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On January 21, Pope John Paul II arrived in Cuba for a four-day visit. The trip, his 85th abroad, was the culmination of almost 20 years of planning and after several attempts to fulfill that goal had failed. This event would constitute a historical landmark for Cuba, not just because of the novelty of the visit (Cuba was the only major country in the hemisphere not visited by the pope), but also due to its possible internal repercussions both for the Church and for the communist regime.

The visit could also be envisioned as a double-edged sword, both for the Castro government as well as for the Church, entailing positive and negative outcomes. For Castro, the presence of the eminent contemporary spiritual leader could constitute not only recognition, but also imbue some sort of legitimacy to his 40-year rule. In the context of Cuba's great economic crisis, the visit could be interpreted in the international arena as proof of a certain opening up, at least towards religion, suggesting that more could ensue at the social, political and economic levels, particularly those required by Europe, in order to continue financial support and trade. On the negative side, the international press could expose the deteriorating Cuban reality to the world, and focus on the repression of

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dissidents and political opposition. This could be detrimental to Castro's economic survival plans. For the Church, the pope's visit could constitute a strong shot of enthusiasm and energy for this battered social institution, and a means of exerting pressure for a greater opening and operational space for the Church on the island. On the other hand, the Catholic Church ran the risk of appearing, both nationally and internationally, as endorsing a totalitarian government, thus promoting its credibility.2

John Paul II's visit was marked by special excitement in the preparation efforts made during the months prior to the trip and even days before his arrival. On the part of the government it was clear that the intent was to minimize the Church benefits vis a vis the people,3 while trying to maximize the advantages of the pope's presence, particularly enhancing the international image of the system. The supply of transportation was one of the points of dispute during the months prior to the visit. Another concern was the press coverage and the arrival of journalists and other visitors. With the former there was an attempt to undermine the private effort to move people to the big gatherings. In view of the Vatican firmness, the government became more flexible, even providing certain transportation facilities. This reached its peak with Castro's call to his sympathizers to attend the public events,4 a smart move, in view of the great popular enthusiasm that the visit was generating.

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2 For a good analysis of these expectations, see Juan O. Tamayo, "Island of Expectations, Cuba's Catholic Church hopes the unprecedented visit of the pope this week will solidify religious freedoms," The Miami Herald, January 18, 1998. See also, for the possible gains or losses from both sides, Tad Szulc, "When the Pope Visits Castro: Who Wins? Who Loses?," Parade, December 14, 1997.

3 Although there were some broadcasts allowed on TV and radio by Cuban bishops prior to the visit, the governmental reluctance to "grant too much" was exemplified by not allowing the broadcast of two church-produced documentaries on the pope. Ibid.

4 Juan O. Tamayo, "Castro urges Cubans to attend papal events," The Miami Herald, January 18, 1998. It seems that those attending the events would not lose the salary for the day, see, Tomás Regalado, "Ahora Castro va a pagarles a día a quienes asistan a los actos papales," Diario Las Américas, January 21, 1998.
The issue of TV coverage was another very important point of friction. The government tried to reduce live coverage to a minimum, thereby excluding the coverage of mass events in which the pope and the Cuban bishops would have the opportunity to deliver any special message to the entire population. The initial intent was that there would only be live coverage of the final Mass on January 25 in Havana, as stated by Castro’s speech on January 16th. According to Vatican sources, the whole trip came to a breaking point when it was expressed by the pope’s representatives that "no direct broadcast, no visit." Castro finally agreed that there could be live coverage for the entire country of all mass events. However, it should be noted that there were many blackouts throughout the nation, particularly during the Santiago de Cuba Mass, coincidentally, one of the events which was most critical of the government, thus preventing the direct exposure of the Church’s message.

Another pre-visit problem had to do with the issuing of visas to foreign journalists, trying to cover the event, and to religious pilgrims. At least 60 journalists did not receive visas, another example of Cuba's "longstanding system for intimidating and punishing the foreign correspondents who cover news on the island." Among those excluded were all journalists from the major English and Spanish Miami-based newspapers. Because of their critical reports on Cuba, journalists have been systematically denied re-entry permits to the island or are simply expelled from it. The situation is considered by expert journalists as "by far the harshest government system of media control in Latin America." But many lay

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persons were also discriminated against regarding visas to travel to Cuba, even to Cubans living abroad that had been invited by the Catholic bishops.8

The Pope's Visit

The pope's visit was news long before his arrival in Cuba. In a press conference held on board the Alitalia plane that carried him, John Paul II issued some very controversial statements, considering that he was visiting a country ruled by a Marxist-Leninist party. He stated that the Marxist revolution "was the revolution of hate, revenge and victims,"9 and thereby reaffirmed his position in defense of human rights. He had more generous words for Che Guevara, whom he considered genuinely interested in "serving the poor." He also indicated that he wanted to hear the truth from Fidel Castro: "I want to hear the truth always and from every angle. I want him to tell me the truth, as a man, as president, as

8 This was the case of well-known professor María Cristina Herrera, of Miami-Dade Community College and director of the Institute for Cuban Studies, that in the past had traveled many times to Cuba and had even been invited by the archbishop of Santiago de Cuba. Many, like her, who had a degree of expertise on Cuba and particular affinity with the Cuban Catholic Church were also denied visas, in itself a violation of Cuba's current Constitution. See Christopher Marquis, "Cuba lags in granting visas for applicants," The Miami Herald, January 21, 1998, p. 8A. This author has personal knowledge of a number of cases of Cuban exiles who were denied entry, and who appeared to have in common the fact that they had been somewhat critical of that system.

9 See "Encuentro del Papa con los periodistas durante el vuelo a Cuba," L'Osservatore Romano, January 30, 1998, pp. 4, 6; and "La revolución marxista es la revolución del odio, las venganzas y las víctimas," Diario Las Américas, January 22, 1998, p. 1A. In the L'Osservatore Romano, (Spanish version), mentioned above there is a very detailed chronicle of all the events during the papal visit. We will rely on this issue for this analysis. It is regrettable that this important Vatican publication had not made an adequate research dealing with past events. Such is the case of their brief biographical note on Fidel Castro (pp. 17, 19). In it, three historical errors were made: that Castro was liberated the same year he was sentenced to 15 years in prison for his attack to the Moncada Garrison; that he arrived "in secret" in the "sailboat" Granma, and finally, and perhaps the worst, that after declaring Cuba to be Marxist-Leninist in 1961 "he expelled several Bishops and numerous priests." Only one Bishop was expelled (Auxiliary Bishop of Havana Msgr. Eduardo Boza Masvidal) in September 1961, along with 130 priests or male religious personnel on the Spanish ship Covadonga. Castro declared himself Marxist-Leninist in December 1961.
commander of the revolution." This encounter with the press was a prelude of what would take place later on, when he would touch upon very sensitive issues in his homilies, regarding the Cuban reality.

