
Pope Francis' trip to Cuba inspires hope in North Jersey

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In a moment that defined his visit to the Middle East last year, Pope Francis bowed in prayer as he touched the “separation wall” between Israel and the West Bank, sending a silent message against the divisive symbol and conflict.

When the pontiff goes to Cuba in September, before his back-to-back visits to New York, Washington and Philadelphia, he’ll be watched for similar actions – as much for what he does as what he says, one church expert said.

The pope is visiting Cuba on the heels of a historic thaw in relations with the U.S. that he and the Vatican played a key role in engineering, holding talks between the two countries in Rome last year. He wrote letters to President Obama and Cuban President Raul Castro, initiating the dialogue, and assigned the archbishop of Havana to act as an intermediary.

Obama has since called for lifting the embargo on trade with Cuba after more than 50 years, and some steps have been taken toward that end, in addition to a loosening of travel restrictions to the island.

In North Jersey, Cuban-American Catholics welcomed the pope’s visit, but were mostly skeptical that lifting of economic sanctions would do much to influence the Castro regime. They said they hoped Pope Francis would address the Cuban peoples’ grievances with their government, including restricted civil liberties, its holding of political prisoners and the extreme influence of its military.

While many North Jersey Cuban-Americans interviewed last week would like Pope Francis to chastise Castro for his oppressive regime and expose a host of domestic problems, as a diplomat, his message is likely to be guarded, said the Rev. Claudio M. Burgaleta, a Jesuit scholar and associate professor of religion at Fordham University. During his visit to three Latin American countries last week, Pope Francis was generally silent on sensitive local issues that many activists had hoped he would address, opting instead to speak in general terms about freedom

and environmental protection.

"It bears underscoring that Francis is going as the leader of the Catholic Church, but Francis is also going as a head of state – Cuba has diplomatic relations with the Holy See. I don't think we can expect on an official state visit, that he'll insult his host," Burgaleta said last week.

But, Burgaleta continued, "He's also a pope who's rather unpredictable in his gestures. There's an excitement in, 'What is this guy going to do apart from the official schedule?'"

Pope Francis' 2½-day trip to Cuba, his first as pope, will include a Mass in Havana's Revolution Square, where his two immediate predecessors also held services. The pope will visit with Castro after the Mass. He'll also meet with families and bishops and bless the city of Holguin from the highly symbolic Cross Hill – for Burgaleta, an unusual inclusion in the papal visit and possibly the site for an important gesture.

"A very important battle in the Cubans' war for independence was fought there," he said, referring to Holguin and its role in the 19th-century Cuban wars. "It will be interesting."

Before he became pope, Francis wrote a book about Pope John Paul II's speeches in Cuba, which focused on the importance of families and open dialogue, both issues Pope Francis has championed on the world stage. Burgaleta said he expects to hear some of those messages in Cuba, which has a high divorce rate and low birth rate, as well as increasing pessimism among young people and ongoing tensions between Cubans on and off the island.

The pope will leave Cuba for a five-day visit to the U.S., which includes a meeting with Obama and the first-ever address by a pope to a joint session of Congress. Burgaleta said that speech could include a reference to the Cuba embargo, which only Congress has the authority to end. But there, too, the pope may prefer to use more "coded language," he said.

However he's able to do it – in words or actions – many North Jersey Catholics of Cuban descent said they would like the pope to spur changes in the government's responsiveness to the needs of its people, something they're not confident ending the U.S. embargo will do – a position held by, among others, Cuban-American U.S. Sens. Bob Menendez of New Jersey and Marco Rubio of Florida.

Mendendez's office declined to comment on the pope's trip. A spokeswoman for Rubio referred to comments he made in May at an event at the Council on Foreign Relations, defining his own position as being in the interest of U.S. national security, whereas Pope Francis was seeking world peace.

"His desire is peace and prosperity," Rubio, a candidate for the Republican presidential nomination, said of the pope. "He wants everyone to be better off ... there are many Roman Catholics on the island of Cuba, and he desires a better future. And anything he can do to open up more opportunities for them, he's going to pursue."

Rubio said his own point of view is rooted in "the belief that it is not good for our country nor the people of Cuba to have an anti-American dictatorship 90 miles from our shores. A nation that harbors terrorists. A nation that harbors fugitives from American justice. A nation that harbors advanced intelligence-gathering facilities for China and Russia."

Local parishioners also were concerned with Cuba's repressive government and hoped the pope would address it.

"They're being oppressed – men forced into the military and not having the right to speak their mind," said Frank Velasco of Bogota, a former youth minister at St. Michael's Parish in Union City. "If he can by a miracle happen to find a way to convince the Cuban government it's completely not right, not Christian-like, that would be great. That would be a bigger move than anything ongoing between the U.S. and Cuba. That would be the biggest miracle."

Velasco has faith that, while Pope Francis is in Cuba, "he'll be able to speak his mind out more than any other previous pope. He might be able to forge some openness with the Cuban government and the rest of the world: releasing political prisoners, starting some open dialogue in terms of basic human rights, giving back to the people."

Others were more skeptical of the pope's possible impact, including Fernando Alonzo, a parishioner at St. Joseph's Church in Oradell and staunch opponent of ending the U.S. embargo.

"Will Cuba change?" he asked. "So far all negotiations have brought no change in the way the Cuban government treats its people."

Hugo Jimenez, a former councilman in Ridgefield, said he'd like to hear Pope Francis "promote freedom in general."

"I just hope the progress continues," he said. "I have a little bit of reservation it will continue in a positive way with Raul Castro being president."

But if anyone can move Castro, it might be Pope Francis. Burgaleta, the church expert, noted comments Castro made during his visit to Rome in the spring, telling the press he was so enamored with the pope that he might return to the Catholic Church. "If the pope continues this way, I will go back to praying and go back to the church, and I'm not joking," Castro said.

The Rev. Cesar Infante, a priest at St. Joseph's of the Palisades Church in West New York, a city of many Cuban immigrants, said he believes the pope will, at the very least, be effective with the people in Cuba. Infante, who's from Colombia, said he has noticed that Latin Americans have taken to his practical style and tangible examples.

Infante says some parishioners are "inspired by how [Pope Francis] addresses the people, his way of living. He's reachable to people."
