

**EVANGELIZATION
FOR A NEW CARIBBEAN
Pastoral Letter of the**

Antilles Episcopal Conference on

The Observance of the Quincentenary, To the faithful of Christ's Church in the Caribbean:

We, the Bishops of the Antilles Episcopal Conference, greet you warmly in the Most Holy Name of the Blessed Trinity in whom we have been baptized. To you and all people of goodwill we wish God's peace and joy.

1. Preface

2.1. The Good News of God's unconditional love for us has been revealed in and through his only begotten Son, once dead and now risen. As he was about to ascend to the Father, Jesus commissioned his disciples to proclaim that same Good News to succeeding generations:

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Mt 28: 18 - 20).

Our observance of the Quincentenary is about the handing on of that same apostolic faith as directed by Jesus.

2.2. Notwithstanding that sublime reason, some burning issues are still on the minds of many of our people in the Caribbean regarding any sort of observance of the five hundred years of Christianity in the region. Conscious of those issues, we, the Catholic bishops of the Region, wish to reflect with you on the lights and shadows of our salvation history from 1492.

2.3. The history and ethnic composition of our Region were drastically altered with the arrival of Christopher Columbus who was the medium through which two Worlds encountered each other.

2. Discovery or Encounter?

3.1. To Europeans who were ignorant of the existence of this "New World" which was already, in many places, well advanced in agriculture, technology and other expressions of culture, e.g. Aztec, Mayan and Incan monuments and artefacts, the 1492 event was a "discovery". To the indigenous peoples of the Americas the 1492 affair was anything but a discovery. It was as much an unwanted intrusion as it was an encounter of two worlds and several cultures, bringing death to many and destruction to age-long traditions.

3.2. It is important to see the Quincentenary in its historical context. The year 1492 saw the beginning of a change of status both for the Americas and for Europe. Europe prospered handsomely. Spain imported large quantities of gold, though not a little of this was captured by English buccaneers. In addition European countries made enormous profits from the slave trade and from sugar, cotton and tobacco. Not so the many slaves in the New World among whom, even for those who had survived the "Middle Passage", the death rate was extremely high. Sugar, brought by the invaders, grew well in the

Caribbean and in Brazil, but at the cost of extreme human misery, loss of land, damage to the environment, and, most of all, countless deaths.

3. The Most Bitter Harvest: Sugar and Slavery

4.1. The production of sugarcane was a strenuous task that weakened the Amerindian people, who were decimated by a combination of hard labour, cruelty, and diseases (e.g. smallpox) brought by the colonizers. To fill the manpower shortage resulting from this appalling decimation of a people, the colonizers from Spain, Portugal, France, England and Holland imported Africans as slaves.

4.2. Horrendous was the "Middle Passage" experienced by more than ten million (10,000,000) Africans who were uprooted, often sold by their own race, and bought by Europeans. Many slave owners and other Europeans questioned whether Africans had souls. These men and women of colour were treated as chattel or as studs for the maintenance of the plantation system. Eminent Latin American author Eduardo Galeano has this to say about sugar and slavery, a most bitter harvest:

"The sugar of tropical Latin America gave powerful impetus to the accumulation of capital for English, French, Dutch and U.S. industrial development, while at the same time mutilating the economy of Northeast Brazil and the Caribbean islands and consummating the historic ruin of Africa. The fulcrum of the triangular trade -manufactures, slaves, sugar - between Europe, Africa, and America was the traffic in slaves for sugar plantations. As Auguste Cochin wrote: 'The story of a grain of sugar is a whole lesson in political economy, in politics, and also in morality.'

Such incredibly dehumanizing developments definitely comprised the very dark "shadows" of the realities of 1492 and later centuries, and must be categorically condemned.

4.3. The East Indians, Indonesians and others were brought over later as indentured servants, but indentureship was just another form of slavery. Both slavery and indentureship were dehumanizing; the difference was only one of degree. These people were used to perpetuate the insatiable appetite of colonial masters who greedily engaged in the triangular trade (Caribbean - Europe - Africa) in which money and material wealth outweighed the value of people.

