Prayer", as they are called, are in conformity with the appeal to evangelize all the settings of life, since they must be true schools in which faith is passed on, where students are instructed in it while they are nourished with prayer. I therefore encourage them to continue creatively to proclaim the Gospel to all Cubans, paying attention to the proper formation of those who run these centres.

In your Jubilee Message you said that Cuba is living "*a historic time*". Therefore as Pastors of all the lay faithful you must continue to enlighten Cuban consciences, directing them towards a persevering dialogue and sincere reconciliation. You must not let yourselves be disheartened by this laborious task, even if your voice should be the only one or if you should be "*signs that are spoken against*" (cf. Lk 2,34). Although confrontations are not desirable, the Church is aware that the Lord's plans do not always coincide with the criteria of the world and, indeed, are at times in opposition to them.

Accepting every day with fresh enthusiasm the Lord's words, "Put out into the deep", guide the destinies of that deeply fervent Church which has given so many proofs of fidelity in the past. Encourage your priests, deacons, religious, seminarians and lay people to "put out into the deep" in their service to the Church and the people, staying faithful to Christ and to their homeland which has such need of them. May all of them journey on without being downhearted, always going ahead with new projects that give meaning and hope to their lives.

4. You are well aware of your responsibility to pass on Christ's message as "true and authentic

teachers of faith, who have been made pontiffs and pastors" (*Christus Dominus*, n. 2). This message must be proclaimed in its entirety and its full beauty, without neglecting its needs and bearing in mind that the Cross is part of the way taken by Christ, a way that was also taken by his disciples. Guided by the one Teacher who has the "words of eternal life" (Jn 6,68), the men and women of Cuba must know where to find a renewed sense of the transcendent in their lives, accepting divine love and perceiving the many possibilities for personal and social fulfilment that are opening before them.

Faith in Jesus Christ, as you well know, acts in the human being in a totally different way than ideologies which are transient and consume the energies of individuals and peoples with earthly goals, many of which are unattainable. It is therefore more and more urgent to present the unfathomable riches of Christian spirituality at the beginning of this millennium to a world that is bored with the old ideologies which, lost their initial fascination and left deep emptiness and the lack of meaning for life.

5. In exercising the "*munus docendi*", the Church, through her ministers, is called also to illumine temporal and social affairs from within with the light of the Gospel (cf. *Lumen gentium*, n. 31), ensuring that her members are "witnesses and operators of peace and justice" (cf. *Sollicitudo rei socialis*). She therefore furthers an education in the authentic values that will set people free and involve them in participation as you indicated in your Global Plan. In this respect, I already pointed out at Camagüey that "the Church has the duty of providing a moral, civil and religious formation which will help the youth of Cuba to grow in human and Christian values" (*Written Message at Mass with Young People*, 23 January 1998, n. 3; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 4 February 1998, p. 3). Lay people, for their part, by benefiting from this activity of the Church, will be able to persevere in their noble task of proposing and promoting new initiatives for civil society, seeking not confrontation but justice. Their efforts will be encouraged by the example of the Servant of God Fr Félix Varela, who devoted himself unsparingly to forming people of conscience with two main concerns: that social and political life be based on ethics and that ethics be nourished by the Christian faith.

6. As I said during my pastoral visit to Cuba, the Church must present her social teaching to all who concern themselves with the good of the Cuban people. Her proposal of a social ethics that would exalt human dignity reveals the possibilities and limitations of the human being, and also of public or private institutions, within a project for growth and development whose aim is the common good and respect for human rights.

In this regard, I would like to recall that these rights must be considered in their integrity, from the right to life of the unborn child to natural death, without excluding any individual or social right, whether it is a matter of the right to food, health care, education, whether it is a question of exercising freedom of movement, expression or association.

Throughout the world human rights are a project that has not yet been perfectly achieved, but this is not a reason to give up the crucial and serious determination to respect them, since they stem from the special dignity of the human being, created by God in his own image and likeness (cf. *Gn* 1,26).

