

Conference of the Holy Father at the Opening of the V General Assembly of CELAM

*Dear Brother Bishops, beloved priests, religious men and women and laypeople,
Dear observers from other religious confessions:*

It gives me great joy to be here today with you to inaugurate the Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean, which is being held close to the Shrine of Our Lady of Aparecida, Patroness of Brazil. I would like to begin with words of thanksgiving and praise to God for the great gift of the Christian faith to the peoples of this Continent.

1. The Christian faith in Latin America

Faith in God has animated the life and culture of these nations for more than five centuries. From the encounter between that faith and the indigenous peoples, there has emerged the rich Christian culture of this Continent, expressed in art, music, literature, and above all, in the religious traditions and in the peoples' whole way of being, united as they are by a shared history and a shared creed that give rise to a great underlying harmony, despite the diversity of cultures and languages. At present, this same faith has some serious challenges to address, because the harmonious development of society and the Catholic identity of these peoples are in jeopardy. In this regard, the Fifth General Conference is preparing to reflect upon this situation, in order to help the Christian faithful to live their faith with joy and coherence, to deepen their awareness of being disciples and missionaries of Christ, sent by him into the world to proclaim and to bear witness to our faith and love.



Yet what did the acceptance of the Christian faith mean for the nations of Latin America and the Caribbean? For them, it meant knowing and welcoming Christ, the unknown God whom their ancestors were seeking, without realizing it, in their rich religious traditions. Christ is the Saviour for whom they were silently longing. It also meant that they received, in the waters of Baptism, the divine life that made them children of God by adoption; moreover, they received the Holy Spirit who came to make their cultures fruitful, purifying them and developing the numerous seeds that the incarnate Word had planted in them, thereby guiding them along the paths of the Gospel. In effect, the proclamation of Jesus and of his Gospel did not at any point involve an alienation of the pre-Columbus cultures, nor was it the imposition of a foreign culture. Authentic cultures are not closed in upon themselves, nor are they set in stone at a particular point in history, but they are open, or better still, they are seeking an encounter with other cultures, hoping to reach universality through encounter and dialogue with other ways of life and with elements that can lead to a new synthesis, in which the diversity of expressions is always respected as well as the diversity of their particular cultural embodiment.

Ultimately, it is only the truth that can bring unity, and the proof of this is love. That is why Christ, being in truth the incarnate *Logos*, “love to the end”, is not alien to any culture, nor to any person; on the contrary, the response that he seeks in the heart of cultures is what gives

them their ultimate identity, uniting humanity and at the same time respecting the wealth of diversity, opening people everywhere to growth in genuine humanity, in authentic progress. The Word of God, in becoming flesh in Jesus Christ, also became history and culture.

The Utopia of going back to breathe life into the pre-Columbus religions, separating them from Christ and from the universal Church, would not be a step forward: indeed, it would be a step back. In reality, it would be a retreat towards a stage in history anchored in the past.

The wisdom of the indigenous peoples fortunately led them to form a synthesis between their cultures and the Christian faith which the missionaries were offering them. Hence the rich and profound popular religiosity, in which we see the soul of the Latin American peoples:

- love for the suffering Christ, the God of compassion, pardon and reconciliation; the God who loved us to the point of handing himself over for us;
- love for the Lord present in the Eucharist, the incarnate God, dead and risen in order to be the bread of life;
- the God who is close to the poor and to those who suffer;
- the profound devotion to the most holy Virgin of Guadalupe, the *Aparecida*, the Virgin invoked under various national and local titles. When the Virgin of Guadalupe appeared to the native Indian Saint Juan Diego, she spoke these important words to him: “*Am I not your mother? Are you not under my shadow and my gaze? Am I not the source of your joy? Are you not sheltered underneath my mantle, under the embrace of my arms?*” (Nican Mopohua, nos. 118-119).

This religiosity is also expressed in devotion to the saints with their patronal feasts, in love for the Pope and the other Pastors, and in love for the universal Church as the great family of God, that neither can nor ever should leave her children alone or destitute. All this forms the great mosaic of popular piety which is the precious treasure of the Catholic Church in Latin America, and must be protected, promoted and, when necessary, purified.

2. Continuity with the other Conferences

This Fifth General Conference is being celebrated in continuity with the other four that preceded it: in Rio de Janeiro, Medellín, Puebla and Santo Domingo. With the same spirit that was at work there, the Bishops now wish to give a new impetus to evangelization, so that these peoples may continue to grow and mature in their faith in order to be the light of the world and witnesses to Jesus Christ with their own lives.



