



# The Holy See

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

MEETING WITH THE CUBAN BISHOPS

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II**

*Sunday, 25 January 1998*

*Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,*<sup>1</sup> I am very happy to be with you, the Bishops of the Catholic Church in Cuba, for these moments of quiet reflection and fraternal encounter, as we share the joys and hopes, the desires and aspirations of this portion of the pilgrim People of God in this land. I was able to visit four of the 11 Dioceses of the country, but in my heart I have visited all of them. During these days I have experienced the vitality of the ecclesial communities and their ability to bring people together, which is due also to the credibility which the Church has gained through her persevering witness and her timely message. The limitations of recent years have made the Church poorer in material resources and personnel, but those same trials have enriched her, stimulating her creativity and spirit of sacrifice in the service of the faithful. I give thanks to God that *the Cross has borne fruit in this land*; indeed, the Cross of Christ is the source of that hope which does not disappoint but produces abundant fruit. For some time, the faith in Cuba has had to endure various trials which have been borne with firm hope and lively charity, in the knowledge that effort and commitment are needed to walk the way of the Cross and to follow in the footsteps of Christ, who never forgets his people. At this hour in history we rejoice, not because the harvest is over, but because by lifting our eyes *we can contemplate the fruits of evangelization growing in Cuba*.<sup>2</sup> Over five centuries ago, the Cross of Christ was planted in this beautiful and bountiful land, in such a way that its light, which shines in the midst of the darkness, made it possible for the Catholic and apostolic faith to take root here. The Catholic faith is truly part of Cuba's identity and culture. This fact inspires many citizens *to acknowledge the Church as their Mother* who, in carrying out her spiritual mission and proclaiming the Gospel message and her social teaching, *promotes the integral development of individuals and their participation in society* on the basis of ethical principles and authentic moral values. The circumstances in which the Church carries out her activity have been gradually changing, and this is a source of increased hope for the future. There remains nonetheless *a certain minimalist way of looking at things* which would put the Catholic Church on the same level as certain other cultural expressions of

religious piety, on a par with the syncretist cults which, while deserving of respect, cannot be considered a specific religion but rather an ensemble of traditions and beliefs. *The Cuban people have placed much hope and great trust in the Church*, as I have been able to observe in these past days. True, some of these expectations exceed the Church's specific mission, but as far as possible all of them must be considered by the ecclesial community. You, dear Brothers, by being close to everyone, are privileged witnesses of these expectations of the people, many of whom truly believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and in his Church, which has remained faithful even in the face of numerous difficulties.<sup>3</sup> I know how concerned you are, as Pastors, that the Church in Cuba seems increasingly strained by the growing numbers of those in need of her various services. I know that you cannot fail to respond to these demands nor cease to seek the means to do so effectively and with genuine charity. This does not cause you to demand that the Church should have a dominant or exclusive position in society, but rather that she occupy her rightful place in the midst of the people and have *the possibility of adequately serving the brethren*. Continue your efforts to discern those areas which rightly belong to the Church, not for the sake of increasing her power — for this is alien to her mission — but for the sake of increasing her ability to serve others. In this undertaking and with ecumenical openness, seek the healthy co-operation of other Christian confessions and maintain a frank dialogue with the institutions of the State and the independent agencies of civil society, endeavouring always to deepen and expand that dialogue. From her divine Founder the Church has received the mission of guiding men and women in worshipping the living and true God, in singing his praises and proclaiming his wonders, and in professing that there is *"one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all"* (Eph 4:5). But the sacrifice acceptable to God is, as the Prophet Isaiah says, *"to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free ... to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house, [and] when you see the naked, to cover him.... Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard"* (Is 58:6-8). The Church's *liturgical, prophetic* and *charitable* mission is in fact indissolubly one, for both the prophetic word in defence of the poor and charitable service give authenticity and consistency to worship. *Respect for religious freedom* must ensure the opportunities, programmes and means by which these three dimensions of the Church's mission can be carried out so that, in addition to worship, the Church can devote herself to the proclamation of the truth of the Gospel, the defence of justice and peace, and the integral development of the human person. None of these dimensions should be restricted; one does not exclude the others, nor should one be emphasized at the cost of the others. When the Church demands *religious freedom* she is not asking for a gift, a privilege or a permission dependent on contingent situations, political strategies or the will of the authorities. Rather she demands the *effective recognition of an inalienable human right*. This right cannot be conditioned by the behaviour of the Pastors and the faithful, nor by the surrender of the exercise of any aspect of her mission, much less by ideological or economic considerations. It is not simply a matter of a right belonging to the Church as an institution, *it is also a matter of a right belonging to every person and every people*. Every individual and every people will be spiritually enriched to the extent that religious freedom is acknowledged and put into practice. Furthermore, as I have already had occasion to state: "Religious freedom is a very important means of strengthening a people's moral integrity. Civil society can count on believers who, because of their deep convictions, will not only not succumb readily to dominating ideologies or trends, but will endeavour to act in accordance with their aspirations to all that is true and right" (*Message for the 1988 World Day of Peace*, n. 3).<sup>4</sup> For this reason, dear Brothers, commit yourselves completely to promoting everything that favours the dignity and continuing improvement of human beings, for this is the first path that the Church must follow in fulfilling her mission (cf. *Redemptor hominis*, n. 14). You, dear Bishops of Cuba, have preached the *truth about man*, which belongs to the fundamental core of the Christian faith and is indissolubly linked to the *truth about Christ and about the Church*. In a variety of ways you have borne a consistent