4.4. Eric Williams comments on how capital/wealth was valued over people:

"Negro slavery and the Negro slave trade fitted beautifully into the economic theory of the age ... The triangular trade provided a market in West Africa and the West Indies for metropolitan products, thereby increasing metropolitan exports and contributing to full employment at home. The purchase of the slaves on the coast of West Africa and their maintenance in the West Indies gave an enormous stimulus to metropolitan industry and agriculture." 2

4. Violation of the Human Person: Then and Now

5.1. We, as shepherds of the faithful in the Caribbean, wish to recall that in our 1975 joint Pastoral Letter, entitled *Justice and Peace in a New Caribbean*, reference was made to these "shadows" of yesteryear. We mentioned then, and we reiterate now, the need of repentance and reconciliation for our past and present insensitivity and cruelty to each

other.

- 5.2.** Then, we deplored the violation of the human person and we do so again in this Pastoral Letter. Such violation is unacceptable, whether it be on the sugar plantations of the past or in factories or business places of today, whether it be in public offices or in abortion clinics. We must admit that some early missionaries who accompanied the colonizers (Spanish, Portuguese, English, Dutch, Danish and French; Catholic and Protestant) were conditioned by the mentality of the time, and sided wittingly and unwittingly with the establishment. This we recalled in *Justice and Peace in a New Caribbean*:

"In the colonial past the Church sometimes acted as if it were a part of the establishment, condoning either openly or by its silence, the existing order." ³

5. Missionaries: Strengths and Weaknesses

- 6.1.** Clearly the response of the early missionaries to slavery and to the subhuman conditions that slavery brought about reflected more the thinking of the predominant social thought than the radical demands of the Gospel which are reflected in the

Church's official teaching. As early as June 2, 1537, Pope Paul III denounced those who held that

"the inhabitants of the West Indies and the Southern continents should be treated like irrational animals and used exclusively for our profit and our service... We hereby decide and declare that the said Indians, as well as any other peoples which Christianity will come to know in the future, must not be deprived of their freedom and their possessions, regardless of contrary allegations, even if they are not Christians." ⁴

Later Pope Urban VIII (1623 - 1644) went so far as to excommunicate those who kept Indians as slaves.

- 6.2.** In spite of this, the close dependency of the clergy of the New World on the patronage system meant that the Church was not always free to take the necessary pastoral decisions. In places where missionaries were closely dependent on political powers it was more difficult for them to curb the colonists' attempt to dominate. At times, some missionaries even encouraged attempts to dominate on the basis of false interpretations of the Gospel. But the Gospel of Christ sees each human as made in the image and likeness of God. As a result a human being can never be reduced to a mere object. This is the teaching of the Catholic Church which must be put into practice by the faithful of every generation.
- 6.3.** Many of the early missionaries did accept the radical call of the Gospel. We can cite, for example, Bartolome de las Casas who championed the cause of the Indians, and St Peter Claver who cared for the dehumanized African slaves. Fr. Raymond Breton was the first missionary to come to Dominica (1646 - 1651). He spent long periods of time among the Caribs, befriended them, and studied their language and their culture. As a result Fr Breton was able to publish a Dictionary and a Grammar of the Carib language, and a Catechism in that same language. Fr. Petrus Donders, a Dutch priest, beatified in 1982, laboured among the oppressed in Suriname from 1847 to 1887. The two Mexican priests, Miguel Hidalgo, "Father of the Revolution", and Josh Maria Morelos, who were trained by the early missionaries, are still enshrined in Mexican monuments as two of the great advocates of oppressed indigenous people, and pillars of their march towards

independence from a foreign force.