The arrival in Havana was preceded by an extended flight over the westernmost province, Pinar del Río, which he would be unable to visit, as a special salute to the people there. Dressed in a dark and sober civilian suit, Fidel Castro solicitously greeted the Holy Father and delivered a speech in which he harshly denounced Spanish colonization,10 and even his own religious education received from the Jesuits. He called the American economic embargo genocide, and shrewdly tried to identify his thinking with that of the pope in terms of Cuba's opposition to injustice in the world. He proclaimed, with hypocrisy, that "if at some time there were some difficulties (with the Church), the Revolution was not to be blamed."11 He concluded by stating what he considered achievements of his government in terms of social equality, health and education. The pope, on the other hand, praised Cuba's beauty, spoke of his great desire to visit the island, and made reference to the 500 years of evangelization, saluting the Cuban episcopate, the priests and the faithful whom he wished to confirm in the faith. This is where he expressed his famous call to "not be afraid to open your hearts to Christ," and said "may Cuba with all its magnificent potential open itself up to the world, and may the world open itself to Cuba."12

On Thursday, January 22, John Paul II visited Santa Clara, in central Cuba. The message of the open Mass of that day, which about 150,000 attended, was centered on the family. It was preceded briefly by the words of the late Bishop Fernando Prego, who made reference to the crises in Cuban families due to divorce, abortion and family separations, all consequences of the ruling system. He spoke

10 L'Osservatore Romano, January 30, 1998, p. 3. He exaggeratedly estimated the number of Indians killed at 70 million.
11 Ibid. p. 3-4.
12 Ibid.
of the drama of the prisoners, and of those who have migrated or have disappeared at sea. The Holy Father went into greater depth on these topics, censuring the system in polite but stronger terms, regarding the government's anti-birth mentality, the promotion of "people being obliged to be away from the family within the country, and emigration, which has torn apart entire families and caused suffering to a large part of the population."

The pope criticized the current educational system that forces youth to do agricultural work, promoting "the separation of children and the substitution of the role of parents as a result of schooling away from home even during adolescence. These experiences place young people in situations which sadly result in the spread of promiscuous behavior, loss of ethical values, coarseness, premarital sexual relations at an early age and easy recourse to abortion." He emphasized the "solemn obligation (of parents) to educate their offspring. Hence, parents must be acknowledged as the first and foremost educators of their children," and this he considers as "an irreplaceable and inalienable duty and right," making a clear reference to and criticism of the state monopoly over education.

The Holy Father referred to the great economic crisis promoted by the system and its dire consequences. "The social situation experienced in this beloved country has created many difficulties for family stability: for example, material scarcities as when wages are not sufficient or have a very limited buying power" (in clear reference to the situation created by the "dollarization" of the country and the parallel economy established by that measure). He ended by emphasizing that "families need proper housing and a united family life" and stated that the Gospel's values are not a threat to any social system.14

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13 With the dollarization, anyone with that currency can buy in these well-stocked stores. Persons can buy the "convertible peso," equivalent to a dollar at the rate of 20 plus pesos for a dollar. Since people earn their salaries in pesos, being the average salary around 200 pesos per month, one can easily surmise the tremendous burden that this system implies in terms of cost of living. A bottle of cooking oil, very difficult to acquire in the rationed market, will take a fourth of the monthly salary of a person.

The city of Camagüey was the site, on Friday the 23rd, of the second open Mass at the Ignacio Agramonte Plaza, which approximately 300,000 attended. The papal homily was dedicated to the Cuban youth, to which he also left a written document. He reminded the youth that they were "the hope of the Church and the fatherland." He exhorted them to a clean life following Jesus' mandates. Making reference to the governmental efforts aimed at banishing God from the minds of the young, he stated that "unfortunately, it is easy for people to fall into moral relativism and the identity crisis which affects so many young people, who become victims of cultural models which are devoid of meaning or of an ideology which does not offer high and clear moral guidelines." This relativism, he said, creates a vacuum that leads to "alcoholism, the abuse of sex, drug use and prostitution, hidden under different guises." He stressed that "faith and upright, moral behavior go hand in hand."

Making specific reference to the right of the Church to educate, he said: "The Church has the duty of providing a moral, civic and religious formation which will help the youth of Cuba to grow with human and Christian values [...] without fear and perseverance in an educational effort which calls for time, and the institutions needed for this sowing of virtue and spirituality for the good of the Church and of the nation." He later underlined, "may Cuba raise her children in virtue and freedom so that your nation will enjoy a future of authentic integral human development in an environment of lasting peace." He concluded by exhorting the young to be "the principal agents of your own history," and to "not be afraid to open your hearts to Jesus." In the document handed to the youth, the pope made his first reference in an indirect way to the "economic embargoes, which are always deplorable because they hurt the most needy." He reiterated aspects covered in his homily, warning his audience against the previously mentioned damaging escapism and exhorted them to be virtuous since "virtuous young people are what makes a country great," and to "return to your Cuban and Christian roots, and do all that you can to build a future of ever greater dignity and freedom." He stressed
that "freedom involves responsibility. A person is defined above all by his responsible behavior towards others and before history."15

On Thursday evening, the Holy Father went to the University of Havana's main Auditorium. There he prayed before the remains of the illustrious Father Félix Varela, before his meeting with Cuba's cultural elite, mostly the official one, of a Marxist-Leninist orientation. To this audience (which included Fidel Castro, who unexpectedly attended) he extolled the spiritual and Christian values supported by Varela, founder of the Cuban nation.16 In his dissertation the Pontiff underlined how Varela was "the best synthesis one could find of Christian faith and Cuban culture." He remembered that Varela considered democracy "to be the political project best in keeping with human nature." Likewise John Paul II stated that "Christ is the way which leads man to the fullness of life, the way which leads to a society which is more just, more free, more human, more caring." He concluded this encounter by underscoring that "the Church and the cultural institutions of the nation need to meet in dialogue and to work together to develop Cuban culture. They share a common path and a common goal: to serve the human being, to cultivate all aspects of the human spirit and to nourish from within all communal and social relations. He concluded with the famous Varela thought, "that there is no fatherland without virtue and no virtue without piety."17

On Saturday, January 24th, Cuba's first diocese, Santiago de Cuba, was honored with the pope's visit. Here, the strongest words of criticism -by a Cuban bishop- since the early 1960s were pronounced about the prevailing system. Before more than 500,000 persons and a warm weather, the pope crowned the image of the Patroness of Cuba, Our Lady of Charity of El Cobre during the mass at the Antonio Maceo Plaza. The introduction of the Holy Father by Archbishop Pedro


16 According to a witness of that event, Castro seemed extremely interested in the pope's words, to whom he listened with rapt attention and even devotion.