After the Fourth General Conference, in Santo Domingo, many changes took place in society. The Church which shares in the achievements and the hopes, the sufferings and the joys of her children, wishes to walk alongside them at this challenging time, so as to inspire them always with hope and comfort (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 1).

Today's world experiences the phenomenon of globalization as a network of relationships extending over the whole planet. Although from certain points of view this benefits the great family of humanity, and a sign of its profound aspiration towards unity, nevertheless it also undoubtedly brings with it the risk of vast monopolies and of treating profit as the supreme

value. As in all areas of human activity, globalization too must be led by ethics, placing everything at the service of the human person, created in the image and likeness of God.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as in other regions, there has been notable progress towards democracy, although there are grounds for concern in the face of authoritarian forms of government and regimes wedded to certain ideologies that we thought had been superseded, and which do not correspond to the Christian vision of man and society as taught by the Social Doctrine of the Church. On the other side of the coin, the liberal economy of some Latin American countries must take account of equity, because of the ever increasing sectors of society that find themselves oppressed by immense poverty or even despoiled of their own natural resources.

In the ecclesial communities of Latin America there is a notable degree of maturity in faith among the many active lay men and women devoted to the Lord, and there are also many generous catechists, many young people, new ecclesial movements and recently established Institutes of consecrated life. Many Catholic educational, charitable or housing initiatives have proved essential. Yet it is true that one can detect a certain weakening of Christian life in society overall and of participation in the life of the Catholic Church, due to secularism, hedonism, indifferentism and proselytism by numerous sects, animist religions and new pseudo-religious phenomena.

All of this constitutes a new situation which will be analyzed here at Aparecida. Faced with new and difficult choices, the faithful are looking to this Fifth Conference for renewal and revitalization of their faith in Christ, our one Teacher and Saviour, who has revealed to us the unique experience of the infinite love of God the Father for mankind. From this source, new paths and creative pastoral plans will be able to emerge, capable of instilling a firm hope for living out the faith joyfully and responsibly, and thus spreading it in one's own surroundings.

3. Disciples and Missionaries

This General Conference has as its theme: "Disciples and Missionaries of Jesus Christ, so that our peoples may have life in him – I am the Way, the Truth and the Life" (*Jn* 14:6).

The Church has the great task of guarding and nourishing the faith of the People of God, and reminding the faithful of this Continent that, by virtue of their Baptism, they are called to be disciples and missionaries of Jesus Christ. This implies following him, living in intimacy with him, imitating his example and bearing witness. Every baptized person receives from Christ, like the Apostles, the missionary mandate: "*Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptized, will be saved*" (*Mk* 16:15). To be disciples and missionaries of Jesus Christ and to seek life "in him" presupposes being deeply rooted in him.

What does Christ actually give us? Why do we want to be disciples of Christ? The answer is: because, in communion with him, we hope to find life, the true life that is worthy of the name, and thus we want to make him known to others, to communicate to them the gift that we have found in him. But is it really so? Are we really convinced that Christ is the way, the truth and the life?

In the face of the priority of faith in Christ and of life "in him", formulated in the title of this Fifth Conference, a further question could arise: could this priority not perhaps be a flight towards emotionalism, towards religious individualism, an abandonment of the urgent reality of the great economic, social and political problems of Latin America and the world, and a flight from reality towards a spiritual world?

As a first step, we can respond to this question with another: what is this “reality”? What is real? Are only material goods, social, economic and political problems “reality”? This was precisely the great error of the dominant tendencies of the last century, a most destructive error, as we can see from the results of both Marxist and capitalist systems. They falsify the notion of reality by detaching it from the foundational and decisive reality which is God. Anyone who excludes God from his horizons falsifies the notion of “reality” and, in consequence, can only end up in blind alleys or with recipes for destruction.

The first basic point to affirm, then, is the following: only those who recognize God know reality and are able to respond to it adequately and in a truly human manner. The truth of this thesis becomes evident in the face of the collapse of all the systems that marginalize God.

Yet here a further question immediately arises: who knows God? How can we know him? We cannot enter here into a complex discussion of this fundamental issue. For a Christian, the nucleus of the reply is simple: only God knows God, only his Son who is God from God, true God, knows him. And he “who is nearest to the Father’s heart has made him known” (*Jn* 1:18). Hence the unique and irreplaceable importance of Christ for us, for humanity. If we do not know God in and with Christ, all of reality is transformed into an indecipherable enigma; there is no way, and without a way, there is neither life nor truth.

