

## The Pope and Raúl Castro: Rubbing Along

by Elizabeth Dore

Pope Benedict XVI's visit to Cuba was a carefully choreographed dance, more tango than salsa. For three days the Pontiff and Raúl Castro, Cuba's president, gracefully circled one another, trying not to step on each other's toes. While there were some touchy moments, all in all the visit went very well for the two leaders. The Pope wanted to shore up the standing of a Catholic Church trying to position itself as the not-so-loyal opposition to the socialist government in Havana. President Raúl Castro wanted the Pope to condemn the US embargo. Both got much of what they wanted. No mean trick considering the longstanding enmity between the Roman Catholic Church and the Cuban Communist Party.

Fourteen years ago Pope John Paul II's visit to Cuba marked a watershed in Church-State relations. Prior to his visit religion was officially tolerated, but effectively outlawed. According to the constitution, Cuba was an atheist state. Shortly before that first papal visit, the constitution was changed to permit religious freedom. This demonstrated the pragmatism of Fidel Castro, then the country's President. Cubans were very religious, so better to tolerate religious practices than continue to try to repress them, especially at a time when the economy was in sharp decline and living standards plummeting. The irony vis-à-vis Pope John Paul's intentions was that Cubans did not flock to the Catholic Church. The outpouring of religious fervour was of a different sort. Most Cubans turned to various Afro-Cuban faiths, Santería, Yoruba, Regla de Ocha. These religions are a legacy of slavery, which lasted longer in Cuba than in almost any other country in the world. Slavery was finally abolished at the end of the nineteenth century.

Pope Benedict's visit was less momentous. The head of the Cuban Catholic Church, Cardinal Jaime Ortega, had been working tirelessly and for the most part quietly to expand spaces for Cuba's very restricted civil society. Recently he brokered the release of virtually all of the country's political prisoners. This consolidated the position of the Catholic Church as the main, one might say the only, institution permitted to operate outside the reach of the state apparatus. It is likely that Pope Benedict's trip was meant to bolster this process, and bolster his own international prestige.

The role of the Cuban Catholic Church in the prisoner release, and Pope Benedict's reputation as a reactionary firebrand, raised expectations that the Pontiff would somehow tighten the screws on Cuba's communist leaders. For the most part he was mealy mouthed. "I have entrusted to the Mother of God the future of your country, advancing along the ways of renewal and hope," he said. "I have also prayed to the Virgin for the needs of those who suffer, of those who are deprived of freedom, those who are separated from their loved ones or who are undergoing times of difficulty." He refused to meet with the Women in White, Cuba's most active dissident Catholic organization, comprised of the wives and daughters of ex-political prisoners. He said nothing about the case of Alan Gross, jailed in Cuba for his role in a CIA operation, which would have greatly pleased Washington. In short, the Pope mostly abided by the rules his hosts set out. Cubans turned out in the thousands to see the Pope. Many were not there of their own volition. According to all reports, people were trucked in to attend his open-air masses in Havana and Santiago, in much the same way that Cubans are made to participate in big rallies to commemorate May Day and the Birth of the Revolution. They had to sign in and sign out to prove they fulfilled their obligation, and they received a soft drink and a sandwich by way of reward. Unlike Cuba-watchers world-wide, Cubans living on the island are simply not that interested in what the Pope has to say. Cubans who look to the Catholic hierarchy for spiritual or

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political leadership are few in number. Many of those who do were warned in no uncertain terms to stay away. The phones of Catholic dissidents were disconnected, their surveillance tightened, some were detained. President Raúl Castro did not want anti-government demonstrations while the world was watching. The Pope said nothing publically, nothing directly, about the suppression of his flock under his watch. Where was God's supposed representative on earth when his people needed him? He was doing what his hosts wanted him to do, and he was minding his own business.

Pope Benedict's major business on this trip to Latin America was to rally the faithful. Latin America has more Roman Catholics than any other continent, but their numbers are falling. For fifty years Latin Americans have been turning to evangelical Protestant sects for their spiritual and earthly needs. Evangelical churches are generously funded by religious organisations in the United States, the same that support the Tea Party movement. In Latin America they are in every community, and like corner shops they supply an array of needs from spiritual to social and material. Evangelical churches are springing up in Cuba, but because of their association with the US, because of the US embargo, and because of the enormous popularity of Afro-Cuban religions, they are not very important.

Pope Benedict faces another challenge in his drive to spread the faith. Today about half of the presidents in Latin America are left of centre. A roll call of Latin American leftist (or leftish) countries includes Venezuela, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Peru, Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, El Salvador and Cuba. Pope Benedict in his earlier incarnation, the right-wing Cardinal Ratzinger, denounced the progressive wing of the Latin American Catholic Church. He took a leading role in campaigns to marginalise, even ex-communicate, bishops and priests who advocated liberation theology. The leftist presidents are wary of this Pope, and several made that clear when he proposed to visit their countries. So he restricted his continental tour to Mexico, where there is a right-wing president, and to Cuba, where Raúl Castro hoped to gain an ally in the country's longstanding fight against the United States.

For the past eight years I directed a large oral history project in Cuba. With Cuban and British colleagues I interviewed women and men across the island about their lives in the revolution. Almost no one we got to know through the project was a practicing Catholic— and we got to know many very well over the course of long interviews that spanned several years. Many Cubans told us their life stories sitting beneath an image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus hanging on the wall above their kitchen table. I thought at first this was a sign of Catholic faith. For some it may have been. I learned, however, that for many, perhaps most, Jesus symbolizes the supreme deity in Cuba's Yoruba religions. Because slaves were forbidden from practicing African religions, they created a parallel African-Catholic pantheon. Most Cubans we interviewed told us that they never went to mass and they avoided Catholic priests. If they went into a Catholic church, and they did so rarely, it was to pray to the Virgin or to saints, whose counterparts are in the Afro-Cuban pantheon. Or they used the local church as a sort of liberated space where they could talk to their friends and neighbours with little fear of surveillance.

Media coverage of the Pope's visit has, predictably, emphasised repression in Cuba. An article on *The New York Times* website reported that Cuba "ranks as one of the most repressive nations on earth," a claim repeated by Reuters and others. This is far, far from the truth. The relevant question is why was there so little overt repression in Cuba over the years? I discovered, talking with Cubans across the island, that the answer lies in Fidel Castro's charisma, a patriarchal political system that offered security in exchange for compliance, and a permanent escape valve. Paradoxically, so long as Cuban exiles were welcomed into the United States with open arms,

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with housing benefits, and with food stamps, many who opposed the government left. Consequently there was less repression.

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