

[There is no date on this document, but it was written by Oswaldo Payá approximately in 1989.]

### **For Cuba: Liberation**

Though no one set out to exclude us from the Medellin documents, the Puebla document, or Liberation Theology in its entirety, the chapter that would use Catholic Social Doctrine to shed light on the realities of Cuban life was never written.

We thank God for that now, because—since the Cuban people did not have any voice that rang out as loudly as those voices crying out other forms of injustice—that chapter might have misrepresented our reality, which even we ourselves could not fully appreciate at that time.

It was as if the world's truth had snuffed out our truth. Or rather, it was as if what was beginning to morph into a great lie in Cuba was being cast as an enlightening, liberating truth to Latin America and the rest of the world. What had begun to harden into the condemnation of our people to an alienating existence was projected to Latin America and to the poor worldwide as nothing short of hope.

Talk of liberating Cuba was jarring, as it still might be today to many ears that have never heard the whimper of a nation silenced by fear.

Now the Catholic Church's social documents, like *Centesimus Annus*, shed the light of Christian doctrine on the changes in Eastern Europe and warn us of the dangers of upholding any sort of property as an absolute value, above even justice. No document has ever been so timely, so in-step with history, and, by extension, so wise.

But there truly are many similarities between the societal patterns that have been done away with in Eastern Europe and the ones that we, the Cuban people, want to overcome. We could say the same of the dangers lying in wait. Yet there are also significant differences. For one, the Cuban process is rooted in a popular revolution with strong civic intentions and whose goals are considerably influenced by Christianity, considering many of its protagonists.

Both the reflections on the realities of communism in *Centesimus Annus* and its harsh condemnation of the forms of injustice that can and, in actuality, are caused by capitalism are bright, guiding beacons for Christians and non-Christians alike.

The Cuban people and the Cuban Church have lived under both systems. Now, amidst the outcry for change, we, the Cuban people, are the only ones who can, with the light of the Holy Spirit and with our hearts filled with love, write a new chapter with our living history, for there is no longer any time for us to write it in ink. This new chapter will be the transformation of Cuba into a more just society, into a society that is superior precisely because its relationships are grounded in love.

For Cuba, liberation is not a theory or a new theology—it is a historical necessity due to our tarnished identity, our lost dignity, and the fact that we have been trapped, both as a nation, in its entirety, and as individuals, in all dimensions of our lives. Change cannot be reduced to political categories, to the ousting of one group from power, or to a mere change of system provoked by external factors divorced from the people, in which the people are relegated to being bystanders. The root of the problem lies, above all, in the bonds between the individuals in this human community; therefore, the Cuban people themselves, the very people who need to be liberated, must be the subject and the protagonist of the change that sparks all other changes.

Due to various circumstances, the exclusion of the Cuban people from political, philosophical, and even theological jargon or language has been universally accepted.

Thus, in Cuba there were no rich, no poor, no marginalized, no persecuted, and no dispirited. In this language, the reactionaries in Cuba are the opposition since the government is revolutionary by definition.

Meanwhile, most intellectual circles in Latin America and many in Europe adopted a terminology in which Cuba, or rather Cuban communists, were progressive, revolutionary, and liberating leaders.

Artists, social activists, prominent members of the clergy, theologians, and politicians at the forefront of the struggle for justice saw the Cuban regime as their model.

They would talk of solidarity with Cuba, thinking of Fidel Castro or socialism or the Cuban revolution. Many still do. What mattered to the world was the conflict between Fidel and the United States, between the Cuban Revolution and the oft-mentioned Yankee imperialism. For many, this continues to be the case.

This language made the pain and suffering of the Cuban people disappear. With each additional prisoner, with each additional injustice, with each additional act of repression we suffered as the totalitarian system consolidated itself, the Cuban Revolution was lauded more and more.

And so, the Cuban people were truly isolated, both morally and spiritually, for decades. Along with the misrepresentations of our history and the absolute control over our means of communication, the Cuban people were left in complete poverty, the likes of which had no equivalent in the rest of the world. We developed our own language because we could no longer speak in the world's language, which had no words for us. It was a time when no one listened.

We were truly a nation alone in our pain and in our hopes. Some considered us a lost cause, while others spoke of our reality as if it were God's Kingdom on Earth.

