

THE HOLY FATHER'S ARRIVAL SPEECH

(Wednesday, 21 January 1998)



Mr. President,

Dear Cardinal Ortega and Brother Bishops,

Distinguished Authorities,

Members of the Diplomatic Corps,

Dear Brothers and Sisters of Cuba,

1. I thank God, the Lord of history and of our personal destinies, that he has enabled me to come to this land which Christopher Columbus called "the most beautiful that human eyes have seen". Arriving on this island, where the cross of Christ was raised over 500 years ago — the same cross zealously treasured today in the parish church of Baracoa, in the extreme eastern part of the country — I greet everyone with warm affection.

This happy and long-awaited day has finally arrived, and I am able to answer the invitation which the Cuban Bishops made a long time ago, and which the President of the Republic had also made and personally reiterated on the occasion of his visit to the Vatican in November 1996. I am filled with happiness to be able to visit your country, being among you and sharing these days of faith, hope and love.

2. I am pleased to address my greetings in the first place to the President, Dr Fidel Castro Ruz, who has kindly come here to meet me and to whom I wish to express my thanks for his words of welcome. I likewise express my thanks to the other authorities present, to the Diplomatic Corps and to all who have had a part in preparing this Pastoral Visit.

I cordially greet my Brothers in the Episcopate; in particular Cardinal Jaime Lucas Ortega y Alamino, Archbishop of Havana, and each of the other Cuban Bishops, as well as those who have come from other countries to take part in the events of this Pastoral Visit and to renew and strengthen, as on so many other occasions, the close bonds of communion and love between their particular Churches and the Church in Cuba. In this greeting, my heart goes out with great affection also to the beloved priests, deacons, men and women religious, catechists and faithful, to whom I belong in the Lord as Shepherd and Servant of the Universal Church (cf. Apostolic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, n. 22).

In each one of them I see the reflection of this local Church, dearly loved and always present in my heart, with whose aspirations and legitimate desires I feel closely bound in solidarity. God grant that this visit which begins today may serve as an encouragement to each one in the task of making these expectations a reality, with the partnership of all Cubans and the help of the Holy Spirit. You are and must be the principal agents of your own personal and national history.

At the same time I cordially greet the entire Cuban people, and I address everyone without exception: men and women, old and young, adolescents and children; all those I will meet and those who for various reasons will not be able to take part in the different celebrations.

3. On this apostolic journey I come in the name of the Lord to confirm you in faith, to strengthen you in hope and to encourage you in love. I come to share your profound religious spirit, your endeavours, joys and sufferings, and to celebrate, as one big family, the mystery of divine Love, in order to make it more deeply present in the life and history of this noble people who thirst for God and for the spiritual values which in these 500 years of her presence on the island the

Church has not ceased to dispense. I come as a pilgrim of love, of truth and of hope, with the desire to give a fresh impulse to the work of evangelization which, in the midst of difficulties, this local Church continues to sustain with apostolic vitality and dynamism, on her way to the third Christian millennium.

4. In fulfilling my ministry I have not ceased to proclaim the truth concerning Jesus Christ, the One who has revealed the truth about man, his mission in the world, the greatness of his destiny and his inviolable dignity. In this respect, the service of man is the path of the Church. I am here today to share with you my profound conviction that the message of the Gospel leads to love, commitment, self-sacrifice and forgiveness; a people that follows this path is a people with hope for a better future.

Therefore, from the very first moment of my presence among you, I wish to say with the same force as at the beginning of my Pontificate: "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.

5. The Church in Cuba has always proclaimed Jesus Christ, even if at times she has had a scarcity of priests and has had to do so in difficult circumstances. I wish to express my admiration for so many of the Cuban faithful for their fidelity to Christ, to the Church and to the Pope, as also for the respect they have shown for the more genuine religious traditions learned from their elders, and for the courage and persevering spirit of commitment demonstrated in the midst of their sufferings and ardent hopes. All this has been rewarded on many occasions by the solidarity shown by other ecclesial communities in America and throughout the world. Today, as ever, the Church in Cuba wishes to be in a position to continue serving all people in accordance with the mission and teachings of Jesus Christ.

Dear sons and daughters of the Catholic Church in Cuba: I well know how much you have looked forward to the moment of my visit, and you know how much I have desired it. Therefore my best wishes are joined with the prayer that this land may offer to everyone a climate of freedom, mutual trust, social justice and lasting peace. May Cuba, with all its magnificent potential, open itself up to the world, and may the world open itself up to Cuba, so that this people, which is working to make progress and which longs for concord and peace, may look to the future with hope.

6. With confidence in the Lord and feeling very close to the beloved sons and daughters of Cuba, I thank you with all my heart for this warm welcome with which my Pastoral Visit is beginning. I commend this visit to the maternal protection of the Blessed Virgin of Charity of El Cobre. I cordially bless you all, especially the poor, the sick, the neglected and all those suffering in body or spirit.

Praised be Jesus Christ!

Thank you.