

Cuba

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The pope never spoke openly about a post-Castro era, but he seemed to cast his thoughts — and his audiences' hopes — in that direction. He said the church and young people should position themselves for building a society of justice and freedom "in the future" and "when the time comes." Stopping in four major cities during his journey, the pope warned that Cuba's religious roots were in danger of eroding, along with family values and a sense of public virtue. He strongly defended the church's right to bring the Gospel to all areas of social life, saying spiritual renewal was the ultimate answer to the country's problems.

In nationally televised events, he explained to Cuba's many nonbelievers that the church's goal is not political power but freedom to serve society.

Castro, for the first time, was sharing his public platform with a world leader who held very different ideas on religion and democracy. That fact alone signaled what many hoped was the beginning of a transition after 40 years of a one-party state.

"Cubans are listening to the pope's words. He has given us a hope, and I think there will be change, but gradual," said Milvio Ramirez, a 26-year-old Havana resident who attended Mass Jan. 25 in the Plaza of the Revolution.

Part of the pope's impact in Cuba was felt almost immediately, however. For the first time, tens of thousands of people gathered in public assemblies that were not sponsored — or controlled — by the state.

An archbishop blasted the government on national TV, from a papal altar.

Huge crowds waved Cuban and Vatican flags, cheered the pope and listened carefully to his sermons. And with Castro in attendance, the pope spoke his mind on human rights, the church's legitimate aspirations, democratic ideals and moral shortcomings aggravated by government policies.

Free speech. Freedom of assembly. New ideas. In socialist Cuba, all this was unprecedented.

Anxious exiles

Although they had mixed opinions on whether the pope's visit would strengthen or weaken Castro, those who spoke to the *Courier* agreed the papal journey was closely watched by most Cubans both here and in their homeland.

Teresa Quevedo left Cuba in 1967 after being released from a forced-labor camp where, she said, she was imprisoned for three months for teaching Catholic catechetical classes to children.

Although she maintained that it was solely her religious activities that made her a communist target, she added that members of her family gave food and medical aid — though no weapons — to anti-Castro rebels operating in the country at the time.

"For Fidel, that's anti-communist," she said.



CNS/Reuters

Cuban Catholics cheer for Pope John Paul II as he enters the stadium in Santa Clara for Mass Jan. 22.

In the camp, she was beaten and verbally abused, she said, but she considered herself lucky because a number of women there were also raped by their captors.

Currently, Quevedo attends both St. Michael's in Rochester and Christ the King Parish in Irondequoit. She noted that she has made several trips to Cuba on behalf of the U.S. government — although she declined to identify for whom she worked. She said she travels to Cuba and exchanges U.S. currency with the Cuban government in order to obtain the release of political prisoners there. She helps to resettle the ex-prisoners in the United States, she said.

Quevedo said she has led public rosary recitations in Cuba in the past few years, and has provided material and spiritual aid to Catholics there. She welcomed the pope's visit to Cuba, and hoped it would ignite a spiritual revival among Cubans.

"The pope is going to open their minds," she said. "They're going to fight for God."

The pope's visit also lets Cubans know that God's church is willing to defend them, according to Lourdes de Chateauvieux, bilingual secretary for Diocesan Urban Services, and a Cuban native.

The papal visit "shows the people in Cuba that the universal church has not forgotten them," said de Chateauvieux, who left Cuba with her French father and Cuban mother for Paris in 1961.

One of the reasons her family left Cuba was they saw increasing government hostility toward practicing Catholics, de Chateauvieux said. As Castro is reportedly easing off Catholics in Cuba, de Chateauvieux said she can envision religious freedom someday for all Cubans, including the non-Catholics.

Like many diocesan Cubans, de Chateauvieux followed the pope's journey via TV and newspaper reports. She said viewing the display of a large picture of Jesus Christ in the Plaza of the Revolution in Havana — facing a picture of Cuban revolutionary hero Che Guevara across from it — was particularly moving to her.

"It's something you wouldn't have dreamed a year ago," she said.

Hiram Jimenez, a Muslim since 1983 who lives in Rochester, shared de Chateauvieux' hope for greater religious freedom in

Cuba, which he left in 1980.