17 *L'Osservatore Romano*, pp. 9, 11.
Meurice constituted, in itself, a landmark of this visit. In the presence of General Raúl Castro, the second in command in the Cuban political and military hierarchy, the archbishop stated that "this was a noble people and also a people that suffers. This is a people [...] that is every time more blocked by foreign interests and suffers from the culture of selfishness, due to the hard moral and economic crisis that we suffer." He referred to the people that "needs to de-mythify the false messianisms," in an obvious reference to Castroism. Alluding to the prevailing totalitarianism he said that this people "has seen disarticulated and ran aground the spaces of association and participation in the civil society, so I introduce to you the soul of a nation that longs for a rebuilding of fraternity based on liberty and solidarity."

Msgr. Meurice expounded about the Cubans "that cannot find purpose in their lives, that have not been able to choose or develop a life project due to the path of depersonalization that is the result of paternalism" (that is totalitarianism). And in his strongest criticism, taking into consideration the attending authorities, the archbishop said that he introduced "Cubans that have confused the fatherland with a party, the nation with the historical process that we have lived in the last decades, and culture with an ideology." According to him, this has generated a situation of uprooting and rejection "as one of the most profound causes of the internal and external exile." In a very important acknowledgement to Cuban exiles, he stated that "the nation lives here and in the diaspora; Cubans suffer, live and wait here and also suffer and wait outside [...] we continue searching for unity, that will never be the fruit of uniformity," referring to the monolithic approach followed by the system. In a clear reference to Cuban prisoners (without distinguishing between common criminals and political prisoners) he said "the poorest among us are those who lack the precious gift of liberty," and he asked the Holy Father to pray for them, among others.18

The pope's homily was devoted to the Patroness of Cuba. He took the opportunity to emphasize certain principles of social philosophy. In this sense, he

18 Ibid., p.13.
highlighted that "true freedom [...] includes the recognition of human rights and social justice. In this regard, lay Catholics holding to their specific role as lay persons [...] have the duty and the right to participate in the public debate on the basis of equality and in attitude of dialogue and reconciliation. Likewise, the good of a nation must be promoted and achieved by its citizens themselves through peaceful and gradual means. In this way, each person, enjoying freedom of expression, being free to undertake initiatives and make proposals within civil society, and enjoying the appropriate freedom of association, will be able to cooperate effectively in the pursuit of the common good." He later underlined the point by adding that the mission of the Church "immersed in civil society, does not seek any type of political power in order to carry out her mission; she wishes only to be the fruitful seed of everyone's good by her presence in the structures of society." The pope remembered the exiles when he said that "I wish to send my greetings also to all of Cuba's children who, in whatever part of the world, venerate Our Lady of Charity; together with all your brothers and sisters who live in this fair land, I place you all under Her maternal protection, asking Her, the loving Mother of all, to unite Her children once more through reconciliation and brotherhood." The occasion was also used to announce the creation of a new diocese of Guantánamo-Baracoa under the direction of Msgr. Carlos Baladrón Valdés, a native of Manzanillo, and until then auxiliary bishop of Havana. With this, the number of dioceses increased to eleven.

That night, the Holy Father visited the Shrine of St. Lazarus, at El Rincón, in the outskirts of Havana, for an encounter with the world of the suffering. A prayer service took place with approximately a hundred lepers and AIDS patients from two nearby hospitals, managed by the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, along with 220 of their staff members. The pope made an address in which, besides making references to the physical suffering, he centered on that of the soul. "There is also the suffering of the soul, such as we see in those who are isolated,

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persecuted, imprisoned for various offenses or for reasons of conscience, for ideas which, though dissident, are nonetheless peaceful. These prisoners of conscience suffer an isolation and are punished for things for which their own conscience does not condemn them. What they want is to participate actively in life, with the opportunity to speak their mind in an atmosphere of respect and tolerance. I encourage efforts to reinsert prisoners into society." This was a clear reference to the Cuban political prisoners and the pope's desire that after their release from prison they be allowed to stay in Cuba, something that the government entirely rejects. He also addressed the pastoral work with the sick in the hospitals and the incarcerated, the ministry with the latter, very much undermined by the government. He was very explicit, saying "the pastoral work in the field of health care and prison ministry must be given the opportunity to perform its mission of service to the infirm, the imprisoned and their families."\(^{20}\)

On the morning of Sunday, January 25th, the Holy Father had an ecumenical encounter in the papal embassy in Havana. There he advocated the dialogue and the union of all Christians. Later, in Havana's Plaza de la Revolución José Martí, before a huge picture of Jesus' Sacred Heart, and before approximately a million persons, including Fidel Castro himself, the pope pronounced his final homily, summarizing, in a way, his earlier preaching. He referred to the two major political and economic systems, criticizing significant negative aspects of both. In reference to Cuba's statist system he said that "the State [...] should encourage a harmonious social climate and a suitable legislation which enables every person and every religious confession to live their faith freely, to express that faith in the context of public life, and to count on adequate resources and opportunities to bring its spiritual, moral and civic benefits to bear on the life of the nation". These are all aspects which are greatly neglected within the Cuban context. On the other hand, he chastised "capitalist neoliberalism which subordinates the human person to blind market forces and conditions the development of peoples on those forces [...]" and

"as a result the wealthy grow even wealthier, while the poor grow ever poorer." He mentioned the need for freedom several times, emphasizing the basic principle of Christian social philosophy about the need of "combining freedom and social justice, freedom and solidarity."

He made reference to the ideas of Father Varela and José Martí, quoting from the latter that "every people needs to be religious [...] An irreligious people will die, because nothing in it encourages virtue. Human injustices offend virtue; it is necessary that heavenly justice guarantee it." He repeated the words pronounced at his arrival, about the need of Cuba to open to the world, and the world to open to Cuba. And he stated, "This is the time to start out on to new paths!" Repeated applause interrupted the pope's homily more than 20 times, and he faced this fact with a great sense of humor, as in previous occasions in Camagüey, making reference to his advanced age saying that "he was not against the repeated applause, because when they applaud, the pope can rest a little." The enthusiasm of the crowd was manifested with the chanting of slogans before and after all the homilies he pronounced. It is worth noting the little applause Castro received when he was mentioned by the pope, in thanking him for his cooperation during the visit. Also noticeable was the repetition out loud of the word liberty and the fact that three persons, who had dared to display anti-government signs, were taken out of the area in a Red Cross ambulance by security agents dressed in civilian clothes.

