



The Holy See

***ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO THE PAPAL REPRESENTATIVES
IN LATIN AMERICAN COUNTRIES IN PREPARATION
FOR THE FIFTH GENERAL CONFERENCE
OF THE LATIN AMERICAN EPISCOPAL COUNCIL (CELAM)***

Consistory Hall

Saturday, 17 February 2007

Venerable Brothers,

I am very pleased to welcome you at the end of your meeting in preparation for the Fifth General Conference of the Latin American Episcopal Council [CELAM]. I offer a cordial greeting to each one of you, starting with Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, my Secretary of State, whom I thank for his words expressing your common sentiments.

I thank the Cardinal Presidents of the Fifth General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate and the Heads of the Dicastries of the Roman Curia who have contributed to your work.

In particular, I take this opportunity to express once again to you, the Apostolic Nuncios present and all Papal Representatives, my appreciation of the important ecclesial service that you carry out, often among numerous difficulties due to the distance from your homeland, your frequent travels and also at times the social and political tensions in the places where you work. In carrying out your sensitive task, which is of course motivated by a deep spirit of faith, may each one of you feel accompanied by the esteem, affection and prayers of the Pope.

Every Apostolic Nuncio is called to consolidate the bonds of communion between the particular Churches and the Successor of Peter. Together with the Pastors and the entire People of God, he is entrusted with responsibility for promoting dialogue and collaboration with civil society in order to achieve the common good.

Papal Representatives are the presence of the Pope, who through them makes himself close to all those he is unable to meet personally and especially to those who live in conditions of hardship and suffering. Your ministry, dear Brothers, is a ministry of ecclesial communion and a service to peace and harmony in the Church and among peoples. Always be aware of the importance, grandeur and beauty of this mission of yours and strive tirelessly to carry it out with generous dedication.

Divine Providence has called you who are present here to carry out your service in Latin America, described by our beloved John Paul II - who visited it several times - as the "Continent of hope", as has already been said.

Please God, I will have the joy of coming into contact personally with the situation in those countries when I speak, God willing, at the opening of the Fifth General Conference of the Latin American Bishops in Aparecida, Brazil, in the coming month of May.

In a certain sense, this Assembly sums up and is a continuation of the previous General Conferences, while it is enriched by the many "post-conciliar" gifts of the Papal Magisterium - in particular the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in America* springs to mind - as well as the other fruit of the Catholic Church's synodal process.

The Assembly proposes to define the important priorities and to give a new impetus to the Church's mission at the service of the Latin American peoples in the concrete circumstances at the beginning of the 21st century.

This recapitulation refers to the Catholic tradition which, thanks to an extraordinary missionary epic, took shape and impressed its hallmark upon the cultural structure that has so far been a feature of the Latin American identity. This was the original vocation - as my late Predecessor John Paul II said at Santo Domingo - of "peoples whom the same geography, Christian faith, language and culture have joined together definitively in the course of history" (*Address at CELAM's Fourth General Conference, 12 October 1992, n. 15; L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 21 October, p. 8).

Starting with the theme of this important meeting: "*Disciples and missionaries of Jesus Christ so that our people may have life in him*", you too have had the opportunity in these days to highlight certain challenges which the Church encounters in the vast area of Latin America, inserted into world dynamics and conditioned increasingly by the effects of globalization.

In the face of these challenges, the nations that make up Latin America seek in different ways to affirm their identity and their weight in the historical process of the contemporary world; they seek, all too often among numerous difficulties, to consolidate domestic peace within their own nation. Feeling like "sisters", they also aim to become a community united in peace and in cultural and

economic development.

The Church, a sign and instrument of unity for the entire human race (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, n. 1), naturally finds herself in tune with every legitimate aspiration of the peoples for greater harmony and cooperation, and makes her own contribution: that of the Gospel.

She hopes that in Latin American nations where constitutional Charters are limited to "granting" freedom of belief and worship but do not yet "recognize" religious freedom, reciprocal relations based on principles of autonomy and a healthy and respectful collaboration can be worked out as soon as possible.

