



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS
TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE CUBAN EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE
ON THE OCCASION OF THE DAY OF THE NATIVITY OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY
FEAST OF THE VIRGEN DE LA CARIDAD DEL COBRE**

To His Excellency

Archbishop Dionisio Guillermo García Ibáñez of Santiago de Cuba

President of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Cuba

Vatican, 8 September 2014

Dear Brother,

A few days ago a venerated statue of Our Lady of Charity of Cobre was placed in the Vatican Gardens. Her presence is an evocative reminder of the affection and vitality of the Church that journeys in the bright land of the Caribbean which, for more than four centuries, has turned to the Mother of God with this beautiful name. From the mountains of El Cobre, and now from the See of Peter, this small and blessed figure of Mary expands the soul of those who invoke her with devotion, as she leads us to Jesus, her divine Son.

Today the Feast of Mary, Most Holy, the *Vergin Mambisa*, is celebrated with devotion, I join all Cubans who desire to direct their gaze to her Immaculate Heart in order to ask her for support, to entrust their loved ones to her and to imitate her humility and dedication to Christ, of whose disciples she was the first and foremost.

Each time I read about Our Lady in the passages of Sacred Scripture my attention is drawn to three verbs. I would like to pause on these so as to invite the pastors and faithful of Cuba to practice them.

The first is to hail. This was the first word the Archangel Gabriel addressed to the Virgin: "Hail, full

of grace, the Lord is with you" (Lk 1:28). The life of one who has discovered Jesus is filled with an inner joy so great that nothing and no one can take it away. Christ gives to his own the strength necessary to be neither sad nor disheartened, when problems seem unsolvable. Sustained by this truth, the Christian does not doubt that what one does lovingly generates serene joy, the sister of hope which breaks the barrier of fear and opens the door to a promising future. "I am the Virgin of Charity", the three brothers read on the tablet that was floating in Nipe Bay. How beautiful it would be if every Cuban, especially the youth, could say the same: "I am a person of Charity": I live to love truly and not to be thus trapped in the vindictive cycle of an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Such joy is shown by one who shows true love through daily actions, and is not one of those whose empty eloquence the wind blows away.

The second verb is to arise. St Luke says that Mary, with Jesus in her womb, arose and went in haste to serve her cousin Elizabeth who, in her old age, was about to become a mother (cf. Lk 1:39-45). She did God's will by making herself available to those who needed her. She did not think of herself, she overcame adversity and gave herself to others. Victory is for those who continually arise without being discouraged. If we imitate Mary, we cannot keep our arms folded, only complaining, or perhaps dodging the hard work that others do and which is our responsibility. This is not about doing everything with tenderness and mercy. Mary was always with her people supporting the least. She knew loneliness, poverty and exile, and she learned to create fraternity and to make her home in any place where goodness took root. Let us beseech her to give us a poor spirit which is not proud, a pure heart that sees God in the face of the neediest, great patience that we may not shrink when confronted with life's difficulties.

The third verb is to persevere. Mary, who felt God's goodness, proclaimed that He worked great things in her (cf. Lk 1:46-55). She did not rely on her own strength but on God's, whose love is endless. She thus remained at the side of the Son, who had been abandoned by all others; she prayed without leaving the apostles and other disciples' side, so that they would not lose heart (cf. Acts 1:14). We too are called to abide in God's love and to continue loving others. In this world, where lasting values are discarded and everything changes, where the throw-away culture triumphs, where it seems people are afraid of life-long commitments, the Virgin encourages us to be men and women steadfast in doing good works, who keep their word, who are ever faithful. This is because we trust in God and we place him at the centre of our life and that of the people we love.

To experience joy and share it with those who surround you, lift your heart and not to succumb to adversity, stay on the path of goodness, tirelessly helping those who are afflicted and distressed: these are the important lessons which the Virgin of Charity of Cobre teaches us, useful today and tomorrow. I place in her maternal hands the pastors, the religious communities and the faithful of Cuba, so that she may encourage their evangelizing commitment and their will to make joy of life, love the cornerstone of society. In this way the joy to live, the courage to serve and to persevere in good works will never be lacking.

I ask the children of the Church in Cuba to please pray for me, because I need it.

May Jesus bless them and may the Holy Virgin always protect them!

Fraternally,

FRANCIS

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