John Paul II later met with the Cuban Bishops' Conference. He left a written message about which there are a few noticeable points, not precisely touched on in his previous messages. He referred, in a conspicuous but indirect way, to the Afro-Cuban Santería cults, pointedly excluded from contact with the pope during his visit. Those cults have counted with an evident governmental promotion through the media and other avenues. He stated, "There remains nonetheless a certain

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21 Ibid., p.16.


minimalist way of looking at things which would put the Catholic Church on the same level as certain other cultural expressions of religious piety, on par with the syncretist cults which, while deserving of respect, cannot be considered a specific religion but rather an ensemble of traditions and beliefs." He underlined the need to count with "[...] the necessary and sufficient spaces to serve its brethren" and "the need to seek the healthy cooperation with other Christian confessions and maintain a frank dialogue with the institutions of the State and the independent agencies of civil society." John Paul made a clear allusion to the prevailing lack of religious freedom when he said, "When the Church demands religious freedom she is not asking for a gift, a privilege [...] rather she demands the effective recognition of an inalienable human right [...] it is also a matter of a right belonging to every person and every people. Every individual and every people will be spiritually enriched to the extent that religious freedom is acknowledged and put in to practice."

The Holy Father exhorted the Bishops to greater interaction with the exile community, "those people who for various reasons have left the country but still feel that they are the sons and daughters of Cuba." Touching again on the theme of religious freedom he expressed that the Church "[...] will gain ever greater access to the modern technologies which can be of help in your evangelizing and educating mission," particularly making reference to being able to count on their own resources in terms of press, radio and television. He gave recognition to the existing modest Catholic publications, developed with great difficulties, which "[...] should be promoted and improved", so they could "[...] more effectively serve the proclamation of the truth, not only to the members of the Church but also to the entire Cuban people."24

The second to last speech by the pope was delivered at Havana's Cathedral before an audience of priests and religious personnel. In it, besides congratulating them for their dedication, he encouraged them to continue their work in favor of others and the Church. He remembered the canonization causes of Father Félix

Varela and Brother José Olallo - entirely devoted to charity work - as life examples to be followed. The last speech by John Paul II was that of his farewell at the José Martí Airport. Besides thanking everyone for their hospitality, he made significant references to the need to fight for the elimination of "[...] unjust inequalities," as well as "[...] limitations to fundamental freedoms." He made an indirect reference to the U.S. economic embargo, which he called "[...] oppressive economic measures unjust and ethically unacceptable imposed from outside the country." The pope emphasized that "[...] all Cubans are called to contribute to the common good in a climate of mutual respect and with a profound sense of solidarity." Fidel Castro, on the other hand, in his farewell words again mentioned the "economic war" against his government and dared to boast about freedom of the press, particularly TV coverage of the pope's visit, which was really the result of strong Vatican pressure.

The pope's visit to Cuba was still making news at the Vatican on Wednesday the 28th of January during his weekly press conference. In it, the pope expressed that he hoped that his visit to the island would have the same repercussions as his visit to Poland in 1979, implying the disappearance in a similar fashion of communism from that country. An important episode had ended in Cuban history. Analysts could then start scrutinizing its results. It was evident that the papal message left in Cuba, according to a content analysis of four homilies and another seven speeches, was - in the context of Vatican diplomacy - one of censure to Cuba's prevailing system, although the pope did not overlook the chastisement of the excesses of liberal capitalism. In a soft but persistent manner, the papal message was essentially anti-communist, condemning that system due to its denial

25 Ibid., p. 23.

26 Ibid.

of freedom to the people, as well as their dignity and individuality, and urging Cubans to surpass these limitations in a non-strident way. His call for the freedom of prisoners for their simple opposition to the system -and his proclamation that democracy is the best way to develop the potentials of human beings (all made before the official intelligentsia of the country), were critical points of his message.

The European press was particularly impacted by the pope's constant call for greater freedoms for the country. On the other hand his references to the American economic embargo were indirect and minimal in comparison with other concepts dealt with by him. An analysis of the 21,094 words pronounced by the pope showed that after the terms God, Jesus and Christ, the five most frequently used words were: truth, 74 times; freedom, 53 times; family, 42; moral and spiritual values, 32; justice, 31 and solidarity, 16. A contrasting dimension with his trip to Poland was the lack of contact by the pope with political dissidents, in spite of a request made by those that were particularly identified with the Church.

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29 See Andrés Oppenheimer, "Sex scandal steals headlines, Castro's thunder," The Miami Herald, January 26, 1998, p. 11A. According to this international analyst, Castro did not win the international public relations game, "for reasons beyond his control."


31 The remaining terms were: Our Lady of Charity, 13; education, 11; civil society, 9; papal and apostolic visit, 7; Cardinal Ortega, 6; fear, 5, reconciliation, 5; Fidel Castro/president, 4; Cubans around the world/emigration, 4; prisoners, 3; embargo/embargoes, 1. See Ariel Remos, "Lo del embargo fue lo menos importante que dijo el Papa en Cuba," Diario Las Américas, February 4, 1998, p.1A. This analysis was made by the Center for a Free Cuba in Washington.

32 This was the case of the most prominent Catholic opposition political leader, Oswaldo Payá, who requested an audience with the pope from the Vatican Embassy but did not get a response. See Juan O. Tamayo, "Dissidents won't get to meet the pontiff," The Miami Herald, January 20, 1998, p. 5A.
Repercussions of the visit

It is imperative to carefully analyze the events related to the Church after the papal visit, in order to assess what progress was made, if any, on the Covadonga Spanish ship. At large, the basic functional relationship between the Church and the government does not seem to have experienced much change within the Cuban totalitarian context. There is no doubt that there has been a greater degree of tolerance with respect to the cult dimension, as was the case with Christmas, granted as a permanent holiday by the end of 1998, and the permission for the entrance of some religious personnel, as well as some humanitarian and charitable material to the island. But on the other hand, a year after John Paul's visit, the old repressive patterns towards the Church appear to still be present. Parodying a Cuban peasant saying, with respect to animals that enjoy a relative degree of freedom, since they are not tied strictly by a rope, it could be said about the Church in general that "[...] they are loose but with the rope dragging." This makes the issue of religious freedom questionable in Cuba. Let us examine some of these aspects in greater detail.

One of the most positive consequences of the papal visit has been the increase in religious participation. A greater interest in learning about religion and reaching a commitment through baptism has come from both the young and old. The number of children attending catechism classes for their basic instruction is also substantial. In the last years this has increased by 500%. It is also contrasting the increase in the number of baptisms between 1985 and 1998, that went from 6,000 to 33,000. Other sources indicate that the number of people baptized, confirmed or married by the Church has increased around 250%, while 70% of

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33 This implies being allowed a certain degree of mobility but always subjected to the pull of the constraining rope of repression by the government.


