



May 20, 2015

The Cuban church and pope's visit

Dear partners of God's mission in Cuba,

Pope Francis, who aided the rapprochement between the United States and Cuba, plans to visit the island in September just before his trip to the United States. There's always much hope among Cubans that a new papal visit could bring changes to the country.

The Vatican was one of the third-party sites where secret high-level talks leading to the U.S.-Cuba rapprochement were held, and the pope also personally intervened by sending letters to both Obama and Cuban leader Raúl Castro urging them to find a way forward on issues that separated them. The talks culminated in the Dec. 17 announcement that Cuba and the United States planned to renew diplomatic ties.

These talks are just the beginning of a more open diplomatic relationship that will lead to the exchange of the goods, people, and ideas that should bring serious change to a country so long cut off from progress. Next we should see the restoration of diplomatic ties and the opening of respective embassies, but there are still many differences.

It is important to note that until very recently, the church in Cuba had been heavily restricted and repressed under Fidel Castro's Cuban government. It is only since 2008, when Fidel's health struggles caused him to step down in favor of his brother Raul, that Havana has increased religious freedoms in the country. The pope's influence in Cuba is complemented by the respect his personal integrity has earned him in the United States, allowing him to act as a mediator with serious clout.

The church is now allowed to train leaders and run social programs and, in a first since the revolution, the government recently approved a permit to build a Catholic church in Pinar del Rio and some confiscated property belonging to the church is being returned. But there is still a huge shortage of pastors, and priests on the island, which was officially atheist from 1962 until 1992.

This visit could be very important. This pope speaks native Spanish, he's Latin American, and a Jesuit and both Castros went to a Jesuit school. Everything fits. This is the pope that walks the street. He is very popular and will have a tremendous impact.

When Pope Francis goes to Cuba in September, he will have a larger-than-usual influence over the Cuban government: he has been a champion of dialogue with the island's regime and strong critic of the U.S. trade embargo since he authored a little-known book on Cuba in 1998.

The big question is whether Francis will use his clout to press Cuba to respect basic universal freedoms (such as freedom of religion), or whether he will just make a symbolic stop on the island to celebrate the recent Vatican-brokered U.S.-Cuba normalization talks.

Right now, Cuban laws allow evangelicals and Roman Catholics to practice their religion within their churches, but not to spread their message through regular radio or television broadcasts. There is freedom of cult, but not freedom of religion, because Christians cannot evangelize outside the walls of their churches. Pope Francis will

have considerable leverage to ask for religious freedoms, such that to evangelize without government censorship. At the very least, he should obtain regular Church broadcasts on Cuba's state censored radio and television, or permission to create an independent radio or television network.

That might seem a small feat by world democratic standards, but it would allow most Cubans to hear a different message from the "Socialism or Death" nonsense they have been bombarded with for the past five decades; so from a U.S. evangelical viewpoint, if Francis doesn't use his considerable leverage with the Cuban regime to speed up basic freedoms on the island, his visit will be a failure.

Another opportunity for Cuban Evangelicals will be to use this pope's visit to leverage new opportunities to expand religious expression in the same way that they were able to leverage the first pope's visit in 1998 which lead to the evangelical church conducting five large outdoor worship services held throughout the island and attended by more than 300,000 persons.

Thank you for expressing your love and concern through your support. Because of you, we are able to offer thousands of lost and hurting people in Cuba what they desperately need: the love of Jesus. And please keep in mind that we consider it an honor to prayerfully intercede on your behalf, so don't hesitate to let us know how we can be praying for you.

Grace, peace, and love be yours in abundance,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Teo A. Babun, Jr.", with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

Dr. Teo A. Babun, Jr.
Chairman
EchoCuba is a ministry of Outreach Aid to the Americas