

The Catholic Church and Nationalism: The challenges from Pope Benedict XVI visit

BY LENIER GONZÁLEZ MEDEROS

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There are two anecdotes, both symbolic, that marked the year of 1981 when the Holy See decided to promote Monsignor Jaime Ortega, bishop of Pinar del Rio, to Archbishop of Habana. On the same day, December 27, 1981, when he was supposed to take possession of the Cathedral, the headlines of the newspaper *El Nuevo Herald* read: “From forced work camps (in reference to the UMAP) to Archbishop of Habana”. At the same time, the government building that was to be occupied by the new Archbishop showed a sad picture, with locked rooms full of old debris and covered by dust. The colonial small palace offered a sad picture, of eternal and sad abandonment.

Both stories are symptomatic. The first story tells of the secular claim to the Church, and specifically to the figure of the future Cardinal, of a “hard” position against the Cuban Government, seeking to insert the Church in the reproduction of logical policies based on the annihilation of the “other”. The second story refers to a ramshackle old building, which was a great metaphor for the Cuban church at that time, stowed within its walls, suspicious of the surrounding reality, deprived of means to relate and interact with the people, deeply hurt by the undertow of its conflict with the revolutionary power and the subsequent government violence practiced against Christians on the island.

More than 30 years later, a priest from Matanzas proved to be, without yielding to the typical Cuban agendas of confrontation scenarios, one of the most brilliant strategists that the Cuban government has had to deal with, whose leadership has managed to reconstruct, soundly, pastoral structures and mechanisms of social and political dialogue of the diocesan Church of Habana. Taking this scenario as a backdrop, and given the high level of dialogue that the Catholic Church has in Cuban society, the followers shall attempt to take stock of the papal visit, and will provide some clues about the overall project that the Church proposes for Cuba, and give clues about the challenges that the current Cuban reality imposes.

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I. THE IMMEDIATE IMPACT OF THE VISIT

The visits of Pope John Paul II and Benedict XVI to our country have, as a common denominator, the existence in Cuba of a crisis scenario. John Paul II came to a country where anti-market paralysis, Soviet dogmatism and the remnants of the Cold War, on both sides of the Florida Straits, aborted the country's transformation after the fall of the Eastern Bloc, and prevented its coupling with the institutions and global economy. Benedict XVI arrives at a Cuba in transition, where it can be said that there is a national consensus that calls for dismantling the Soviet-style economy, moving towards a regime of greater freedom, to enable an inclusive sociopolitical model of consensus, without rejecting the social policies that enjoy strong popular support. All this is marked by the widespread perception that time is running out for the current government authorities, lead by Raúl Castro, to facilitate an orderly and gradual transformation of the Cuban system.

According to Levy and López-Gonzalez, the papal visit contributed to the Cuban government's agenda on three levels: a) it strengthened institutional forms of dialogue between the administration of Raul Castro and the Catholic Church, creating incentives for the latter to participate in the process of change, and contributing to the renewal of the existing system; b) it helped create an international environment favorable to reform and new projects without leaving the one-party rule; and c) it reinforced the image of a country in transition where the costs of the rigid U.S. position against the island are raised.

For the Catholic Church, the effectiveness of its policy of social integration of the last two decades was confirmed, where social spaces are gradually recovered and its appreciation of the political system is recognized. These spaces have contributed to widen the religious rights of assembly and expression, without having to accept internal destabilization. The visit strengthened the social role of religious communities as critical supports of the reforms. The Church consolidated its status as interlocutor with the Cuban authorities, which will have consequences within the Communist Party where there are "hard" sectors who hold suspicions against any kind of pluralism outside of the coordinates of Marxism-Leninism. This requires a coordinated management between the Cuban Bishops and the Archdiocese of Miami, which favors dynamic dialogue and openness that could be key in the future, as facilitators of a readjustment of the relations between the island and their exiles, and the potential start and reinforcement of political dialogue between the Cuban government and moderate opposition groups based in southern Florida.

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The recently concluded visit of Pope Benedict XVI has had a diverse impact on the Cuban nation. A broad spectrum of social sectors in the island welcomed the visit of the Pope. This is the case of the Catholic faithful, Christians of other denominations, and a wide range of simple people who do not profess any faith as militants, but are spirituality open to maintain organic links with the Cuban Catholicism, who holds custody of popular religious icons. I have the perception that this is a huge sector, which perceives the realignment of Church-State relations in a positive way, while strengthening religious freedom at home and publicly legitimates religious practice, as an element of everyday life. These are usually areas who have failed to express their opinion in public and to the media about the impact caused by the Pope's visit to Cuba. It is necessary to highlight the efforts of the State in the Island to ensure the success of the visit, as well as signs of respect and affection expressed to the Pope by President Raul Castro.