God is the foundational reality, not a God who is merely imagined or hypothetical, but God with a human face; he is God-with-us, the God who loves even to the Cross. When the disciple arrives at an understanding of this love of Christ “to the end”, he cannot fail to respond to this love with a similar love: “I will follow you wherever you go” (*Lk* 9:57).

We can ask ourselves a further question: what does faith in this God give us? The first response is: it gives us a family, the universal family of God in the Catholic Church. Faith releases us from the isolation of the “I”, because it leads us to communion: the encounter with God is, in itself and as such, an encounter with our brothers and sisters, an act of convocation, of unification, of responsibility towards the other and towards others. In this sense, the preferential option for the poor is implicit in the Christological faith in the God who became poor for us, so as to enrich us with his poverty (cf. *2 Cor* 8:9).

Yet before we consider what is entailed by the realism of our faith in the God who became man, we must explore the question more deeply: how can we truly know Christ so as to be able to follow him and live with him, so as to find life in him and to communicate that life to others, to society and to the world? First and foremost, Christ makes his person, his life and his teaching known to us through the word of God. At the beginning of this new phase that the missionary Church of Latin America and the Caribbean is preparing to enter, starting with this Fifth General Conference in Aparecida, an indispensable pre-condition is profound knowledge of the word of God.

To achieve this, we must train people to read and meditate on the word of God: this must become their staple diet, so that, through their own experience, the faithful will see that the words of Jesus are spirit and life (cf. *Jn* 6:63). Otherwise, how could they proclaim a message whose content and spirit they do not know thoroughly? We must build our missionary commitment and the whole of our lives on the rock of the word of God. For this reason, I encourage the Bishops to strive to make it known.

An important way of introducing the People of God to the mystery of Christ is through *catechesis*. Here, the message of Christ is transmitted in a simple and substantial form. It is

therefore necessary to intensify the catechesis and the faith formation not only of children but also of young people and adults. Mature reflection on faith is a light for the path of life and a source of strength for witnessing to Christ. Most valuable tools with which to achieve this are the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and its abridged version, the *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

In this area, we must not limit ourselves solely to homilies, lectures, Bible courses or theology courses, but we must have recourse also to the communications media: press, radio and television, websites, forums and many other methods for effectively communicating the message of Christ to a large number of people.

In this effort to come to know the message of Christ and to make it a guide for our own lives, we must remember that evangelization has always developed alongside the promotion of the human person and authentic Christian liberation. “Love of God and love of neighbour have become one; in the least of the brethren we find Jesus himself, and in Jesus we find God” (Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est*, 15). For the same reason, there will also need to be social catechesis and a sufficient formation in the social teaching of the Church, for which a very useful tool is the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. The Christian life is not expressed solely in personal virtues, but also in social and political virtues.

The disciple, founded in this way upon the rock of God’s word, feels driven to bring the Good News of salvation to his brothers and sisters. *Discipleship and mission* are like the two sides of a single coin: when the disciple is in love with Christ, he cannot stop proclaiming to the world that only in him do we find salvation (cf. *Acts* 4:12). In effect, the disciple knows that without Christ there is no light, no hope, no love, no future.

4. “So that in him they may have life”

The peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean have the right to a full life, proper to the children of God, under conditions that are more human: free from the threat of hunger and from every form of violence. For these peoples, their Bishops must promote a culture of life which can permit, in the words of my predecessor Paul VI, “the passage from misery towards the possession of necessities ... the acquisition of culture ... cooperation for the common good ... the acknowledgement by man of supreme values, and of God, their source and their finality” (*Populorum Progressio*, 21).

In this context I am pleased to recall the Encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, the fortieth anniversary of which we celebrate this year. This Papal document emphasizes that authentic development must be integral, that is, directed to the promotion of the whole person and of all people (cf. no. 14), and it invites all to overcome grave social inequalities and the enormous differences in access to goods. These peoples are yearning, above all, for the fullness of life that Christ brought us: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (*Jn* 10:10). With this divine life, human existence is likewise developed to the full, in its personal, family, social and cultural dimensions.

