



The Holy See

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

MEETING IN THE METROPOLITAN CATHEDRAL

ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II

Sunday, 25 January 1998

*Dear Brothers in the Episcopate and the Priesthood,
Beloved Men and Women Religious,
Seminarians and Faithful,*

1. In these last few hours of my Pastoral Visit I am filled with joy in meeting you, the representatives of those who, with joy and hope, in trials and sacrifice, take up the exhilarating task of evangelization in this land marked by so singular a history.

I am grateful for the kind words which Cardinal Jaime Lucas Ortega y Alamino, Archbishop of Havana, has spoken, giving voice to the feelings of affection and esteem which you nurture towards the Successor of the Apostle Peter. I wish to respond in kind, assuring you once more of my own great affection in the Lord, affection which extends to all the sons and daughters of this island.

2. We are gathered in this metropolitan cathedral dedicated to the Immaculate Conception, on the day when the liturgy celebrates the conversion of St Paul. On the road to Damascus St Paul was visited by the risen Lord and was converted from a persecutor of Christians to a fearless and tireless Apostle of Jesus Christ. His shining example and his teachings should serve as your guide in facing and overcoming day by day the many obstacles to the fulfilment of your mission; in this way energy and enthusiasm for advancing the kingdom of God will not diminish.

In your national history there have been many pastors who, because of unshakeable fidelity to Christ and his Church, have stood by the people in every trial. The witness of their generous dedication, their words in proclaiming the Gospel and in defending the dignity and inalienable

rights of persons, and their promotion of the integral well-being of the nation are a precious spiritual patrimony worthy of preservation and cultivation. Among these pastors, I have referred in these days to *the Servant of God Fr Félix Varela*, faithful to his priesthood and *active in promoting the common good* of the entire Cuban people. I recall as well *the Servant of God José Olallo*, of the Hospitaller Brothers of St John of God, *a witness to mercy* whose life in service to the most needy is a *magnificent example of consecration to the Lord*. Let us hope that their processes of canonization will soon be concluded, in order that they may be invoked by the faithful. Many other Cuban men and women — priests, religious and laity — have also given proof of faith, of perseverance in their mission, and of consecration to the cause of the Gospel.

3. *Dear priests*, the Lord abundantly blesses your daily dedication to the service of the Church and the people, even when difficulties and antipathies arise. For my part, I express appreciation and gratitude for your response to divine grace. By grace you are called to be fishers of men (cf. *Mk 1:17*), without letting yourselves be overwhelmed by the weariness or discouragement produced because of the immensity of your apostolate, resulting from *the reduced number of priests* and *the many pastoral demands* involved in attending to the faithful who open their hearts to the Gospel, as has been experienced in the recent mission by which you prepared for my visit.

Do not lose hope even though you lack the material means for your mission or because the scarcity of resources causes a large part of the population to suffer. *Accepting the Lord's invitation, continue to work for the kingdom of God and his justice*, and the rest will be given to you as well (cf. *Lk 12:31*). In close union with the Bishops and as an expression of the dynamic ecclesial communion characteristic of this Church, do all that you can to continue to enlighten people's consciences in the development of human, ethical and religious values, the absence of which affects whole segments of society, especially the young who are therefore most vulnerable.

The increase of priestly vocations, as indicated by encouraging statistics, and the arrival of new missionaries, which we ardently hope will be made easier, will make the apostolate more far-reaching and, as a result, will bring benefit to everyone.

Conscious that *"our help comes from the Lord"* (*Ps 121 [120]:2*), that he alone is our support and our strength, I encourage you *never to forsake personal, daily and extended prayer*, that you may become more and more like Christ, the Good Shepherd; for in him is found the principal source of our energy and our true rest (cf. *Mt 11:30*). In this way you will be able to face joyfully the burden of *"the day and the heat"* (cf. *Mt 20:12*) and will thus give the best testimony for promoting the priestly and religious vocations which are so greatly needed.

The preaching of the Word of God and the celebration of the sacraments constitute the prophetic and liturgical mission of the priest; but *the priestly ministry extends also to works of charity, assistance and human development*. In these areas, the work of deacons and members of various institutes and ecclesial associations is also important. God willing, may it be made easier for you

to receive and distribute the resources which so many sister Churches want to share with you, may you find the most appropriate ways to meet the needs of your brothers and sisters, and may this work encounter ever greater comprehension and appreciation.

4. *I express thanks for the presence in this country of consecrated men and women from different religious institutes.* For some decades, you have had to live your vocation in very unusual circumstances and, without renouncing what is specific to your charism, you have had to adapt to the prevailing situation and respond to the pastoral needs of the Dioceses. I thank you also for your praiseworthy and much valued pastoral work, and for your service of Christ in the poor, the sick and the elderly. Let us hope that in a not-too- distant future the Church will be able to resume her role in the field of education, a task which religious institutes carry out in many places with high commitment and with great benefit to civil society.

The Church admires in you and expects from you *the witness of a life transfigured by the profession of the evangelical counsels* (cf. *Vita consecrata*, n. 20) giving witness to love through a *chastity which makes the heart grow stronger, a poverty which breaks down barriers, and an obedience which builds communion* in the community, in the Church and in the world.

The faith of the Cuban people whom you serve has been the source and lifeblood of the culture of this nation. As consecrated persons, seek and *foster a genuine process of inculturation of the faith* which will facilitate the proclamation, acceptance and practice of the Gospel for all.

5. *Dear seminarians and novices,* be eager to acquire a solid human and Christian formation in which *the spiritual life occupies pride of place.* In this way prepare yourselves to undertake more effectively the ministry which will be entrusted to you in due course. Look with hope to the future when you will have special responsibilities. With a view to this, strengthen your fidelity to Christ and his Gospel, increase your love of the Church and your dedication to his people.

The two seminaries, which are now becoming too small to accommodate your numbers, have contributed notably to the awareness of Cuban national identity. May these distinguished religious houses continue to foster a fruitful synthesis of piety and virtue, of faith and culture, of love for Christ and his Church and love for the people.

6. To *the laity* here present, who represent so many others, *I am grateful for your daily fidelity in maintaining the flame of faith in the heart of your families,* thus overcoming all obstacles and working courageously to make the spirit of the Gospel present in society. I invite you to *nourish faith by means of a continuing biblical and catechetical formation* which will help you persevere in your witness to Christ, pardoning offences, exercising the right — as Catholic believers — to serve the people in all the ways already open to you and working to gain access to those still closed. The work of a committed Catholic laity lies precisely in the areas of culture, economics, politics and the media in order to transmit through these channels the truth about Christ and the human

person, and the hope which flows from that truth. In this regard, Catholic publications and other such initiatives should have the means necessary to serve Cuban society as a whole. I urge you to pursue this path, which is an expression of your vitality as believers and of your genuine Christian vocation to the service of truth and to the service of Cuba.

7. Dear brethren, *the Cuban people need you because they need God*, who is the foundation of their lives. As part of this people, show them that Christ alone is the Way, the Truth and the Life, that he alone has the words of everlasting life (cf. Jn 6:68-69). The Pope is close to you, he accompanies you with his prayer and his affection, and he commends you to the maternal protection of the Blessed Virgin, Our Lady of Charity of El Cobre, Mother of all Cubans. To her, Star of the new evangelization, I entrust the work of all of you and the well-being of this beloved nation.

At the end of his address the Holy Father spoke extemporaneously:

We are concluding this visit on 25 January, which is the feast of the Conversion of St Paul. The last Eucharist, celebrated in Revolution Plaza, is very significant because Paul's conversion is a profound, continual and holy revolution, valid for all ages.

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