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## **In Cuba, religious freedom remains a dream**

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Five nuns from Our Lady of the Good Shepherd's congregation returned to Cuba on Aug. 28 with a small statue they had taken 50 years ago when they left after Cuba's communist revolution. As recognition of the Cuban government's "advances" toward freedom of religion, the Episcopal Conference of Cuba noted that the religious act was "another sign of the improved relations between the church and the government."

Interestingly, this past summer, during remarks on the State Department's annual report on International Religious Freedom, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said, "Freedom of religion is not just about religion." For Cubans, in particular, this is very true.

In Cuba, every aspect of life is controlled by the state. Freedoms in general — and specifically freedom of religion — are not fully available, and persecution of those who publicly profess a creed exists today. Freedom of religion is a right that every human being should be allowed to enjoy without restriction of any government or political entity.

Religion in Cuba must be presented in the context of its recent history, in a spirit of truth and justice, putting aside our personal interests or agendas — with no other objective except the truth.

When we talk about Cubans and religion, we must begin with what the people in Cuba have experienced and are experiencing today.

From the 1960s until 1990, discrimination against Christians slowed the growth of churches. Christians suffered under Cuban communism. In the early years some pastors and priests were placed in “re-education camps” a type of “concentration camp” where they were forced to perform manual labor in agriculture in order to survive — and where many met their death. These so-called camps were part of a rehabilitation program known as “military units to help agricultural production” or “UMAP” by its Cuban acronym.

Christians and their families could not receive a good education or good jobs. This pushed religious people to the lowest levels of society. Even by the mid-1980s, Cuba’s government declared Christians could still not hold jobs where they would influence other people, especially children. This means no Christian teachers, social workers, counselors, etc. The result of these restrictions was that very few people wanted to be associated with Christianity as it would lead to the loss of job or status, as well as other discrimination.

One of the hardest realities of this strategy is that children are shamed by their teachers and others to disown religious symbols and renounce religious practices. In his last newsletter published only a few weeks before his death, Oswaldo Payá, a Catholic, wrote that it is “shameful that a child must feel fear in her school because she attended a church service.”

Religious leaders endure persecution and at times undergo threats from government officials. Some face difficult decisions when their lives and their families’ lives are threatened. Due to fear, they comply with restrictions or requests to cease certain religious activity, such as outdoor concerts or baptism events.

Specific sectors of society, like the police and members of the military and their families, are still discouraged from participating in religious services. Lawyers, government workers and journalists are often effectively barred, usually under threat of losing their jobs.

Although officially the government does not favor any one church or religion, it appears to be more tolerant of those churches that maintain close relations with the state, such as those that belong to the “government friendly” Cuban Council of Churches.

It rewards them with special benefits (such as permits for outdoor services and youth camps). This exclusive favoritism is the cause for division with other religious institutions in the country.

The absence of religious freedom creates a climate of fear and lack of trust, which weakens civil society and creates greater distance between the citizens and those who govern them. And therefore makes it more difficult to achieve any type of common national agenda.

Cubans should be free to promote the understanding of religious freedom embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and other international covenants to their fellow citizens.

Article 18 of the declaration states: “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

The Cuban government has it wrong. These are human rights which provide dignity. It is the inherent patrimony of all human beings and a right of all Cubans. This is not something “allowed” or “gifted” by any country. Instead, it is the responsibility of governments’ to protect.

In Cuba, the church should be free to define the mission it believes it has received. Christians, Catholics and other believers must be free to practice their faith in whatever manner they believe necessary. Unfortunately this is not the case.

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