

Fidel and the Pope

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The extraordinary reception accorded Pope John Paul II during his visit to Cuba was a measure of Fidel Castro's desperation to reach an accommodation with Washington and an end to the 36-year-old US economic embargo against the island nation.

For five days the Vatican was given unlimited, state-sponsored access to the Cuban people. Masses were held in virtually every major city and broadcast live into every Cuban home. The Pope's denunciations of the Castro regime went unanswered, while his statements opposing the embargo, as well as "materialism" and the "blind forces of the market," were given great play by the government-controlled press.

Castro's embrace of the pontiff provoked much speculation about his personal motives and considerable consternation among both his followers in Cuba and his apologists internationally. The sight of Castro in a dark business suit—the first time since the revolution that he has appeared in Cuba without his olive drab uniform—addressing the Polish-born Wojtyla as "your Holiness" and attending mass, prompted many to wonder whether the Cuban leader was returning in his old age to the faith of his youth.

No doubt John Paul himself factored Castro's early Jesuit training into his calculations on the Vatican's ability to turn Cuba's crisis to its own advantage. The church has always held the position that once a Catholic, always a Catholic. More decisive, however, is the political estimation of the Cuban situation made by both the Vatican and its backers in the capitalist centers of Western Europe.

John Paul, it should be recalled, played a significant role in the events of the 1980s which culminated in the collapse of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe, and ultimately the liquidation of the Soviet Union. In relation to his native Poland, he worked on an intimate basis with the US Central Intelligence Agency to divert

the mass rebellion of the workers into channels advantageous to American imperialism.

How is it that such a figure receives a hero's welcome from the Castro regime, whose very existence has been called into question by the collapse of the Soviet bloc? The Castro regime did far more than "let the Pope come to Cuba." In addition to the government broadcast network carrying every papal appearance, the press issued appeals to all Cubans, "believers and nonbelievers," to turn out for the visit, and the ruling party's Committees for the Defense of the Revolution organized people on a block-by-block basis to swell John Paul's audiences and line the route of his "popemobile." A massive portrait of the Sacred Heart of Jesus was hung in Havana's Plaza de la Revolución, eclipsing the permanently displayed Christ-like image of the long-dead guerrilla, Ernesto "Che" Guevara.

This fomenting of enthusiasm for Catholicism and the Pope is extraordinary, not only because the Castro regime, until a few years ago, proclaimed itself atheist. Cuba has historically been the least Catholic of all the Latin American countries. In the prerevolutionary period most priests had to be imported from Spain and the church counted upon the elderly for its followers, while providing its unstinting support to the ruling oligarchy and, in the end, the Batista dictatorship.

But it is precisely the anticommunist credentials of John Paul and the church that he heads which make the visit useful to the Castro regime as a gesture of accommodation to imperialism. Ricardo Alarcon, the former foreign minister and head of the national legislature, was most explicit in this regard. "I hope," he declared, "that the visit of the Pope will serve to mark a before and after in the North American policy of hostility."

The principal change that Havana seeks is an end to the US ban on trade with Cuba. The economic embargo, or blockade as it is termed in Cuba, is

presented by the Castro regime as the root of all of the island's economic and social crises. Even those Castroites who criticized the regime's uncritical attitude toward the Pope justified the visit on the grounds of John Paul's public criticism of the US embargo.

The Pope's condemnation of US policy, however, is hardly unique. Nor is it by any means an indication of "anti-imperialist" sentiment in the Vatican. Within the United States, the demand that the embargo be lifted is the official position of the National Association of Manufacturers and virtually every other major business organization. Bankers such as Paul Volcker and David Rockefeller have repeatedly condemned it.

In Europe it is universally viewed as an unnecessary and irrational impediment to capitalist investment and trade. The Helms-Burton law, which attempts to penalize foreign corporations for operating in Cuba, is bitterly resented as an attempt by Washington to enforce this irrational policy beyond its own territory.

The continuation of this policy, at the expense of US corporate interest eager to exploit the Cuban market, is a measure of the continuing ideological grip of anticommunism over US foreign policy, as well as the disproportionate role played by extreme right-wing organizations, such as the Cuban National Foundation, in dictating Washington's agenda.

As for Castro, the claim that the embargo is the source of all of Cuba's problems is somewhat paradoxical. Clearly, US policy has greatly exacerbated shortages that have created conditions of misery for the majority of the island's population. Moreover, Washington routinely sabotages Cuba's attempts to find other economic openings.

But the central promise of Castro's petty-bourgeois nationalist movement was to free Cuba from US economic domination. For nearly three decades he was able to achieve independence from US capital only by accepting Cuba's dependence on the Soviet bloc. With the collapse of the latter, the Castro regime is demanding that restrictions on US capital entering Cuba be torn down.

There are few overt signs that the Clinton administration is about to depart from the long-standing policy on Cuba. In an interview staged to answer allegations of sexual scandal in the White House, Clinton made it clear that he had no intention of lifting

the embargo and suggested that the Pope's criticisms of US policy reflected the views of European big business.

What could be seen as a gesture from the administration, however, came on the eve of the Pope's visit. The Pentagon announced that it was removing some 50,000 antipersonnel and antitank mines which have ringed the US naval base at Guantanamo, Cuba since 1961, the year in which Washington broke off diplomatic relations with the Castro regime and launched the abortive Bay of Pigs invasion.

Also coinciding with the Pope's visit, a number of US delegations descended on the island. These included a Congressional group headed by New York Congressman Charles Rangel and Joe Moakley of Massachusetts, as well as a team of top aides to Senator Jesse Helms and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Washington, meanwhile, asked for and received unprecedented permission from the Cuban government to reinforce its Interests Section in Havana with nine additional US personnel.



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