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Cuba's Catholic Church Strengthens its Position Amid Clashes between Government and Opposition

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Pope Benedict’s XVI’s visit to Cuba in late March demonstrated that the Cuban Catholic Church hierarchy is strengthening its role on the island, showing its independence and social doctrine that separates it from the bitter clashes between government and opposition, including from demands by some of its own parishioner groups.

The pope arrived in Cuba on March 26 for a three-day stay marking the 400th anniversary of the apparition of the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre, patroness of the island. His schedule included two masses—in the southeastern city of Santiago de Cuba and in Havana—and meetings with President Raúl Castro and former President Fidel Castro.

Expectations were lower for this visit than those generated in 1998 by Pope John Paul II (NotiCen, Jan. 29, 1998), who was the first pontiff to visit the country and whose visit was followed closely by the population of 11.2 million. According to the Catholic Church, 10% of the population identify themselves as practicing Catholics, while a large percentage engage in spiritual practices related to Christianity, including the popular Afro-Cuban religions. There are 54 recognized Protestant and evangelical religious denominations in Cuba.

The mood of the Caribbean nation has changed since 1998 and so, therefore, have the expectations generated before each pope's arrival. Pope Benedict came to the island after 14 years during which the church has established a greater role under the communist regime and has even become a legitimate mediator for opposition groups.

The 1990s represented the Cuban government’s liberalization toward established religious congregations in the country. This was after more than three decades during which, if a religion was publicly professed, the practitioner would be questioned and politically excluded. Without a doubt, a summit was reached in 1998 when the antagonism between the government and the Catholic hierarchy began to abate.

Since then, the Catholic Church has obtained permits for public processions, which had been banned for decades; Dec. 25 was declared a national holiday; the construction of a seminary, the first in half a century, was authorized; the restoration of churches has begun; and Catholic publications have increased and even include questions about the country’s internal situation from time to time.

Their own path

The 2012 papal visit found a Cuba in which the Catholic hierarchy has increased its presence, taking care to avoid clashes with the government of President Raúl Castro, who still cannot manage to hasten the numerous reforms long-awaited by the population. At the same time, the church is keeping its distance from the vigorous demands of opposition groups, which are more organized and visible than in 1998.
The fundamental challenges Benedict faced could be summarized as: to claim benefits for the Catholic Church; to speak out on the internal situation, the communist regime, demands for liberalization, and tolerance for dissidents and relatives of political prisoners, such as the Damas en Blanco (NotiCen, June 17, 2010); and to comment on the international situation in light of the US embargo.

The Cuban regime created a cordial atmosphere for the visit. Raúl Castro attended the two masses celebrated by the pope, who in turn was received at the Palacio de la Revolución, the seat of executive power. Meanwhile, former President Fidel Castro, despite his obvious physical decline and trouble in walking and standing, visited the Apostolic Nuncio to meet privately with the Pope.

Reproaches from opposition groups were heard much earlier because the pope did not agree to meet with the Damas en Blanco, even for just "a minute." The group was created after the 2003 jailing of 75 dissidents and has achieved international recognition with their peaceful protest marches after attending Sunday mass in a Havana Catholic church (NotiCen, Dec. 13, 2007).

Expectations that the pope would listen to a representative of the dissidents was because of the 2010-2011 mediation efforts by the Catholic hierarchy for the release of political prisoners, about 130 of whom were sent to Spain with their families. The initiative was controversial: for some, it made possible the end of hundreds of families’ sufferings, but for others, it was a forced exile and a tactic to relieve internal stresses.

In his open-air masses, Benedict stressed the need to promote ethics for better social harmony. "Cuba and the world need change, but they will only grow if everyone is able to ask for the truth and decide to take the path of love, sowing reconciliation and brotherhood," he said at the Plaza de la Revolución before a half million attendees.

In addition, the pontiff referred to the possibility of finding truth through Christianity but said that "there are those who misinterpret the search for the truth, leading to irrationality and fanaticism; they close themselves up in ‘their truth’ and try to impose it on others." Observers and the population perceived these statements as a reference to the Cuban context.

Perhaps the pope’s most explicit statement came shortly before landing in Cuba: "[It] is clear these days that Marxist ideology, as it was conceived, no longer corresponds to reality." He then added, "We must find new models, with patience, and in a constructive way."

In response to its guest, the government announced that, starting in 2012, Good Friday will be a national holiday. Also, authorities granted the pope special permission to celebrate the March 28 mass at the foot of the monument in Havana’s Plaza de la Revolución where the Castro brothers have led the massive marches during their more than a half century in power.

**Benefits, complaints, and revelations**

Throughout April, many have tried to interpret who truly benefited most from the papal visit. Both the Catholic Church and the government were considered favored during those days of calls for tolerance, harmony, and humanism, while some opposition voices expressed disappointment in the way they were ignored by Catholic authorities and broken up by the government.

The month of March had the most arrests for political reasons in the country since April 1961 following the Bay of Pigs. The Comisión Cubana de Derechos Humanos y Reconciliación Nacional...
(CCDHRN) reported 1,158 arrests in the days before and during the papal visit. Some opposition members in Havana were arrested on their way to mass, and many more had their telephone service cut off.

President Raúl Castro's administration was "the biggest winner as a result of Pope Benedict XVI's visit, in terms of political legitimacy and international image," said the CCDHRN.

Before the papal visit, there was a clear indication that the Catholic hierarchy would not allow disturbances. On March 14-15, 13 members of the opposition Partido Republicano de Cuba (PRC) occupied a church in Havana demanding the release of political prisoners, Internet access, and freedom of expression. In an unprecedented move, Cardinal Jaime Ortega called on the police to evict them.

The greatest revelation for Cuban society and the opposition on the island during those days was that Cuba's Catholic hierarchy is avoiding interfering in politics despite the pressures and demands of the internal opposition, but it does cooperate, as it did in 2010-2011, in directions that appear in agreement with the government, thus legitimizing and strengthening the territory gained since 1998.

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