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Pope Calls for Freedom and Dialogue

Leaves Havana With Promise of Prayer for a Better Future

HAVANA, Cuba, MARCH 28, 2012 (Zenit.org).- Benedict XVI gave thanks to God for the opportunity to visit Cuba during his departure speech at Havana's airport today. He also thanked the civil and Church authorities for their cooperation and assistance.

"I hold deep in my heart all the Cuban people, each and every one," he said. "You have surrounded me with prayer and affection, offered me cordial hospitality and shared with me your profound and rightful aspirations," the Pope added.

He declared that he had come to Cuba as a witness to Jesus Christ, to proclaim a message of salvation and to strengthen the Church.

"May this Journey also serve as a new impulse to all those who cooperate with perseverance and self-sacrifice in the work of evangelization, particularly the lay faithful," he said.

Christ's message to humanity, he explained, is not one of constraint, but is rather the premise for authentic development.

"The light of the Lord, has shone brightly during these days; may that light never fade in those who have welcomed it; may it help all people to foster social harmony and to allow the blossoming of all that is finest in the Cuban soul, its most noble values, which can be the basis for building a society of broad vision, renewed and reconciled," he commented.

On a more overtly political note the Pope referred to the limitations on basic freedoms and also to restrictive economic measures imposed from outside that "unfairly burden" the people of Cuba.

The respect and promotion of freedom is essential, the Pontiff continued, to enable people to respond to the demands of human dignity and to build up society.

He called for a "patient and sincere dialogue" and said that: "The present hour urgently demands that in personal, national and international co-existence we reject immovable positions and unilateral viewpoints which tend to make understanding more difficult and efforts at cooperation ineffective."

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