witness to Christ. Whenever you have maintained that human dignity is superior to every social, economic, political or other structure, you have proclaimed a moral truth which elevates man and leads him, by God's mysterious ways, to an encounter with Jesus Christ the Saviour. It is man whom we must serve with freedom in the name of Christ, without allowing this service to be obstructed by particular historical situations and even, on occasion, by arbitrariness or disorder. When the scale of values is inverted and politics, the economy and social activity are no longer placed at the service of people, the human person comes to be viewed as a means rather than respected as the centre and end of all these activities, and man is made to suffer in his essence and in his transcendent dimension. Human beings are then seen simply as consumers, and freedom is understood in a very individualistic and reductive sense, or men and women are seen as mere producers with little room for the exercise of civil and political liberties. None of these social and political models fosters a climate of openness to the transcendence of the person who freely seeks God. I encourage you therefore to continue in your service of *defending and promoting human dignity*, and of proclaiming with persevering commitment that "only in the mystery of the Incarnate Word does the mystery of man become clear. For Adam, the first man, was a figure of him who was to come, namely Christ the Lord. Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and his love, fully reveals man to himself and brings his supreme calling to light" (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 22). This is part of the mission of the Church, a mission which "cannot remain insensitive to anything that serves the true good of man, just as it cannot remain indifferent to anything that threatens him" (*Redemptor hominis*, n. 14).<sup>5</sup> I am well aware of your pastoral sensitivity, which leads you to face with pastoral charity *situations which threaten human life and dignity*. Among the faithful and the Cuban people as a whole, strive to foster *respect for life from the mother's womb*, a respect which always excludes recourse to abortion, a criminal act. Work for *the promotion and defence of the family* and for the sanctity and indissolubility of Christian marriage against the evils of divorce and separation which cause so much suffering. In your pastoral charity encourage *young people* who are in search of opportunities to achieve their goal of building their personal and social life on authentic spiritual values. You need to make special efforts to care for this segment of your people, and to ensure that an adequate catechetical, moral and civic formation will foster or perfect in them that much-needed "expansion of the soul" to which my Predecessor Paul VI referred. This will enable them to make up for the loss of values and meaning in their lives, through a solid human and Christian education. Together with your *priests* — your primary and beloved co-workers — and the *men and women religious* at work in this Church in Cuba, continue to carry out the task of evangelization which brings the Good News of Jesus Christ to all those thirsting for love, truth and justice. Remain close to your *seminarians* and help them to acquire a solid intellectual, human and spiritual formation which will enable them to be conformed to Christ the Good Shepherd, to love the Church and the people to whom they will one day minister with generosity and enthusiasm. May they be the first to benefit from the missionary spirit of this Church. Encourage the *lay faithful to live out their vocation with courage and perseverance*, to be present in all areas of social and national life, to bear witness to the truth about Christ and about man, and, together with other people of good will, to seek solutions to the various moral, social, political, economic, cultural and spiritual problems facing society. With effectiveness and humility they should take part in all efforts to improve the sometimes critical situations affecting everyone, so that the nation may attain more humane standards of living. *The Catholic faithful*, like all other citizens, *have the right and the duty to contribute to their country's progress*. Through civic dialogue and responsible participation new areas can be found for the action of the laity; it is desirable that committed laypeople continue to prepare themselves for this activity by studying and applying the Church's social teaching which, being inspired by the Gospel, is capable of shedding light on every situation. I know that in your pastoral concern you have not neglected those people who for various reasons have left the country but still feel that they are *sons and daughters of Cuba*. To the extent that they consider themselves Cubans, they too must co-operate, peacefully and in a constructive

