

FRIENDSHIP WITH THE VENEZUELAN PEOPLE

The best way to understand a country is to look at the daily life of its people. It is a paradox that Venezuela, which possesses the greatest petroleum reserves on the planet, cannot solve the most basic problems of its citizens, who have been living for years with insufficient services—electricity, water, gas and public transport—and scarcity of food, medicine, and other essential products. The general state of deprivation and the political situation have generated the exodus of over three million people. Every day, thousands of people abandon the country and cross the borders of Columbia and Brazil, moving in conditions of extreme precariousness, and giving rise to this region's most significant migratory crisis of the century.

This social and political crisis has been underway for years, but took on an international dimension when, in 2017, most Western countries did not recognize the National Constituent Assembly, composed exclusively of members of the government party, nor the early presidential elections it established, which Maduro won in May, 2018. Consequently, after Maduro was sworn in on January 10 for his second term, he did not receive the recognition of the National Assembly elected in 2015 by the majority of Venezuelans. On the basis of article 233 of the Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, the President of the National Assembly, Juan Guaidó, proclaimed himself provisional President with the support of the United States, the Lima Group, and later, the European Union.

Maduro, for his part, continued the struggle to remain in power, with the backing of the military and the support of China, Turkey, Russia, Cuba, Nicaragua and Bolivia. At the same time, he has refused all offers of humanitarian aid and has insisted that the international community not interfere in the internal affairs of his country.

In the face of all this, some neutral countries, headed by Mexico and Uruguay, gathered in Montevideo together with representatives of the European Union to offer proposals of dialogue for dealing with this conflict.

The Holy See, called upon again to take a position or to be a mediator in a dialogue, has responded with the reminder that in order for the latter to happen the consent of both parties is necessary. Pope Francis has also repeatedly expressed his communion with the Venezuelan bishops. Of particular importance are his words during the *Visita ad limina apostolorum* of September 2017, when he said, “In the voice of the Venezuelan bishops my voice rings out too.” In the same way, he has repeatedly expressed his pain over the sufferings borne by the Venezuelan people, wishing that concord may reign.

The Cardinal of Caracas, Baltazar Porras, declared in an interview for the daily newspaper *El País* on February 14th that “the situation is irreversible. Irreversible does not mean that one side or the other wins. If this regime consolidates its hold on power, it will certainly lead to greater repression and greater poverty. This is an open window on a reality that can be different.” In addition, on February 21, 2019, the Venezuelan Bishops' Conference urged the government and the military “**to listen to the cry of the population and allow the peaceful entry and distribution of humanitarian aid.**”

In this complex scenario, in which almost the entire international community has taken a position, one wonders how best to offer closeness and friendship to the Venezuelan people. The solution of the conflict will pass neither through messianic pretensions nor through violence: **a peaceful transition requires seeds of a reconciliation that unites all Venezuelans as a people on a journey of national unity.**

Always starting from the encounter with the person, with the particular story, desires and sufferings, joys and hopes of the individual, it is possible to understand what changes the person and the whole of society. In the same way, it is urgent and necessary to reflect on **how we should respond to the**

suffering of those who remain in Venezuela and of the many others who make the painful decision to depart, leaving behind their family in wretched conditions.

1. In the face of such a painful, complex and uncertain reality, **it is fundamental to know what certainties our life is grounded upon**, and how we can discover from these circumstances the concrete task the Lord asks of us. The hope of those who live in Venezuela or who have left it passes through the encounter with concrete faces who offer them a friendship that points to something greater than themselves, and that serves in the discovery of what we truly need for living.

2 **It is essential to strengthen and expand the fabric of operative and creative friendships** to meet specific needs, oriented to the common good, rather than solutions that merely propose denunciations or ideological discussions.

3 **Let us call everyone to be protagonists of change in Venezuela** through simple but highly valuable gestures that start from the encounter with concrete people:

> **Adopt a family, and help a person to keep his or her job in Venezuela.** On the one hand, immediate help is fundamental so that many Venezuelans can have access to the minimum for living, and for this purpose the Church has organized numerous “common pots.” On the other hand, there is a clear need to take an extra step that promotes the growth of people, collaborating and emphasizing the creativity, entrepreneurial ability, and desire to work of every Venezuelan. We have already seen that those engaged in projects that help people work have begun to live again, because life demands an objective and responsibility. In this sense, we are promoting initiatives with the goal of supporting the work of friends in Venezuela. For this, you can write to this address:

amistadconvenezuela@gmail.com.

> **Invite a family of Venezuelan immigrants to your home for lunch.** Because of unfavorable vicissitudes, many Venezuelans have emigrated and are far from their homeland. We propose that you welcome a Venezuelan family into your home to share a meal and the embrace and hospitality of Christ.

Hope for Venezuelans is possible if we allow ourselves to be filled with the gaze of Christ, in order to go out to encounter others, embracing them even in their differentness, so that we can become companions in their suffering through prayer and gestures, looking together at the great horizon we have in front of us and the long journey of reconstruction of a wounded society.

All this will be possible if we return to encountering each other, wagering on behalf of every person, on his or her dignity and on the common good.

Communion and Liberation Latin America