

Cuba nowadays is getting ready for the visit of Pope Benedict XVI. A papal visit is an exciting event in any country in the world, let alone in Cuba with its Catholic majority on one hand and the state church relations marked by a tension to dialog process over the past decades on the other. The visit on 26 and 28 March will be the second papal trip to Cuba in the past 14 years after the John Paul II visited in 1998. John Paul's 5 day stay on the Caribbean island was memorable to the Cuban people, mainly due to the former Pope's call: "Let Cuba open to the world and let the world open to Cuba."

With this memory in mind, Cubans welcomed the announcement of Pope Benedict XVI on 12 December accepting President Raul Castro's and the Conference of Catholic Bishops of Cuba's invitation to visit. The details on the trip were agreed in a meeting between President Castro and a delegation from the Vatican. The Cuban press reported about the preparations, which are well under way in eastern Santiago de Cuba and Havana, the 2 major cities to be visited by the Holy Father.

The Archbishop of Havana, Cardinal Jaime Ortega, told me this week that John Paul's visit boosted a change in Cuba and led to a gradually growing openness to the Catholic church. A process which kept unfolding over the years. The Cardinal said "The Pope will come to consolidate a process of our own return to our own roots, which reinforces our identity as people, a process that favours reconciliation among all Cubans and creates an environment of hope." The Cardinal observed a new phase in the relationship between the Catholic Church and Cuba's people in government. The tension which characterised the early days of the Cuban revolution is evolving into dialog, he said, between believers and non-believers, between the church and Cuban authorities, between Catholics in Cuba and those abroad.

The upcoming visit will encourage a flock of accredited journalists into Havana along with tourists and visitors from the region and beyond. Cubans currently living abroad and also in the United States, where there are some 1.5 million, many of those Cubans have kept coming to the island over the years to visit their relatives. The dialog which followed John Paul's visit led to the Church becoming more present in Cuban public life, referred to by state media. Christmas Day, 25 December, was declared a national holiday again; Catholic priests were allowed to visit prisons; foreign priests, seminarians and religious people were allowed to work in Cuba, and Cuban priests were allowed to go and study in Rome. Public processions of faith now take place and Catholic publications are widely spread and are well received by Catholics and non-Catholics.

Many in Cuba take special interest in the support offered by the Catholic Church to the on-going process of economic and social transformations, known as the Updating of the Cuban Socialist Economy. The Cardinal recently stated "The success of these transformations not only depends on national, provincial or municipal authorities but on appropriate understanding by the people, and the Church has great responsibility in this effort, including our prayers for the good development of this process and its support by the people."

But more than focusing on all these economic and social changes, the visit by Benedict XVI will be a fulfilment of the Pope's wish to join the jubilee celebrations for the 400th anniversary of the discovery of the Virgin of Charity of El Cobre, Cuba's patron saint whose sanctuary is in eastern Santiago de Cuba province, Cardinal Ortega pointed out.

In a recent interview to state television, the vicar general of Havana, Monsignor Carlos Manuel de Cespedes, acknowledged the early days of tension between the Church and the state, a tension typical to most Marxist regimes in the past. The vicar noted that fortunately there were always people interested in bridging those gaps, at present he stressed the Catholic Church in Cuba is functioning as well as in anywhere else in the Catholic world, if not better.

Over 100 inmates were released from prison in 2011 as a result of an improving government-Church dialogue that started in 2010 about this issue. Later in December, President Castro announced the humanitarian release of another 2,900 prisoners upon the requests by religious institutions and their relatives. These inmates were under status of common prisoners and the action was in tune with their appropriate behaviour in their penitentiaries and as a gesture in views of the upcoming visit by the Pope.

The Holy Father will arrive in the eastern city of Santiago de Cuba on March 26th, he will officiate mass at the Antonio Maceo Central Square on March 27th and later he will visit the Sanctuary of the Virgin of Charity of El Cobre, and then he will leave for Havana. Where he will be welcomed by Cardinal Jaime Ortega, Archbishop of Havana, and other religious and civil authorities. Also on March 27th Benedict XVI will meet with Cuban President Raul Castro, and later he will visit the Catholic bishops. And on March 28th the Pope will officiate mass at the Jose Marti Revolution Square before returning to Rome.

For Global Radio News, I'm Luis Chirino.