The visit of Pope Benedict XVI also impacted other domestic sectors, including emigration. These are sectors with an articulated socio-political discourse, actively opinionated, whose balance of the visit were marked by a strictly political prism, which in any scenario, would be logical and legitimate. Especially in Cuba, where

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the Catholic Church has been and is the largest sector of organized civil society, holder of an anthropological discourse, social and political, highly articulated, perceived by the Cuban authorities during the confrontation years, as a worthy rival to take into consideration.

The analyses of the visit, from all over the national political and ideological field, mark, in its innermost essence, the recognition or not of the Cuban government as a legitimate national actor. It would be appropriate in the future, to track in more detail the positions of the Cuban left and right (inside and outside the island) about the visit, in order to finish setting up a map on the matter. It would be a good prelude to realize how the correlation of forces will be structured in the Cuban scenarios in the near future.

Benedict XVI clarified the socio-political proposal made by the Church to Cuban society, in line with the teaching of the Cuban Bishops and the Holy See for at least the last 20 years. Those who expected something else just ignored the political paths agreed by the Cuban bishops, now with greater synergy in their dialogue with the political system. This proposal, which will be addressed in more detail in the next section, promotes a scenario of gradual and orderly change, preserving national stability, national sovereignty, social inclusion standards, and works towards a more inclusive and pluralistic society, a scenario without losers, where the Cuban government participates as a facilitator. In this regard, we find political groups on both sides of the national spectrum who do not accept dialogue and consensus as a method for rebuilding the country, and who see in the reconciling and gradual work of the Church an unlawful act, almost treason. In addition, the Cuban government's inaction in the political arena has a negative influence.

The Church aspires to expand its social presence, from loyal nationalism, in which its values, interests and ideals are recognized as legitimate, even though they are different from those upheld by the Communist Party in government. Since the rise of Raul Castro, the Church has lent, and will continue to lend its voice to reform proposals and gradual openings. An important question is whether the government will officially recognize new training and development centers of social-Christian thought, such as the Centro Cultural Padre Felix Varela, allowing them to develop their work under normal conditions

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After the Holy Father's visit it is possible to establish more clearly the agreements and divergences in the agendas of the Church and the Cuban government. There seems to be consensus with regards to the issues of support to families and youth, promotion of values, coordinated support to socially disadvantaged groups, the exercise of human rights in the area of religious freedom, the positive readjustment of the relations of the island with the exiles, the success of the ongoing economic reform and the rejection of the aggressive policies of U.S. administrations against Cuba. It is interesting how both actors, displaying political realism and pragmatism, succeeded in transforming former areas of conflict in what has become areas of cooperation. This scenario was unthinkable just a decade ago.

Where there is clearly no consensus between the church and the government is on the subject of the immediate paths to be followed by the country to implement a sociopolitical model that will ensure wider participation by the entire political spectrum, according to the principles outlined by the Pope and Bishop Dionisio García, as president of the Conference of Catholic Bishops of Cuba. During the press conference held before the arrival of the Holy Father, Foreign Minister Bruno Rodríguez indicated that there would be an update of the Cuban model and that they are open to proposals, but the Deputy Prime Minister Marino Murillo said, after the visit has already started, that there would not be any political changes, only economic. This is the great

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unfinished business of the Cuban government and the main dissonance between it and Cuban society, including the Church. It would be desirable that the good climate of dialogue that exists today would help in the future, to include this issue on the agenda of bilateral discussions.

II. KEYS TO UNDERSTAND THE PROJECT OF THE CHURCH

At a time of evident national crisis, when the Church has managed to rebuild an effective social presence and the level of dialogue with the Cuban government, the visit of Pope Benedict XVI has impacted two key areas of the national life: politics and culture. The former is more circumstantial and ephemeral; very soon the heated debates about the visit will end, as well as the scurrilous attacks against Cardinal Ortega and the Episcopate, caused by the large polarization of the country. However, the challenge of the Catholic Church is to change the cultural area into fertile ground for Cuban society, following a healthy Christian anthropology, which is respectful dialogue with the great diversity of social and political actors present in the Cuban stage, and which encourages the formation of a new civic responsibility, as the only way to build an inclusive and prosperous nation.

This would be an appropriate time to finalize the Varelian project, where Faith, Hope and Charity fertilize the very essence of the country: a beautiful moment where Catholicism and nationalism could look face to face. The time has come when the Church must choose between having secular power, which places it in absolute confrontation with the Government, or, conversely, to accompany all Cubans, regardless of the way they think, wherever they live, whether related or not to the Roman Catholic faith, in the double path of personal transformation and in the dream of building a country “with all and for the good of all.”