Meanwhile, a new breed of men and women blossomed in Cuban prisons: people who had been forgotten by the world, who were condemned to rot away, and who, by their own astonishing accounts, endured only thanks to their Faith in God. Having been stripped of any treatment that could be considered human, these spirits endured cruelty and isolation.

They were the ones who stood firm. They are sublime evidence of how man, even when reduced to impotence and total solitude, remains unbroken when his Faith sustains him. There were many Christians among those prisoners, and many fell before the firing squads to shouts of "Long live Christ our King." Now that we have made a decision to discuss the Church's social doctrine at this meeting, let us not consider ourselves precursors or heroes, [...] out of gratitude and justice for our siblings in Christ, who, inspired by the Gospels, gave their lives and their

youth and lovingly sacrificed themselves for the freedom of their people. Understanding this is essential to keep the word liberation from being discordant to our ears.

— The pseudo-culture of fear.

The Cuban people could never have been alienated to this extent if not for the dechristianization of our culture and our conduct.

The people of Cuba, bound and gagged, witnessed the entrenchment of a pseudo-culture, a superficial culture: the culture of fear.

The fall of communism and the breaking up of the old communist world has shaken the foundations of the Cuban system, but it has not made the people feel as if they have lost something of their own, especially not in the cultural sphere. This is proof that the State forced society to adopt Marxism and the Soviet model, and the people merely pretended to accept it.

However, even though this ideology was never accepted within Cuba, the State's systemic practice of attacking the values of our Christian cultural roots and destroying traditions and institutions through the dechristianization of society has truly hollowed out and caused severe harm to the Cuban nation, touching everything from interpersonal relationships to individual self-esteem. It has impoverished and undermined all artistic efforts, the value of work, respect for the family and the community, and all aspects of our national identity.

On one hand, education became one of the Revolution's achievements in terms of its growth and its expansion to cover all sectors of society. On the other hand, however, the Revolution has literally destroyed the Cuban school, i.e., that popular, respectable institution that used to provide an education in human, spiritual, and civic values.

Children and young people were and continue to be "educated" to obey and submit to the orders of those who are in power, regardless of what those orders may be.

Never before have young Cubans valued the foreign so much more than they valued the Cuban. Never before has rock culture from the North so profoundly displaced what we consider “the Cuban way” in all aspects of life. This stems from the aforementioned hollowing out of society and from a search for surrogates for freedom given the complete lack of true freedoms.

The State eclipses the individual and the community. As if it were an all-powerful, provident being, it gives and it takes away, it forbids and grants permission, it has the lives of the Cuban people at its disposal, and now it even plans for the death of an entire nation.

### Liberation for Cuba:

In Cuba, the change that will lead us to freedom, allow us to rediscover our cultural identity, enable us to conserve the positive aspects of this experience, and bring us to the realm of sovereignty must be radical. It must come from the roots of Cuban society, which means it must entail liberation. It must be a change to the individual and to the community that is carried out by all and takes place in each and every one of us.

Liberation is inseparable from the reconciliation of the Cuban people. In fact, reconciliation is part of the process.

The liberation process must also result in the Cuban people exercising their sovereignty and leave them with the real ability to remodel society in the name of justice.

While economic and legal blueprints for the Cuban society of the future are welcome, what we need more than anything is the ability to work peacefully to achieve change and lead the people to sovereignty. Documents will not liberate the people, but commitment, hard work, and action with and for the people will.

If we as Christians want to accept our commitment to that end, we must foster a spirituality of liberation, which is not without precedent in our history as a Nation, as we have already said.

Liberation from pretense, from apathy, from fear, from opportunism, from intolerance, from hatred, and from a socio-political framework or structure that keeps the community in a state of modern slavery based on fear.

We must promote the search for that free, dignified self that God grants each and every human being, which is the foundation of our rights. But the greatest liberating force is born from love for our neighbors, at the level of a community of solidarity. And those of us who, inspired by the Gospels, prepare to work for society and for a change in the spirit of the Church's social doctrine must open our hearts to God to become our neighbor, become our nation's poor, become those who have been repressed. Only love can build the spiritual strength that the work toward, and the individual experience of, liberation demand. We need to convince each other, but above all we need to become neighbors through Christ.

