

HOMILY IN SANTIAGO DE CUBA (Saturday 24 January 1998)



1. "Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord" (Ps 32: 12). With the psalmist we have sung that blessings accompany the people which have God as its Lord. More than 500 years ago, when the cross of Christ arrived on this island and with it his saving message, there began a process which, nourished by Christian faith, has continued to forge the characteristic traits of this nation.

The series of this nation's illustrious figures include: that soldier who was the first catechist and missionary of Macaca; the first Cuban teacher, Fr Miguel de Velázquez; the priest Esteban Salas, the father of Cuban music; the renowned man of Bayamo, Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, father of his country, who, prostrate at the feet of the Our Lady of Charity, began the fight for Cuba's freedom and independence; Antonio de la Caridad Maceo y Grajales, whose statue stands in the plaza where our celebration is taking place today, and whose mother prayed before the crucifix asking that he commit himself wholly and completely to the freedom of Cuba. In addition to these, there are many other illustrious men and women who, motivated by their unshakeable faith in God, chose the way of freedom and justice as the foundation of their people's dignity.

2. I am pleased to be here today in this distinguished Archdiocese, which counts St Anthony Mary Claret among its Pastors. First of all, I offer cordial greetings to Archbishop Pedro Meurice Estiu of Santiago de Cuba and Primate of the nation. I greet as well the other Cardinals, Bishops, priests and deacons who are committed to furthering the kingdom of God in this land. I likewise greet the men and women religious and all the faithful present here.

I wish to extend my respectful greetings to the Vice-President of the Council of State, to Minister Raúl Castro and to the other civil authorities taking part in this Holy Mass, and I thank them for their help in organizing this event.

3. During this celebration we will crown the image of Our Lady of Charity of El Cobre. From her shrine, not far from here, the Queen and Mother of all Cubans — regardless of race, political allegiance or ideology — guides and sustains, as in times past, the steps of her sons and daughters towards our heavenly homeland, and she encourages them to live in such a way that in society those authentic moral values may reign which constitute the rich spiritual heritage received from your forebears.

With gratitude, we turn to her, as did her cousin Elizabeth, and say: "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord" (Lk 1: 45). In these words lies the secret of the true happiness of individuals and peoples: to believe and proclaim that the Lord has done marvelous things for us and that his mercy is from generation to generation on those who are faithful to him. This conviction is the force which inspires men and women to commit themselves selflessly, even at the cost of sacrifice, to the service of others.

Mary's example of readiness to serve shows us the path to take. With her, the Church fulfils her own vocation and mission, proclaiming Jesus Christ and exhorting us to do what he says, building a universal brotherhood in which every person can call God "Father".

4. Like the Virgin Mary, the Church is Mother and Teacher in the following of Christ, who is light for the nations and the dispenser of divine mercy. As the community of all the baptized, the Church is likewise the place of forgiveness, peace and reconciliation, opening her arms to all people so that she might proclaim to them the true God. By serving the faith of the men and women of this beloved people, the Church helps them to advance on the path of goodness.

The evangelizing efforts being carried out in different places, for example, the missions in districts and towns which have no churches, must be sustained and promoted so that they may increase and serve not only Catholics but the whole Cuban people, so that everyone may come to know and love Jesus Christ. History teaches that without faith virtue disappears, moral values are dulled, truth no longer shines forth, life loses its transcendent meaning and even service of the nation can cease to be inspired by solid motivations. In this respect, Antonio Maceo, the great patriot of the East, said: "He who loves not God loves not his country".

The Church calls everyone to make faith a reality in their lives, as the best path to the integral development of the human being, created in the image and likeness of God, and for attaining true freedom, which includes the recognition of human rights and social justice. In this regard, lay Catholics — holding to their specific role as lay persons so that they may be "salt and leaven" in the midst of the society of which they are part — have the duty and the right to participate in public debate on the basis of equality and in an attitude of dialogue and reconciliation.

Likewise, the good of a nation must be promoted and achieved by its citizens themselves through peaceful and gradual means. In this way each person, enjoying freedom of expression, being free to undertake initiatives and make proposals within civil society, and enjoying appropriate freedom of association, will be able to co-operate effectively in the pursuit of the common good.

The Church, immersed in civil society, does not seek any type of political power in order to carry out her mission; she wishes only to be the fruitful seed of everyone's good by her presence in the structures of society. Her first concern is the human person and the community in which the individual lives; she is well aware that actual people with all their needs and aspirations constitute her primary path. All that she claims for herself she places at the service of people and society. For this reason Christ charged her to bring his message to all peoples, and for this she needs sufficient freedom and adequate means. Defending her own freedom, the Church defends the freedom of each individual, of families, of different social units, which are living realities with a right to their own sphere of autonomy and sovereignty (cf. *Centesimus annus*, n. 45).

