



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE SYMPOSIUM
ON THE LAST 100 YEARS
OF EVANGELIZATION IN LATIN AMERICA**

Tuesday, 22 June 1999

Your Eminences,

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. I am pleased to have this meeting with you, who have been taking part in the symposium on *The Last 100 Years of Evangelization in Latin America*, organized by the Pontifical Commission for Latin America to commemorate the first centenary of that continent's Plenary Council. It was a meeting which left its mark on the history of the Church in Latin America, unfolding new horizons of hope for those peoples.

In fact, the Plenary Council's *Acta et Decreta* which you have presented to me in a beautiful facsimile edition, contains the norms, guidelines and suggestions which inspired the path of evangelization in America in the last century.

2. Ever since Jesus Christ's message reached the New World, the Popes have had a special apostolic concern for the American continent, as can be seen by closely examining historical events. This concern culminated in the convocation of the Plenary Council of Latin America by Leo XIII. In his Apostolic Letter *Cum diuturnum* of 25 December 1898, the great Pontiff wrote: "We have omitted nothing, on any occasion, which could serve to build up or extend Christ's kingdom in these nations; today, accomplishing what we had anxiously desired for some time, we would like to give a new and solemn proof of our love for you. Thus what we considered most relevant was that you should meet to exchange views, with our authority and in accordance with our convocation of all the Bishops of these Republics, in order to dictate the most suitable measures so that in these nations, the identity or at least the affinity of race should continue to be closely associated, the unity of ecclesiastical discipline preserved unharmed, the Catholic vision shine forth and the Church publicly prosper, through the joint efforts of all people of goodwill" (*Acta*, p. XXIXXII).

Although the decrees of that Council are not directly applicable to the current circumstances, they are a "memorial" which must enlighten, inspire and help us at this crossroads in history. In them, carefully drafted by the Council Fathers, one can perceive a great concern to maintain and elevate the Catholic faith; to form the characteristics of the clergy; to pay attention to divine worship and the celebration of the sacraments; to promote the education of youth and their formation according to the principles of Christian doctrine; to encourage the practice of charity and the other virtues.

The Council Fathers presented a series of resolutions, norms and guidelines, taking into account "the needs of the Church and the salvation of souls" and, prompted by strong ecclesial communion as the last canon (n. 994) says: "with filial reverence and a most obedient heart, we submit to the Holy Apostolic See each and every one of the things that were decreed and sanctioned at this Plenary Council". This affective and effective communion was deeply appreciated by the Pontiff who, in his farewell address to the Bishops on 10 July 1899, which he himself considered "the testament of a loving father", said to them: "Goodbye, a last goodbye, dear Brothers: come close to receive the kiss of peace. May you know that with regard to your Council, all Rome has admired your union, your knowledge and your piety; and that we consider your Council to be one of the most precious jewels in our crown" (Acta, p. CLXIX).

3. After the Plenary Council the Church in Latin America flourished remarkably, sometimes amidst untold trials, serious difficulties and immense problems. But light overcomes darkness, and thus we have been able to congratulate ourselves on the abundant fruits of the Christian life which has developed on this continent, thanks to the silent and self-sacrificing work of so many Bishops, priests, men and women religious and lay people in parishes and apostolic centres, as well as in the area of education and charity. This is why we can say joyfully that the Catholic faith is a sign of Latin America's identity.

I would like to recall that since the celebration of the Council, the Church in America has continued to thrive. The Eucharistic and Marian Congresses are proof of this, as well as the four General Conferences of the Latin American Episcopate celebrated in Rio de Janeiro (1955), Medellín (1968), Puebla (1979) and Santo Domingo (1992), the last two of which I inaugurated. I would also like to recall that with his historic pilgrimage to Bogotá Paul VI paved the way to the Pastoral Visits to America which, with God's grace, I have been able to make. All this culminated in the celebration of the Synod for America in the Vatican, which I had the opportunity to open and afterwards, early this year, to close in the Mexican Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the Marian heart of the continent, where I presented the Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in America*.

4. In this document, gathering the Synod Fathers' proposals, I desired to approach the continent's current situation by inviting the Pastors to study this project further and then to carry it out in each particular Church, focusing their attention on what is fundamental: the proclamation of Jesus Christ, who is the "Good News" of salvation made known to people yesterday, today and for ever; but he is also the first and greatest evangelizer. The Church must make the crucified and risen Christ the centre of her pastoral concern and evangelizing activity. "Everything planned in the

Church must have Christ and his Gospel as its starting-point". Therefore, "the Church in America must speak increasingly of Jesus Christ, the human face of God and the divine face of man" (n. 67).

5. By participating in this symposium as Pastors and historians, you have looked to the future in the perspective of the past. In this task it is necessary to continue objectively, taking as a basis the real facts and not ideologies or a partial view of events. I thank you for your work in this regard, so that the Church, by knowing her history better, can fulfil her evangelizing programme, updating it in keeping with the new times. In this programme, in addition to pastoral structures, the person of the evangelizer is important: the Bishop, priest, catechist and committed Christian who, with their faith should bear witness to Jesus Christ with joy and courage.

I am grateful to the Pontifical Commission for Latin America for organizing this symposium which will in a certain way be continued at its plenary meeting. I also thank you for your participation and service motivated by an ecclesial spirit. I express my best wishes that your work, shortly to be published in the respective Acta, will offer a wealth of suggestions and proposals to help in the apostolic task so generously being carried out in the American countries.

As I invoke upon everyone the protection of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the first evangelizer of America who with her motherly, gaze in the chapel of the former building of the Pontifical Latin American College, guided and accompanied the Council's steps, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing to you all.