In order to form the disciple and sustain the missionary in his great task, the Church offers him, in addition to the bread of the word, the bread of the Eucharist. In this regard, we find inspiration and illumination in the passage from the Gospel about the disciples on the road to Emmaus. When they sit at table and receive from Jesus Christ the bread that has been blessed and broken, their eyes are opened and they discover the face of the Risen Lord, they feel in their hearts that everything he said and did was the truth, and that the redemption of the world has already begun to unfold. Every Sunday and every Eucharist is a personal encounter with

Christ. Listening to God's word, our hearts burn because it is he who is explaining and proclaiming it. When we break the bread at the Eucharist, it is he whom we receive personally. The Eucharist is indispensable nourishment for the life of the disciple and missionary of Christ.

Sunday Mass, Centre of Christian life

Hence the need to give priority in pastoral programmes to appreciation of the importance of Sunday Mass. We must motivate Christians to take an active part in it, and if possible, to bring their families, which is even better. The participation of parents with their children at Sunday Mass is an effective way of teaching the faith and it is a close bond that maintains their unity with one another. Sunday, throughout the Church's life, has been the privileged moment of the community's encounter with the risen Lord.

Christians should be aware that they are not following a character from past history, but the living Christ, present in the *today* and the *now* of their lives. He is the living one who walks alongside us, revealing to us the meaning of events, of suffering and death, of rejoicing and feasting, entering our homes and remaining there, feeding us with the bread that gives life. For this reason Sunday Mass must be the centre of Christian life.

The encounter with Christ in the Eucharist calls forth a commitment to evangelization and an impulse towards solidarity; it awakens in the Christian a strong desire to proclaim the Gospel and to bear witness to it in the world so as to build a more just and humane society. From the Eucharist, in the course of the centuries, an immense wealth of charity has sprung forth, of sharing in the difficulties of others, of love and of justice. Only from the Eucharist will the civilization of love spring forth which will transform Latin America and the Caribbean, making them not only the Continent of Hope, but also the Continent of Love!

Social and Political problems

Having arrived at this point, we can ask ourselves a question: how can the Church contribute to the solution of urgent social and political problems, and respond to the great challenge of poverty and destitution? The problems of Latin America and the Caribbean, like those of today's world, are multifaceted and complex, and they cannot be dealt with through generic programmes. Undoubtedly, the fundamental question about the way that the Church, illuminated by faith in Christ, should react to these challenges, is one that concerns us all. In this context, we inevitably speak of the problem of structures, especially those which create injustice. In truth, just structures are a condition without which a just order in society is not possible. But how do they arise? How do they function? Both capitalism and Marxism promised to point out the path for the creation of just structures, and they declared that these, once established, would function by themselves; they declared that not only would they have no need of any prior individual morality, but that they would promote a communal morality. And this ideological promise has been proved false. The facts have clearly demonstrated it. The Marxist system, where it found its way into government, not only left a sad heritage of economic and ecological destruction, but also a painful destruction of the human spirit. And we can also see the same thing happening in the West, where the distance between rich and poor is growing constantly, and giving rise to a worrying degradation of personal dignity through drugs, alcohol and deceptive illusions of happiness.

Just structures are, as I have said, an indispensable condition for a just society, but they neither arise nor function without a moral consensus in society on fundamental values, and on

the need to live these values with the necessary sacrifices, even if this goes against personal interest.

Where God is absent—God with the human face of Jesus Christ—these values fail to show themselves with their full force, nor does a consensus arise concerning them. I do not mean that non-believers cannot live a lofty and exemplary morality; I am only saying that a society in which God is absent will not find the necessary consensus on moral values or the strength to live according to the model of these values, even when they are in conflict with private interests.

On the other hand, just structures must be sought and elaborated in the light of fundamental values, with the full engagement of political, economic and social reasoning. They are a question of *recta ratio* and they do not arise from ideologies nor from their premises. Certainly there exists a great wealth of political experience and expertise on social and economic problems that can highlight the fundamental elements of a just state and the paths that must be avoided. But in different cultural and political situations, amid constant developments in technology and changes in the historical reality of the world, adequate answers must be sought in a rational manner, and a consensus must be created—with the necessary commitments—on the structures that must be established.