- 6.4. It should also be pointed out that Christianity was introduced into the Caribbean Region, not only by Catholic missionaries, but also by Protestant ministers who were products of the time. Those early Protestant missionaries also ministered to the slaves and taught them to read and write and to acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord. Catholicism, which now accounts for a little over two million out of a total population of seven million people, was prohibited or subject to penal laws in some of our territories for many years, so that Catholicism could not be practised freely until after the abolition of slavery. As a consequence it was only in the nineteenth century that missionaries were able to give the Catholic Church a solid foundation in those territories.
- 6.5. Such missionaries, Catholics and Protestants alike, constitute "lights" shining through the darkness of 1492 and beyond! Such bearers of the Christian faith are often ignored by many of those who glibly say, "There is nothing good to celebrate for these five hundred years of the coming of Christianity and the early missionaries!" Moreover, in the context of "lights shining in the darkness", credit must also be given to the values - moral, social and religious - which the African slaves and indentured East Indians and Indonesians brought with them and which sustained them throughout their trying ordeal.

6. **Celebration of Jesus Christ, Lord of History**

- 7.1. Born out of the struggles of 1492 and after, we celebrate the resilience of our people. The Caribbean people have transcended several centuries of cruelty and inhumanity through the God-inspired determination of the human spirit and the unquenchable hope of a new tomorrow. We have only to cite the situation in Antigua, as recorded in *Seeds of Change: Five Hundred Years since Columbus*:

"The slaves' struggle to cope with slavery, to overcome adversity, to survive, and to make slavery work for them rather than against them was obviously complicated. While they certainly hoped for emancipation some day, in the meantime they had to live, and they exploited every possibility that slavery offered to ease their burden... In spite of the harsh realities of life under slavery, the Antigua slaves, like their counterparts elsewhere in the Americas, found ways to determine the paths their lives might take." 5
- 7.2. This determination was present from the very inception of the slave trade and expressed itself in revolts:

"If the Spanish slave code gave academic recognition to the fact that slavery is contrary to reason and naturally abhorrent to man, the slaves, on the slave ships themselves and immediately on their arrival in the Caribbean, fought unceasingly for their freedom".6
- 7.3. Surely this resilience, love for freedom and self-determination -all of which are divine gifts - are values enough to celebrate!
- 7.4. As bishops of the Catholic Church in the Region, we wish to underscore these values. We exhort our people to emulate our fore-parents in the struggles in which we find ourselves today in several of our territories. Too often we get bogged down with the pre-occupation of resisting oppressive systems and corrupt governments. As a result negativity and despair invade our very minds and replace Christian hope, fortitude and self-determination which are characteristic of God's evangelizers, which we are called to be.

7.5. It is precisely on this theme, "Evangelization", that we, the Church in the Caribbean, wish to focus as cause for observing five hundred years of Christianity in our hemisphere. The Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, reflected our own thoughts thus:

"Evangelization is what the Church is preparing to celebrate; the arrival and proclamation of the faith and the message of Jesus, the planting and development of the Church, splendid and permanent realities which cannot be denied or underestimated. It also intends to celebrate these events in the deepest theological sense: It is a celebration of Jesus Christ, Lord of history, `the first and greatest Evangelizer in that he himself is the Gospel of God.'" 7

7.6. Mindful of the very dark "shadows" (cultural oppression, disrespect for native ways and traditions, and genocide) which accompanied the first proclamation of the Gospel in the Caribbean and in Latin America, the Pope went on to describe the type of celebration that should take place:

"For these reasons, the Church intends to celebrate the fifth centenary without triumphalism, but consciously aware that the calling to the light of faith of so many millions of men and women, who invoke his (Jesus') name and are saved in him, is a sublime grace from the Lord ... The figure and mission of the Saviour will certainly be the centre of the conference in Santo Domingo ... Christology will be, then, the backdrop to the Assembly." g

7. The Church faces a New World requiring a New Response

8.1. Not only will the centrality of Christ be the backdrop to the Assembly in Santo Domingo marking 500 years of the Church's existence, but a new world scene will attract the attention of the Holy Father and the bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean. What are the issues of this new world scene? The quest of the individual for his or her roots results in an identity crisis which has its origin in history. In addition, there are substance abuse and AIDS. Then also we have family life concerns such as sexual permissiveness, loss of the sanctity of life and sex, unwholesome male-female relationships and irresponsible parenthood. Of deep concern to nations are issues such as crippling international debts, violence, social injustice and corruption. Also there are crises in credibility among some of our political and religious leaders, mesmerizing materialism and cloying consumerism, increasing poverty and a widening gap between rich and poor, cultural domination through the mass media and unequal distribution of the riches of creation. These are certainly some of the actual settings within which the Church must make Christ present once again in a more effective and relevant way.

