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U.S. priest: Spiritual costs of Cuban embargo have been high

20/08/2015



The U.S. trade embargo against Cuba turns 55 in October, and its effects are clear in the dilapidated buildings, scant food supply of Cuban stores and infrastructure around the island.

But what's not easy to see is the spiritual cost. Trinitarian Father Juan Molina, director of the U.S. bishops' Office for the Church in Latin America, said that spiritual cost has been great.

"The embargo has literally put a block between two hands, two sister churches working together," Father Molina said. "The church in the United States is very much a missionary church that goes to very different places around the world, not only to spend time with their brothers and sisters, but also to help them."

The embargo has prevented Cubans from receiving supplies from the U.S., even during natural disasters and emergencies. Financial donations from U.S. church members and groups that want to help pastoral programs for the church in Cuba also have been blocked. But it also has eroded something even more important to the Catholic Church: a spiritual fraternity between Catholics on the island and those in the United States.

"All that has been lost for last 50 years," Father Molina said.

Richard Coll, a foreign policy adviser for Latin America and global trade at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, said he sees hope, however, and it arrived with the Dec. 17 news that diplomatic relations between the two countries would be restored -- a move facilitated by the diplomatic hand of the Vatican.

"It was a day that marked Cuba," and one largely welcomed by the island's denizens, said Lourdes Maria Escalona, who works at a Catholic formation center on the eastern end of the island.

In April, Cuba was removed from the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism. Both countries opened embassies in each other's territory July 20, and on Aug. 14, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry raised the U.S. flag at the

embassy in Havana.

The hope now, Coll said, is "that there's no backtracking" by Congress on the flexibility granted to Americans so they can travel to Cuba, which includes permission to travel to the island for religious activities. The greater hope, however, is getting rid of the embargo.

"Certainly the conference (of bishops) in the United States, in conjunction with the Cuban bishops' conference, for many years, has favored that kind of action, the lifting of the embargo," Coll said. Such a move can bring about greater dialogue, commerce and contact with the Cuban people, their government, and foster human rights, freedom and democracy, just as it did in the similar landscape of Eastern Europe after the Berlin Wall fell, he said.

"The more they were able to rely on commerce and engage in dialogue with the West, the more possible it became for their own societies to be able to open up to human rights advances and eventually to a move toward democracy rather than pulling away from the West," Coll said.

Even St. John Paul II, an ardent opponent of communism, favored lifting the sanctions.

"Embargoes," he said while addressing a group of young people during his visit to Cuba in 1998, "are always deplorable because they hurt the most needy."

Any benefits that come from the historic thaw have the potential to affect more than just relations between Cuba and the U.S., Coll said.

"Cuba is a key that unlocks many other doors within Latin America," said Coll. "You can think about the situation in Venezuela, for example ... that's related very much to what's happening in Cuba."

Success with Cuba can lead to success addressing issues such as religious freedom, violence and poverty in other neighboring nations. And that's very much an interest of Pope Francis but it's also not an interest that began with him, Coll said.

"Sometimes in the press, and elsewhere, there's a desire to talk about how Francis is a revolutionary and so different from other popes, but on Cuba policy and on many other issues, including even economic policy, I would argue that Francis is very much in the tradition of Benedict XVI, John Paul II, going back to Leo XIII, so this is a chain ... it really is a pretty unbroken chain," Coll said.

Eduardo Azcarate, a native Cuban who lives in Falls Church, Virginia, said he does not like to get involved in politics and does not like to address the embargo. But the embargo has made it complicated for Cuban Catholics like him to help the church and its members carry out its mission.

"If the embargo did not exist ... it perhaps would help to facilitate an openness of service, of help to the church" in Cuba, he said.

However, he also tries to understand those who favor the sanctions and those who see it as "holding a chip" to "remind the government about the importance of human rights and religious freedom."

Just before Kerry arrived in Havana, a group of activists was arrested and released, following a protest in which they wore masks with the image of U.S. President Barack Obama.

The topic of the embargo almost seems unavoidable for Pope Francis, who will head directly from Cuba to the United States Sept. 22.

"I wouldn't be surprised if the pope speaks about that," Father Molina said, though it may not be a welcome topic in Congress.

"The challenge is that we're going to be heading into 2016, which is a presidential election year, and I think that most candidates are going to be very cautious and most members of Congress are going to be very cautious about taking any action," Coll said.

But the pope may see it as a priceless opportunity for world diplomacy, Father Molina said, and as another step in

the path of his predecessors.

At a recent panel of policy advisers in Washington, Demetrios Papademetriou, president emeritus of the Migration Policy Institute, a Washington think tank, said directly or indirectly, the subject of the embargo will come up during his U.S. visit.

"Even if the pope does not say the words Cuba directly, he will probably say something about facilitating dialogue and opening up within Latin America," he said. "After all, let's not forget that this is a pope that understands, has lived all his life, has preached, became a cardinal, in Latin America. He has lived with these issues."

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