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## Bishop Aranguren Echeverría: "St John Paul II was a harbinger of hope and truth"

"The presence of the Polish Pope represented an oasis in the life of the people. It will always be remembered: a perpetual reminder of new horizons." These words were spoken by Msgr. **Emilio Aranguren Echeverría** twenty-five years ago, on the occasion of **Pope John Paul II's** [historic visit](#) to Cuba. Back then, he was a young bishop serving as General Secretary of the Conference of Catholic Bishops of Cuba ([COCC](#)). He bore personal witness to this visit and to Pope Wojtyla's well-known statement: "May Cuba open itself up to the world, and may the world open itself up to Cuba!" Pope Wojtyla "conquered" the island "of the revolution" with his Message and charisma. Among other things, he had a long conversation with the "líder máximo" Indeed, "new horizons" unfolded, paving the way for a new season for the Cuban Church, albeit still fraught with hardship. Special celebrations marking the 25th anniversary of St. John Paul II's apostolic visit to Cuba are planned for January 25 by the Cuban Church, with the participation of Cardinal Beniamino Stella, Apostolic Nuncio to Cuba at the time. Pope Francis has sent [a Letter](#) to the People of God of Cuba. It reads, inter alia: "During this time, I would like you to recall in your hearts the gestures and words that my predecessor addressed to you during his Visit, so that they may echo strongly in the present, and give a new impetus to continue building the future of this nation with hope and determination." Monsignor Aranguren, bishop of Holguín, currently serves as President of the Cuban bishops, SIR interviewed him in his current capacity. **What is your personal recollection of the visit of St John Paul II?** For me, the visit began a year earlier, in January 1997, on the occasion of [a visit](#) to us by Cardinal Camillo Ruini, the Pope's vicar for the diocese of Rome and president of the Italian Episcopal Conference (CEI). During those days he had a number of meetings, including one with President Fidel Castro Ruz and I accompanied the Cardinal, in his capacity as COCC General Secretary on that occasion. During his stay in Cuba he consecrated St. Isidor Cathedral in Holguín, to which CEI provided financial support, and visited the Holguín Provincial Hospital Cardiology Ward, completely renovated with equipment and materials thanks to the financial support of the Third World Aid Committee, operating under CEI. The apostolic visit of Pope John Paul II at the beginning of the following year, 1998, was announced in the context of this visit. The Bishops' Conference created a dedicated group of three bishops and two priests tasked with organising the event, along with another team comprising members of the Cuban Communist Party and other ministries and government agencies. It was a beautiful experience, which served to establish a forum for dialogue in an atmosphere of understanding and respect, in the awareness that we had different opinions on certain issues. That is why I repeat today what I said 25 years ago: "The visit of the Polish Pope (his gestures, messages and the general atmosphere) represented an oasis in the life of the people. It will always be remembered, standing as a perpetual reminder that new horizons are always possible." **Which changes were occasioned on the island by this event for the Church and for believers?** It was an opportunity to give visibility to and experience the people's feeling of belonging to the Church. The Pope was not a distant figure, he was "one of our own", he spoke our language, he was familiar with the socio-political reality surrounding our religious practice, he clearly expressed certain concepts in his messages (family, youth, culture, the suffering world, Church mission in a secular State society). He was a true "harbinger of hope and truth". St. John Paul II's Magisterium retains its topical relevance even 25 years later, and has remained so in the subsequent visits of his two successors. **Would it be accurate to say that it brought about irreversible changes?** There were two concrete developments: the solemnity of Christmas returned to be a public holiday, as did Good Friday. Furthermore, during the preparations, the visit and the following days, emphasis was given to the teachings of a popular Cuban proverb: "We understand each other by speaking to each other." This testifies to the fact that the practice of dialogue in a pluralist world is indispensable and indeed feasible, as was reiterated in the years that followed that visit. **Which of the Pope's messages or**

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**statements has special topical relevance today?** Pope John Paul II has entrusted us with two messages: one in gestures and one in words. A book was published after the visit with photographs cherished by many, where one can perceive his gaze, the movement of his hands, the way he inclines his head, expressing the love of the father-shepherd for his son, for the two sheep, penetrating and abiding in the innermost being. Each of the four homilies or the welcoming and farewell events, as well as the ecumenical meetings and the meetings with the world of suffering and of culture, are marked by phrases or expressions representing a point of reference still today. I will mention them as I remember them off hand, not verbatim: "Cuba, take care of your families so as to preserve a healthy heart!" And: "The State must promote a climate of serenity in society along with legislation that enables each person to freely practice their faith, to express it in public life and be given the room they need to contribute to society with their spiritual, moral and civil richness." Finally: "The Church is an expert in humanity, which is why she promotes the culture of love and of life, thereby offering humanity hope in the power of life-giving love, and fostering the unity envisioned by Christ. It is therefore necessary to tread the path of reconciliation, dialogue and fraternal welcome with everyone and all people." Three years after the visit, on 6 January 2001, the Pope published the exhortation [Novo Millennio ineunte](#), wherein he expounded on various messages expressed in his magisterium to Cuba and the people of Cuba. **The visits of successive Popes, Benedict and Francis, ensued. Is there a common thread linking these historic events?** There is certainly a common thread in the magisterium of the three Popes, and in that of the Cuban Bishops, as well as a clear connection with the teachings of the General Assemblies of the Latin American Episcopate (from Medellín to Aparecida). Terms such as "synodality" ("walking together") and "social friendship", expounded by Pope Francis; the distinction between "ideology and faith (encounter with Jesus Christ)", and the existence of "unrenounceable principles of faith", expressed by Benedict XVI, along with St. John Paul II's previous statements, provide an inspiring framework for our Church in Cuba and for its commitment and mission with the people it belongs to. What remains in the hearts of all Cubans is the prayer and the gesture of each of the three Popes before the image of Our Lady of Charity of El Cobre, Mother of all Cubans. **Could the celebrations of this anniversary offer renewed hope to the Cuban people at these challenging times?** The times we are living can be described as "difficult and complex", encompassing both internal and external factors. Responding to these challenges requires everyone's participation, with no exception, if it is to be tackled and overcome. Over the past 25 years, society has changed, along with the ecclesial community. These changes are due to the natural law, to substantial emigration, to many people's weariness, to the access and use of social networks, and to the need for new languages and perspectives. The upcoming celebrations can help us re-read and listen to the exhortation of the Saint Pope who visited us 25 years ago, when he said: "Do not be afraid to open your hearts to Christ. Allow him to come into your lives, into your families, into society. In this way all things will be made new." He then added: "You are and must be the principal agents of your own personal and national history."

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