This will enable Ecclesial Communities to develop their full potential for the benefit of society and of every individual human person, created in the image of God. A correct juridical formulation of these relations cannot but take into account the historical, spiritual, cultural and social role played by the Catholic Church in Latin America.

This role continues to be paramount, partly thanks to the fortunate blending of the old and rich sensitivity of the indigenous peoples with Christianity and the modern culture. Some sectors, as we know, point to the contrast between the wealth and depth of the pre-Colombian cultures and the Christian faith that is presented as imposed externally from outside or as alienating for the peoples of Latin America.

In fact, the encounter between these cultures and faith in Christ was a response inwardly expected by these cultures. This encounter, therefore, is not to be denied but deepened, and has created the true identity of the peoples of Latin America. Indeed, the Catholic Church is the institution which is the most respected by the Latin American population.

She is active in the life of the people, esteemed for the work she carries out in the sectors of education, health care and solidarity to the needy. Help for the poor and the fight against poverty are and remain a fundamental priority in the life of the Churches in Latin America. The Church also actively intervenes with her mediation, often requested on the occasion of internal conflicts.

Today, however, among other things, this consolidated presence must deal with the proselytism of sects and the growing influence of post-modern hedonistic secularism. If we are to find the right answers, we must think seriously about what makes the sects attractive. In the face of the challenges of this time in history, our communities are called to strengthen their adherence to Christ in order to witness to a mature and joyful faith, and - despite all the problems - the potential is truly enormous.

And the spiritual potential that Latin America has to draw on is truly enormous, where the mysteries of the faith are celebrated with fervent devotion and confidence in the future is

nourished by the increase in the number of vocations to the priestly and Religious life.

It is of course necessary to accompany the young on the path of their vocation with great care, and to help priests and men and women religious to persevere in their vocation. Furthermore, an immense missionary and evangelizing potential is offered by the young who account for more than two thirds of the population, whereas family "feeling [is] a primordial trait of your Latin American culture", as my venerable Predecessor John Paul II said at the meeting in Puebla, Mexico, in January 1979 (*Homily*, Palafoxiano Seminary, Puebla, 28 January 1979; *Puebla and Beyond*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, 1979, p. 78).

The family institution deserves priority attention; it is showing signs of breaking up under the pressure of lobbies that can have a negative effect on legislative processes. Divorce and *de facto* unions are on the rise, while adultery is viewed with unjustifiable tolerance.

It is necessary to reassert that marriage and the family are based on the deepest nucleus of the truth about man and his destiny; only on the rock of faithful and permanent conjugal love between a man and woman is it possible to build a community worthy of the human being.

I would like to highlight other religious and social topics on which you have been able to reflect. I shall limit myself to mentioning the phenomenon of migration, closely linked to the family; the importance of school education and attention to values and to the conscience, to train mature lay people who can make a high-quality contribution to social and civil life; the education of the young with an appropriate vocation policy to accompany in particular seminarians and aspirants to the consecrated life in their formation process; the commitment to informing public opinion properly about the great ethical issues in accordance with the principles of the Church's Magisterium and an effective presence in the area of the media, also in order to respond to the challenge of the sects.

Ecclesial movements certainly constitute a valid resource for the apostolate, but they should be helped to stay in line with the Gospel and the Church's teaching, also when they work in the social and political realms. In particular, I feel it is my duty to reassert that it is not the task of ecclesiastics to head social or political groups, but of mature lay people with a professional training.

Dear Brothers, in these days you have reflected and discussed together. Above all you have prayed together. Let us ask the Lord, through the intercession of Mary, to grant that the fruits of this meeting and of the upcoming General Conference of the Latin American Bishops benefit the entire Church.

I thank you again for your work. On returning to your countries, please convey my cordial sentiments to the Pastors and the Christian Communities, the Governments and the peoples. Please assure your collaborators, the women religious and all who cooperate in the smooth

functioning of the offices at your Nunciatures of the Pope's spiritual closeness. I cordially impart to one and all a special Apostolic Blessing.

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