



# The Holy See

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JOHN PAUL II

## GENERAL AUDIENCE

*Wednesday 28 January 1998*

***Church in Cuba has persevered in faith***<sup>1</sup>. The day before yesterday I returned from Cuba where, accepting the invitations of the Bishops and of the President of the Republic himself, I made an unforgettable Pastoral Visit. The Lord wanted the Pope to visit that land and bring comfort to the Church which lives there and proclaims the Gospel. I first of all thank him and my gratitude is then extended to the whole People of God in whom, during those days, I found constant spiritual support. I particularly thank the President of the Republic of Cuba, Dr Fidel Castro Ruz, and all the other authorities who made my apostolic pilgrimage possible. With great affection I thank the Bishops of the island, starting with the Archbishop of Havana, Cardinal Jaime Ortega, and the priests, religious and all the faithful who offered me a moving welcome. Indeed, from the moment I arrived I was surrounded by a great popular demonstration, which impressed even those who, like me, are familiar with the enthusiasm of Latin Americans. It was the expression of a long expectation, a meeting desired for quite some time by a people who thereby *became as it were reconciled with their own history and vocation*. My Pastoral Visit was a great event of spiritual, cultural and social reconciliation, which will not fail to have a beneficial effect on other levels also. In Havana's imposing *José Martí Revolution Plaza*, I saw an enormous picture depicting Christ, with the words: "Jesus Christ, I trust in you!". I gave thanks to God, because, precisely in that square named after the "revolution", there was a place for the One who brought the genuine revolution into the world, that of the love of God who frees man from evil and injustice and gives him peace and fullness of life.<sup>2</sup> I went to the land of Cuba, which Christopher Colombus described as "the most beautiful ever seen by human eyes", primarily to *pay homage to that Church and to strengthen her on her way*. This Church has known some very difficult times but has persevered in faith, hope and charity. I wanted to visit her to share her deeply religious spirit, her joys and her suffering; and to give an impetus to her evangelizing work. I went as a pilgrim of peace to make the Church's eternal message resound: Christ is the Redeemer of man and the Gospel is the guarantee of the authentic development of society. The first Mass I had the joy of celebrating on Cuban soil, in the city of Santa Clara, was a thanksgiving to God *for the gift of the family*, and it was linked in spirit to the great world meeting for families held last October in Rio de Janeiro. I wanted to show my solidarity with Cuban families as they face the problems raised by contemporary society.<sup>3</sup> In Camagüey I was able to *speak to young people*, fully aware that being young Catholics in Cuba was and is a challenge. Their presence in the Cuban

Christian community is very important in relation to great events and to everyday life. My gratitude goes to the young catechists, missionaries and those working for *Caritas* and other social projects. The meeting with young Cubans was an unforgettable celebration of hope, during which I urged them to open their hearts and their whole lives to Christ, defeating moral relativism and its consequences. I again express to them my encouragement and all my affection.<sup>4</sup> In the University of Havana and in the presence of President Fidel Castro, I met the representatives of the *world of Cuban culture*. Over a period of five centuries it has come under various influences: the Hispanic, the African, that of the various groups of immigrants and the properly American. In recent decades, the materialistic, atheistic Marxist ideology has influenced it. However, its features, those known as "cubanía", continue to be deeply marked by Christian inspiration, as is evidenced by the many Catholic figures of culture throughout its history. Outstanding among them is the Servant of God Félix Varela, a priest whose tomb is actually located in the university's *Aula Magna*. The message of these "fathers of the fatherland" is more timely than ever and points to a synthesis of faith and culture, the way to form free and responsible consciences, capable of dialogue and at the same time of fidelity to the fundamental values of the person and of society.<sup>5</sup> In Santiago de Cuba, the primatial see, my visit became a real pilgrimage: there I knelt before the patroness of the Cuban people, *Our Lady of Charity of El Cobre*. I noticed with deep joy and emotion how much Cubans love the Mother of God, and how *Our Lady of Charity* is truly, over and above every difference, the principal symbol and support of the Cuban people's faith and their struggle for freedom. In this setting of popular piety, I urged them to incarnate the Gospel, the message of authentic liberation, in their daily lives by living as Christians fully involved in society. A hundred years ago, the country's independence was declared at the feet of *Our Lady of Charity*. With this pilgrimage I have entrusted to her care all Cubans, in their homeland and abroad, so that they may form a truly prosperous and fraternal community more and more enlivened by authentic freedom. At the Shrine of St Lazarus I met the suffering, to whom I brought the comforting words of Christ. Lastly, in Havana, I was also able to greet a representative group of the clergy, religious and committed laity, whom I encouraged to devote themselves generously to serving the People of God.<sup>6</sup> Divine Providence granted that precisely on the *Sunday* when the liturgy presents the words of the prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me ... he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor" (Lk 4:18), the Successor of the Apostle Peter was able to complete *a historic stage of the new evangelization* in Havana, the Cuban capital. Indeed I had the joy of proclaiming to Cubans the Gospel of hope, the message of love and of freedom in the truth which Christ never ceases to offer the men and women of all times. How can we not recognize that this visit has an important symbolic value because of the unique position Cuba has occupied this century in world history? From this standpoint, my pilgrimage to Cuba — so long awaited and patiently prepared — marked a very opportune moment for making known the Church's social teaching. At different times I sought to emphasize that *the essential elements of the Church's Magisterium* on the person and on society also belong to the heritage of the Cuban people, who received them as a legacy from the fathers of the homeland who in turn drew them from the roots of the Gospel and witnessed to them to the point of sacrifice. The Pope's visit was meant in a way to give a voice to the Christian soul of the Cuban people. For Cubans, I am convinced, this Christian soul is their most precious treasure and their most secure guarantee of integral development under the banner of authentic freedom and peace. I deeply hope that the Church in Cuba may have more and more opportunities for fulfilling her mission.<sup>7</sup> I find it significant that the great final Eucharistic celebration in *Revolution Plaza* should have taken place on the day of the Conversion of St Paul, as if to indicate that the great Apostle's conversion "is a profound, continual and holy revolution, valid for all ages". Every genuine renewal begins with conversion of heart. I entrust to Our Lady all the aspirations of the Cuban people and the commitment of the Church, which is continuing her mission in the service of the Gospel with courage and perseverance. *To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors the Holy Father said:* I warmly greet the English-speaking pilgrims, especially those from Japan,

Denmark, Finland and the United States. Upon all of you I invoke the abundant blessings of almighty God.

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