This political task is not the immediate competence of the Church. Respect for a healthy secularity — including the pluralism of political opinions — is essential in the authentic Christian tradition. If the Church were to start transforming herself into a directly political subject, she would do less, not more, for the poor and for justice, because she would lose her independence and her moral authority, identifying herself with a single political path and with debatable partisan positions. The Church is the advocate of justice and of the poor, precisely because she does not identify with politicians nor with partisan interests. Only by remaining independent can she teach the great criteria and inalienable values, guide consciences and offer a life choice that goes beyond the political sphere. To form consciences, to be the advocate of justice and truth, to educate in individual and political virtues: that is the fundamental vocation of the Church in this area. And lay Catholics must be aware of their responsibilities in public life; they must be present in the formation of the necessary consensus and in opposition to injustice.

Just structures will never be complete in a definitive way. As history continues to evolve, they must be constantly renewed and updated; they must always be imbued with a political and humane *ethos* — and we have to work hard to ensure its presence and effectiveness. In other words, the presence of God, friendship with the incarnate Son of God, the light of his word: these are always fundamental conditions for the presence and efficacy of justice and love in our societies.

This being a Continent of baptized Christians, it is time to overcome the notable absence — in the political sphere, in the world of the media and in the universities — of the voices and initiatives of Catholic leaders with strong personalities and generous dedication, who are coherent in their ethical and religious convictions. The ecclesial movements have plenty of room here to remind the laity of their responsibility and their mission to bring the light of the Gospel into public life, into culture, economics and politics.

5. Other priority areas

In order to bring about this renewal of the Church that has been entrusted to your care in these lands, let me draw your attention to some areas that I consider priorities for this new phase.

The family

The family, the “patrimony of humanity”, constitutes one of the most important treasures of Latin American countries. The family was and is the school of faith, the training-ground for human and civil values, the hearth in which human life is born and is generously and responsibly welcomed. Undoubtedly, it is currently suffering a degree of adversity caused by secularism and by ethical relativism, by movements of population internally and externally, by poverty, by social instability and by civil legislation opposed to marriage which, by supporting contraception and abortion, is threatening the future of peoples.

In some families in Latin America there still unfortunately persists a chauvinist mentality that ignores the “newness” of Christianity, in which the equal dignity and responsibility of women relative to men is acknowledged and affirmed.

The family is irreplaceable for the personal serenity it provides and for the upbringing of children. Mothers who wish to dedicate themselves fully to bringing up their children and to the service of their family must enjoy conditions that make this possible, and for this they have the right to count on the support of the State. In effect, the role of the mother is fundamental for the future of society.

The father, for his part, has the duty to be a true father, fulfilling his indispensable responsibility and cooperating in bringing up the children. The children, for their integral growth, have a right to be able to count on their father and mother, who take care of them and accompany them on their way towards the fullness of life. Consequently there has to be intense and vigorous pastoral care of families. Moreover, it is indispensable to promote authentic family policies corresponding to the rights of the family as an essential subject in society. The family constitutes part of the good of peoples and of the whole of humanity.

Priests

The first promoters of discipleship and mission are those who have been called “to be with Jesus and to be sent out to preach” (cf. *Mk* 3:14), that is, *the priests*. They must receive preferential attention and paternal care from their Bishops, because they are the primary instigators of authentic renewal of Christian life among the People of God. I should like to offer them a word of paternal affection, hoping that “the Lord will be their portion and cup” (cf. *Ps* 16:5). If the priest has God as the foundation and centre of his life, he will experience the joy and the fruitfulness of his vocation. The priest must be above all a “man of God” (*I Tim* 6:11) who knows God directly, who has a profound personal friendship with Jesus, who shares with others the same sentiments that Christ has (cf. *Phil* 2:5). Only in this way will the priest be capable of leading men to God, incarnate in Jesus Christ, and of being the representative of his love. In order to accomplish his lofty task, the priest must have a solid spiritual formation, and the whole of his life must be imbued with faith, hope and charity. Like Jesus, he must be one who seeks, through prayer, the face and the will of God, and he must be attentive to his cultural and intellectual preparation.

Dear priests of this Continent, and those of you who have come here to work as missionaries, the Pope accompanies you in your pastoral work and wants you to be full of joy and hope; above all he prays for you.

Religious men and women and consecrated persons

I now want to address the religious men and women and consecrated members of the lay faithful. Latin American and Caribbean society needs your witness: in a world that so often gives priority to seeking well-being, wealth and pleasure as the goal of life, exalting freedom to the point where it takes the place of the truth of man created by God, you are witnesses that there is another meaningful way to live; remind your brothers and sisters that the Kingdom of God has already arrived; that justice and truth are possible if we open ourselves to the loving presence of God our Father, of Christ our brother and Lord, and of the Holy Spirit, our Comforter. With generosity and with heroism, you must continue working to ensure that society is ruled by love, justice, goodness, service and solidarity in conformity with the charism of your founders. With profound joy, embrace your consecration, which is an instrument of sanctification for you and of redemption for your brothers and sisters.

