

Pope Benedict backs market measures in Cuba

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On a three-day visit to Cuba this week, Pope Benedict XVI gave the Vatican's seal of approval to the government's policies of opening the Cuban economy to private property relations and exploitation by global transnational corporations.

A curious incident that casts light on the relationship between the Cuban state and the Vatican took place a week before the Pope's arrival. On March 17, the Cuban police removed 13 government opponents who were conducting a sit-down protest in the Catholic Cathedral in Havana, demanding an audience with the Pope.

The previous evening, March 16, Cardinal Jaime Ortega had appeared on Cuban state television, denouncing the protesters. Using the language of the Raúl Castro government, Ortega called them mercenaries acting in consort with other groups on the island and demanded that they be removed. Pointedly, both Ortega and the government refused to say what message the protesters planned to give to the Pope. Days earlier, the church, which claims to represent the ideology of "love," had stopped food from reaching the protesters.

In preparation for the Pope's visit the cities of Havana and Santiago were "cleansed" of many of their street children, beggars and homeless, a growing population that is testimony to the increasing inequality in this island-nation. Those rounded up were arbitrarily housed in detention centers.

Security forces also kept a tight watch on right-wing Cuban dissidents; some were arrested, others were prevented from seeing the Pope.

A Cuban blogger and devout Catholic commented in disgust: "The Cuban church will not fight for the poor. It prefers to observe official protocol. Beggars bother it, as do the quantity of the mentally ill that show up at church asking for help."

Such a characterization would not surprise anyone with even a minimal knowledge of the Catholic Church's history in Latin America. The spirit of greed is deeply entrenched in the Vatican itself, which is constantly reeling from one

financial scandal to another.

Pope Benedict XVI, formerly Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, arrived in the eastern city of Santiago on March 26. While in Mexico, on the eve of his arrival, the Pope declared that Marxism no longer works. Undoubtedly, Raúl Castro and his administration agree with him.

Benedict XVI's visit marks the culmination of a relationship between the Vatican and the Cuban Regime that began in 1992—in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union—when the government in Havana, then headed by Fidel Castro, modified the constitution.

From then on, the state would no longer define itself as atheist; it would now be a secular one. This semantic change signaled a change in the status of Catholicism and in Havana's relations with the Vatican. As part of the changes, membership in the Cuban Communist Party was opened to Catholics.

The "thaw" between the government and the Vatican that was born out of these counter-reforms paved the way for the visit to Cuba by Pope John Paul II in January, 1998 and an ostentatiously warm welcome from the Jesuit-educated Fidel.

Fourteen years after Pope John Paul's visit, the relationship between the Vatican and the Cuban Government, now headed by Raúl, Fidel Castro's slightly younger brother, has evolved substantially and the Catholic Church is now an important factor in Cuban politics.

In a country in which traditionally Protestants, Jews, *Santería* worshipers, and Catholics existed side-by-side and practiced their faiths in relative freedom, the Catholic Church is re-conquering its pre-revolutionary primacy. It has become the only independent institution allowed to operate without the involvement of the Cuban Communist Party.

In 2006 the Catholic Church announced plans to build a new seminary—the first in 50 years. The 11-building, 55-acre complex on the outskirts of Havana, built with government-subsidized construction materials, was inaugurated in November, 2010 with Raúl Castro in attendance.

Earlier that year, the church had flexed its muscles when it

negotiated the release and exile to Spain, of scores of right-wing dissidents from Cuban jails, a number of whom had actively collaborated with US imperialism in its espionage and destabilization operations against the Cuban government.

Those negotiations between Raúl Castro, Cardinal Ortega and Santiago Archbishop Dionisio García were aimed at clearing the way to an expanded role of European, and particularly Spanish, capital in Cuba. The talks were well publicized, with newspapers across Cuba publishing photos of the three men on their front pages, giving public legitimacy to the church.

Throughout the Pope's three-day visit, Raúl Castro, Cuban officials and the Cuban media referred to Ratzinger in exaggeratedly deferential terms, e.g., his holiness, heavenly father, and even supreme pontiff.

While making no response to the Pope's anti-communist and anti-Marxist declarations, the Cuban media gave major coverage to his criticism of the half-century-old US economic embargo on the island, a position that merely places him in sync with virtually every government in Europe, not to mention the US National Association of Manufacturers.

The Cuban government, which had closed all Catholic schools and universities in the aftermath of the 1959 revolution, now allows the Catholic University of Murcia, Spain to operate two campuses for postgraduate studies on the island, including a business school where Cubans will be able to graduate with a Masters in Business Administration, a degree designed to provide transnational businesses, hotels and banks with native managerial personnel with which to better exploit the Cuban working class.

Restoration of the Catholic Church goes hand in hand with the economic counter-reforms that have contributed to a widening gap between the working class and a newly rich layer of high government officials, heads of government-owned enterprises, and recipients of US dollars and euros.

The Raúl Castro administration is replacing its pseudo-Marxist, petty-bourgeois nationalist ideology with one more suited for the restoration of private property, the end of social programs that benefit the working class and poor and the creation of an army of unemployed workers.

Last year, the government announced that 1.5 million government workers were to be sacked Over a period of a few years. In April, 2011, at its first Congress in 13 years, the Cuban Communist Party approved Castro's proposals.

The layoffs have already begun. The official unemployment rate is 3.8 percent, more than twice what it was before the layoffs. At the same time the government has dramatically increased the number of privately owned domestic companies operating in Cuba, with the right to hire

unemployed workers.

In the last year, the number of private enterprises has exploded from 145,000 to 350,000, many of them high-end boutiques and pricey restaurants.

A Cuban blogger recently reported on one of those newly opened businesses: a high-end Havana boutique, where a pair of women's shoes costs the equivalent of three months salary for a state employee. As a sign of the times, the writer points out that across the street from this boutique was an elderly woman begging.

In agriculture, some of the land that had been property of the state has been parceled out to individual farmers. It is the expectation that the new private industries and farms will absorb the unemployed.

Among the economic changes being planned by the Raúl Castro government is a reduction in ration cards that currently ensure a minimal dietary level for many Cuban households.

In his homily in Santiago, Benedict XVI told Cubans to re-dedicate themselves to Christ, and, on that basis, build a better society.

Before leaving Cuba on March 28, Ratzinger spoke to Fidel Castro, the aging ex-head of state. "He is a good man," said Castro of the Pope. In a meeting with President Raúl Castro, Pope Benedict pressed both for an expansion of free market measures and, as he had done in Mexico a few days before, for granting the Catholic Church more control over education and the media, all in the name of religious liberty.

The author also recommends:

Fidel and the Pope

[27 January 1998]



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