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Cuban dissidents attend Mass, hold protest, day before pope's arrival

Cindy Wooden Catholic News Service | Mar. 26, 2012

HAVANA (CNS) -- The eyes and the prayers of parishioners in Havana's St. Rita of Cascia Church were focused on the 19 catechumens who will be baptized at Easter. Only the large group of reporters was fixated on the 35 women dressed all in white sitting near the front.

But after the Mass March 25, while parishioners visited with each other and with their pastor, the Ladies in White -- the "Damas de Blanco" -- recited the Hail Mary in the back of the church, and then began their weekly protest march along the main street outside.

The women's weekly walk began nine years ago as a way to call attention to the imprisonment of their husbands, sons or brothers. The last of the prisoners were released last spring in an agreement negotiated by Havana Cardinal Jaime Ortega Alamino.

The women have kept walking to and from the church each Sunday because, they said, even though their loved ones have been released, most of them are not free of government repression, and Cuba continues to arrest dissidents.

Elizardo Sanchez Santa Cruz, president of the Cuban Commission for Human Rights and Reconciliation, said in a statement March 25 that at least 70 "peaceful dissidents," including 15 Ladies in White, had been detained in the previous four days as part of a crackdown before the visit of Pope Benedict XVI, who arrives in Cuba March 26.

Jacqueline Boni Echevarria, dressed in white and carrying a light orange gladiolus, said, "We come every Sunday. We struggle for freedom."

She said her son had been arrested for "having an idea different than the government's."

Miriam Reyes, also dressed in white and carrying a gladiolus, said the women begin and end their march reciting the Hail Mary because "the Virgin empowers us. ... We are poor. We have nothing, no rights. She inspires us."

The women told reporters they want to meet Pope Benedict. They promised not to dress all in white and not to bring photographers with them so that it would not be a media event. Before the trip, Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, Vatican spokesman, said no special meetings were planned with Cuban dissidents, but he did not completely rule out a late addition to the papal schedule.

Msgr. Jose Felix Perez Riera, pastor of St. Rita's and assistant secretary of the Cuban bishops' conference, told Catholic News Service the women are welcome at his parish because "they participate in the Mass correctly. The only problem is the reporters who interrupt the liturgy."

Speaking after Mass in a mix of Spanish, English and Italian, Msgr. Perez interrupted his interview repeatedly

to tell overly helpful parishioners to leave the church doors open.

"Everyone is welcome here to encounter Jesus," he explained to reporters.

The pastor said he has let the Ladies in White use the church because "St. Rita was a woman who suffered much because of her husband and children. We call her the 'advocate of the impossible,'" the patron saint of impossible causes, and the women seemed to need that kind of powerful intervention.

"The other reason is because this church is very visible," he said. "Ambassadors come here and foreign journalists," because the parish is in an upscale neighborhood filled with embassies. The visibility offers some protection, although the women frequently are detained for a few hours and then released.

The Mass March 25 was punctuated with prayers and references to Pope Benedict's visit to Cuba. Msgr. Perez told the congregation that the pope was coming to Cuba to confirm the people in the faith and to encourage them to educate their consciences and strengthen their charity.

The message of the Gospel is the opposite of "power and arrogance," he said in the homily; it's the opposite of the people who try to prevail with force.

In Cuba today, he said, everyone is talking about the desire for change, but it would be "a mistake to think that only others have to change, change must take place in the hearts of all."

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