The Church in Latin America thanks you for the great work that you have accomplished over the centuries for the Gospel of Christ in favour of your brothers and sisters, especially the poorest and most deprived. I invite you always to work together with the Bishops and to work in unity with them, since they are the ones responsible for pastoral action. I exhort you also to sincere obedience towards the authority of the Church. Set yourselves no other goal than holiness, as you have learned from your founders.

The lay faithful

At this time when the Church of this Continent is committing herself whole-heartedly to her missionary vocation, I remind the lay faithful that they too are the Church, the assembly called together by Christ so as to bring his witness to the whole world. All baptized men and women must become aware that they have been configured to Christ, the Priest, Prophet and Shepherd, by means of the common priesthood of the People of God. They must consider themselves jointly responsible for building society according to the criteria of the Gospel, with enthusiasm and boldness, in communion with their Pastors.

There are many of you here who belong to ecclesial movements, in which we can see signs of the varied presence and sanctifying action of the Holy Spirit in the Church and in today's society. You are called to bring to the world the testimony of Jesus Christ, and to be a leaven of God's love among others.

Young people and pastoral care of vocations

In Latin America the majority of the population is made up of young people. In this regard, we must remind them that their vocation is to be Christ's friends, his disciples. Young people are not afraid of sacrifice, but of a meaningless life. They are sensitive to Christ's call inviting them to follow him. They can respond to that call as priests, as consecrated men and women, or as fathers and mothers of families, totally dedicated to serving their brothers and sisters with all their time and capacity for dedication: with their whole lives. Young people must treat life as a continual discovery, never allowing themselves to be ensnared by current fashions or mentalities, but proceeding with a profound curiosity over the meaning of life and the mystery of God, the Creator and Father, and his Son, our Redeemer, within the human family. They must also commit themselves to a constant renewal of the world in the light of the Gospel. More still, they must oppose the facile illusions of instant happiness and the deceptive paradise offered by drugs, pleasure, and alcohol, and they must oppose every form of violence.

6. “Stay with us”

The deliberations of this Fifth General Conference lead us to make the plea of the disciples on the road to Emmaus our own: “Stay with us, for it is towards evening, and the day is now far spent” (Lk 24:29).

Stay with us, Lord, keep us company, even though we have not always recognized you. Stay with us, because all around us the shadows are deepening, and you are the Light; discouragement is eating its way into our hearts: make them burn with the certainty of Easter. We are tired of the journey, but you comfort us in the breaking of bread, so that we are able to proclaim to our brothers and sisters that you have truly risen and have entrusted us with the mission of being witnesses of your resurrection.

Stay with us, Lord, when mists of doubt, weariness or difficulty rise up around our Catholic faith; you are Truth itself, you are the one who reveals the Father to us: enlighten our minds with your word, and help us to experience the beauty of believing in you.

Remain in our families, enlighten them in their doubts, sustain them in their difficulties, console them in their sufferings and in their daily labours, when around them shadows build up which threaten their unity and their natural identity. You are Life itself: remain in our homes, so that they may continue to be nests where human life is generously born, where life is welcomed, loved and respected from conception to natural death.

Remain, Lord, with those in our societies who are most vulnerable; remain with the poor and the lowly, with indigenous peoples and Afro-Americans, who have not always found space and support to express the richness of their culture and the wisdom of their identity. Remain, Lord, with our children and with our young people, who are the hope and the treasure of our Continent, protect them from so many snares that attack their innocence and their legitimate hopes. O Good Shepherd, remain with our elderly and with our sick. Strengthen them all in faith, so that they may be your disciples and missionaries!

Conclusion

As I conclude my stay among you, I wish to invoke the protection of the Mother of God and Mother of the Church on you and on the whole of Latin America and the Caribbean. I beseech Our Lady in particular, under the title of Guadalupe, Patroness of America, and under the title of Aparecida, Patroness of Brazil, to accompany you in your exciting and demanding pastoral task. To her I entrust the People of God at this stage of the third Christian millennium. I also ask her to guide the deliberations and reflections of this General Conference and I ask her to bless with copious gifts the beloved peoples of this Continent.