

The Catholic Church and the destiny of the Cuban nation

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SEPTEMBER 1, 2011

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Cuba needs to undergo an intense process of adjustment, reform or change, or anyway you may want to call it. These transformations must be deep and wide, if we want to take the country out of its current condition. These needed changes should include the renewal of the economic, social, legal and political structures, as well as intense work to promote the individual (with regards to education and culture, as well as spiritually and as a citizen). Both, the structural and the anthropological areas must work together and use procedures to guarantee that they will support each other.

This road to reconstruction must be based on a methodology that promotes the free development of the individual potential and a positive relationship among all individuals. Cuba needs a higher degree of freedom, as well as a greater fraternity. We must understand clearly that if we are to rebuild our lives and that of our families, we must also rebuild the nation, which is vital to reinforce individual and family stability. This will only be achieved if we can find a path of dialogue and joint efforts, conscience and even reconciliation, when possible.

It is also true that in our political-ideological spectrum we exhibit attitudes that hinder this reconstruction and that everybody can claim reasons to justify their positions. But we must be clear that if we do not choose to place the future, even better the present, before so much pain that cannot be erased, we will choose as our present and our future another scenario of pain that will only bring us more suffering. The common good for the country and for each of our children deserves that we use this moment as the

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hour of reconciliation, at the risk that otherwise the country may fall into an abyss very difficult avoid, if we are to reach the necessary balance.

The Cuban nation faces the challenge of having to design the methodology needed by its citizens, government supporters and opponents, residents in the Island or emigrants, to build together, from their respective individual positions, the destiny of the country. In the full span of our political and ideological spectrum there are individuals or groups ready and capable to undertake this Project. There are many Cubans who oppose the government and accept this methodology. There are also many revolutionary Cubans, including authorities that in some cases barely accept this, but in some cases they even wish for a methodology like this. And what is even more important, as far as I have been able to analyze the social situation of the island, I believe that the majority of Cubans hope for this type of solution.

I believe that only using a methodology based on reconciliation, dialogue and consensus it will be possible to reinvent the economic, social, legal and political institutions, and what is more important, develop the individual ethically, civically and spiritually. This will be very important because only from a strong position of spirituality will it be possible to incorporate the necessary humanism and ethics to obtain a diverse (it will more diverse, maybe than it ever was), yet harmonious nation. Cuban churches, and in particular the Catholic Church, are particularly prepared to facilitate the path to reconciliation and national progress.

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The Catholic Church in Cuba has a solid history that makes it fit for this purpose. At the time of Cuban independence the Church made a significant contribution with the generation that concentrated around the Seminaries of San *Carlos* and San *Ambrosio*, in Havana. That was the generation that laid down the pillars of the Cuban culture and drew important paths for its history. We must also recognize that following the impact of liberalism in Spain, the Church removed itself from the national processes and received the Independent Republic at some distance, which was eventually overcome during an important process of insertion in the new reality, with an active presence and certain influence over the lives of the Cuban people. Ironically, it is in the actions of the Church in our current history, when many considered the Church to be destined to disappear, and overcoming the current deficiencies, that it has recovered the strength to support the nation in its process of recreation by promoting dialogue and reconciliation.

Along these lines it is very important to reflect deeply about the mission of the Church and its characteristics in the particular context of our society, which were made during the process known as the *Reflexión Eclesial Cubana* that lasted for five years and led to the Encuentro Nacional Eclesial Cubano (ENEC) in 1986. During the ENEC, one of the most relevant ecclesiastic events in Cuban history, the Church invited Cubans to recognize a reality had been considered as foreign and suggested the path to reconciliation as the only path for the Christian contribution to society and for its improvement as a whole. The ENEC represented the return of the Church to the social Cuban environment with a very evangelical presence and very, very Cuban. The Church should never abandon this position, in spite of circumstances, like those that took place during the most difficult years of the Special Period.

During very difficult hours for the nation, the Cuban Episcopate reinforced the ultimate and always new solution for all types of maladies: love. In a historic message Love Expects All (*El amor todo lo espera*), in September 1993, the church reminded Cubans of the importance of dialogue among Cubans, without

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exclusions, or pressure, as a fair and permanent solution to the crisis and the best path to reconciliation, faced with future challenges from the new national and international scenarios. But, unfortunately, the circumstances when the document was first published (first statement made by the Catholic Church in many years) did not allow a full understanding of the specifically ecclesiastic mission, promoter of reconciliation, ignoring ideologies and individual interests. In spite of the attacks received by these statements, the church continued with its position of dialogue and the will to build love, fraternity, solidarity among all Cuban, as it had been done in the ENEC.

