

Pope Francis to Cubans: “avoid ideology”...or else!

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Pope Francis arrived in Cuba Sunday for a three-day visit, then left for the United States. The visit to both nations is described in the press as symbolically bridging the two reconciled adversaries. Francis (former Buenos Aires Archbishop Jorge Mario Bergoglio) conducted mass at Cuba's Copper Virgin, praying for reconciliation for all Cubans, residents and in exile. He also met with Cuba's president Raul Castro and his older brother, former president Fidel Castro.

The evolution of Cuba's relationship with the Catholic Church chronologically goes hand in hand with, and is the ideological counterpart to, the pro-market reforms that have restored private property, production for profits, free markets, and foreign investment in Cuba.

While the separation between Church and State in Cuba has been enshrined in every constitution since 1901, that separation was observed in its breach; throughout Cuban history the Catholic Church played a prominent role, not only in supporting brutal dictatorship, such as those of Machado and Batista, and the repression of the working class but also, when the time came, smoothing the transition between Batista and Fidel Castro in 1959.

Much of the Catholic Church in Cuba, as in the rest of Latin America and in the US, following the defeat of the Spanish Revolution (1936-39), was under the ideological influence of the Franco and the Spanish fascist *Falange*. The surplus of *falangista* Spanish priests was exported to Latin America.

For this reason during the 1950s the church was opposed in Cuba by anticlerical and atheist intellectuals, and despised by many workers. Following the triumph of the Cuban Revolution, the new government enforced more resolutely the separation of church and state.

In 1961 expulsions took place of Spanish priests, and the separation from the Church of some of its properties and landholdings, which were transformed in government facilities and schools. Atheism was encouraged in Cuban education. While about 60 percent of Cubans are nominally Catholic today (down from about 70 percent in 1961), participation in masses and other sacraments, including baptisms, is at a historical low, while Afro-Cuban and evangelical cults made gains among the poorest and least educated layers. Fidel Castro himself was excommunicated from Catholicism in January 1963, as a result of the regime's expulsion of Spanish priests.

Since 1961 the Cuban people have been free to worship, and the Church remained autonomous from the government, though religious practices were discouraged. The Cuban government itself maintained full relations with the Vatican.

By the 1970s, relations between the regime and the Catholic Church had reached their lowest point, with a decreasing number of men choosing the priesthood; some churches had no priest. Celebrations such as Easter and Christmas did not take place officially. The Constitution of 1976 declared Cuba to be an “Atheist State.”

In 1992 Cuba modified its constitution replaced the phrase “Atheist State” with “Secular State.” This semantic change signaled more than a change in the status of Catholicism in Cuba. As part of the changes, membership in the Cuban Communist Party was opened to Catholics.

This act, part of the political transformation of Cuba driven by the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, opened the door for a new relationship with the Catholic Church and the Vatican and for popes to visit.

Fidel Castro opened the door when he met with Pope

John Paul II; the aging leader initiated a warming up of relations between the Cuban regime and the Vatican. As a sign of good faith Castro publicly disavowed the “religion of Atheism” that he claimed existed in Cuba and began taking steps to reestablish the Church’s traditional historical relationship with the Cuban state, beginning with the official celebration of the Christmas holiday in 1998.

In 1998 John Paul II visited the island nation and gave masses that were attended by many high-ranking government officials. Since that visit, there has been a steady stream of Vatican officials visiting Cuba.

In 2012 Pope Benedict (Joseph Ratzinger) also traveled to Cuba, following a visit to Mexico. While Ratzinger declared Marxism dead and called for the restoration of private property and “free market” reforms in Cuba, this was no obstacle to a warm welcome from Cuban officials.

Since Benedict’s visit, hundreds of state-owned small and medium-sized businesses have been turned into privately owned cooperatives, while Spanish, Canadian and other transnational firms have penetrated the economy. In April 2014 Cuba put in place foreign-investment reforms that allow Cuban exiles to invest in Cuban firms. Parallel to these changes there has been a reduction in the role of government agencies, and the destruction of thousands of government jobs.

The visit by Pope Francis reaffirms and strengthens the new social role that the Church intends to play as imperialism regains its influence over Cuba. The Catholic Church alternates, within an overall reactionary framework, an approach now *falangista*, now liberal.

Both sides are represented in Jorge Bergoglio; the collaborator with the military-fascist junta that ruled Argentina between 1976 and 1983, and the kind liberal who rode the Buenos Aires subways and is now calling for disinterested “service” to the poor. Pope Francis (The Dirty War Pope), Bergoglio spent 40 minutes chatting on Sunday with Fidel Castro, himself a product of a Catholic education, exchanging books on religion. He also reviewed the state of US-Cuba relations with his brother Raul, the Cuban president.

Unlike John Paul II and Benedict, Francis took a softer stance, deferential to Cuban authorities, whose favors he wants, and made a public relations effort to give the Church a human face. In a homily delivered in

Revolution Square with the monument to Che Guevara behind him, the Pope preached tolerance and called on Cubans to eschew “ideologies.”

Bergoglio made few concrete political statements, other than calling for successful negotiations between the FARC guerrillas and the Colombian government. Along those lines, Francis also avoided defending political dissidents, or raising alarms about social conditions. Undoubtedly behind-the-scene negotiations are taking place to restore the Church to its former privileges.

Most likely in deference for the brutal inequality that is now surfacing in Cuba, Francis avoided making any references to capitalist injustice, a theme that he has touched on before. However, in a more subdued way, Bergoglio did signal his concern that the Cuban ruling class will go too far in destroying those concessions that have been granted to Cuban workers, such as jobs, medical care and education, to benefit a greedy few. He repeatedly called for a balance, between people “benefiting their own” and the provision of social needs.

The Pope brought together US Secretary of State John Kerry, President Obama, Raul Castro and Cuban foreign minister Bruno Rodriguez, to build the scaffolding for the restoration of US and Cuban relations that now opens the door to the exploitation of Cuban labor and resources, and the integration of Cuba into global capitalism.

By repeatedly telling his young listeners to avoid “ideology,” the Pope is warning the working class to stay away from socialism and revolution; true to his personal history as Buenos Aires archbishop dripping with blood, his message is really “stay away from revolution...or else!”



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