In Cuba, Catholicism has always had a secular project of nation, whose ideas and constructions can be tracked since at least the first half of the nineteenth century. During the revolutionary period the emergence of a Catholic nationalist project begins in the 80's with the Basic Ecclesiastic Reflection, and crystallizes in the Final Document of the Cuban National Ecclesiastic Meeting (ENEC), with two subsequent updates: Pastoral Letter “Love expects everything” (1994) and the speech of Pope John Paul II at the Aula Magna of the University of Havana (1998). The final text of the ENEC marks, the subsequent paths of the Church in Cuba. Dr. Carlos Rafael Rodriguez is aware of the emergence of this phenomenon and transmits the government's concern, as referred in personal conversation with a priest in Havana in 1986. Special mention should be made of the Origins Group, whose poetic production was born in the margins of the institutional Church, but achieved strong “coupling” to the country's cultural policy, and was cleverly manipulated by the Cuban government to operate its own symbolic transition after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc.

It is therefore impossible to try to understand the purpose of Benedict XVI visit by trying to establish a break with the strategies outlined by Pope John Paul II in 1998. Benedict XVI ratified the project left to the Cuban Church by his predecessor, and emphasized areas related to personal values that support all Catholic nationalist projects from the ground. This project keeps common ground with the principles of the Social Doctrine of the Church, but with other more substantial leads from the thought of the Catholic Church.

The ultimate expression of the purposes and means of this project was publicly proclaimed by John Paul II at the Aula Magna of the University of Havana, where he urged the Church and all citizens to seek a “synthesis” where all Cubans could feel identified. John Paul II, in that important speech, re articulated and re launched,

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from more sophisticated key political, cultural and theological basis, the legacy of ENEC and the proposal of a “national dialogue” made by the Cuban Bishops in their pastoral letter “Love expects everything”. The need for a national dialogue towards forging a new political consensus for Cuba, is the very basis of the proposal made by the Catholic Church to the Cuban nation. John Paul II proposed a Catholic nationalist ideology marked by the heterodoxy centered on the figure of Cuban priest Félix Varela.

The ramifications of the socio-political proposal made in this speech are easily traceable in other projects emanating from Cuban Catholicism in the decade after the papal visit. Since then, it has become clear that the image of monolithic unity that projects from the Church begins to contrast with the diversity of voices within the Church itself. The keys to this proposal of John Paul II lies under the homilies of prelates like Cardinal Jaime Ortega and Archbishop Adolfo Rodríguez Herrera, and the idea of “Casa Cuba” driven by Monsignor Carlos Manuel de Céspedes (Archbishop Cardinal Ortega y Céspedes were the priests who dedicated more time to “analyze” the speech, and their views have helped to articulate the positions of the laity in Habana), and also in the secular drivers of the liberal democratic tradition of Cuban Catholicism, of which Vitral magazine was its main exponent in Cuba

Benedict XVI ratifies this direction, now complemented by the promotion of items on the agenda of the Church: truth and life, marriage and family, freedom and justice, dialogue and social inclusion, forgiveness and reconciliation. The German Pope emphasizes the human being and the means more than the ends. The Pope understands that it will be difficult to travel this road without strengthening ethics, spirituality and virtue, since these are essential factors in the effort to achieve a rapprochement between diverse social actors, the abdication of hatred, the banishing of the temptation of withdrawing into our truths, and trying to impose them on others, and a commitment to ensure our concrete historical reality

It is no accident that Father Felix Varela is presented by Benedict XVI, again, as the paradigm to conduct this path of personal and social transformation. The life and thought of the Cuban priest distil the essence of this nationalist proposal, unorthodox in its universality, for Cuba, where there will be a nation provided we practice patriotism, and there will be patriotism if we exercise virtue, and virtue will as we grow in spirituality. This is why Benedict XVI says that religious freedom is essential. The Pope acknowledges that Cuba has taken steps so that churches can carry out their mission openly and publicly express their faith. However, he encouraged the authorities to strengthen the achievements and progress towards more ambitious goals. In this sense, he suggests a greater presence of religious institutions in all areas, with particular emphasis on the issue of education.

The themes outlined are, without doubt, the core theological, pastoral and political proposal made by the Catholic Church in Cuban society. This is a solidly structured nationalist project, as are few of these scenarios in Cuba. This is a heterodox project that allows “multiple couplings,” both from existing opposite positions within Cuban Catholicism, and from other sectors of Cuban society. Because it is a verifiable fact that the Church has, through its publications, put that project in dialogue with the rest of Cuban society. Dialogue, forgiveness and reconciliation pave the road, with the participation of all Cubans toward a sociopolitical model that preserves the positives aspects of the revolutionary legacy and allows the coexistence of the emerging new social arrangements.