35 Judith Harris, "Una iglesia que emerge de las catacumbas," El Nuevo Herald, January 25, 1999, p. 2A.
deceased persons do receive some type of Christian ceremony. According to Vatican sources, approximately 70% of the Cubans are Catholic. All of this points to the need to increase the number of places of worship or to conduct religious instruction, thus the creation of the houses of prayer or mission, to perform that function, both for Evangelicals as well as Catholics. The latter have about 560 of such houses throughout the country, many of which have endured some degree of repression through harassment of those who live there. But in general, the people have been losing the fear to show their faith openly, although frequently they pay a price for that militancy.

There is no doubt that there still is a relative freedom of worship, constrained in terms of open manifestations such as processions in the streets. Since this cult dimension is determined by an organism of the Communist Party, its decisions are capricious and arbitrary in terms of granting the permits to some and not to others, without a legal or logical basis. In a Havana parish, permission was granted to have a public street activity within three meters of the perimeter of the church building. The pastor humorously said that "Three meters was the extent of the progress made." It is also true that there are fewer instances of harassment or sabotage of worship celebrations, than there used to be in the past.

The restoration of Christmas as a national holiday was another aspect of the religious celebrations connected with the papal visit. After great pressures from the Vatican, that concession was made in 1997. It must be remembered that the original cancellation took place in 1969, to help the failed 10 Million ton Sugar Harvest. It remained that way until the present. Finally, the holiday was permanently restored by the end of 1998, after a laborious presentation by the Party in the national media, where many explanations were made to justify that the original cancellation of the holiday had not been motivated by anti-religious

37  Ibid.
reasons. It should be noted that the new holiday went completely unnoticed in the national press during the 1998 Christmas.

The issue of religious freedom is intimately connected with the entry of priests, ministers and other religious personnel into the country. Their visas had to be obtained through the Office of Religious Affairs of the Communist Party after long delays and with the same arbitrariness to which the public celebrations were subjected. In December 1998 the entry of 19 priests and 21 religious was authorized. With this, for the first time after the massive expulsion of priests in 1961, the number of priests will surpass 300. This is a critical reality if one takes into consideration that Cuba has one of the lowest indexes of priests per inhabitant in Latin America, one per 56,000 persons that consider themselves Catholics. This antireligious approach has been part of an intelligent and indirect repressive policy of imposing upon the Church a minimum amount of personnel without allowing it to claim the existence of any open persecution.

Religious freedom is also connected to the number and condition of the churches in Cuba. No new churches have been built since 1959. It should be noted that 120 Catholic churches were confiscated in the initial years of the revolution, only five of which have been recuperated. Many churches, mostly in the rural areas of the country, are in ruins. At the dioceses of Cienfuegos, for example, Mass

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See Mario J. Viera, "La Navidad no existió para la prensa oficial", (Cuba Verdad) El Nuevo Herald, January 5, 1999, p. 4A. See, also, "Festejos causan extrañeza en Cuba," El Nuevo Herald, December 26, 1998, p. 1A. In this report about the actual celebration of Christmas, it is pointed out that many were not sure about the meaning of this celebration, due to nearly 40 years of de-Christianization of the country.


See Judith Harris, "Una iglesia que emerge de las catacumbas," El Nuevo Herald, January 25, 1999, p. 2A.

is celebrated in twelve churches without roofs.\textsuperscript{44} Some churches have been repaired, particularly in the important cities, and paying well, in dollars. These funds come mainly from donations from European Churches and from the United States, increasingly from the exiled community, in a nice expression of solidarity on the part of former members of those communities. Freedom to build new churches has been an outcry from all religious denominations.\textsuperscript{45}

Due to the great economic crisis the island is suffering, as a result of the cut of the Soviet subsidy, the country has been plunged into shortages of all type, without parallel in Cuba. This affects both the nutrition as well as the health of the people. With the dollarization of the country, the situation has worsened, mainly for those who do not have access to that currency, mostly the elderly. As a result of this situation, the traditional charitable function of the Church has experienced a tremendous demand. To that effect, Caritas - the Catholic agency specialized in this activity with worldwide support - was established in Cuba in 1991. But, as yet, Caritas has not been legally recognized by the government. It counts on a variety of sources, coming mostly from abroad.\textsuperscript{46} Although in great need internally, the Cuban Church has also organized collections for funds and other donations to be distributed by Caritas in the parishes.\textsuperscript{47}

Each diocese has its Caritas affiliate. They typically offer services to those of the "third age" (over 65), including the sewing and cleaning of clothes, as well as

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{45} See "Cardenal pide dejen construir iglesias," \textit{El Nuevo Herald}, December 3, 1998, p. 3A. This was an appeal by Cardinal Ortega while visiting in Germany.

\textsuperscript{46} See April Witt, "Católicos de EU envían $6 millones en medicinas," \textit{El Nuevo Herald}, February 20, 1998, as a typical case of the help coming from abroad from the U.S. Catholic Relief Services. The largest shipment by this agency to Cuba, prior to this one, was valued at $3 million. See, for other examples of help or assistance offered to the Cuban Catholic Church, mostly from private sources, Fabiola Santiago, "Católicos del exilio buscan vínculos con la iglesia cubana," \textit{El Nuevo Herald}, April 15, 1998, p. 1A. The pope himself ordered a special collection in Rome to purchase medicine for Cuba, see "Colecta en misa papal será para Cuba," \textit{El Nuevo Herald}, April 9, 1998.

supplying food and information in general and for health purposes.\textsuperscript{48} There are similar services for infants and youth, especially those affected by Down Syndrome. There are also services in connection with emergency situations such as natural disasters. Along this line there is the intention to promote community development, giving assistance in housing construction, and advice to self-employed workers. There is also an assistance line to those sick with HIV/AIDS, and on how to prevent the disease. Finally, they distribute, in an outstanding way, medication that is received through individual channels, not from those imported by Caritas, as bulk donations from abroad, which go entirely to the national health system. Caritas is supposed to exercise some degree of supervision with the way in which these donations are distributed. There is concern about those donations not reaching the people but rather the hospitals for the military and political elite, as well as those visiting for health tourism that is being heavily promoted by the Castro government.\textsuperscript{49} Notable in this sense, is as the humanitarian gesture in the medical field with the construction of a cardiology unit donated through Caritas to the Lenin Hospital of Holguín.\textsuperscript{50}

Following the governmental patterns against private initiative at the economic level, it was expected that Castro's government would not view favorably this type of medical service by the Church. Through it, in practice, Caritas was belying the proclaimed revolutionary achievement in medicine, especially after the

\textsuperscript{48} See "La Iglesia tiende la mano a ancianos necesitados," \textit{El Nuevo Herald}, January 24, 1999, p. 23A.