Jimenez said his family practiced both Catholicism and Santeria, a religion popular throughout Cuba that syncretizes African god and goddess worship with Catholic devotion to saints. Santeria allowed Cubans to have a spiritual life under communism because they could worship at home altars, he said.

Jimenez co-owns Rincon Criollo, a new Caribbean diner in Rochester with his brother, Alberto, who attends St. Michael's Church. As he sat in the diner, Hiram Jimenez talked about how he and Alberto learned about Christianity when they were growing up in officially atheist Cuba. The boys' grandmother, Jimenez said, asked them to read her tattered old Bible out loud to her on a regular basis because her failing eyes prevented her from doing so herself.

"That's when we heard about Christ, about God and all that," Jimenez said.

Jimenez called the pope's visit to Cuba "fantastic" and said he saw it as a harbinger of good things to come in Cuba.

"I approve (the visit of the pope) 300 percent due to the fact that that's the only person who might be able to make change in Cuba," he said. "It will give the people more certainty to do whatever they want to do."

A skeptical voice

Not all Cubans agreed that the pope's arrival in Cuba necessarily signaled Castro's demise. One such Cuban immigrant is Jose J. Coronas, vice chairman of the Diocesan Stewardship Council, and a parishioner at St. Louis Church in Pittsford.

Coronas said many Cubans he knew had highly ambivalent feelings about the pontiff's visit to their native land. Many, he said, like himself, saw it as a move that could only help Castro.

"He is getting the recognition of a pope's visit which gives him credibility around the world," Coronas said.

Coronas acknowledged that papal visits to other nations under dictators, had sparked political change, but he maintained that Castro is in a unique position. Castro has squashed political opposition successfully for almost 40 years on an island isolated from the rest of the world, he said.

However, Coronas did see a ray of light

in the fact that Castro welcomed the pope. It's a sign that the end of Soviet support for his regime and the continuing U.S. embargo on Cuba are having effects, he said.

"That fact is that (the embargo) is working because Castro's desperate enough to invite the pope in," he said. "He doesn't have the Russians or the U.S."

Prior to the pope's visit, several polls had shown that the vast majority of Cubans living in the United States agree with Coronas, and support the embargo on Cuba. Many, like Coronas, defend their view by pointing out that Cuban-Americans privately provide substantial economic aid to their fellow natives through channels that exist outside the Cuban government — whether it's by sending money to relatives in Cuba, or by giving money to charitable organizations operating on the island nation.

Quevedo, however, agreed with the pope who repeatedly called for an end to the U.S. embargo on Cuba during his visit because of its effects on Cubans' access to needed material goods.

"The government people are not being affected," she said of the embargo. "Only the people of Cuba, the poor people of Cuba."

De Chateauvieux expressed similar sentiments to Quevedo's when she argued for lifting the embargo.

"It would help the people to be more in contact with other countries," she said. "They are going to see for themselves the difference between life in Cuba and life outside, and change within."

Who gained the most?

As the pope left the country, Vatican officials were pleased at the pope's impact, but worried that Castro may have difficulty convincing his underlings that it is time for reform.

"Castro does have admiration for the pope, and he thinks this visit is important. But his party apparatus is nervous and afraid," said one Vatican official.

In one of his talks, the pope reached out to a group he was unable to visit: Cuba's estimated 500 political prisoners. The pope said they were imprisoned for "ideas which though dissident are nonetheless peaceful" and should be reinserted into society.

Earlier, the Vatican had presented Cuban officials with the names of several hundred Cuban prisoners, asking for clemency on humanitarian grounds. The Cuban government said it would study the possibility, but made no promises.

One positive sign was that the Communist Party daily, *Granma*, responding to the pope's calls, agreed that there should be a "free space" for religious and cultural contributions to national development.

Whatever the outcome, here in the Diocese of Rochester, Cuban Catholics expressed their wish that the fire of freedom lit by the pope continues to burn in Cuba even though he's left.

"I hope that the prayers of the people will get to God, and that he will put his merciful hand to my people and do something for my people," Nuez said.

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