First and foremost, we need to liberate ourselves from what has become an absolute point of reference: power. If we continue to use power, or the political positioning of power, or even those who could replace that power, as our point of reference, then opportunism is what will prevail. Opportunism, which makes many lurch from one ideology to another, swing from one extreme to the other, because they have never understood that opting for justice is a must.

It is not a matter of trying to take hold of the current as it changes, but rather of being able to go against the current whenever it flows toward injustice, regardless of how it manifests. Therefore, our point of reference should not be the possibilities that arise within the established power, but instead should be grounded in that spirit of solidarity with the poor of our nation and with our poor nation, our people.

### Reconciliation in Liberation

Reconciliation can only be achieved by realizing that our neighbor is our brother, regardless of his social status and history or our own. Reconciliation cannot be achieved if our intention is to reach a mutually accepted interpretation of our past, which is impossible. Reconciliation means coming to an agreement about our future based on a foundation of respect and the acknowledgement of the rights of each and every one of us. In Cuba, there is a great potential for forging such a reconciliation if we listen to the widespread outcry for a change that leads

us to brotherhood and freedom, an outcry that must not be quashed by efforts to defend ideologies or positions or by individual projects that are incompatible with social dialogue.

The only way to find the path that can unite us is to account for all of the experiences of man, rectifying the painful ones while weaving the positive ones into this change.

Instead of drawing sharp lines between the opinions and projects of opposing forces, we should forge a space in which all of the positive contributions can be joined together. The outcome will be a nation that is reconciled, that holds itself accountable, and that is willing to tackle, in brotherhood, what lies ahead.

The Cuban diaspora cannot be left out of this dialogue, nor will it be. The contributions of our siblings in exile are a necessary complement to our own. To that end, we must move past the comments made to discredit this community and work toward a reunion that is not an isolated event, but rather an integral part of this process of radical transformation. Assuming anything else would be completely unrealistic, to say the least.

Let us watch as those who were once enemies meet each other, taken aback at times, but united in the same situation. This should give us all cause for reflection: In the name of justice and peace and for the good of Cuba, we cannot draw a dividing line [...] to judge and condemn each other.

Now, we must start anew because all of Cuba needs a renewal.

But we should have a different view of those within the established power who seek to use the fear of bloodshed to snuff out this spirit of renewal in the people, because the nation has a right to defend its future, and individuals have the right to defend their lives and the lives of their children.

Change for Cuba cannot be a backlash or resignation to a different type of injustice. The people will only be able to attain justice through a civic movement spiritually grounded in reconciliation. The future is guaranteed today by what we achieve today.

The future depends less on our current intellectual projects than on our efforts and struggle for change in the present. Whether or not this will be a true liberation depends on the way we enact that change. Therefore, let us work to ensure that this process that has already begun is not tainted by bloodshed.

There is a risk that the repressive forces will provoke civil war or bloody clashes, and if we do not speak out about the severe manifestations of this repression that we have already witnessed, we will have to remain silent afterwards. We must act firmly yet prudently, since the Cuban people are truly being treated as if they were hostages.

So, the time has come for us to peacefully offer ourselves to and for the people, because their right to exist if they do not submit is already being debated. In this, following the path that points toward the source of the Church's social doctrine; we reach the Gospel itself: "Whatsoever you do to the least of my brothers, you do unto me."

Yet hope lives, and Christians in Cuba today must sustain that hope with a living, committed presence, by being that embodiment of Christ we speak so often about.

The essence of the Cuban problem lies in the fact that each individual and each family has subjugated themselves out of fear, based on the myth of one leader. We are trapped, all of us, even those who are instruments for trapping others, even those in the highest ranks of power. Together, we are one enslaved whole. It is the most total loss that a human community can experience, so the solution must go to the roots. For Cuba: Liberation.

But liberation is achieved by mobilizing our hearts and our wills. Those of us who are Christians cannot keep calling for or proposing solutions without taking on the risks, the repression, the misunderstandings, and all of the pain that choosing to live for our neighbor brings us. That, and only that, is the legitimate place for Christians in Cuba. That is the place for charity, which is ultimately a liberating presence.

*Translated by Ashely Caja.*