



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO CUBAN BISHOPS
DURING HIS APOSTOLIC VISIT TO CUBA**

Tuesday, 9 June 1998

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

1. I am pleased to receive you at this audience, a few months after my memorable visit to your homeland. On that occasion I could experience first hand the warmth of Cubans and the wealth of values with which these beloved people are blessed. In the words of the Apostle Paul, I tell you “for this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers” (Eph 1:15-16). At the same time, I ask the Lord of history to make every Cuban the principal agent of his own “aspirations and legitimate desires” and to enable Cuba to “offer to everyone a climate of freedom, mutual trust, social justice and lasting peace” (*Arrival Address at José Martí Airport*, Havana, 21 January 1998; *L’Osservatore Romano* English edition, 28 January 1998, p. 2).

I am deeply grateful for all your efforts in preparing for my Visit, together with the priests, religious and committed lay people and then for seeing that it all went smoothly. I am also grateful for your concern to keep alive the genuine hopes aroused by the message I left you, and to ensure that the teachings which stem from it are gradually put into practice in the future.

2. In the almost five months that have passed since my unforgettable Visit to your country, I have seen that my invitation to help Cuba “open itself up to the world, and ... the world to open itself up to Cuba” (ibid., n. 5) has been accepted by various nations and organisations, and that many ecclesial communities have intensified their desires and achievements, expressing their solidarity in concrete action and showing a fraternal spirit to the children of God who live in this beautiful land. You can be sure that the Holy See and the Successor of St Peter will continue to do

everything possible, in accordance with the specific requirements of their spiritual mission, so that this response will continue to grow and that the interest aroused by my Visit will not subside but will achieve the results hoped for by the Cuban people.

In this regard, I also appreciate the gestures made by the Cuban authorities since my return to Rome. I would like to see them as the pledge and first-fruits of their readiness to create legal and social opportunities so that Cuban civil society can grow in autonomy and participation, and the country take its rightful place in the region and the concert of nations.

3. The desired opening is not limited to a mere improvement in international relations which tend to promote a process of mutual interdependence among peoples in the current context of globalisation. It is primarily a question of each individual's inner attitude, so that a new mentality and an openness of spirit may lead to true personal conversion and thus encourage the process of improvement and change in social structures. In this regard, I said after arriving on Cuban soil: "Do not be afraid to open your hearts to Christ. Allow him to come into your lives, into your families, into society. In this way all things will be made new. The Church repeats this appeal, calling everyone together without exception — individuals, families, peoples — so that by *faithfully following Jesus Christ all may find the full meaning of their lives*, commit themselves to serving their neighbour, and transform the bonds of family, work and friendship. This will always redound to the benefit of the nation and of society" (ibid., n. 4). And I repeated in Santa Clara: "Do not be afraid; open your families and schools to the values of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which are never a threat to any social project" (*Homily at the Mass with families*, 22 January; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 28 January 1998, p. 3).

By overcoming ideological, historical or political barriers which prevent the human person from growing in freedom and responsibility, peoples and nations should do all they can so that the truth, every human being's deepest aspiration, will be sought with honesty, found with joy, proclaimed with enthusiasm and generously shared by all, without arbitrary restrictions on basic freedoms, such as freedom of expression, of assembly and of association. This enables a society to achieve a state of social harmony where mutual trust, participation, solidarity and justice prevail. In this regard, Cuba is called to embody and live her own identity, which has deeply Christian roots, by setting out towards honesty, openness and solidarity.

4. The Catholic Church in Cuba, of which you are the lawful Pastors, is a living community which promotes love and reconciliation and spreads the truth that stems from the Gospel of Jesus Christ, in season and out of season (cf. 2 Tm 4:2). The Church forms a substantial part not only of your national history, but also of its present, and is in a certain sense co-responsible, together with other institutions, for the future. With her daily work, "amidst the persecutions of the world and the consolations of God" (St Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, XVIII, 51, 2), she contributes to the enrichment of all society, and not only of believers, since she strives to foster the spirituality of each individual, knowledge of the highest values and brotherhood among men. For this reason,

when the Church is recognized and can count on sufficient means and opportunities to fulfil her mission, society benefits as a whole. In seeking the integral welfare of all its citizens, the State, although secular, must acknowledge this mission and guarantee these opportunities.