As expected, from this renovation of the pastoral basis of the Church, the relations of the Church and society began changing, and even the relationship with the State changed, although imperceptible for a while and undergoing a difficult process, which could not be any other way. The Church increased its participation in the Cuban social and cultural Cuban scenarios, with all the relevant implications. This caused frequent tensions with the government, but as it always happens when actions are based on a true and noble commitment, among discrepancies a mutual respect began to grow. Although there is still much work to be done in this direction, we have arrived at a point where this encounter and contributions that are positive for Cuba, and the Church, could help many of the sectors of the Cuban nation, if they were to agree. This, in my opinion is the biggest challenge on the road to heal the relationship among national groups with opposing criteria.

Among these great milestones, the current Cuban Catholic Church has promoted other conciliatory efforts for dialogue that have continued to offer positive results. The interest to serve the needy, including the work for the release of political prisoners, and mediation work, asking for the elimination of acts of repudiation, are some of the most evident examples. All the actions undertaken by the Church, in public or private, have shown a support that the church has offered without reservations.

Therefore, the Church has two main instruments to validate its interest in facilitating the path for the reconciliation of Cubans: a message of love inclusive and conciliatory, and proven experience, simple but proven, without forgetting its own limitations. The Church also has a group of conditions called to support this activity among which are: years of institutional presence on the Island, networks that extend all over the country, an articulated discourse about mankind, the nation and the cosmos, and although small and poor, it is strong and free at the same time like never before in its history, because it does not have structural connections to any center of power inside or outside of Cuba.

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The Catholic Church has a very peculiar way of carrying out its work. Its modus operandi is to work using a Catholic methodology which requires all Cubans to act as brothers, raising the sense of responsibility and fraternity, promoting understanding and arriving at consensus. Such methodology is based on honest dialogue that is at the same time respectful, prudent and generous and when questioning it does so in such a manner that the other party may always respond in a positive manner. Therefore, it promotes dialogue around spiritual, moral, family, cultural, education and even political issues, but in this case in a very general way, and never divisive.

This is what the Church does for Cuba. For example, the Archdioceses of Havana carries out this activity, as each entity does, in their own way, such as the Aula Fr. Bartolomé de las Casas, of the Dominican priests, a

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true space for dialogue among people with opposing beliefs; the publication *Espacio Laical*, whose editorials support the building of Casa Cuba; magazines *Palabra Nueva*—the senior publication in Havana, *Bioética*—from the Centro de Bioética Juan Pablo II-, *Vivarium*—from the Centro de Estudios Arquidiocesano-, *Amor y Vida*—from the Movimiento Familiar Cristiano-, and *Spes Habana*—from the Instituto Padre Félix Varela; the school for educators, dedicated to train professors and teachers, both in methodology as well as in values; the Centro de Bioética Juan Pablo II; Signis-Cuba (Organización Católica para el Audiovisual); and the team promoting dialogue between faith and reason.

When the Church promotes dialogue in every instance it does not attempt to impose its views, but accepts contributions from all, with the highest respect for diversity and contuse its work to reach consensus. The Church also participates by offering its humble opinion to encourage honest behavior, reflection and an authentic human attitude. In this dialogue the Church contributes: Jesus Christ, analysis and adherence to the natural Law, the Social Doctrine of the Church, a theology and teachings of reconciliation and prayer (this tool which offers fulfillment through faith and is used by us as well as those who we pray for, to open hearts for a deeper relationship with God and our fellow men, inspired by feelings of respect, trust, understanding, appreciation and love).

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And given the hope that has opened from the dialogue between government and the Church, in particular between Cardinal Jaime Ortega and Monsignor Dionisio García, Archbishop of Santiago de Cuba, and President Raúl Castro, many expect that the Catholic Church will extend and intensify its work promoting reconciliation, dialogue and harmony.