In this sense, "Christians and Christian communities are very much a part of the life of their respective nations and can be a sign of the Gospel in their fidelity to their native land, people and national culture, while always preserving the freedom brought by Christ.... The Church is called to bear witness to Christ by taking courageous and prophetic stands in the face of the corruption of political or economic power; by not seeking her own glory and material wealth; by using her resources to serve the poorest of the poor and by imitating Christ's own simplicity of life" (*Redemptoris missio*, n. 43). This is a constant, permanent teaching of the social Magisterium, what is called the Church's social doctrine.

5. In recalling these aspects of the Church's mission, we give thanks to God who has called us to be part of his Church. In the Church, the Virgin Mary has a unique place. An expression of this is the new crowning of the venerated image of Our Lady of Charity of El Cobre. Cuban history is marked by wonderful displays of love for the patroness of Cuba, at whose feet the figures of humble natives, two Indians and a Black, symbolize the rich plurality of this people. El Cobre, where the shrine is located, was the first place in Cuba where freedom was won for slaves.

Beloved brothers and sisters in the faith, never forget the great events connected with your Queen and Mother. With the canopy of his family altar, Céspedes put together the Cuban flag and went to prostrate himself at the feet of Our Lady before beginning the battle for freedom. The brave Cuban soldiers, the "Mambises", bore on their breast the medal and "medida" of her holy image.

The first act of liberated Cuba in 1898 was when the troops of General Calixto García knelt during a solemn Mass at the feet of Our Lady of Charity for the "Mambisa Declaration of Independence of the Cuban People". The various pilgrimages of the image through the towns of the island, heeding the desires and hopes, the joys and sufferings of all her children, have always involved great displays of faith and love.

From this place I wish to send my greetings also to all of Cuba's children who, in whatever part of the world, venerate Our Lady of Charity; together with all your brothers and sisters who live in this fair land, I place you under her maternal protection, asking her, loving Mother of all, to unite her children once more through reconciliation and brotherhood.

6. Today, following the glorious tradition of love for the our common Mother, before proceeding with her crowning, I turn to her and together with all of you I call upon her:



Our Lady of Charity of El Cobre, Patroness of Cuba! Hail Mary, full of grace! You are the beloved Daughter of the Father, the Mother of Christ, our God, the living Temple of the Holy Spirit. Your name, O Virgin of Charity, evokes thoughts of the God who is Love, recalls the new commandment given by Jesus, invokes the Holy Spirit: love poured into our hearts, fire of charity sent on Pentecost over the Church, gift of the total freedom of the sons and daughters of God. Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus! You came to visit our people and wished to remain with us as Mother and Lady of Cuba, throughout its pilgrimage along the paths of history. Your name and image are sculpted in the mind and heart of every Cuban, both within and outside the country, as a sign of hope and a focus of fraternal communion. Holy Mary, Mother of God and Mother of us all! Pray for us before your Son Jesus Christ, intercede for us with your maternal heart, filled with the Spirit's charity.

Increase our faith, enliven our hope, augment and strengthen love in us. Shelter our families, protect young people and little children, comfort the suffering. Be the Mother of the faithful and of the Shepherds of the Church, the model and star of the new evangelization. Mother of reconciliation! Gather together your people scattered throughout the world. Make the Cuban nation a home of brothers and sisters so that this people will open wide its mind, its heart and its life to Christ, the sole Saviour and Redeemer, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, for ever and ever. Amen.

At the end of Mass the Holy Father announced the creation of the new Diocese of Guantánamo-Baracoa:

I have had the joy of celebrating Holy Mass with you all in this plaza dedicated to Antonio Maceo. By your presence here you too have given visible proof of the Church's perseverance and growth in this beautiful land, an expression of her rich

vitality. In this regard, I have the joy of informing you that, to further the Church's activity in Cuba, I have decided to establish the Diocese of Guantánamo-Baracoa and to appoint Bishop Carlos Jesús Patricio Baladrón Valdés, until now Auxiliary of Havana, as its first Bishop.

I would like to encourage the priests and faithful of this new ecclesiastical jurisdiction to commit themselves, like living stones around their Shepherd, to building this particular Church which is born today.

Dear Bishop Baladrón, consider the great importance of the mission that is now entrusted to you, and with all your might proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ to your diocesans, calling them to the Eucharist and the other sacraments, so that they may grow in holiness and justice in the Lord's presence.

Before imparting the final blessing, the Holy Father spoke extemporaneously:

I want to thank you for this warmth, the warm weather but also the human warmth, the warmth of your hearts. I would like to offer the final blessing of the Mass to this people, to this Church which is so warm.