\textsuperscript{49} This information about Caritas is derived from several interviews with persons knowledgeable about this matter in Cuba. See also Edel José García Díaz, "Es el gobierno y no la Iglesia quien reparte los donativos de Caritas," (Nueva Prensa Cubana) \textit{Diario Las Américas}, October 24, 1998, where the situation of the city of Caibarién, in terms of non-medical products, is described, see "Desvía Castro en su provecho 'ayuda humanitaria' internacional," \textit{Diario Las Américas}, September 9, 1998, p. 1A, where the international Catholic organization Pax Christi, based in the Netherlands, denounces the fact that a good portion of the international humanitarian assistance disappears in the governmental and the health tourism circles.

\textsuperscript{50} See Judith Harris, "Una Iglesia que emerge de las catacumbas," \textit{El Nuevo Herald}, January 25, 1999, p. 2A.
interruption of the Soviet subsidy. Apparently that is why the Church is not permitted to distribute the medication coming from abroad. However, the parishes, through the persons travelling to Cuba who can carry medications, have been able to create small dispensaries that distribute free medication to those who come with the proper prescriptions, trying to make sure that it would not be used for sale. The distribution of this medication has faced a situation similar to that of the distribution of powdered milk by the Church. There are reports that dispensaries have been flooded with fake or unnecessary prescriptions. The government's purpose is to undermine their work by exhausting their supplies, according to a denunciation by the only Catholic national publication, the weekly Vida Cristiana, a plain two page leaflet, in its January 17, 1999 issue.51 Considering the caution exercised by the Church in exposing this type of abuse, we may deduce the seriousness of this situation. In that bulletin there are criticisms of the many delays and bureaucratic snarls that the Church must endure to have access to the aid it receives from abroad.

Cubans in exile have been sensitive to this situation of need experienced by their fellow Cubans on the island, who in many cases are family members. On an individual basis, help with medications has gone on since the early 1960s, at a prohibitive cost, taking into consideration the huge shipping charges.52 It is paradoxical to see the shipments of common medications to Cuba (who claimed to be a medical power, which has even exported this type of professional and biotechnological production)53 but were lacking an every day aspirin. The shortage in medication became more acute with the elimination of the Soviet subsidy, and


52 It reached approximately 20 US dollars per pound.

53 According to a May 14, 1997, State Department report, Cuba exported medical supplies in 1994 for 110 million dollars; and the following year, it reached 125 million. By 1990, Cuba was planning to have 10,000 medical doctors working abroad by the end of the century.
is more serious for those who do not have relatives abroad. Thus, in addition to the aid on a person-to-person level, and on a family or friendship basis, the Cubanos con Fe en Acción program from the Ermita de la Caridad, in Miami, began in a discreet way, in 1993. From that Catholic spiritual center of the Cuban exiles, a system of shipments was developed, using visitors to the island. It has been effectively sending medications, reaching those in greater need in the parishes and without relatives in the U.S., that requested the medicine. This has been possible thanks to the generous help of many involved in this process, both individuals and institutions.54 Rather than supporting this humanitarian effort that helps those in greater need, done without any propaganda, the Cuban government has undermined it. This has taken place through the progressive reduction of the maximum luggage weight allowed on trips to Cuba, and by imposing high tariffs for the excess, always paid in dollars, on the island.

Another area where the Church has gained some latitude has been with its diocesan publications. As mentioned earlier, the only nation-wide publication is the modest leaflet Vida Cristiana, printed and distributed with great difficulties, that circulates through all the parishes. But motivated by the desire to reach the largest number of persons, and facing the lack of access to the national or local media, a system of publications has developed in each diocese. This has been on a very modest basis, but with great skill in its presentation, in the form of magazines or bulletins. These cover a variety of subjects, some very sensitive, such as human rights, the economy, politics and the common good, besides other less controversial, such as art and literature. Among them are Vitral, which has been the most controversial of all, from the diocese of Pinar del Río; Palabra Nueva from Havana; Presencia from Matanzas; Amanecer from Santa Clara; Fides from Cienfuegos; Boletín Diocesano from Camagüey; Imago, from Ciego de Avila; Cocuyo, from Holguín; Iglesia

Father Francisco Santana inspired and coordinated this project. The economic aid from Mrs. Elena Díaz-Versón Amos has been crucial to this effort, as well as that of the Miami Medical Team, that has performed humanitarian missions of medical assistance in different places where there has been great need. Many other anonymous collaborators have also contributed to make this project on human solidarity a success.
en Marcha, from Santiago de Cuba and Alba from Guantánamo-Baracoa. Some of these publications have had to endure recently, indirectly and directly, the government's displeasure. These modest publications have to go through a lot of trouble to procure their supplies due to the bureaucratic difficulties in obtaining the necessary paper and ink, in view of the totalitarian control exercised by the government.

The results of the papal visit can be better appreciated as time goes by. The immediate and most visible outcome was the liberation of a number of prisoners, both common and political. The majority of political prisoners were pressed to leave the country against the wishes of the pope. During the month of May, 1998, on

55 Vitral has been in this sense the most attacked one. As recently as February 1999, Bishop José Ciro González Bacallao declared to the Cooperativa de Periodistas Independientes that "the social activities of the lay persons of Pinar del Río and their magazine Vitral continue to be submitted to an almost police-like control. Bishop González Bacallao warned: "Freedom of worship should not be confused with religious freedom. This implies a recognition of the Church in society... High ranking officials consider Vitral a 'subversive' magazine. Vitral is not nor will it be a magazine with those characteristics. It is a magazine of the Church and we will not allow it to be manipulated by spurious interests." The bishop also stated the "sometimes I think that Cuban officials expect... that we stop expressing what the Social Doctrine of the Church teaches us, that the Christian identity and their socioeconomic and political commitment be diluted." Cubananet Weekly, February 4, 1999, p. 2. Vitral director, engineer Dagoberto Valdés, has been harassed in his profession; he is currently "técnico de yaguas" (royal palm tree leaf technician). Valdés has been distinguished and supported in his work by the Vatican, with his recent appointment to the Papal Commission for Justice and Peace, an organization that monitors the situation of human rights. See Pablo Alfonso, "Laico nombrado a Consejo Pontificio," El Nuevo Herald, December 29, 1998. See also Ramón Alberto Cruz Lima (Nueva Prensa Cubana) El Nuevo Herald, "Nueva política oficialista intenta opacar la revista católica local," November 8, 1998.

