



To Supreme Knight Virgil C. Dechant  
and the Knights of Columbus

On the occasion of this year's Supreme Council Meeting of the Knights of Columbus, I am happy to greet all of you and your families in the name of Christ our Savior.

In keeping with the spirit of your Order, you are celebrating this Columbian Year as a time of special significance. You are united with the whole Church in giving thanks to God for five hundred years of the Church's presence in the Americas, five centuries of faith and service, of confidence in the saving power of the Cross of Jesus Christ.

Because the Church acknowledges her Savior as the Lord of history, from the very beginning she saw the discovery of the New World as a fresh and urgent call to carry out the mission he entrusted to his Apostles: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19). Then as now, the Church recognized the unfolding of a divine plan of salvation in the events of human history. In this sense, 1492 represented a kairos, a "salvific occasion" of the first magnitude, to which the Church responded promptly and decisively, in a great saga of evangelization. Generous missionaries faced enormous

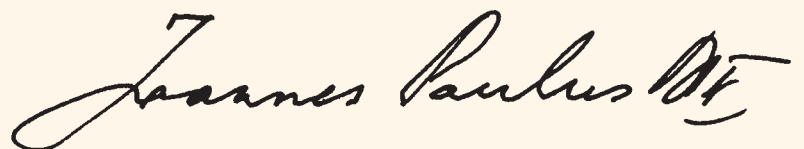
challenges in the new lands, in order to plant the Cross of Christ. They preached the Word of God in all its fullness, without passing over in silence the practical consequences that derive from the dignity of each man and woman - brothers and sisters in Christ and children of God.

In this evangelization as in any human enterprise there were successes, failures and mistakes, 'darkness and light, but more light than darkness', to judge from the results we see five hundred years later (cf. International Symposium on the History of Evangelization of America, May 14, 1992, 3). In view of various attempts to distort the history of the evangelization of the Americas, I have appealed to historians and others to seek the truth in the facts. One extraordinary fact which cannot be overlooked is the conversion to Christianity, within a relatively short period of time, of an enormous continent, a continent where half of the world's Catholics now live. The depth and the fruitfulness of the acceptance of the Gospel clearly indicate that the first evangelization of the Americas was truly a work of love. The encounter between European missionaries and the indigenous peoples, while not exempt from certain misunderstandings and limitations characteristic of that age, was in both practice and theory a vigorous affirmation of the equal dignity of all peoples and the universality of the basic rights inherent in human nature.

Today, five hundred years after the beginning of that first evangelization of the Americas, a new proclamation of the salvific message of the Gospel is needed. I know that the Knights of Columbus are deeply conscious of this challenge: already you are cooperating with the Bishops in programs of evangelization in the countries where you are present. May the Cross of Evangelization which symbolizes your commitment to advancing the Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ inspire you with renewed vigor in Christian living, so that the Successor of Peter and the Church at large may continue to rely on the Knights of Columbus in the new evangelization called for at the approach of the Third Christian Millennium.

As a pledge of abundant divine gifts I gladly impart my Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, July 27, 1992

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Johannes Paulus II". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial 'J' and a distinct 'II' at the end.