and respectful way, in the nation's progress, avoiding useless confrontations and encouraging an atmosphere of positive dialogue and mutual understanding. As much as is possible and in co-operation with other Episcopates, help them through your proclamation of the highest spiritual values to be builders of peace and harmony, of reconciliation and hope, and to practise a generous solidarity with their Cuban brothers and sisters most in need; thus they will demonstrate their profound attachment to their homeland. I hope that in your pastoral activity you, the Bishops of Cuba, will gain ever greater access to the modern technologies which can be of help in your evangelizing and educating mission. The secular State should not fear but rather appreciate the Church's moral and educational role. In this respect it is normal that the Church should have access to the communications media — radio, press and television — and that she should be able to count on her own resources in these fields as a means of proclaiming the living and true God to men and women everywhere. In this work of evangelization, Catholic publications should be promoted and improved; they should more effectively serve the proclamation of the truth, not only to the members of the Church but also to the entire Cuban people.<sup>6</sup> My Pastoral Visit is taking place at a very special moment in the life of the whole Church: *the preparation for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000*. As Pastors of this portion of the pilgrim People of God in Cuba you share in the spirit of this preparation, and through your *Global Pastoral Plan* you have encouraged every community to live "that new springtime of Christian life which will be revealed by the Great Jubilee, if Christians are docile to the action of the Holy Spirit" (*Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 18). May the *Global Pastoral Plan* give continuity to my visit and to an experience of the Church as incarnational, participatory and prophetic as she strives to be at the service of the integral promotion of all Cubans. All of this requires an adequate formation which — as you have said — "should restore man as a person in his human, ethical, civic and religious values and enable him to fulfil his mission in the Church and in society" (II ENEC, *Memorial*, p. 38). This requires "the creation and the renewal of Dioceses, parishes and small communities which can foster participation and co-responsibility, and which can live out, in solidarity and service, their mission of evangelization" (ibid.).<sup>7</sup> Dear Brothers, at the conclusion of these reflections I wish to assure you that I am returning to Rome with *great hope for the future* after seeing the vitality of this Church. I am aware of the extent of the challenges which you face, but also of your valiant spirit and your ability to take on this task. With this confidence I encourage you to continue to be "*ministers of reconciliation*" (cf. 2 Cor 5:19), so that the people entrusted to you, putting behind them the difficulties of the past, can advance along the path of reconciliation among all Cubans without exception. As you well know, forgiveness is not incompatible with justice, and the future of this country must be built on peace, which is the fruit of justice and of forgiveness offered and accepted. Continue to be "*messengers who proclaim peace*" (cf. Is 52:7) so that a just and worthy society will develop, one in which everyone will meet a climate of mutual tolerance and respect. As co-workers of the Lord, you are God's field, God's building (cf. 1 Cor 3:9). May the faithful find in you authentic teachers of truth and concerned guides of his People, committed to the material, moral and spiritual good of all, in accordance with the exhortation of the Apostle Paul: "*Let each man take care how he builds! For no other foundation can any one lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ*" (1 Cor 3:10-11). With our eyes fixed on our Saviour, "*the same yesterday and today and for ever*" (Heb 13:8), and commending all our hopes and aspirations to the Mother of Christ and of the Church, venerated in Cuba under the fairest title of Our Lady of Charity, I cordially impart to you my Apostolic Blessing as a token of affection and a sign of the grace which accompanies you in your ministry. © Copyright 1998 - Libreria Editrice

Vaticana