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By Dr. Teo A. Babun

How Pope Benedict could shape religious freedom in Cuba

Fourteen years ago, Pope John Paul II, great champion of freedom and warrior against communism, visited the island of Cuba. And Monday, his successor, Pope Benedict XVI, will follow suit.

But this pope has the chance to avoid the political traps that diminished the political, if not the spiritual, impact of the visit of the last pope, and to carry on the legacy of his predecessor—who solidified the Catholic Church’s position as the leader of the global cause for religious freedom.

Benedict’s visit comes at a time when the Cuban government is amid an aggressive public relations campaign to present itself as reformist. Last December, the government announced it would be releasing nearly 3,000 prisoners in advance of the pope’s visit. This notice came just a month after the government announced that for the first time since the communist revolution, the purchase and sale of private property would be legal.

Academics and diplomats around the world rejoiced and heralded a new era of change in Cuba. The Cuban exile community and those who know the oppressed nation more intimately knew better than to expect little more than a replay of 1998.

We remember the image of a fatigue-free and ex-communicated Castro greeting the pontiff in a crisp black suit. We recall his brother Raul smiling agreeably in the front rows of the papal Mass as the pope called for “true freedom” and “recognition of human rights and social justice.” We recall a brief period of apparent change that former political prisoner Armando Valladares characterized as “cosmetic,” at best.

In the words of Orlando Marquez, editor of Palabra Nueva, a publication of the Archdiocese of Havana, "It is as if those five days in January 1998 were an opened and closed parenthesis."

We recall that after he left, the dark curtain of oppression fell on the sunny island once more and religious oppression only escalated. In the decade and a half since his visit, thousands have been imprisoned in the Castro brothers' detention centers, and the government retains to this day a tight grip on religious freedom through the government-sanctioned Cuban Council of Churches (CCC). Membership in the council is mandatory for the most rudimentary of rights, such as the right to hold a worship service or make basic repairs to a building, but most religious groups opt not to join, as compliance restricts religious practice just as severely.

From intra-Catholic perspective Pope John Paul II's trip was a success in planting seeds that have grown into what Miami Archbishop Thomas Wenski recently called a "springtime of faith," a revitalization of Catholic fervor especially notable among Cuban youth, as well as winning broader ground for the Catholic Church to practice more freely and openly without fear of reprisal.

But outside of Catholic circles, the visit fell short of making broader strides for religious freedom, largely because the Castro regime used the visit for an international aren't-we-actually-so-tolerant horse and pony show.

Benedict should take careful note of what his predecessor's visit taught us: Papal visits make for great opportunities for shammy public relations campaigns on the part of totalitarian governments.

But there is no reason Raul should get away with keeping the voices of non-Catholic religious leaders and their own faithful revivals and pleas for freedom from the ears of Pope Benedict as Fidel so artfully did with Pope John Paul II.

Should the pope desire to make Cuba's oppressors squirm, he could:

- Meet with the Catholic youth groups in Santiago de Cuba who are advocating for freedom of religion through initiatives not funded by the official Catholic Church,

- Talk to the leaders of the independent evangelical churches, such as the eastern & western Baptists, Los Pinos Nuevos, or the Assemblies of God Conventions who represent the majority of the evangelical protestants in the island but are not allowed to be part of official visits because they are not members of the CCC, and

- Meet with the leaders of the non-government recognized (and therefore illegal) house church movement (Casas de Culto) and hear the grievances endured by the more than 35,000 house churches across Cuba.

While many of these figures do not look to the pope as a doctrinal shepherd, they view him as a shepherd of religious freedom, someone to hear their cries in the wilderness, an intercessor before the Cuban government and the world.

This pope has the opportunity to impact the island nation that has suffered under an atheist and totalitarian government for more than fifty years in that he comes at a time when his church is more vibrant and influential than ever. A Cuban Catholic community hungry for faith creates an energy the pope can channel toward demand for authentic religious freedom. **But authenticity demands that the circle be widened beyond the Catholic community to include the marginalized, the de-legitimized, and the silenced. Because when the rights of one religious group are in jeopardy, the rights of all hang in the balance.**

The challenge Pope Benedict faces is how to turn a springtime of faith into a springtime of freedom.

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