

Pope Francis in Cuba

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Prior to his visit to the United States, Pope Francis traveled to Cuba from September 19-22, 2015. This was the third papal visit to Cuba, following those by Pope John Paul II in 1998 and Pope Benedict XVI in 2012. During his time in Cuba, Pope Francis visited three Cuban cities. In both Havana and Holguín, he celebrated masses in the Plaza of the Revolution, and in Santiago, he celebrated mass at the Basilica of Our Lady of Charity of El Cobre, Cuba's patron saint. Pope Francis's visit appeared to be largely pastoral, aimed at reinvigorating the Church in Cuba, but it also highlighted the increasing role of the Church in Cuban society in recent years.

The Cuban Catholic Church

Historically, the Cuban Catholic Church has been weak compared to the Church in other Latin American countries, with few active participants. During the early years of the Cuban Revolution, state-church relations deteriorated significantly. The regime expelled many foreign priests and nationalized all Catholic schools. Cuba became an atheist state, with the government actively discouraging the population from church participation. The Cuban government's repression of religious freedom eased considerably beginning in the 1980s, influenced in part by the changing role of the Catholic Church in Latin America and the influence of liberation theology and its focus on the poor. In 1991, Cuba's Communist Party allowed religious observers to obtain party membership, and in 1992, it enacted constitutional reforms banning religious discrimination and establishing Cuba as a lay or secular state, rather than an atheist state.

The Cuban Catholic Church became more active in the early 1990s. Cuban bishops issued a pastoral letter in 1993 strongly criticizing the government's human rights record. In 1994, Pope John Paul II elevated the Archbishop of Havana, Jaime Ortega, to the position of cardinal. Ortega has been widely commended for reinvigorating the Church in Cuba, including the expansion of the role of [Caritas Cubana](#), the Church's social assistance agency. The Cuban Catholic Church has been active in broadening the debate on social and economic issues in Cuba through its online publications such as [Palabra Nueva](#).

The Church has also played an important role on human rights issues, including the release of some 125 political prisoners in 2010-2011. Cuban bishops issued a [pastoral letter in 2013](#) maintaining that just as economic changes were occurring in Cuba, the country's political order needed to be updated with respect for diversity of thought. Some Cuban political dissidents, however, have [criticized](#) the Church for not more forcefully confronting the Cuban government, and some critics of Cardinal Ortega view him as being too conciliatory to the Cuban government.

Today, while the Church in Cuba still faces [government restrictions](#), it is involved in many social services, including soup kitchens, services for the elderly and other vulnerable groups, after-school programs, music groups, job training,

and even college coursework. Two Catholic seminaries also operate in Cuba, including a new one that opened in 2011.

Pope Francis's Emphasis on Service and Reconciliation

Just ahead of Pope Francis's visit to Cuba, the Cuban government announced that it would release [3,522 prisoners](#), which included prisoners older than 60, those younger than 20 with no prior record, inmates with chronic health conditions, and women—the list did not include political prisoners. During Pope Francis's visit to Cuba, between [100 and 150 dissidents](#) were reportedly prevented from attending papal events, and dozens more were ordered to stay home, according to the Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation. Three dissidents were forcibly detained after calling out for freedom and dispersing pamphlets after one of them had approached the pope and received his blessing. Some dissidents [expressed frustration](#) that the pope did not speak out about victims of government repression.

During his four-day visit, Pope Francis repeatedly emphasized two pastoral themes—service and reconciliation. In his [sermon in Havana](#), Pope Francis spoke of the need for service to those who are vulnerable. He said: "Serving others chiefly means caring for their vulnerability. Caring for the vulnerable of our families, our society, our people." The pope said that caring for others does not mean being servile, but rather means putting "our brothers and sisters at the center." In a phrase that some observers believe was aimed at Cuba's communist rulers, the pope contended that "service is never ideological, for we do not serve ideas, we serve people." In his [sermon at the Basilica of Our Lady of Charity](#), Pope Francis said that "our faith calls us out of our house, to visit the sick, the prisoner, and those who mourn."

Pope Francis touched on reconciliation throughout his trip to Cuba. In his [sermon in Holguín](#), the pope recounted the conversion of Matthew, maintaining that Jesus "invites us slowly to overcome our preconceptions and our reluctance to think that others, much less ourselves, can change," and poses questions such as "Do you believe it is possible that a traitor can become a friend?" In an [encounter with youth](#) at a Catholic cultural center, Pope Francis encouraged them not to be limited by ideologies or preconceptions about others. He asked the crowd to open their hearts and minds to others: "If you are different than me, why don't we talk? Why do we always throw rocks at that which separates us?"

The theme of reconciliation was also illustrated by Pope Francis's praise for the rapprochement in U.S.-Cuban relations. Upon his arrival in Cuba, Pope Francis said that the process of detente between Cuba and the United States was "[a sign of the victory of the culture of encounter and dialogue](#)." In 2014, Pope Francis [had played a role](#) in facilitating the improvement in relations by writing letters to President Obama and Cuban President Raúl Castro (personally delivered by Cardinal Ortega) that called for the two leaders to resolve issues and advance bilateral relations. Even though the Vatican has long opposed the U.S. embargo on Cuba, Pope Francis did not publicly raise the issue directly during his visit to the United States. Instead, during his [address to Congress](#), he recognized efforts by countries "to overcome historic differences linked to painful episodes of the past," and noted his "duty to build bridges and to help all men and women, in any way possible, to do the same."