When the Church is concerned with the dignity of the person and his inalienable rights, she does no more than watch that none of the individual's rights are harmed or degraded by others, by the authorities themselves or by foreign authorities. This calls for justice, which the Church fosters in relationships between individuals and peoples. In the name of this justice, I clearly said in your country that restrictive economic measures imposed from outside the country are and continue to be "unjust and economically unacceptable" (Departure Address, 25 January 1998, n.4: *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, 4 February 1998, p. 10). However I would like to recall just as clearly, that man was created free, and in defending this freedom, the Church is acting in the person of Jesus who came to set the person free from every form of oppression.

When in your capacity as Catholic bishops you call for justice, freedom or greater solidarity, you are not claiming to challenge anyone, but are carrying out your mission, promoting for the Cuban people a life that is firmly based on the truth about man. I therefore encourage you to continue working patiently for justice, for the true freedom of God's children and for reconciliation among all Cubans, those who live on the Island and those who live elsewhere, sparing no efforts for reconciliation that will always make it possible to spread the Church's charitable work through the human advancement of the people.

7. Priests and religious work with you and under your pastoral authority and guidance; unfortunately there are not enough of them to satisfy all the needs. Thinking of them, the Lord's words naturally spring to our minds: "The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few" (*Mt* 9,38).

I often think of them and would like to express my gratitude for all they do for the growth of the Church and to meet the needs of the Cuban people. The missionary spirit, so alive in many of the Church's children, gives rise to the hope that it will be increasingly easy for new priests and religious who want to dedicate themselves to the mission in their beautiful island to enter it, which will certainly be to the advantage of all.

Concerned by the number of personnel dedicated to the mission, you are striving to foster vocations and to follow them attentively. This must be accompanied in the first place by diligent prayer, since you must ask the Lord to send new labourers to his harvest (cf. *ibid.*). On the other hand, candidates must be guided wisely and competently, so that they may undertake all the stages required in order to follow the Lord in the priestly or religious life. The substantial growth in the number of vocations is a cause of hope. In this regard and to facilitate the process, it will be necessary to consider, wherever possible, founding minor seminaries that accept the young men before they embark on philosophical and theological studies, so as to offer them a complete

formation based on Christian moral principles. The building, now about to begin, of the new seminary in the capital - whose foundation stone I blessed - and the progress of the propaedeutic and philosophical seminaries will facilitate the spiritual and intellectual formation of future indigenous priests in better conditions, and will ensure that seminarians from all over the country can train adequately to serve their people.

8. In Cuba there is no lack of committed lay people who strive in their own milieu to live a life consistent with faith. I am aware of the difficulties that many people must face as believers, since as in other places, the external conditions do not make it any easier to practise the Church's teachings. Therefore one of your duties is to encourage them and to help them to put their Christian choices into practice.

Then continue to proclaim to them comprehensively the teaching on marriage and the family, the acceptance of children as a gift of God and the springtime of society, encouraging everyone without exception to collaborate for the common good and progress of the nation. May they always have in mind the Lord's words: "You are the salt of the earth.... You are the light of the world" (*Mt* 5,13-14), and as a result continue to be, each according to his own possibilities, enthusiastic missionaries, preachers and witnesses of Christ who died and is risen, knowing that in this way they contribute to the Church's mission and to raising the standard of morality of their people, who thirst more and more for spirituality and lofty religious values.

9. Dear Brothers, I have wanted to reflect with you on certain aspects of your pastoral activity. When I returned to Rome - from my apostolic pilgrimage in your country - I told you that I did so "with great hope for the future after seeing the vitality of this Church ... aware of the extent of the challenges which you face, but also of your valiant spirit and your ability to take on this task" (cf. *Written Message to the Cuban Bishops*, 25 January 1998; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 4 February 1998, p. 10). Today I repeat these sentiments to you and also ask you to convey my affectionate greeting to all the priests, men and women religious and faithful, as well as to the entire Cuban people. Express my closeness and pastoral concern in particular to all who are suffering, to the elderly and the sick, to prisoners, to broken families, to those who feel down at heart or who are deprived of hope. Each of them has a place in the Pope's heart and prayer.

Returning in spirit to the Shrine of Cobre and prostrate before the image of Our Lady of Charity of El Cobre, Mother and Queen of Cuba, whom I had the joy of crowning: "Your name and image are sculpted in the mind and heart of every Cuban, both within and outside the country, as a sign of hope and a focus of fraternal communion" (*Homily at Mass in Santiago de Cuba*, n. 6; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 4 February 1998, p. 7).

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