

HOMILY AT CAMAGÜEY (Friday 23 January 1998)



1. "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom 12:21). The young people of Cuba join the Pope today to celebrate their faith, to listen to the word of God which is the path leading away from the works of evil and darkness, and thus to clothe themselves in the raiment of light in order to accomplish good works. For this reason, I am pleased to have this meeting with all of you in this great plaza where the sacrifice of Jesus Christ will be renewed at the altar. This place, named after Ignacio Agramonte, "El Bayardo", reminds us of a hero beloved by all. Motivated by his Christian faith, he embodied the values by which men and women are distinguished as good: honour, truthfulness, fidelity, the love of justice. He was a good husband and father, and a good friend; in the face of slavery he defended human dignity.

2. First of all, I extend an affectionate greeting to Bishop Adolfo Rodríguez Herrera, the Pastor of this local Church, to Bishop Juan García Rodríguez, his Auxiliary, and to all the Bishops and priests present who, by their pastoral work, inspire the youth of Cuba and lead them to Christ, the Redeemer, the never-failing friend. The encounter with Christ brings about conversion and the singular joy which makes us cry out, like the disciples after the Resurrection, "We have seen the Lord" (Jn 20:25). I likewise greet the civil authorities taking part in this Holy Mass and I thank them for their co-operation in this function at which the principal guests are the young people.

With heartfelt sentiment I address you, dear young people of Cuba, the hope of the Church and of your homeland, and I present you to Christ so that you might know him and follow him with total determination. It is he who gives you life, shows you the way, brings you to the truth, motivating you to walk together in solidarity, happiness and peace as living members of his Mystical Body, which is the Church.

3. "How shall the young remain sinless? By obeying your word" (Ps 119:9). The psalm gives this answer to the question which all young people must ask themselves if they wish to lead a worthy and upright life, suitable to their condition. To achieve this, Jesus is the only way. The talents which you have received from the Lord and which lead to commitment, authentic love and generosity bear fruit when you live not merely for things that are material and fleeting, but "by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Mt 4:4). For this reason, dear young people, I encourage you to experience Christ's love, to be conscious of what he has done for you, for all of humanity, for the men and women of every age. Feeling yourselves loved by him, you will in turn be truly able to love. Experiencing an intimate communion of life with him, which should be accompanied by receiving his Body, by listening to his Word, by the joy of his pardon and mercy, you will be able to imitate him and, as the psalmist teaches, "remain sinless".

What does it mean to remain sinless? It means living your life according to the moral principles of the Gospel which the Church sets before you. At present, unfortunately, it is easy for people to fall into moral relativism and the identity crisis which affects so many young people, victims of cultural models which are empty of meaning or of an ideology which does not offer high and clear moral guidelines. Such moral relativism gives rise to selfishness, division, marginalization, discrimination, fear and distrust of others. Moreover, when young people live life "their own way", they idealize things from other countries, they allow themselves to be seduced by unchecked materialism, they lose their own roots and long for distractions. Consequently, the emptiness brought on by this behaviour explains many of the evils which beset young people: alcohol, the abuse of sex, drug use, prostitution hidden under different guises, the causes of which are not always and exclusively personal, motivation based on personal likes and selfish attitudes, opportunism, the lack of a serious life project with no room given to a stable marriage; also the rejection of all legitimate authority, the desire to escape and to emigrate, the avoidance of commitment and responsibility in order to seek shelter in a false world founded on alienation and annihilation.

Faced with this situation, Christian youth, longing to "remain sinless" and firm in faith, know that they are called and chosen by Christ to live in the authentic freedom of God's children, which involves many challenges. Thus, welcoming the grace received in the sacraments, they know that they must bear witness to Christ by their confident efforts to lead a life which is upright and faithful to him.

Faith and morally upright behaviour go hand in hand. In effect, the gift received leads to a permanent conversion enabling us to imitate Christ and receive the divine promises. In order to hold fast to the fundamental values which keep them sinless, Christians sometimes have to suffer marginalization and persecution — at times heroically — because of moral choices which are contrary to the world's behaviour. This witness to the cross of Christ in daily life is also a sure and fertile seed of new Christians. A life fully human and committed to Christ requires this generosity and dedication.

Dear young people, this is the cost of Christian witness, of a worthy life in the eyes of God. If you are not willing to pay this price, your lives will be empty and you will not have a worthwhile life project responsibly accepted with all its consequences. The Church has the duty of providing a moral, civic and religious formation which will help the youth of Cuba to grow in human and Christian values. This is a duty to be undertaken without fear and with perseverance in an educational effort which calls for time, and the resources and institutions needed for this sowing of virtue and spirituality for the good of the Church and of the nation.

4. "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Mk 10: 17). In the Gospel which we have heard, a young man asks Jesus what he must do, and the Master, filled with love, tells him how he must "be". The young man presumes that he has kept all the commandments, and Jesus answers that what is necessary is that he leave everything and follow him. This gives a firm grounding and authenticity to values and permits the young man to reach his fulfillment as a person and as a Christian. The key to this fulfillment is found in fidelity, which St Paul referred to in the first reading as one of the characteristics of our Christian identity.

This is the path of fidelity presented by St Paul: "Hold fast to what is good; love one another with brotherly affection; ... rejoice in your hope, ... practice hospitality.... Bless.... Live in harmony with one another ... associate with the lowly; never be conceited. Repay no one evil for evil.... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom 12: 9-21). Dear young people, whether you are believers or not, accept the call to be virtuous. This means being strong within, having a big heart, being rich in the highest sentiments, bold in the truth, courageous in freedom, constant in responsibility, generous in love, invincible in hope. Happiness is achieved through sacrifice. Do not look outside for what is to be found inside. Do not expect from others what you yourselves can and are called to be or to do. Do not leave for tomorrow the building of a new society in which the noblest dreams are not frustrated and in which you can be the principal agents of your own history.

Remember that the human person and respect for the human person is the path to a new world. The world and humanity are deprived of their life-breath if they are not open to Jesus Christ. Open your hearts to him and thus start out on a new life, a life in harmony with God and which responds to your legitimate aspirations to truth, goodness and beauty. May Cuba raise her children in virtue and freedom so that your nation will enjoy a future of authentic integral human development in an environment of lasting peace!

Dear Catholic young people: all of this is a program of personal and social life founded on love, humility and sacrifice, which has as its ultimate purpose "to serve the Lord". I wish you the joy of making this a reality. The efforts which are already being made in youth ministry must be focused on the realization of this program of life. To help you in this, I am leaving you also a written Message in the hope that it will reach all the young people of Cuba, who are the future of the Church and the country. This future begins now in the present and will be fulfilling if it is based on the integral development of each individual, a development which cannot be achieved without Christ, by ignoring Christ or much less by working against Christ. For this reason, as I said at the beginning of my Pontificate and repeated upon my arrival in Cuba: "Do not be afraid to open your hearts to Christ". With great affection I leave you this motto and exhortation, asking you to pass it on with boldness and apostolic courage to the rest of Cuba's youth. May almighty God and Our Lady of Charity of El Cobre help you to respond generously to this call!

Now we are going to celebrate the sacrifice of Christ. Christ will make himself present, the same Christ who once looked at a young man and loved him. Each of you must live him today; the Christ who sees you and loves you is present today. Christ is watching. Christ knows what is in each one of us. He knows that he loves us. Praised be Jesus Christ.