8.2. Needless to say, all these elements of our present world scene dull our minds and hearts to the demands of faith. The message of Jesus, the Evangelizer, must speak to us today, who, even though caught in the web of sheer secularism, are unwittingly searching for God who alone satisfies every longing and desire.

8. Message of Salvation and Hope

9.1. To satisfy this longing, God sent his Son, born of the Virgin Mary, to identify with us in all things, except sin, in order to save us and bring us back to the Father. As the ultimate revelation of the Father, Jesus is "the Way, the Truth, and the Life" (John 14:6). And above all, this same Jesus is the ultimate expression of the Father's love, a love appealing

to the human heart to leave sin behind in order to become one with the Divine. This was the first Pentecost message preached by Peter and the Apostles. This same message of salvation and hope has re-echoed down the corridors of 2,000 years. This is the same message, ever new and rich in possibilities for new life, that we, the Bishops of the Antilles Episcopal Conference, in solidarity with the Holy Father, wish to pass on to you, the faithful and people of good will, during the observance of the Quincentenary.

- 9.2. To this end, the Holy Father has designated "*New Evangelization, Human Promotion, and Christian Culture*" as the central theme of the Fourth General Conference of the Episcopal Council of Latin America (CELAM) in Santo Domingo, 12-28 October 1992. Connected to the theme is the motto: "*Jesus Christ, Yesterday, Today, and Forever*" (*Heb* 13:8). During those two weeks, bishops representing all the Episcopal Conferences of Latin America and the Caribbean, will pray and discuss together how best to apply the "ever ancient, ever new" message of salvation and hope to people of a new society and culture.

9. New Evangelization

- 10.1. "New Evangelization" demands new fervour among Catholic Christians and new expressions and methods in handing on the Good News to others. It should challenge the growth of secularism among Christians; champion the sacredness of life in a Region where the culture of death is becoming prominent. New evangelization should demand of Jesus' followers a commitment to apply Gospel principles to their life situation. The Good News should result in a transformation of the society in which we live, and in a renewal of structures which still dehumanize certain ethnic groups.
- 10.2. This "New Evangelization" with its consequent transformation of society, calls for and demands new forms of pastoral action, new strategies and approaches to ministry, an attitude of invitation and mission, as well as creativity and innovation.

10. Human Promotion

- 11.1. "Human Promotion" naturally deals with truly human values, bearing in mind that all human persons are made in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26). The Bishops at the Puebla Conference (1979) put it clearly:

"Every attack on human dignity is simultaneously an attack on God himself of whom man is the image."⁹

We ourselves expressed our concern in the joint 1982 Pastoral Letter:

"Denial or neglect of the dignity and rights of individual men and women lies at the root of many of our problems today. The rights of women, in particular, are often set aside. But there is another problem too, the tragedy that so many fail not only to recognize the human dignity of others, but also to appreciate sufficiently their own worth."¹⁰

- 11.2. The attack on human dignity is usually against minorities. Conscious of this, the Holy Father indicates the objective of "Human Promotion":

"Human development makes present the world of the poor, above all those most in need: the indigenous peoples, the Afro-Americans, the marginalized of the large cities and of the villages..."

