



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II TO CUBA (JANUARY 21-26, 1998)

ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II

University of Havana

23 January 1998

Mr President of the Republic, thank you for your presence,

Your Eminences, Brother Bishops,

University Authorities,

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, 1. It is a great joy for me to have this meeting with you in the revered setting of the University of Havana. To all of you I offer my affectionate greeting. In the first place I would like to express my thanks for the words of welcome which Cardinal Jaime Ortega y Alamino has spoken in the name of all. I am grateful too for the friendly greeting of the Rector of the university who has received me in this *Aula Magna* where lie the remains of the great priest and patriot, the Servant of God Fr Félix Varela, which I have just venerated. Thank you, Rector, for gathering this distinguished group of women and men who have made their prime undertaking the promotion of the genuine culture of this noble Cuban nation. 2. Culture is the special way in which human beings express and develop their relationship with creation, with one another and with God. Thus they create the body of values which distinguish a people, and the characteristics which give it an identity. Understood in this way, *culture is of fundamental importance for the life of nations and for fostering the most authentic human values*. The Church, which accompanies human beings on life's path, opening to the life of society, seeking opportunities for her evangelizing action, embraces culture in her word and action. *The Catholic Church* identifies with no particular culture, but approaches all in a spirit of openness. In respectfully proposing her own vision of the human being and human values, the Church *contributes to the ever greater humanization of society*. In this evangelization of culture, Christ himself is present, acting through his Church: Christ who, in his Incarnation, "enters into culture" and "brings to each time-conditioned culture the gift of purification and fullness" (*Conclusions of Santo Domingo*, n. 228). "Each culture is an attempt to penetrate the mystery of the world and, in particular, of the human being: it is a way of expressing the transcendent dimension of human life" (*Address to the United Nations*, 5 October 1995, n. 9). Respecting and promoting culture, the Church respects and promotes the human person: the human person seeking to live a more human life and to approach, even if at times haltingly, the hidden mystery of

God. *In every culture there is a central core of religious convictions and moral values* which constitutes, as it were, its soul. It is there that Christ wants to reach with the purifying power of his grace. The evangelization of culture is like a heightening of its "religious soul", imbuing it with a new and powerful dynamism, the dynamism of the Holy Spirit which empowers it to realize to the full its human potentialities. In Christ, each culture is profoundly respected, valued and loved, because each culture is always open, at the point of its deepest truth, to the riches of the Redemption.³ Because of its history and geography, Cuba has its own distinctive culture, shaped by a dense synthesis of different influences: the Spanish influence, bringing with it Catholic Christianity, the African influence, its religious spirit permeated by Christianity, the influence of the various immigrant groups, and then the specifically American influence. It is right to recall the influence which the Seminary of St Charles and St Ambrose in Havana has had in the development of the national culture under the sway of figures such as José Agustín Caballero, called by Martí "father of the poor and of our philosophy", and Fr Félix Varela, the veritable father of Cuban culture. The superficiality or anti-clericalism of some at that time are not truly representative of what has most distinguished this people, which historically has seen the Catholic faith as the source of the rich values of Cuban identity. Expressed in turns of phrase, popular songs, peasant sayings and much used proverbs, this identity has a deep Christian matrix and still today is a rich resource and a constitutive reality of the nation.⁴ A pre-eminent son of this land is *Fr Félix Varela y Morales*, considered by many to be *the foundation-stone of the Cuban national identity*. He is, in his own person, the best synthesis one could find of Christian faith and Cuban culture. An exemplary priest of Havana and an undeniable patriot, Fr Varela was an outstanding thinker who in 19th-century Cuba renewed the method and content of teaching in philosophy, law, science and theology. To generations of Cubans, he taught that to assume full responsibility for our existence we must first learn the difficult art of thinking in a right way and with our own mind. He was the first to speak of independence in these lands. He also spoke of democracy, judging it to be the political project best in keeping with human nature, while at the same time underscoring its demands. Among these demands, he stressed two in particular: first, that *people must be educated for freedom and responsibility*, with a personally assimilated ethical code which includes the best of the heritage of civilization and enduring transcendental values, so that they may be able to undertake decisive tasks in service of the community; and second, that *human relationships, like the form of society as a whole, must give people suitable opportunities to perform*, with proper respect and solidarity, *their historic role giving substance to the rule of law*, which is the essential guarantee of every form of human concourse claiming to be democratic. Fr Varela realized that, in his time, independence was an as yet unattainable ideal. He therefore devoted himself to *training people, men and women of conscience*, who were neither high-handed with the weak nor weak with the powerful. From his exile in New York, he used a range of means to pursue his goal: personal letters, the press and what might be judged his finest work, *Letters to Elpidio concerning impiety, superstition and fanaticism in relation to society*, a true monument of moral teaching, his precious legacy to the young people of Cuba. In the last 30 years of his life, far from his teaching-post in Havana, he continued to teach from afar and so gave birth to a school of thought, a vision of human society and an attitude towards one's own country which even today should illumine all Cubans. The entire life of Fr Varela was *inspired by a profound Christian spirituality*. This was his deep driving-force, the wellspring of his virtues, the root of his commitment to the Church and to Cuba: *to seek the glory of God in all things*. This led him to believe in the power of little things, in the creative force of seeds of truth, in the appropriateness of changes being made step by step towards great and authentic reforms. When he came to the end of his journey, moments before he closed his eyes to the light of this world and opened them to the Light which never ends, he fulfilled the promise which he had always made: "Guided by the torch of faith, I go to the tomb, on the edge of which I hope, with God's grace, to make with my last breath a profession of my firm belief and a fervent prayer for the good of my country" (*Letters to Elpidio*, volume 1, letter 6, p. 182).⁵ This is the heritage which Fr Varela left. The good of his country

