

IMPRESSIONS ON THE VISIT OF POPE JOHN PAUL II TO CUBA

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Aside from very powerful personal experiences and testimonies of people I met in Cuba, the limited time available forces me to be pragmatic. Following are some of my conclusions regarding the Pope's visit to Cuba.

First, Cuba is not in a process of transition yet. In fact, in the aftermath of the Pope's visit, this has been clearly confirmed by the Cuban leadership. I think it is reasonable to say that a transition is inevitable at some point in the future, but I believe it is likely to be post-Castro and will refer to it accordingly.

What Cuba has today is a selective and distorted opening to aspects of capitalism, because of sheer economic necessity. This cannot, in and of itself, effect meaningful change in the system. Because the Pope has raised concerns regarding the ills of neo-liberalism, it is pertinent to focus attention on Cuba's unique adoption of neo-liberal elements, which is, in many ways, capitalism of the worst kind. Because the privatization of financial resources currently taking place precludes the participation of the population and exclusively favors foreigners and a select few in the nomenklatura, the consequences are very worrisome. This situation will prove very detrimental to achieving a stable and just transition, when that process does begin. The Pope's warning should be centered on this particular aspect; foreign investors and their governments participating in this type of "engagement" ought to be held accountable.

Cuba's peculiar model of enclave capitalism has an additional implication. For free markets and capitalism to work effectively—as per theory and experience—they require a proper value system and institutional framework. The problems of former Soviet bloc countries, especially the former Soviet Union, warn of the need to avoid replicating that disaster in Cuba. Therefore, the various exile political parties, groups, or currents ought to engage in some serious pre-planning regarding what kind of democracy and economic model they favor and what legal and institutional framework is called for. This planning should ideally be done with counterparts in the organized dissident community in Cuba that correspond to the political definitions of each tendency.

I also believe that especially the Cuban community in exile will need to accept that when a transition actually takes place, Cuba will be far from the ideal we have struggled for. Because I'm convinced of a real commitment to contributing to a post-Castro Cuba, I think we need to understand that we'll have to work with people who have lived under the current system all their lives and have idiosyncrasies and ideas very different from those of us who left. This will require that we learn to live with and forgive many gray areas. Unavoidably, the majority has either supported or, at best, acquiesced by participation, believed in or, at least, tolerated the current system. The role of the Catholic Church, as that of other churches, is very important in creating a psyche of reconciliation

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and peace. But this is long-term work, not a short-term solution. Because social and moral issues that pose huge challenges will have to be dealt with, turning for guidance to the sobering experiences of the former Soviet bloc countries may prove useful.

Second, people on the island have no point of reference with respect to such things as how different systems of government work. Yes, they recognize that their lives are hard and their cities and dwellings decrepit; they want something better, but they seem to have no clue what that “better” might mean. In fact, the alternatives they are presented with play consistently on fear. Amidst an almost total government control of information, the population is subject to constant propaganda on the ills of Western societies. The vast majority has either been born during or has grown under the present system. Few have traveled abroad and many of those who have, lived or traveled within the former Soviet bloc.

Given the unique space that institutionalized religion has gained in Cuba and the people's eager response to the Pope's visit, the Catholic Church in particular—and other religious denominations to some extent—could play a decisive role in helping shape the ethos of an alternative society and in providing a value system on which to sustain an institutional framework. We should look at working with these religious institutions, as well as with different governments and foundations, in the on-going task of teaching democratic and universal values that have been absent from Cuba. (I understand that some planning is currently being done to this effect, but it seems minimal.) And it is essential to make TV Martí available and boost Radio Martí's signal and to make sure that their programming responds to the needs and the frame of mind of the audience on the island.

Third, the one theme that surfaces loud and clear when contemplating a different system or way of life is that—regardless of the deficiencies of the actual system—Cubans do not want to lose free access to health and education. This plays very prominently in the expectations of the population. And the Pope only consolidated this conviction. We need to prioritize this aspect in both planning for a transition and helping design a proper model of a democratic Cuba

as well as in our contacts with people there. The general failure of former Soviet bloc countries to assure the basic social safety net and the consequent re-emergence of a yearning for a Communist society point to the relevance of this issue.

Fourth, I found the Castro regime nowhere close to falling, at least in the way that the majority of the exile community has expected or wanted it to end. I did not get the impression that there is readiness to revolt or demand change and it looks like the system could survive indefinitely despite the precarious economic condition. The possible exception—which I find improbable as well as hard to assess accurately—would be a revolt at the top. If Castro were to die or become impaired, the system seems institutionalized and strong enough to survive, at least in the short term.

The Pope's visit appeared to have an authentically powerful and highly symbolic impact at the level of the individual. People seem eager to seek meaning for their lives to ease the burden and replace the void left by the failures of a lifetime of sacrifice for “Socialism or Death.” The Pope's themes—peace, love, compassion, justice, tolerance, family—are the opposite of what Cubans have been hearing for almost four decades. Yet, I witnessed how most people of all walks of life were deeply touched. They are hungry for this message and welcomed it, which might have very positive effects both in the short and long terms. But, I cannot conclude that it was taken as a call to revolt.

