

Can Pope Francis Free Cuba?

The upcoming trip of Pope Francis to Cuba will raise significant issues concerning the future of Cuba in the last days of the Castro regime, but, more importantly, concerning the pope's relative treatment of questions of human rights and wealth redistribution. He has been outspoken in support of both and wrote a rather turgid book about St. John Paul II's visit to Cuba in 1998, which resulted in some liberalities for the Catholic clergy in that country, but little else. As an Argentinian and a Jesuit, this pope evidently feels keenly the problems of socioeconomic inequalities in Latin America, is troubled by the tendency in many of those countries to restrict human liberties, and is very mindful of the Jesuits' history in Latin America. The Society's objections to the most savage excesses of the Spanish and Portuguese colonists played an important role in the Order's being shut down from 1773 to 1814 (other than in Prussia and Russia, or more precisely Poland, where the Jesuits were protected by Catherine the Great).

It should become clearer whether the pope's apparently somewhat indiscriminating endorsement of problematical initiatives like the framework for an agreement on Iranian nuclear weapons, the recognition of the state of Palestine, and resumption of normal relations between Cuba and the United States indicates naïve hopefulness or tactical public-relations sophistication, or a combination of both. The pope has long been a critic of the sort of severe inequalities of wealth that have plagued Latin America, though he has been studiously vague about how to deal with the problem. There have been times when it was possible to believe that he was prepared to saw the baby in half and allow the Left to do what it wanted with people's wealth – as if this were a zero-sum game and giving the disadvantaged half the assets of the rich would be a quick and fair fix – as long as the rule of

impartial law respectful of human rights replaced the Left's customary totalitarian despotism. Pope Francis's recognition that economic growth is essential to increased and more generously distributed prosperity has flagged at times (though not more than President Obama's). At least the pope has not tried to mire us in Pius XII's chimerical corporatist third way between Communism and capitalism, or Paul VI's addiction to centralized economic planning.

It doesn't really matter that the pope has opposed the U.S. economic embargo of Cuba, porous and easily circumvented through Mexico and Canada and other countries though it has been. But it is not publicly clear that he understands that the United States has had some legitimate grievances over these 56 twilight years of the Castros' negative economic and human-rights miracle. Fidel Castro expropriated American assets in Cuba without compensation, and he did try to export godless, Communist guerrilla warfare and attempts at violent revolution around Latin America, most celebratedly through Che Guevara's doomed guerrilla mission to Bolivia in the mid-Sixties.

The U.S. embargo, for which the pope habitually uses the term employed by Castro adherents, the "blockade" – as if the U.S. were physically preventing other countries' goods from reaching Cuba – has served as an excuse for the economic disaster of the Castro regime, but that regime has been a perfect illustration, for American foreign-policy purposes, of the total failure of Communism in both economic and human-rights terms. It is all academic to the United States now, as the collapse of the Soviet Union meant the end of attempted geopolitical subversions in the Western Hemisphere from outside, and the United States has no direct interest in how the Latin American states are governed as long as no strategic threat to U.S. security arises from them. However, prosperity is obviously desirable, for general humanitarian reasons as well as to reduce the pressure of impoverished Latin Americans

seeking entry to the U.S., and to give this hemisphere a stronger trading bloc opposite China, Europe, and Japan.

So far, the Castro regime has not followed through at all on President Obama's confident assertion that his overtures would break the logjam of Cuban totalitarianism and begin a long process of normalization. The pope, while he may be acting from intimate knowledge of the impact on the Latin American masses of the spectacle of a puny little country like Cuba standing up to mighty America in the name of the little people in the hemisphere against the swaggering gringo – however far removed that is from the facts – will presumably want to know if Raúl Castro's claim to be considering a return to Roman Catholicism after a lapse of nearly 70 years will be translated into greater freedom in Cuba, especially religious freedom.

In particular, during the four months until the pope's visit, we shall see whether the Cuban regime releases political prisoners; curbs its ubiquitous denunciatory Committees for the Defense of the Revolution; stops trying to intimidate the brave Ladies in White (relatives of political prisoners who demonstrate every Sunday despite often severe physical intimidation); and accords Cubans freedom of dissent, public criticism and media comment, foreign travel, pastoral religious activity, and access to the international Internet. The pope, and Catholic opinion generally, would also be gratified if the display, in the Museum of the Revolution in Havana, of the burlap bag in which Che Guevara's body was returned from Bolivia were modified so that it was no longer an obscene imitation of the Holy Shroud of Turin. The previous papal visits to Cuba, of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, were more deferential to this appalling Stalinist regime than they should have been by the normal criteria of papal accommodation of inimical governments. This pope knows a great deal more about Latin America than his predecessors, and his itinerary and public utterances will be instructive.

This will be a watershed for Pope Francis. He has been a public-relations genius in his two years as pontiff, and has struck from the hands of Catholicism's enemies the bludgeon they had long wielded, representing the Roman Church as an anachronism of superstitious hypocrisy directed by septuagenarian celibates and deviants (or protectors of deviants) scolding the people of the world from an absurdly traditionalist perspective about their sex lives. Francis's resonant "Who am I to judge?" – amplified by his emphasis on the fact that gays and the promiscuous have souls no less than anyone else and that it is the salvation of the human soul that is the Church's purpose – has largely silenced those most vocal critics of the Church, without, to their consternation, the pope's renouncing traditions or overly upsetting the arch-conservatives. The Church's struggle against atheists has thus been recast as a contest between the world's principal bearer of a spiritual tradition and advocate of the existence of a divine intelligence, against the forces of nihilism, uncompromising materialism, and paganism. This is a much more promising battle than the Roman Church's long-running imbroglio with those who successfully portrayed it as an unlimited source of killjoy humbug pretending that the implications of the sexual act had not been modified by advances in contraception.

The fear lingers that Pope Francis is not just agile, but facile, as in his hopeful exhortation to Mahmoud Abbas last weekend – as he gave the Palestinian leader a medallion of the angel of peace – "May you be an angel of peace." That is hopeful indeed, given Abbas's record as a terrorist and toady of the most odious Islamist governments, incanting the old Palestinian nonsense about the destruction of Israel and the right of return of millions of Palestinian fugitives and generations of offspring to Israel to swamp the Jewish state.

Beneath his bonhomous velleities, Pope Francis is obviously a very skillful operator walking a tightrope between engaging in

tactical outreach and maintaining the direction of the ark bearing the Christian message. The virtuosity of this reconciliation of his roles as practical navigator and pillar of immutable Christian tenets has given Pope Francis a prestige that clearly exceeds that of any of the world's current secular leaders.

His visit to Cuba in September, unless the Castros really have been inflamed by the grace of religious and philosophical conversion, will require him to demand change in Cuba, where all polls indicate that he and his faith are held in much higher regard than the Castros and their raddled and blood-stained Communist party.

If the Castros do not move toward greater freedom for Cubans at this very late date, the Cuban government will present an irresistible and extremely vulnerable target for this pope to attack as the bankrupt tyranny that it is, tottering to its end in brutal decrepitude.

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