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III. CASA CUBA AS POETIC DERIVATION OF CATHOLIC NATIONALISM

Minutes before boarding the plane back to Rome, Pope Benedict XVI said: “I conclude my pilgrimage here, but I will continue praying fervently for you to move forward, and for Cuba to become the home of all, and for all Cubans, where justice and freedom coexist, in an atmosphere of serene brotherhood. The growing respect and freedom that lies at the heart of every man is essential to adequately respond to the basic requirements of his dignity to build a society in which everyone feels as an essential protagonist of the future of his life, his family and his country. “Never before had a Roman Pontiff used, quite literally, the poetic metaphor “CUBA HOUSE”, to refer to these issues.

Top of Form

For lay people who have grown in Habana under the “Apostilles” of Father Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, the Pope’s words were familiar. For this Catholic nationalism, Cuba carries a passion and a delusion, a frantic search-while-balanced harmony between diverse national elements. This need to rebuild what is broken or torn arises from the belief that man is the center of the Universe: the man is endowed with the gift of precious freedom. For this Catholic nationalism, the concept of the Universe is equated with to HOUSE, because its foundation is born of the brotherhood among its members. In historical terms the poetic vision of CUBA HOUSE assumes the redemption of a sense of community for the nation, while it stands as a balanced and rational political threshold for the worthwhile sacrifice. This concept also enables the emergence of a political sociability that through dialogue promotes the communion of the seemingly antagonistic and irreconcilable positions and involves the banishment of any exercise of exclusion and sees Cuba as the need for synthesis, dialogue and communion. In this new national Universe, “the inside” and “outside”, the Revolution and Exile, teleology and pragmatism, have at least the possibility to recognize each other as part of a single and indivisible whole.

The CUBA HOUSE, as we dream it, transcends partisan political activity and opens the door to promoting fraternal participation of all components of the Cuban nation. The political realization of this poetic desire implies a methodology of meeting and acceptance of others, standing on the recognition of the full dignity of man. Hence its catholicity. It is a joint project committed to complementary and diversity in the country. In that sense, the “reinvention” of Cuban socialism is not only based on economic functionality, but on a real chance to receive and integrate the growing plurality of subjectivities present in Cuban society. To take this challenge implies the radical redesign of state institutions and the architecture of the current Communist Party of Cuba, in order to effectively accommodate the entire national diversity.

In the XXI century we are challenged as a nation to expand the horizons of political imagination that has been limited to the defense of a share of social justice and national sovereignty, and open a path towards ensuring that, alongside these inalienable achievements, the exercise of all responsibilities and rights of human beings, based on the national project. The decision to absorb the “otherness” takes on the challenge of redefining the current margins of inclusion or exclusion in political the participation of social actors, or to redefine what we have traditionally understood by revolution and counterrevolution. Living up to that responsibility involves creative and bold policy responses, to break the canon of what until now has been politically correct socialism in the Island, results that will result in a widening of political consensus within the country.

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In the end, the object is to rearticulate the consensus around a republican structure, to be able to carry to the end Martí's legacy to Cuba, a country with all and for all Cubans. A project that goes beyond a simple restoration of the past, capable of impregnating the present of sufficient creative power to build a Cuba where everyone fits, with equal dignity

EPILOGUE

I hope to see the Church's ability to continue to deploy this task, in symmetrical dialogue with the rest of Cuban society. The Church faces the challenge of accompanying a highly diverse society, in which movements are gaining consistency that defend religious, environmental, racial, immigration, sexual orientation, gender and political issues, as well as others who may be articulated. There are sectors that are wary of potential social hegemony of Christianity. We will have to wait and see the wiliness of the Cuban government to accept it or to control it, to negotiate multiple contents critically position of the national secular tradition; all this amid the great polarization present in the Cuban scenarios, where there is still no clear political path that allows for real dialogue among various national projects. The challenge has been raised for all.

Note Some ideas in the first section are from the text "*Cuba espera a Benedicto XVI*", in combination with Arturo López-Levy and Lenier González, published in *Foreign Policy* in Spanish.



LENIER GONZÁLEZ MEDEROS

Havana, 1981. BA in Communications, Universidad de la Habana. Member of the Editorial Council (Assistant Editor) for Espacio Laical, publication of the Secular Council, Archdiocese of Havana. Member of the Secular Council and Culture Commission for the Archdiocese of Havana. Currently teaches Communications at the San Carlos and San Ambrosio Seminaries. Academic Coordinator for the MBA program at the Murcia Catholic University, Centro Cultural Padre Varela.