

**KEY REMARKS BY DR. FIDEL CASTRO RUZ, PRESIDENT OF THE
REPUBLIC OF CUBA, IN QUITO, REPUBLIC OF ECUADOR, AT THE
INAUGURATION CEREMONY OF THE CAPILLA DEL HOMBRE.
NOVEMBER 29, 2002 [1]**

Date:

29/11/2002

Honorable Mr. President:

Authorities from Ecuador and from Quito:

Dearest family:

Distinguished guests:

I remember that at the very beginning of the Cuban Revolution, in the midst of all the turmoil, a man with indigenous features and a determined and inquisitive look, who was already famous and admired by many of our intellectuals, proposed to paint my portrait.

For the first time in my life, I was submitted to a tormenting experience. I should stand still. I did not know if this would last an hour or a century. I had never seen anyone move with such speed, squeezing out the paints contained in aluminum tubes, like toothpaste, mixing them with liquids while staring at me with persistent hawk eyes. There he was, stroking the canvas with his paintbrush from left to right, like flashes of lightning, and turning his eyes again and again to the astonished living object of his feverish activity, breathing heavily like a track and field athlete.

Finally, I could see the result of all that. It was not I, it was what he wanted me to be, how he saw me: a combination of Don Quixote with features of famous personalities from Bolivar's wars for Independence. But aware of the painter's fame, I did not dare say a word. Maybe I eventually told him that the painting was "excellent". I was embarrassed by my ignorance of the fine arts, as I was no less than in the presence of a great master painter and an extraordinary person, whom I later grew to know with increasing admiration and deep affection: Oswaldo Guayasamin. He was then about 42 years old.

Three times I lived through the same memorable experience, throughout more than 35 years, and the last time we had several working sessions. He continued painting with the same passion, even when his eyesight began to experience severe limitations, which was particularly cruel for such an indefatigable painter. The last portrait showed a face more or less similar to the others, but with long bony hands that enhanced the image of the Knight of the Sad Countenance that he still saw in me almost to the end of his life.

Guayasamin was perhaps the most noble, transparent and humane person I have ever met. He painted with the speed of light and his dimension, as a human being, was boundless.

I learned much from our talks, which enriched my conscience about the terrible drama of the conquest, colonization and genocide of the indigenous peoples in this hemisphere; a lacerating pain that he felt

deep in his heart. He was an authority in the history of those terrible events.

One day, while we were in the studio at his residence here in Quito, I asked him how many indigenous lives he thought had been lost to the conquest and colonization. He was quick to respond without hesitation: 70 million. His thirst for justice and vindication for those who survived that holocaust was the major drive of his life.

However, he felt it was necessary to struggle not only for these indigenous peoples but also for the peoples of North, Central and South America. He thought about the formerly Iberoamerican colonies that emerged from a crucible of martyrdom and from the mixing of victims and victimizers, who together with the descendents of enslaved Africans, as well as European and Asian immigrants, formed the Latin American societies of today. There, where ruthless exploitation, plundering and the imposition of an unsustainable, destructive and genocidal world order kills every 10 years --from hunger, poverty and disease-- as many people as those 70 millions that according to Guayasamin died throughout centuries. I avoid mentioning the English colonies because in that case, there was no crucible or mixing, only extermination.

The social data on Latin America certified by authorized international organizations are dreadful. Suffice to mention those related to child labor and to the sexual exploitation of children.

Actually, 20 million children under 15 years of age must work for a living; most of them are girls, which contributes to the sexual exploitation that many girls and boys are subjected to. In a large number of countries almost half of the girls, usually very poor, have been victims of sexual abuse or violence in their own homes and become active in commercial sex between the ages of 9 and 13, while approximately 50% to 80% use drugs.

Hundreds of boys and girls live in the streets and many are also victims of sexual exploitation. In some cities 40% of the women working as prostitutes are not yet 16 years old. This is a small sample, among the dozens of shameful statistical figures of what it means to be the region of the world with the worst distribution of national income.

None of this escaped Oswaldo Guayasamin profound thoughts, his warmth and his sense of human dignity. He devoted his art to building an awareness, to denounce, fight, struggle and overcome these evils.

"I have been painting for three to five thousand years, more or less", he told me one day with impressive conviction.

"I paint", he confessed, "to hurt, to tear and to strike at the hearts of people, to show what man is doing against man".

"Painting is for me a form of prayer as much as it is a cry [...] and the loftiest consequence of love and solitude", he sentenced.

Guayasamin wanted to leave an enduring work as a legacy to his indigenous ethnicity and to his mestizo and multiracial people.

Today, we inaugurate the first stage of one of his most cherished dreams: La Capilla del Hombre (The Chapel of Man) a majestic representation of truth, history and the destiny of our peoples from pre-Columbian times to date, which is an extraordinary feat of universal resonance.

This son of Ecuador born in Quito 83 years ago, whose father was an indigenous and his mother a mestizo was the first of the 10 children of a poor family that lived in La Tola. There, he learned from this legendary city, surrounded by mountains and volcanoes, until finally becoming a genius in fine arts, a gladiator of human dignity and a prophet of days to come. He placed his patrimony at the disposal of Ecuador, the Americas and the World.

Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the Chapel of Man

Published on FIDEL Soldier of Ideas (<http://www.comandanteenjefe.info>)

How many geniuses like him may have been lost for culture and universal sciences among the millions of indigenous and mestizos who during the last two centuries never learned how to read and write!

I had the great privilege of being his friend and today I have the privilege to be here when, thanks to the endeavors of many, his most cherished dream has become a tangible reality. I can bear witness to his courage, which stirred the anger of the empire and to his social commitment as a man of the vanguard, intimately bounded with the humble of the world.

And since dying is a way to continue our journeys, in 1988, in this very treasured place, when I said a few words of greetings and humorously referred to death, he immediately reacted by saying: "We no longer die, we no longer die". Thus, with the inauguration of the Capilla del Hombre, to which he devoted the last of his physical energies before departing, we can confirm that what he said in a moment of euphoria and fraternal joy was true for the author of that prophetic prediction.

Today, we can clearly see that both he and his work will endure in the conscience and hearts of present and future generations.

Thank you, my dearest brother Oswaldo Guayasamin, for your legacy to the world!

Thank you.

(Versiones Taquigráficas - Consejo de Estado)

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