56 Según varias entrevistas entre 1998 y 1999 con personas involucradas en la impresión de las mismas.

the occasion of the celebration of Pentecost, the Cuban bishops declared themselves in favor of a greater opening in the island. They called for basic respect for human rights and rejected "all types of economic encirclements." They rejoiced for the international response in connection with the opening to Cuba, and showed preoccupation for the migratory phenomenon affecting the island.58 However, in June the Vatican considered it timely to evaluate the Cuban situation calling for a meeting of all Cuban bishops in Rome. According to Vatican sources, the Holy See was not very happy with the dilatory events on the island. "The world was opening to Cuba, but Cuba was not opening to the world," underlined that source.59 Even Cardinal Ortega, considered very moderate in his criticisms to the system, stated in New Orleans, that "one could have the impression that the visit of the pope to Cuba can be considered a parenthesis that was opened and closed without much consequence," highlighting the scant progress in civil life.60 The Vatican source was more precise with respect to the reunion with the Cuban bishops when he stated that the encounter (to the highest level) was to "evaluate the papal visit [...] and study the possibilities that this has opened for the Church and the Cuban people."61

The Bishop of Rome was very explicit in his speech to Cuba's bishops. He expressed his confidence that the country would evolve "in peace" to a development
of civil and social rights and advocated the promotion of freedom of expression, reunion and association "without arbitrary limitations." The pope invited to overcome the "[...] ideological and historical frontiers that don't allow the person to grow in freedom and responsibility," and urged the bishops to "[...] assume the challenges derived [...]" from his historic visit to Cuba. "That your voice may never falter," requested the pontiff.  

Commenting on the papal speech in Rome, Archbishop Meurice, of Santiago de Cuba, again pointed the finger at the critical point when he emphasized that although the Church needs "spaces of sustained freedom" in order to "fulfill its mission in benefit of all Cubans inside and outside the country," that leeway should be for all. He continued saying that the pope claimed spaces of freedom in the areas of "social communication, of which all are excluded, or the assistance to the needy, hampered by the fact that the authorities don't recognize (legally) organizations such as Caritas."

After John Paul's visit to Cuba, the situation of religious repression on the Island appears to have persisted with the same previous basic features. There have been some concessions, already noted, but the relationship seems to be that of simple tolerance toward the Church, procuring that the religious militancy would not escape totalitarian control. When someone in the Church "disturbs," a way for that person to "get out of circulation" is often procured. This applies to lay persons as well as to priests. We know of priests who, because of their more critical tone in their homilies have been told openly by security agents "that if they behave well they will have certain advantages." Surveillance (openly visible during worship

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62 See "Papa aboga por más libertades en Cuba", El Nuevo Herald, June 10, 1998. The pope emphasized that "Christians in Cuba should participate in the search for the common good, offering their critical conscience and their capabilities and even offering their sacrifices with the purpose of promoting the transformations that the country needs at this moment with the help of all its children."

services), and the attempt to compromise the persons for blackmailing purposes, has not stopped. Neither has the selective harassment of the clergy (through putting them in compromising positions for blackmailing purposes, harassing phone calls, anonymous letters and rumors), especially those considered particularly "problematic." There are notorious cases that have transpired in the media, but our interviews with witness from the island corroborate, in an experiential way, the repressive reality at the work and educational levels. Some careers with social impact continue to be denied to those with a religious track record.64 Within the academic area, in 1998, a case of flagrant discrimination was known of a young man, Juan Francisco Pulido Martínez, notable because he is the son of a distinguished lay Catholic leader. According to reports, he refused to vote in the elections for the Assemblies of Popular Power (Poder Popular) and was expelled from the University of Cienfuegos.65 In a minor scale it is reported that students who attempt to display religious symbols on their persons or at the school dorms in the countryside (all high school students must attend that type of school, away from their families, where they combine agricultural work and classes) have been forced to take them off. These include posters of the pope's visit and other religious symbols. These seem to be the only ones that bother the school authorities.66

The repressive rigor against religion does not bypass priests that have forgotten that "[...] they are loose, but have the rope dragging [...]" Such was the case in April 1998 of the only American priest in Cuba, the Capuchin Patrick Sullivan. This priest had distinguished himself for his work on human rights issues,

64 These are still journalism, psychology and psychiatry.

65 See "Por no votar expulsan a joven católico de la Universidad de Cienfuegos, Cuba," (NPC), Diario Las Américas, March 8, 1998. See also "Juan Francisco Martínez expulsado de la Universidad por no votar," Cartas de Cuba, Autumn of 1998, Number 7, pp. 28-29.

66 See Monike de Motas, "Alumnos son obligados a retirar fotos del Papa," El Nuevo Herald, May 24, 1998. It is significant and contrasting that other posters, such as those of popular singers, don't seem to bother the academic environment, according to several interviews of 1998.
for his ties with activists in that area, and by statements he made to The Boston
Globe about the lack of political pluralism in Cuba that did not please the
government. Thus, the Office of Religious Affairs of the Communist Party told him
that his visa would not be extended, a procedure used before against "undesirable"
foreign religious personnel. Sullivan chose to leave the country when his superiors
asked him to leave Santa Clara, where he was exercising his ministry, and go to
Havana.67 A rather similar situation took place in August with an Italian couple,
members of the Franciscan Third Order who were forbidden to return to Cuba.68

The denial of street procession permits in three places in Havana has been made
known.69 In Santiago de Cuba, and remembering the old planes de la calle (street
plans designed to indirectly disrupt religious services) of the 60s and 70s, some
congas were promoted during Holy Week in 1998, with similar purpose.70

The very important religious ministry with the incarcerated has been
systematically undermined by prison authorities. In many indirect ways, and often
using outright lies, obstacles are raised for the priest or nun who attempts to visit
jail inmates, so this cannot be accomplished, in spite of the fact that they had
requested that spiritual assistance. Evidently this situation has not improved,

67 See Pablo Alfonso, "Cura confirma que el Partido le niega su estancia en Cuba," El Nuevo
Herald, April 14, 1998, and "Sigue acusando el padre Sullivan al Partido Comunista
cubano de obligarlo a partir," (AFP), Diario Las Américas, April 15, 1998. For a
contrasting view see "Niega la Iglesia cubana que los comunistas ordenaran a partir al
padre Sullivan," (EFE), Diario Las Américas, April 15, 1998. Apparently trying to ease the
situation religious authorities indicated that Father Sullivan's move was due to "internal
reorganization." According to another version of this matter, Father Sullivan informed
his parish members that he should leave so two other members of his religious order
could come to Cuba. See Ana Luisa López Baeza, "Expulsado el sacerdote Patrick

68 "Amenazado a su salida de Cuba un matrimonio italiano," (NPC), Diario Las Américas,
August 12, 1998.


70 See Margarita Llero, "Salen las congas otra vez en Semana Santa," The Cuba Free Press
Project, April 12, 1998.
prompting a denunciation in Palabra Nueva, the magazine of the Archdiocese of Havana. In general, the Church in Cuba has preferred not to make much noise about the harassment tactics it has endured, probably thinking that this is the most effective way to deal with this highly repressive system.