- 11.3.** This injunction is real today when we consider how greedy people, in the name of "modern progress", rape the ecology. A few examples of this are the Amazon River Delta, Jamaica's "caustic lakes" resulting from bauxite mining, and, in the other Caribbean territories, the destruction of valuable marshland in favour of the construction of yet another questionably-needed hotel for tourists. Most of all, this consideration of human promotion addresses the plight of poor labourers imported to work for starvation wages and to live in subhuman conditions in order to line the pockets of the elite. Typical examples of this are poorly paid and disgracefully housed Haitian "braceros" and illegal immigrants in some of our Caribbean territories who, because of their status, are obliged to accept slave wages and poor conditions of employment. This we categorically deplore and condemn. Human promotion demands integral human development whereby the well-being of the total person is addressed.

11. Christian Culture

- 12.1.** "Christian Culture" has as its end a "civilization of love" or a culture of solidarity. To achieve that objective, evangelization has to be properly focused on "the culture and the cultures of man in the rich and full sense which these terms have in *Gaudium et Spes* (Vatican 11 Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World), always taking as its starting point the human person and always bearing in mind the inter-relationship between persons and with God." *12*
- 12.2.** The inculturation of the Gospel is, therefore, crucial to any realization of a "New Evangelization". Otherwise the Gospel message barely scratches the surface. Consequently, we have a veneer of Christianity enveloping a good, glorified pagan or an uncritical political creature. Sad to say, this is the case for very many church-goers worldwide, including our own Region. The Gospel was proclaimed in a medium foreign to local culture. As a result there is a dichotomy between religious worship and the political or social reality. Religion, therefore, becomes something merely social or decorative and not applicable to real life. For that reason, the Antilles Episcopal Conference is embarking on an in-depth study of the interrelation of religion and culture.
- 12.3.** In his Encyclical Letter, *Redemptoris Missio* [The Mission of the Redeemer], Pope John Paul II comments:
"As she carries out missionary activity among the nations, the Church finds herself faced with different cultures and she becomes involved in the process of inculturation." *13*
- 12.4.** A very important and effective expression of inculturation for the Americas is the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Here, the Holy Mother of God appeared as an indigenous maiden of Mexico. No wonder the Catholic faith has taken root in that country, notwithstanding the religious persecutions that took place there.

12. Exhortation to Priests and People

- 13.1.** We encourage pastors and pastoral workers in the Region to bring to the attention of the faithful the need to observe the Quincentenary in the spirit we have outlined above. The observance must be a time to contemplate the changes that took place in the encounter of the two worlds: biological, psychological, spiritual and ecological. It also must be a time of repentance and reconciliation for the atrocities that accompanied that encounter; this repentance embraces the concept of a Church always needing to reform - yesterday,

today, and forever- because of the sinfulness of human persons in society and in the Church. The reconciliation that is needed involves forgiveness as well as repentance, the healing of memories of the pain endured, of the pain inflicted, by one's ancestors and by the ancestors of one's neighbours. Such reconciliation means that awareness of the past is not permitted to cripple one's self-esteem nor to inhibit people living together in the present and in the future. To this end the Church needs to discern where the people of today are wounded and the areas in which colour and race continue to be divisive. The Church then needs to evolve strategies of healing and liturgies of reconciliation over one's history and its consequences.

- 13.2.** Likewise for Christians who acknowledge God as the Lord of history, it is a time to reflect upon the resilience of peoples oppressed - not only yesterday, but also today even in our Region - so that hope can be enkindled in the heart of all, in spite of the odds that must be faced. Too often we forget that God is continuously revealed in historical and political events. We re-commit ourselves to proclaiming God's presence and action in these events, as well as to working for justice and the promotion of the total well-being of each person in our Region.
- 13.3.** Further, we wish to invite each of you to embrace this opportunity of the observance of the Quincentenary to make our Catholic faith come more alive in the Caribbean. We all need to be reminded continuously that the Church is missionary. As such, we cannot stand still, neither bishop, priest, deacon, Religious or lay person.
- 13.4.** The Christ-centred person in a new Caribbean is looking for new responses. Hence, a "New Evangelization" is needed in response to a religious indifference championed by materialism. "Human Promotion" answers the challenge of life being considered cheap due to a secularism which denies the centrality of Jesus Christ and that the human person is made in his image. "Christian Culture", symbolizing the insertion of the Gospel in our cultures, must continuously challenge a civilization of death characterized by individualism, negativism and isolationism.