In response to this increased expectation, the magazine *Espacio Laical* published an interview with a group of Cuban analysts, both from the island, as well as from abroad. Those interviewed believed that the Church must offer deep spiritually and an always new anthropology, teach its social doctrine; promote a national reflection about the moral obligations of today Cubans towards those that will inherit the country, announce structures of solidarity; continue contributing to the national unity; create a national climate of understanding and acceptance of the “others”; seek to revert the strategy of the annihilation of the adversary, so that those that are opposed decide to understand each other, at least reach some basic understanding to attain the necessary harmony to plan a future that can offer some hope to all Cubans; cooperate in the solution of conflicts and the joint construction of shared spaces; legitimize speeches and policies about human rights; help to understand the best way to restructure the economy; establish programs to help the Cuban family; tend to the needs of the population’s more vulnerable groups, and facilitate the international relationships of the country. In summary, they propose the promotion of a spiritually, ethics and practice of communion based in an adequate anthropology.

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In order to promote these ideas, the Church should study the possibility of developing other instruments that could offer valuable help, such as the creation of publications with certain specialization in the areas of anthropology and spirituality, as well as the promotion of dialogue between those with opposing criteria. Catholic publications can offer great help too, if they are prepared to offer their support for the agreement of the different opinions in the country, which for a catholic publication should be more than just the expression

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of ideas, but the expression of ideas should be a starting point for the promotion of self confidence and consensus which would represent a real benefit for all.

We must also recognize that the study of Cuba and its possibilities requires work that exceeds the scope of Catholic publications. It is also necessary to study the possibility of building at least a network of entities, open to all, in order to carry out such joint research, as well as to promote the creation of different open forum to debate the Cuban reality and its challenges. We must also work to carry out this activity from a positive perspective and based on general harmony. And we must also make sure that we are not interfering with the activities of any institution or social entity, since that is not the purpose of the Church, which is facilitating the general reconciliation and the common good.

In order to reach these goals, the Church must be in condition to mediate at the time of conflict, both in relation to research and dialogues promoted by it, as well as in the day-to-day of the society. To that end, the Church must adequately prepare its pastoral agents and train several individuals and groups.

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A very important task, requiring intensive work shall be that of the political area. The political and ideological issues are a very sensitive matter for Cubans. Therefore, many feel that the encounter should be reached through mutual contribution in areas less controversial and leave this issue for when it is possible. Those who feel this way are right. But there are still many aspects where work could be started. We will never be able to renew the essence of the national reality while a political-ideological agreement is not possible, and I do not believe that the nation can wait any longer to feel the relief of a renewal in its foundation. For this reason I consider this to be a fundamental issue. But I still understand the difficulties of this mission. Especially if we do not facilitate at the same time a change of attitude.

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The issue of human rights, what they are and how to guarantee them, will be the most important issue of any political activity, at least under an environment of common sense and patriotism. There are differences among Cubans with regards to this very important issue and what divides them. Therefore, given the conflicts that have developed among Cubans around this issue, it would help to understand that we must reverse the current dynamic to settle this issue.

There are those who believe that at the beginning it would be difficult to reach the readiness for dialogue, understanding, respect and consensus, and we if we fail to exercise the rights that we do have, and to be able to structure these rights formally, as well as others that may be absent among our guarantees, to reach the common good. There are those who believe that all basic rights are innate and therefore, they don't need to be granted by anyone. This, obviously, is only true in part.

It is also true that rights are inalienable, but by nature we are social beings, and therefore these rights must be recognized reciprocally among other members of society or by important sectors of it. So it is important to begin the path to reconciliation and confidence among all with opposing beliefs if you want to define a true and effective universe of rights for all Cubans, and an environment where they can be exercised fully.

This will be decisive if we really prefer to settle the issue instead of going from an intransigent posture to a position supposedly based on principles.

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But this will only be possible if all the parties are capable of introducing a political culture that is new, mature and capable or recognizing the opposing party as interlocutor, based on the decision to accept the legitimacy of all opinions and the shared analysis, in order to work together and reach a consensus. This position can produce hostility, and may seem impossible and there are reasons that justify these positions. But this conduct is an imperative for the process needed to recreate our nation.

The Church could help by seeking the incorporation of these political attitudes, but it may not be able to do much if the political actors, the individuals responsible for the different positions, (which are many) fail to listen to the message and the work of the church in this area. That is why I am asking them to reflect deeply so that they may understand that there is no other patriotic path to procure the common good for all Cubans.

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