As a result, I wouldn't bank on policies that assume that the abrupt collapse of the Castro regime is near. Rather, in the aftermath of the Pope's visit, I would engage in some very serious reflection concerning the adequacy of existing U.S. policy. Status quo being the order of the day, things may well remain frozen for a very long time unless we take decisive steps to design a pro-active and comprehensive policy that takes advantage of existing opportunities in order to induce certain outcomes. I believe we need to brainstorm, thinking very pragmatically and strategically, in order to design a policy with philosophical grounding and the incorporation of the themes used by the Pope which (1) focuses on de-legitimizing the

regime; (2) is composed of a selection of the most effective elements of current policy while eliminating its most detrimental aspects; and (3) is spiced with creative tactical measures designed to break the status quo. This should seek to change the focus from talk about lifting or keeping the embargo to changing strategic aspects of the current policy.

Fifth, the government's propaganda of blaming many of the economic ills of the Special Period on the U.S. embargo—which they all refer to as “blockade”—is almost universally effective. This doesn't mean that there's no recognition of the deficiencies of the system, but, rather that the government's effective manipulations indeed legitimize the regime's failures to a degree I never imagined. Plus, the Pope's words can easily be interpreted as endorsing this notion—misguided in my opinion. He made no specific references to the government's terrible mismanagement of the economy, within the context of an already disastrous model, as the primary source of its problems.

For this reason, I'm more convinced than before my trip that we need to look carefully at loosening trade aspects of the embargo, exclusively with respect to U.S. exports to Cuba (not imports from Cuba). As a tactical move I would recommend the immediate, unilateral and unconditional elimination of all restrictions on the sale of food and health-related products. Instead of conditionality, Cuba could be called to, in good faith, reciprocate by, for example, allowing independent press. (This would be a tactical tool, unlikely to achieve the desired result.) I have long believed that we have pretty much nothing to lose and everything to gain by lifting this aspect of the embargo. I'd love to have the time to expand on this issue, but am forced to leave it here for lack of time. It should be looked at and debated exhaustively.

In addition, propaganda about hostility by the United States and the leadership of the exile community seems generally effective. Therefore, I think it's very important to take into account the perceptions and sensitivities of the people who've lived under the current system and carefully word policy statements and laws, avoiding what sounds most interventionist. Less specific requirements than those in current legis-

lation which spell out the necessary terms of a transition, could generally call for a democratic system respectful of human rights and more effectively convey our essential support of the Cuban people's right to self-determination. Specifics should be carefully weighed so as not to fall prey of propaganda that plays on nationalism, which I found strong despite Cuba's sorry state.

Sixth, I have seen first-hand why people-to-people contacts are of utmost importance. I perceived nothing but good feelings towards the exile community. Just as my understanding was greatly expanded with this visit, the understanding of people on the island widens with these contacts. Family visits and remittances, although they help the regime in an important measure and remain controversial, have at least played a significant part in dispelling the bad propaganda of the past regarding those who have left. These are the type of contacts that reach the people directly, the ones the government finds most difficult to control. As a result, I'd recommend intensifying and increasing people-to-people contacts as per the Cuban Democracy Act's Track II, relaxing travel restrictions for academic and scientific exchanges as well as for visits by Cuban-Americans. I believe that the cost-benefit equation in this area weighs in favor of the benefits for those of us who want to see a free Cuba reconciled as one nation.

At the same time, I would direct efforts and resources to account for the victims of the 38 years of Castro's regime. The Catholic Church might now be in a position to take a more active role in this area, as it has done in other Latin American countries in the past. The Cuban tragedy needs to be personalized—given names and faces—in order to raise awareness in the island and worldwide. It's important to provide the Cuban people of today and of future generations the well-documented evidence of the violent nature of the Castro regime. Up to now, I think we have done a poor job in this area.

What is perhaps the most important lesson I have drawn from my trip is one that the Holy Father has attempted to communicate to Cubans everywhere: that with faith, tolerance and hope we must explore all viable avenues to find a solution to the Cuban

predicament and that we must not be afraid. In some ways, those avenues may require compromises we'd rather not contemplate. But reality is dynamic, we must be open to learning along the way and be willing to take action—with caution, but without fear. Because Cuba cannot be today what we desire or expect, we must work with what we have—imperfect as it is—and make the best of it.

Given our terribly painful history, all who have been born Cuban or feel Cuban, wherever we live, can benefit from listening with open minds and practicing more tolerance and pluralism—the values of true democratic behavior. Those of us fortunate enough to live in free societies are called upon to set the example by finding ways to argue and negotiate our differences with respect, honesty, and integrity. Importantly, those of us who hold spiritual beliefs are challenged to do so with compassion and empathy. This may be our greatest challenge in the midst of

the pain and ruins this Revolution has left in its wake.

The Pope brought a message to all Cubans, wherever we might be, which implies a commitment, at the heart of each one of us, to seek and defend the values that can nourish our lives and that of those who surround us. We must also do it collectively, as a nation. We are urged to reflect on how that calls on each and every one of us to contribute our part and find a way to work together for a common good. This is the only possible answer to rescuing something from the ashes that injustice, hatred, antagonism, abuse, separation, exclusion, deprivation—indeed, a long trail of sufferings—have left behind. I think that it's not only our duty, but, more importantly, that we have no choice if we are to plant the seeds for the moral, cultural and material restoration of the Cuban nation.