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In Cuba, Vatican envoy meets with Raul Castro

by Catholic News Service

HAVANA

Archbishop Dominique Mamberti, the Vatican's foreign minister, concluded an official and pastoral visit to Cuba June 20 saying relations between the Catholic Church and the Cuban government are on a healthy course.

Just hours before his departure, the archbishop met with President Raul Castro, saying afterward that bilateral relations are "cordial, continuing and on the rise."

An official release to various Cuban state-run news media reported on the meeting and said the president and the Vatican diplomat also discussed subjects of common interest on the international agenda.

"The visit of (Archbishop) Mamberti also showed the favorable development of relations between the state and the Catholic Church in Cuba," the government's note said.

The Vatican diplomat spent several days on the island, marking 75 years of diplomatic relations between the Vatican and Cuba and participating in a national conference on the church's social teachings.

Archbishop Mamberti is considered an expert on Latin America, the United Nations, Africa, the Middle East and Islam. His visit took place at a time of church-state dialogue, focused primarily on the status of political prisoners, although other subjects have also been on the table.

As a result of these conversations, begun in May, the government recently released one jailed political opponent, Ariel Sigler, who had become ill, and moved another 12 prisoners to jails closer to their homes.

During his stay on the island, Archbishop Mamberti participated in several official programs, including a tribute to 19th-century Cuban hero Jose Marti and a meeting with the foreign minister, Bruno Rodriguez.

At a joint press conference following their meeting, Archbishop Mamberti welcomed the results of the conversations between the church and the government and said he hoped his visit would contribute to strengthening such talks.

Archbishop Mamberti said one of the Vatican's diplomatic objectives was "to support the dialogue between local churches and the authorities of various countries."

Rodriguez emphasized the church's social programs and called its communications with the government "profound and constructive." He said the conditions were right to continue such "fruitful exchanges."

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The archbishop's official visit included stops at various schools, a concert and a tour of Havana's historic district.

His pastoral visit opened with a session on the state and laity during a church social teaching forum that analyzed subjects like dialogue and reconciliation among Cubans, the economic situation of the island and the public role of the institutional church.

Archbishop Mamberti is the highest-ranking Vatican representative to visit the island since February 2008, when Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, Vatican secretary of state, represented Pope Benedict XVI for celebrations marking the 10th anniversary of Pope John Paul II's historic visit.

Cardinal Bertone was the first international dignitary received by Castro after he officially assumed the presidency, a few days after the announcement that Fidel Castro was turning over the role to his younger brother.

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