



The Holy See

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

Esteemed Priests,

Religious and Faithful,

Dear Cubans,

1. "I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born ... a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord" (Lk 2:10-11).

The feast of Christmas which we will be keeping in a few days is an intensely moving solemnity for all Christians and is also shared by men and women of goodwill throughout the world. It celebrates the greatest event in history: God became man. Before this great day, with the approach of my Apostolic Visit to Cuba, where I will go as a messenger of truth and hope, I would like to convey my cordial greetings to all the sons and daughters of this nation, as I renew the expression of my deep affection for them in Jesus Christ.

It is a cause of great joy that in your country this bright day has been restored as a civil holiday, thus giving everyone the opportunity to take an active part in the Christmas celebrations and so to recover a tradition very deeply rooted in Cuban hearts.

Christmas, as the feast of the mystery of God who loves us to the point of coming into the world and sharing our earthly pilgrimage, is a feast for all mankind, called to participate in divine life. A great mystery is commemorated: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn 1:14) and "to all who received him ... he gave power to become children of God" (ibid., 12). In the simplicity and humility of Bethlehem was expressed the most radical and profound change humanity has ever known, which is why in our era human time came to be calculated from Jesus' birth.

2. Since the moment the Son of God became incarnate, man has no longer been alone, for God has been with us, sharing our joys and our sorrows. He is the "Emmanuel" foretold since antiquity (Mt 1:23). Christmas is one of the year's most beautiful and beloved feasts, in which are expressed the noblest sentiments that dwell in the human heart, thereby creating the atmosphere of joy and serenity, of kindness and solidarity which traditionally belongs to this season.

The feast of Christmas, in its many forms full of Christian meaning and with its popular flavour, is part of Cuba's cultural and religious heritage. On this day, Midnight Mass and the "nativity scenes", with their special charm, will once again reunite around the figure of the Infant Jesus whole families who are happy to partake of the light and peace that descend from heaven, and want to illuminate the future of a whole people.

I would like all Cubans to be able to live this beloved day enlivened by hope, since without it enthusiasm is extinguished, creativity wanes and the aspiration to the loftiest and noblest values dwindles.

3. Dear Cubans: as the moment for me to kiss your land draws near, my appeal is addressed to everyone, without distinctions of creed, ideology, race, political opinion or economic condition. I would like my words to reach those who have the heavy responsibility of guiding the destiny of the nation as well as the simplest citizens, wishing each one prosperity, happiness and peace.

On this day of the Lord's Birth in 1997 I would like to encourage them to hope, by living in Christ's truth, and, with the Apostle Paul, I tell them: "If any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come.... So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us.... Be reconciled to God.... We entreat you not to accept the grace of God in vain.... At the acceptable time I have listened to you, and helped you on the day of salvation", (2 Cor 5:16, 20; 6:1-2).

Cuban Catholics know well that I am coming to strengthen them in faith, that faith which has sometimes been so tried, and to proclaim with them, as St Peter did to Jesus: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Mt 16:16). I would like to walk on paths of peace in the various Dioceses of Cuba, reaching to the very heart of the nation, at the feet of her Queen, Mother and Patroness, Our Lady of Charity of Cobre. On her sublime head I will set the crown her children are offering her, a crown of gold, purified in the crucible of the years of faith preserved and with the precious pearls of her children's good deeds.

The moment is approaching when, please God, I will meet you in your land so that we may praise and bless God together and proclaim his Word of life which invites each one to open the doors of his heart to Christ the Lord.

I hope that after my visit the Church, which will have been able to give public witness to her faith in Christ and to her dedication to the human cause around the Successor of the Apostle Peter, will increasingly be able to enjoy the necessary freedom for her mission and suitable places where she can carry it out to the full and thus continue her service to the Cuban people.

4. I wish all Cubans a Happy Christmas and a prosperous New Year, as I place the legitimate hopes inspired by my pilgrimage to your island in the crib of Bethlehem, before the eyes of Jesus

Christ, Saviour of men, certain that God who has begun this work will himself bring it to completion.

As I hope shortly to be able to impart my Apostolic Blessing to you in person at the celebrations we are preparing, I ask the Lord for an abundance of gifts for the sons and daughters of this beloved nation, and I once again entrust them to the motherly intercession of Our Lady of Charity of Cobre, Queen and Patroness of Cuba.

From the Vatican, 20 December 1997.

IOANNES PAULUS PP. II

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