

Pope Francis Warms Communist Leader's Heart Ahead of Cuba Visit

Olivia Becker : 7-9 minutes : 9/18/2015

Pope Francis will arrive in Cuba on Saturday for the first time in his papacy, just as the United States embargo on the island nation has begun to weaken.

Cuba's leaders renewed their call for a United Nations vote against the economic embargo earlier this week. The Vatican has disapproved of its imposition for decades, citing the difficulty it causes the island's people. The White House has meanwhile renewed diplomatic ties with Cuba and has encouraged a reassessment of the embargo. On Friday, the Treasury Department unveiled rules that will allow businesses in sectors like travel, banking, and communications establish offices in Cuba starting on September 21. The new regulations also remove any limitation on the amount of money that people can send back to Cuba.

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"By further easing these sanctions, the United States is helping to support the Cuban people in their effort to achieve the political and economic freedom necessary to build a democratic, prosperous, and stable Cuba," said a statement from US Treasury Secretary Jacob Lew.

Pope Francis's visit to the island on his way to the US is the latest sign of increasingly warm relations between the communist country and the Vatican. Cuban President Raul Castro met with the pope at the Vatican in May and expressed his gratitude for the Catholic leader's role in helping to encourage the diplomatic thaw between the US and Cuba.

"When the pope goes to Cuba in September, I promise to go to all his Masses, and with satisfaction," Castro [remarked](#) after the meeting took place in May. "I read all the speeches of the pope, his commentaries, and if the pope continues this way, I will go back to praying and go back to the church, and I'm not joking."

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Considering the Cuban government's long and complicated relationship with Catholicism, Castro's clarification of seriousness was no doubt heartening to the island's faithful. After the 1959 Cuban revolution, the Communist government adopted atheism as an official ideology. Cuba's bishops declared it incompatible with Catholicism, while the government banned Catholics from membership in the Communist Party. But the government softened this position by 1992, adjusting its constitution to eliminate its identification as a Marxist-Leninist state.

Although Cuba is now technically a secular state that allows for freedom of religion, Catholicism is still closely regulated. Religious groups must apply to the Ministry of Justice for recognition in order to be legal, while those that operate house churches complain of onerous restrictions. The Catholic Church is also not allowed to run its own schools or hospitals in Cuba, which are all state-run. But Catholicism has historically been the island's dominant religion, and despite the Vatican's criticism of Cuba's treatment of dissidents, the government seems less at odds with the faith than ever.

Francis's visit has been seen as further indication of a gradual opening for the Catholic Church in Cuba. Castro — a staunch, lifelong atheist — has hinted as much.

"I am from the Cuban Communist Party, that doesn't allow [religious] believers, but now we are allowing it," he said in May. "It's an important step."

"There were a lot of years of politically entrenched atheism in Cuba," said Michael Murphy, a theologian at Loyola University. He added that he is "hopeful" that the pope's visit will further normalize Catholicism in the country.

The visit won't be without some tension, however. On Thursday, responding remotely to questions being sent by Havana students, Francis delivered an answer about leadership that appeared to be aimed at his imminent

hosts.

“A good leader is one who is capable of bringing up other leaders. If a leader wants to lead alone, he is a tyrant,” he [said](#). “The leaders of today will not be here tomorrow. If they do not plant the seed of leadership in others, they are worthless. They are dictators.”

Pope Francis’s popularity certainly helps matters. A native Argentine, Francis is the church’s first Latin American leader, and his progressive political stance is particularly appealing to Cubans. The pope has been an outspoken critic of wealth inequality across the world and a prominent advocate for the poor and needy.

“Some people continue to defend trickle-down theories which assume that economic growth, encouraged by a free market, will inevitably succeed in bringing about greater justice and inclusiveness in the world,” Francis wrote in a 2013 [papal statement](#). “This opinion, which has never been confirmed by the facts, expresses a crude and naive trust in the goodness of those wielding economic power and in the sacralized workings of the prevailing economic system.”

Francis’s avowed support for the plight of the downtrodden matches up with Marxism, Murphy said, “in the idea that power should not be concentrated in the hands of the few and everyone should not be constrained by power.”

The pope’s language also echoes liberation theology, a social justice-inspired movement against poverty that emerged from the 1950s and 1960s in Latin America. The Vatican historically dismissed liberation theology as too radical, fretting that it was a vehicle for Marxist ideas. But Francis has reacted differently, welcoming the Peruvian priest Gustavo Gutiérrez, who coined the phrase “liberation theology” in 1971, to the Vatican in May. He also declared Oscar Romero, a Salvadoran archbishop who sympathized with the movement and was assassinated by a right-wing gunman in 1980, a martyr earlier this year, opening the way for Romero’s beatification in May and bringing him closer to being classified as a saint.

The Pope has made it clear he is motivated by religion, however, not politics.

“The Marxist ideology is wrong,” he said in a 2013 [interview](#), responding to criticism from conservatives who had labeled him a proponent. “But I have met many Marxists in my life who are good people, so I don’t feel offended.”

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A central tenet in Catholicism has always been caring for the poor, which Francis has discussed in the case of Cuba before.

In 1998, when Pope Francis was still Bishop Jorge Mario Bergoglio, he wrote a book titled *Dialogues between John Paul II and Fidel Castro* after Pope John Paul II made the first papal visit to Cuba. The book discussed how the pope had “appealed to the Christian soul of Cuba,” and it advocated for increased dialogue between the church and Cuba’s government, which Bergoglio hoped would turn to democracy in order to better help its people.

“The message of the pope, not only to the Cuban people but its leader,” he wrote, “contains a deep reflection on the need to cross the road to allow Cuban citizens to participate in the civil life of that country.”

Nearly two decades later, Pope Francis is delivering that message to Cubans again — this time in person.

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