still needs the undying light which is Christ. *Christ* is the way which leads man to the fullness of life, *the way which leads to a society which is more just, more free, more human, more caring*. The love for Christ and for Cuba which illumined Fr Varela's life is part of the indestructible root of Cuban culture. Consider the torch which appears on the coat of arms of this distinguished house of studies: it is not only a remembrance of things past, it is also a vision of things to come. The origin and purpose of this university, its history and its heritage, reveal its vocation to be a fountain of wisdom and freedom, an inspiration to faith and justice, a crucible where knowledge and conscience are fused, the teacher of a culture which is at once universal and Cuban. The torch, lit by Fr Varela, which illumined the history of the Cuban people, was taken up, shortly after his death, by another striking figure of this country, *José Martí: a writer and a teacher in the fullest sense of the word*, deeply committed to democracy and independence, a patriot, a loyal friend even to those who did not share his political programme. He was above all an enlightened man, faithful to his ethical values and stirred by a spirituality the roots of which are outstandingly evangelical. He is regarded as the heir of the thought of Fr Varela, whom he called "the Cuban saint".⁶ Today we are gathered in this university which preserves as one of its most precious treasures the remains of Fr Varela. Everywhere in Cuba I can also see the monuments which Cubans have erected in memory of José Martí. And I am sure that the Cuban people have inherited the human virtues, Christian in their origin, of both these men, since all Cubans share in common that culture which these men nourish. I know too that in Cuba one can speak of *a fruitful cultural dialogue* which ensures a more harmonious growth and continuing development of the creative initiatives of civil society. In this country, most of those who shape culture — Catholic and non-Catholic, believers and non-believers — are people of dialogue, prepared both to speak and to listen. I encourage them to pursue with vigour the search for a synthesis with which all Cubans can identify, and to foster a Cuban identity, both comprehensive and harmonious, which can unite the various national traditions which they represent. Cuban culture, if it is open to the Truth, will be ever more characteristic of this nation and ever more profoundly human. *The Church and the cultural institutions of the nation need to meet in dialogue and so work together to develop Cuban culture*. They share a common path and a common goal: to serve the human being, to cultivate all aspects of the human spirit and to nourish from within all communal and social relations. What initiatives of this kind there are already should find support and encouragement in a pastoral plan in the field of culture in ongoing dialogue with individuals and institutions dedicated to the intellectual life. Pilgrim as I am in a nation such as yours, with its rich inheritance both *mestizo* and Christian, I am confident that in the future Cubans will achieve a civilization of justice and solidarity, of freedom and truth, a civilization of love and peace which, as Fr Varela said, "may be the foundation of the great edifice of our happiness". To that end, I place once again in the hands of young Cubans the ever necessary and ever relevant legacy of the Father of Cuban culture, the mission which Fr Varela entrusted to his disciples: "Tell them that they are the sweet hope of the motherland and that there is no motherland without virtue and no virtue without piety".