Finally, it is worth noting the great emphasis placed by the Castro government on all Afro-Cuban matters and its relation to the expansion of the Christianity faith. Some observers and students of the Cuban situation point toward this being an indirect tactic to promote Santería, as a way to counteract the increase of Christianity, especially the Catholic religion in the recent past. These cults were the only ones that did not receive acknowledgement by the pope, but rather a rejection, in his address to the Cuban bishops. Indirectly, the notion that the Afro-Cuban cults are the majority religion in Cuba has also been promoted by the government, along with significant amounts of Afro culture in the media. This indirect promotion of "santería" was strongly evidenced, after the pope's visit, in the book sponsored by the Cuban government and printed in Italy, as a chronicle of his journey. In Cuba Querida, besides constituting an unprecedented propaganda tool

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71 See "Revista dice impiden actos religiosos a los presos," El Nuevo Herald, April 19, 1998. In that article the words of the pope about the importance of this ministry are remembered. Again we may deduct the magnitude of this problem when this religious magazine dares to mention it. This reluctance to the ministry with the prisoners, particularly with the political ones may have its roots in the experience that the current leaders had during their stay in prison after the assault on the Moncada Garrison. These received assistance from the Daughters of Charity that performed that ministry. They sometimes brought messages from them as a cooperative gesture for those political prisoners. Sister Mercedes Alvarez distinguished herself with that work. She enjoyed great influence due to her past deeds with the new political leaders. Later she tried to perform the same ministry with the new political prisoners. To that request they responded "Listen Sister, ask for anything else, but not to see the prisoners because we remember what you did with us and we don't want this to happen with the new prisoners." According to interview in 1989 with a person knowledgeable of this matter that resides in Cuba. The magazine Palabra Nueva received the 1998 Golden Medal award from the International Catholic Press Union.

72 All the established religions in Cuba were received by the pope in his ecumenical encounter on the morning of January 25 at the Papal Embassy in Havana. This was not the case of the Afro-Cuban cults.
to promote Castro's person, taking advantage of his relationship with the pope and promoting the identification between the thought of both, there is an out-of-place and disproportionate presentation of the phenomenon of the Afro-Cuban religions in two entire chapters. Observers within the island interpret this type of governmental action as a form of promoting an alternative to authentic Christianity, through a set of beliefs that lack a moral and ethical code, and much less any type of hierarchical structure, thus being more easily manipulated by the security apparatus and even used for tourist promotion. In a way, it can be also considered as a form of channeling the supernatural concerns of the people into a lesser threatening form of religious expression. It is predictable that this indirect form of undermining the expansion of the Christian faith will continue, and even increase in the immediate future.

A year after the pope's visit there has not been a noticeable change in Church-State relations. The prevailing religious tolerance existing before the visit has increased somewhat, with the permits for some religious processions during Holy Week and other religious holidays. Some prisoners were freed due to the papal request, without allowing them the option of remaining in Cuba as the pope

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73 See Giuseppe Berti, Cuba Querida (Roma: Edizioni Percorsi Immaginari, 1998). In p. 108 the attempt to identify Castro and the pope is illustrated with a degree of misspelling. Under a photo of both leaders shaking hands, it reads in Spanish "Nos identifican el culto a la libertad y a la dignidad (sic) del hombre." (The cult to freedom and full dignity of men identify us). Out of the 108 pictures of that book, almost 30% have Castro appearing in them.

74 Lec. cit. pp. 91-103, "Una semana entre los orishas" by Reynaldo González; and pp. 112-119, "Retrato del alma cubana," by Magda Resik Aguirre.

75 According to interviews conducted in 1998 with visitors from the island knowledgeable of this matter. Journalist Andres Oppenheimer, who has addressed this issue in his book Castro's Final Hour (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992) pp. 339-356 believes that the government has tried to use Santería to undermine the Catholic Church, and has recruited hundreds of Santería priests as collaborators and tried to use them as tools in the security apparatus. See also Andres Oppenheimer, "A slow road to democracy might be best," The Miami Herald, January 22, 1998, p. 16A.
But in the context of the people, a year after the visit, the Cuban government has not really opened itself to the world and much less to its people. Moreover, manifestations of the growing independent civil society are repressed in an equal or worse form than before the visit, in a society that, in the opinion of an American bishop with vast experience in Eastern Europe, who visited the island along with the pope, is the most repressive one of all those he had visited.

To add insult to injury, during the meeting held in Havana, in February 1999, of Catholic bishops of the hemisphere, Castro unleashed an extremely repressive legislation really aimed at suppressing the growing civil society, mainly the independent journalists that report abroad events on the island. A few days later, on March 1, dozens of arrests were made to prevent any type of demonstration of support for the four internationally known dissenters, Vladimiro Roca, Marta Beatriz Roque, Félix Bonné and René Gómez, that were finally brought to trial after more than a year and a half of arbitrary arrest. Among the arrested was the most important Christian opposition leader.

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76 In the opinion of experts on Cuba, as the former advisor to President Clinton, Richard Nuccio, he considered that Castro had won a lot more in terms of his international image than what he gave in terms of internal liberalization. See "Juan Pablo II cambió el corazón de los cubanos... menos el de Castro. Ahora la represión es peor," (EFE), Diario Las Américas, January 17, 1999, p. 1A.

77 See Olance Nogueras, "Visita papal no disminuyó la represión," El Nuevo Herald, January 21, 1999. Several incidents of repression to the population are mentioned here.


79 See Juan O. Tamayo, "Cuba takes aim at dissent, crime. Legislation casts a wide net," The Miami Herald, February 16, 1999, p. 1A. The new legislation will impose a 30-year prison sentence and 100,000 Cuban-pesos fine on dissidents or 'counter-revolutionaries' -citizens who collaborate in the 'constant economic, political, diplomatic, propaganda and ideological war' against the country," among other measures. See, also, "Bishops launch conference in Havana," (AP), The Miami Herald, February 16, 1999. p. 12A.

80 The four dissenters are Vladimiro Roca, son of one of the founders of the old communist party, as well as Marta Beatriz Roque, economist; Félix Antonio Bonne Carcassés, former University of Havana professor; and René Gómez Manzano, lawyer. Among the arrested was Oswaldo Payá, leader of the Christian Liberation Movement, with strong Church connections. See Juan O. Tamayo, "Cuban dissenters on trial,
The essence of the lack of religious freedom continues to be present in Cuba without major changes. None of the parameters characterizing a country with religious freedom, including its right to educate, to communicate in the media, to freely allow the entrance of personnel or materials, or to build churches, is present in Cuba, nor does it seem that they will have a slight chance in the near future. In this way, indirect repression of the Church continues to be the predominant form of control of this important social institution. Those measures that could be viewed as an opening, such as the entrance of a few religious ministers, or the occasional use of the media, are really circumstantial concessions or crumbs, that have to be constantly requested from the system. Because of that, a religious authority told us by the end of 1998, that "religious repression continues to be an iron fist but in gloves with a little bit more of silk."  

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This authority had told us before the pope's visit that repression was like "an iron fist in silk gloves." Interview of November 11, 1998.
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