



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II **GENERAL AUDIENCE** Wednesday, 14 February 1979

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. "Evangelization in the present and future of Latin America": this is the subject on which the third General Conference of the Episcopate of that Continent worked from 27 January to 13 February of this year. Yesterday the Conference concluded its work. Today, together with my Brothers in the Episcopate who took part in that Conference, with all the Episcopates of the whole Latin-American continent, I wish to thank the Holy Spirit for the whole of that work. I wish to thank the Spirit of Our Lord Jesus Christ and his Mother, the Bride of the Holy Spirit. Precisely at her feet, in the Sanctuary of Guadalupe, we began the third Conference together. When we hear the word "evangelization", there comes into our mind the words of St Paul: "For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!" (1 Cor 9:16). These words, which spring from the depths of the Apostle's soul, are the *cry of the Church* of our time. They became the testament of Paul VI, which found its expression in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelií Nuntiandi*. Now they become the words of faith, hope, and charity of the Latin-American Episcopate. For faith, hope, and charity must be expressed in a language of responsibility for the Gospel, for its proclamation, as the Apostle St Paul put it.

2. Evangelization in the American continent is in the first place the heritage of the centuries. If we speak of the present and the future of this evangelization, we cannot forget its "yesterday", its past. I spoke of this in my first homily, which I delivered at the Mass concelebrated at Santo Domingo during the recent journey. "From the first moments of discovery", I said, "the concern of the Church is manifested in making the kingdom of God present in the hearts of the new peoples, races and cultures... The soil of America was prepared to receive the new Christian seed by movements of spirituality of its own." That "yesterday" of the evangelization of the men and peoples of the Latin-American continent could be noticed constantly during my visit in Mexico, and formed a characteristic of the whole journey. Everywhere, I found splendid temples which recalled the first generations of the Church and of Christianity in that land. But above all, I met the *living men*, who accepted as their own the gospel proclaimed to them in the new world, by missionaries from the old world, and made it the substance of their own lives. Certainly, that meeting of the new arrivals from Europe with the natives was not an easy one. One has the impression that the latter did not completely accept what is European; that, in a certain way, they tried to hide in their own tradition and in their native culture. But, at the same time, one has the impression that they accepted Jesus Christ and

his Gospel; that in that community of faith a meeting of the "old" with the "new" took place, and that this is at the basis not only of the life of the Church but of Mexican society itself. That continuity of faith, as we all know, went through serious tests and hard examinations. It is difficult to resist the impression, which strikes one insistently, that in the crucible of those tests and examinations the community was strengthened and deepened. It bears the signs of a great simplicity and of the spiritual victory of faith, in spite of the circumstances which might bear witness to the contrary and which, considering things from the human point of view, might sadden us.³

"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever!" (Heb 13:8). The representatives of the Episcopate gathered in Puebla, thinking of evangelization in the present and future of Latin America, were aware of the fact that the Church as the Body of Christ and his faithful Bride, the Church as the People of God, can never break with the past, with tradition. But neither can it be content to look only to the past: the *ecclesia "retro-oculata"* must always be, at the same time, the Church that looks to the future (*ecclesia "ante--oculata"*). To this future, *to the men who already exist and those who will come, the Church must always reveal Jesus Christ, the full and not diminished mystery of Salvation*. This mystery is an eternal mystery in God, who wants all men to be saved and to arrive at knowledge of the truth. The mystery that became in time a Divine-Human Reality, which *bears the name of Jesus Christ*. It is a historical Reality, and at the same time he is above history. He "is the same yesterday and today, and for ever." (Heb 13:8). It is a Reality which does not stop outside man; the reason for its existence is to be and operate in man; to construct the source and ferment of new life in every man. To evangelize means acting in this direction, in order that the source and ferment of new life may shine forth in men and in the ever-new generations. To evangelize does not mean just telling "about Christ". To proclaim Christ means getting the man — the one to whom this proclamation is addressed — to "believe", that is, *to see himself in Christ*; to find again in him the adequate dimension of his own life; simply, to find himself again in Christ. The one who carries out this work is the man who evangelizes, who proclaims Christ; but, above, all, it is the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus Christ. The Church, which evangelizes, remains the handmaid and instrument of the Spirit. The fact of finding oneself again in Christ, which is precisely the fruit of evangelization, *becomes man's substantial liberation*. Service of the Gospel is service of freedom in the Spirit. The man who has found himself in Christ, has found again the way to the consequent liberation of his own humanity through the overcoming of all his limitations and weaknesses; through liberation from his own situation of sin and from the multiple structures of sin which weigh upon the life of society and of individuals. To this truth, so strongly expressed by St. Paul, we must refer with no less clarity in the evangelizing mission in the American continent and everywhere.⁴ The future of evangelization is identified with the implementation of the great and multiple programme outlined by the Second Vatican Council. The Church, in order that she may carry out her mission with regard to the "world", must strengthen herself, deeply in her own mystery, and must construct thoroughly her own community, the community of the People of God, based on the apostolic succession, on the hierarchical ministry, on the vocation to exclusive service of God in the priesthood and in religious life, and on the laity aware of its own apostolic tasks. The Latin-American world is waiting for the Church to carry out her own mission with regard to it. It is waiting for it even when it shows contestation and

indifference with regard to the Church and the Gospel. All this must not discourage the apostles of Christ and the servants of the Gospel of his love. My dear brothers in the Episcopate of the Latin-American Continent are bearing witness that "the love of Christ controls us" (cf. 2 Cor 5:14), that they are ready to "preach the word, be urgent in season and out of season, convince, rebuke, and exhort, be unfailing in patience and in teaching." (cf. 2 Tim 4:2) — as St Paul says — in order that the communities, entrusted to their care as pastors and teachers, will not "turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths" (cf. 2 Tim 4:4). My brothers in the Episcopate of the Latin-American continent are ready, together with their priests, religious men and women, and all zealous laity, to read the "signs of the times", to form the whole People of God in justice, truth, and love. May the Lord bless them in all this work of theirs. May he allow them to see the fruits of this zeal and this cooperation, the proof of which has been the third General Conference in Puebla. May the Church in the Latin-American continent, strong in the tradition of its first evangelization, become strong again with the conscience of the whole People of God, with the strength of its own priestly and religious vocations, with a deep sense of responsibility for the social order, based on justice, peace, respect of human rights, on the adequate distribution of goods, on the progress of public education and culture. We wish them all of this. Let all of us gathered here, and the whole Church, continue to pray tirelessly for these aims of Latin America, invoking the intercession of the Mother of God of Guadalupe, at whose feet we began our work. Amen.

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