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Pope Benedict XVI's visit to Cuba benefits both Vatican and the Castros

Cathy Grossman USA Today | Mar. 23, 2012

When Pope John Paul II visited Cuba in 1998, he called for the island nation "to open to the world and for the world to open to Cuba."

Pope Benedict XVI now will walk in that wider doorway.

The official reason for the trip is pastoral. Just weeks before his 85th birthday, Benedict is mustering his strength to bring encouragement to the Cuban flock after his first stop in Mexico this week.

The pope will bless the patroness of Cuba, La Caridad, the Virgin of Charity of El Cobre, on the 400th anniversary of her statue found floating in the sea.

Experts say his two-day visit to Cuba benefits the Vatican with increased opportunity to promote the faith in a country that once imprisoned priests, confiscated church property, shuttered religious schools and deprived active Catholics of education and job opportunities.

In turn, the visit benefits the Castro brothers -- ailing revolutionary Fidel and his now-ruling brother Raul -- who know the Roman Catholic Church has always opposed the half-century-old U.S. trade embargo.

Thousands of U.S. Catholics are streaming in to see the pope, 500 from South Florida alone. Historian and Benedict biographer Matthew Bunson says the pontiff "wants to give a vocal and open show of support for the Cuban church and the Cuban people -- 60 to 70 percent of whom are Catholic -- and translate their historic faith into a more active and vibrant Catholic life."

Archbishop of Miami Thomas Wenski, who has been to Cuba frequently in the past decade, sees this visit as possibly as transformative as John Paul's visit.

Wenski estimates churchgoing is still weak in Cuba -- maybe just 500,000 attend Sunday Mass among the nation's 12 million people. But when La Caridad was loaded onto a pickup and toured around the island for 15 months, an estimated 4 million people came out to greet her.

Still, the relationship between church and state is "not yet what it could be. The church doesn't have the complete freedom it enjoys in other free societies," Wenski says.

Even so, Wenski can tick off signs of progress, including:

- A newly completed seminary campus is the first major construction project by the church since the revolution.
- Renovations are now underway in several churches.

- Cuba's first program offering a master's in business administration is offered at a new Catholic cultural center in Havana.
- St. Thomas University, owned by the Archdiocese of Miami, gives training programs to public school teachers in Cuba.

National Catholic Reporter Vatican expert John Allen says the Castro brothers "want international legitimacy. Wrapping the pope in a warm, loving embrace, showing they're not enemies of the faith, is a good way to get it," Allen says.

But the Rev. Thomas Reese, a political scientist, says Benedict might also "shake his finger at the Castros and challenge them to pay attention to religious liberty."

(Cathy Lynn Grossman writes for USA Today.)

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- **Pope Benedict XVI's visit to Cuba benefits both Vatican and the Castros** [7], March 23
- **Pope tells Cubans to look beyond Marxism** [8], March 23
- **The pope in Mexico and Cuba** [9], John Allen's weekly column. March 23
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Links:
[1] http://ncronline.org/node/29520
[2] http://ncronline.org/node/29519
[3] http://ncronline.org/node/29518
[4] http://ncronline.org/node/29511
[5] http://ncronline.org/node/29516
[6] http://ncronline.org/node/29515
[7] http://ncronline.org/node/29514
[8] http://ncronline.org/node/29513
[9] http://ncronline.org/node/29465
[10] http://ncronline.org/node/29512