

EDITOR: TOM FOX WR 541

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a top level delegation from the american conference of bishops visited cuba during the week of january 20 at the invitation of the episcopal conference of cuba. during their visit, bishop james malone of youngstown (president of the american conference of bishops), archbishop bernard law of boston, archbishop patrick flores of sant antonio and msg daniel hoye (sec gen of american conference) visited churches, schools and historic sites and met with cuban churchmen and with high cuban government officials including president fidel castro.

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the visit to cuba of the american church delegation had a double character: religious and political.

on the religious side, it provided an opportunity for the american churchmen to discover the reality of religious life in cuba and for the cuban church to moral, financial and material aid from its rich u.s. counterparts. the visit also spurred prospects of reconciliation and unity between the catholic church in cuba and the catholic church in centers of the cuban exile community, principally miami.

on the political side, the visit highlighted the desirability of peace coexistence between the catholic church and cuba's revolution government, a point stressed by cuban leader fidel castro. some diplomats in havana interpreted the visit as another sign that tensions between the united states and cuba could be lessened by further dialogue and pointed to the successful conclusion in mid-december 1984 of the u.s.-cuban immigration agreement as a first step in that direction.

felipe carneado, the man responsible for church affairs within cuba's communist party viewed the visit as a first step in a wider dialogue. cuban vice-president, carlos rafael rodriguez said that cuba and the church have to understand each other and work together on common problems, that of peace, social and economic development and improving the life of the people. rodriguez, who spent long hours with the american delegation said there are many areas in which there is a total coincidence of views between christian and marxist thought, a view often expressed by jesuit-education fidel castro himself.

Delegation from
of Bishops
The American Conference
of Bishops

in his sermon at havana's gothic sacred heart church, cuban archbishop ~~jaime~~ ortega said that +the cause of unity brings the christians closer to other christians and also brings them closer to non-believers.+ in his sermon at the ~~same~~ same church, archbishop flores of san antonio spoke of the importance of unity between the peoples of different lands, between churches and between catholics in cuba and miami. since the revolution, there have been an evident estrangement between the cuban based church and catholic leaders in miami. who have suggested that the church in cuba is too passive in its dealings with cuba's socialist government.

the visit of the american delegation was not considered as a renewal of contacts between the u.s. and cuban churches inasmuch as prior to the cuban revolution they had little to do with one another. cuba's catholic church had strong links with spain and 70 percent of its priests and nuns in 1959, the year of the revolutionary triumph, were spanish.

the american delegation found freedom of worship in cuba but a dramatically debilitated church.

following the revolution, the catholic church in cuba lost its mass base when many priests confronted castro's revolutionary government.

in the early 1960's, most of cuba's wealthy catholics went into exile and the majority of the spanish priests view the revolution with great reserve and, in some cases, actively identified with counterrevolutionary groups. on september 17, 1961, the cuban government expelled 131 priests and nuns from the island, accusing them of oppositionist activities.

during the first years of the revolution, numerous cubans who support the revolution felt obliged to make a choice and left the church.

although several million cubans are baptized, only 75,000 of cuba's 10 million population attend mass on sundays.

archbishop flores pointed to the fact that there is no public, anti-church propaganda in cuba but he noted that the church no longer has access to the mass media nor is it permitted to run parochial schools since all private education institutions with the exception of seminaries were prohibited by law in 1960.

the american delegation discovered that the cuban church has not been successful in winning over the new generation. cuba's two catholic seminaries have a total of only 70 students.

more than half of cuba's 220 catholic priests were ordained since the revolution and there is a strong current among many younger priests in favor of cooperation with the cuban government in the fields of social services and welfare. 3

the cuban government gives monetary and material aid for the repair of churches which are declared historical monuments and for catholic welfare projects such as homes for the aged and a home for the mentally ill. last year fidel castro pointed to the work of the nuns at the santovenia home for the aged in havana as an example of efficiency and dedication that outshines state run facilities.

a special department in the central committee of cuba's communist party, the american bishops learned, is the main point of contact between the church and state in cuba. while relations between the two are those of respect, the american delegation was made aware of some of the problems faced by the cuban church.

cuban prelates told the american churchmen that they would like a more defined position on the part of the cuban government on the question of discrimination against religious persons in certain spheres. while freedom of religion is explicitly guaranteed in the cuban constitution, some church officials say that religious youth, as an example, find it difficult to enter the highly selected university system as full time students.

the cuban church also wants the cuban government to allow foreign priests to reinforce the cuban clergy in greater numbers. over the past few months the cuban government has, in fact, given permission for foreign nuns to work in the social aid and welfare projects of the church but few foreign priests have received permission to give pastoral services in cuban churches on a permanent basis..

plans are being made for the visit of another u.s. catholic church delegation to visit the island and maintain the dialogue already begun. this first encounter was considered as positive by all concerned. the top vatican representative in havana, msg giulio anaudi said he was highly satisfied by the visit.

tom - if you want materials on press conference please let us know immediately so that i will have them punched for the 2pm (est) call from you/ regards/ martin

following is essential content of a press conference chaired by archbishop james malone, president of the u.s. bishops conference. malone said +we had a helpful exchange of views on a wide

range of topics during a five hour meeting with fidel castro. +

he said that the delegation commented to castro on some positive observations and also pointed out several pastoral concerns.

among the positive comments were that +there have been marked improvements in the overall literacy state of the people, that there have been limited but real improvements in communications between the church and state and that health care has improved appreciably as evidenced in the low infant mortality rate. +

among the pastoral concerns pointed out by the bishops was +the need for intensive and organised dialogue between the bishops of cuba and the highest authorities of the government. + mr castro, + the archbishop stated in his prepared statement, +seemed to be open to such a dialogue. +

the bishops also mentioned to dr. castro what they believe is the defacto discrimination against believing catholics. +while we seek no special privilege as members of a certain faith, we always ask that practicing believer not suffer discrimination in jobs, education and other areas of society. +mr. castro said that pressure against catholics was no part of the policy of government and noted historical reasons which might explain the possibility of individual pressure against catholics, + the statement said and went on, +dr. castro pledged to review this in detail with cuban bishops. +

archbishop malone announced that dr. castro had been presented with a list of political prisoners who have, according to their relatives in the united states, problems of health. castro said the health of those on the list would be checked and if anyone is found to be seriously ill they will be released as a humanitarian gesture and allowed to join their relatives overseas.

malone said castro told them that he would like to become acquainted with the pope and amid laughter added: +in cuba or in rome. +

the president of the u.s. bishops conference refuted charges made by some church leader in miami that the delegation had been manipulated by the cubans. he said: given the obvious restrictions of the brief visit, we do not feel that we have in any way been manipulated by the authorities. + he said that the delegation had been free to go where they wanted and to talk to anyone.

the statement read by malone said the highlight of the visit was the celebration of public liturgies in churches in santiago de cuba and havana. +the participation of so many people, especially the young, was a source of great encouragement,+ he said.

he also noted that +the church in cuba has for many reasons experienced a significant loss of membership. +there seems to be reasons to hope that this trend has been stopped,+ he said.

the statement said that the u.s. bishops would explore the possibility of sending financial assistance to the church in cuba.

it ended: +we believe it is significant that the bishops of cuba and the highest authorities in government there may soon meet in dialogue in an intensive and ongoing manner. while there have been improved communication possibilities in recent times, this new level of discussion is a real sign of hope for the church in cuba.+

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