13. The Church Must be Missionary

- 14.1.** 14.1 Let us, as a Church which is missionary, with its Caribbean roots in 1492, both claim and redeem our past. Merely to claim our past will result in an incapacity to act and to transcend. On the other hand, to redeem the past through repentance and reconciliation liberates us for growth-producing missionary action.
- 14.2.** 14.2 Let us also claim the present as a challenge from God. Not to do so is tantamount to a denial that God is with us always (cf. Mt. 28:20). Let us step out with deep faith into the future. We know that God is calling us to usher in the Kingdom through holiness of life and a commitment to transform the world. This transformation comes through loving service to our brothers and sisters, especially the poor, abandoned elderly, the disadvantaged, the rudder-less confused adolescents/youth, and the marginalized (cf. Mt. 25).
- 14.3.** 14.3 With generosity of spirit, acceptance of our sinfulness and total reliance on God's Holy Spirit, we can and should become people of the beatitudes, sowing the seeds of justice, peace and unity. Remember, "It is all God's work" (2 Cor. 5:18). We are but partners in this task, and with God all things are possible. Was that not Mary's attitude?

She who, at the marriage feast at Cana, faced with an impossible predicament, could say to others: "Do whatever he tells you!" (John 2:5).

- 14.4.** 14.4 It is with this effective Marian faith that we Catholics use this occasion of the Quincentenary to dedicate ourselves anew as a truly indigenous and missionary Church in the Caribbean. Let our loins be girded for action. Let us be imbued with the Holy Spirit whose temple we are, so that we become more his instrument for the realization of the Kingdom which is one of "justice, peace and joy". (Rom 14: 17)

"May Christ Jesus our Lord who has loved us,
may God our Father, who in his mercy
gives us everlasting comfort and true hope,
strengthen you.
May he encourage your hearts
and make you steadfast in every good work and word."
(11 Thess 2: 16 17)
Feast of St. Matthias,

May 14, 1992,

Nassau, The Bahamas

FOOTNOTES

1. Eduardo Galeano, *Open Veins of Latin America*, New York: Monthly Review, 1973, p. 91
2. Eric Williams, *From Columbus to Castro: The History of the Caribbean 1492 -1969*, London: Andre Deutsch Ltd., 1970, pp. 140 - 141
3. Antilles Episcopal Conference, *Justice & Peace in a New Caribbean* (1975), Par. 13
4. Pope Paul III, *Sublimis Deus*, 2 June 1537
5. H. & M. Viola (Editors), *Seeds of Change: Five Hundred Years since Columbus*, Washington, D.C., Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991, pp. 134, 137]
6. Eric Williams, *From Columbus to Castro: the History of the Caribbean 1492 -1969*, p. 65
7. Pope John Paul II, Address to the Pontifical Commission for Latin America, 14 June 1991.
8. *Ibidem*
9. John Eagleston & Philip Scharper (editors), *Puebla and Beyond*, New York: Orbis Books, 1979, Par. 306.
10. Antilles Episcopal Conference, *True Freedom and Development in the Caribbean: A Christian Perspective*, 1982
11. Address to the Pontifical Commission for Latin America, 14 June 1991.
12. Pope Paul VI, *Evangelization in the Modern World*, Rome, 1975, Par. 20
13. Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, The Mission of the Redeemer, Rome, 1990, par. 52.

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4. Pope John Paul II, Address to the Pontifical Commission for Latin America, Rome (1991).
5. Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, Rome, 1990
6. Pope Paul VI, *Evangelization in the Modern World*, Rome, 1975
7. *Seeds of Change*, Edited by Viola, Herman & Margolis, Carolyn, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington., D.C. & London (1991).
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10. CELAM, *Documento de Consulta*, Bogota, Colombia, 1991.