The Church which lives in every nation presents herself as “the new People of God” who, “although it does not actually include all men, and at times may appear as a small flock, is, however, a most sure seed of unity, hope and salvation for the whole human race” (*Lumen gentium*, n. 9).

5. Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, “by virtue of the Holy Spirit” who has been given to you, you have “been constituted true and authentic teachers of the faith and have been made pontiffs and pastors” (*Christus Dominus*, n. 2), dedicating yourselves to the continual, daily care of the faithful (cf. *Lumen gentium*, n. 27) and finding in it your joy and fulfilment. I urge you to live it as authentic ministers of reconciliation (cf. 2 Cor 5:18), so that under your guidance the message I gave Cuba will have continuity and produce fruit in abundance.

At this historic moment in the nation’s life, as Pastors you must meet the challenges created by my Pastoral Visit. May your voice, which is the voice of Christ who has sent you and consecrated you for his service, never be lacking! May your work as true spokesmen and authentic Pastors of the pilgrim Church in this beloved nation be recognized! May everyone see you as “messengers who announce peace” (Is 52:7), as I said to you at my meeting in Havana in a programmatic message which retains all its validity!

The exercise of your ministry is sometimes a burden and is always marked by the Cross of Christ. Do not be disheartened by this; persevere in prayer and offer at the altar of the Lord the sacrifices and lack of understanding involved in a courageous and daring exercise of the cultural, prophetic and charitable mission he has entrusted to you. You are not alone on this path. You are aided by the power of the Holy Spirit, together with the solidarity and affection of the whole Church, as well as the prayer of the Vicar of Christ. I also ask God, the Lord of the harvest, not only to send in- to the fields without delay the new workers needed by the Cuban nation, but also to increase the efforts, creativity and availability of the generous and dedicated priests and religious who are working in Cuba, so that evangelization will be new not only in its ardour, methods and expression, but also in its influence, by inculturating the Gospel in all areas of personal and social life.

6. During my visit to Cuba I had the opportunity to recall several aspects of the “social Gospel”. The lay faithful must respond with maturity, perseverance and boldness to the challenges of applying the Church’s social doctrine to the economic, political and cultural life of the nation. In this regard, the faithful are called to take part in public life with full rights and equal opportunity, to make their own contribution to national progress and to participate generously in rebuilding the country, having access to the various sectors of social life, such as education and the means of social communication, within an appropriate legal framework.

Christians in Cuba must join in seeking the common good, contributing their critical conscience and abilities, and even making sacrifices to foster the changes which the country needs at this time, with the help of all her children. Man's true dignity is found in the truth revealed by Christ. He is the light of the world, and those who believe in him will not walk in darkness (cf. Jn 12:46). For this reason, the obstruction of the light, personal dishonesty and social duplicity must be overcome by the culture of truth, so that, by profoundly respecting every person and every culture, the conviction may be proclaimed that the fullness of life is reached when one transcends the limits of materialism and reaches the ineffable and transcendent Light that frees us from all selfishness.

7. The rain that saw me off when I left Cuban soil reminded me of the hymn "Rorate caeli", and I asked that the seeds sown with sacrifice and patience by all of you, Pastors and faithful, would grow vigorously and that Cuba would open her doors to Christ's redemptive power, so that all Cubans can live a new advent in their national history.

When you return to the island, please convey the Pope's affection and closeness to all Cubans. May they be certain that "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all, making my prayer with joy And I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to feel thus about you all, because I hold you in my heart For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment (Phil 1:3-10).

To Our Lady of Charity of El Cobre, Mother of all Cubans, deeply moved as I recall the moment when I placed on her the crown that her children had offered her, I present the hopes and desires, the joys and sorrows of them all, while from my heart I affectionately impart to them a special Apostolic Blessing.