

A lesson to the world



AS the Popemobile moved along Havana's wide avenues lined with enthusiastic people, chants of "You can feel it, you can feel it, the Pope is here with us," and "Juan Pablo, friend, Cuba is with you," could be heard.

From January 21 through 25, 1998, Cuba gave the world a lesson, one of many. One did not have to be religious to feel the intensity of the encounter between the Cuban people and the Supreme Pontiff.

Cuba's enemies wanted to celebrate. But the idea of an alleged Apocalypse presented by the foreign media ceded to the image of a people who listened with affection and respect to his message. Those five days did not change the history of Cuba, they enriched it.

Cardinal Roger Eychegaray, then president of the Justice and Peace Pontifical Commission, stated in an interview with Granma, "Rarely has a Papal visit aroused such universal interest and infused in his diverse interlocutors a responsibility so great that it commits all of one and everyone."

Pope John Paul II defined a central theme in each one of the four masses he gave. In Santa Clara he dedicated his sermon to the family; in Camagüey to youth, and in Santiago de Cuba to the homeland.

In the José Martí Plaza de la Revolución he devoted his reflections to the role of laypersons in the Church.

REENCOUNTER WITH FIDEL

They already knew each other. They had met in the Vatican on November 19, 1996. Thousands of journalists, camera crews, reporters for various foreign television and press networks, transmitted images of a Pope and a Communist leader which swept aside ill-intentioned commentaries and their alleged differences with the second shaking of hands.

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Fidel Castro received the Pope and bade him farewell at José Martí International Airport, and met with him privately in the Palace of the Revolution. He also accompanied John Paul II in the encounter with cultural figures and during the mass in Plaza de la Revolución.

"Fidel was the President who gave the best attention to Pope John Paul II," Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, current Vatican Secretary of State, affirmed years later in his book *Un cuore grande, Omaggio a Giovanni Paolo II*. "Fidel showed affection for the Pope, who was already ill, and John Paul II confided to me that possibly no head of state had so profoundly prepared for the visit of a Pontiff (...). Fidel had read the encyclicals and principal speeches of John Paul II and even some of his poems."

A LESSON TO THE WORLD

The Supreme Pontiff's visit to Cuba took place in the upheavals of the 1990s. The disappearance of socialism in Eastern Europe and the USSR had unleashed great euphoria within the U.S. government and among counterrevolutionary groups in Miami. It was predicted that the Cuban Revolution would collapse in a matter of days or weeks. Cuban exiles began to make political moves to organize a new government.

They themselves described John Paul II as a kind of exterminating angel of socialism, as a man whose visit would be prejudicial to the national social project.

With his usual clarity of vision, Fidel had observed that. "I see so many illusions being created in desperation, that the Pope's visit will be somewhat tragic for the Cuban Revolution, a fiery sword which is going to liquidate socialism and communism in Cuba (...). They do not know the Pope, they do not know him (...). They are underestimating his intelligence, underestimating his character, underestimating his thinking."

For that reason, as if in response to those deluding themselves, Fidel stated at the farewell to the Holy Father, "I think we have given a good example to the world: you, in visiting what certain people chose to call the last bastion of communism; we, in receiving the religious leader to whom they wanted to attribute the responsibility of having destroyed socialism in Europe. And there were those prophesying apocalyptic events. Some even dreamed of them."

Unfortunately for those dreamers, Cuba demonstrated to the world that, despite erroneous interpretations, socialism can be reconciled with religious faith. Fidel confirmed that upon receiving the Pope. "There will not be any country better prepared to understand your felicitous idea, as we understand it and which is so similar to what we preach, that equitable distribution of wealth and solidarity among human beings and peoples must be globalized."

AGAINST THE BLOCKADE

Fidel recalled the injustices being committed against the country. "Cuba, your Holiness, is currently standing up to the strongest power in history like a new David, a thousand times smaller, who in the same spirit of biblical times, is fighting to survive against a gigantic Goliath of the nuclear age who is trying to prevent our development by forcing us to surrender through sickness and hunger. If that story had not been written then, it would have had to have been written today. This monstrous crime cannot be ignored or excuses given for it."

For that reason, it was gratifying to hear the leader of the Catholic Church condemn the U.S. blockade of Cuba, describing it as "restrictive economic measures imposed from outside of the country, unjust and ethically unacceptable."

At the same time he criticized neoliberalism, then in its apogee. "Economically unsustainable programs are being imposed on nations, as a condition of receiving more aid and the exaggerated enrichment of a few at the cost of the impoverishment of many can be confirmed."

MESSAGES OF ENCOURAGEMENT AND GRATITUDE

"Dear Cubans, upon leaving this beloved land, I am taking with me a lasting impression of these days and great confidence in the future of your homeland," John Paul II affirmed in his farewell address.

"I have experienced full and moving events with the people of God, on a pilgrimage through the beautiful land of Cuba, which has left a profound impression on me. I will take with me the memory of the faces of so many people whom I have met during the last few days. I am grateful for your cordial hospitality, a genuine expression of the Cuban soul."

His words were in response to all the affection shown him by the Cuban population. Everyone – believers and non-believers – gave the Pope a massive demonstration of hospitality and respect.

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