

## The Church in Cuba: *Tested by torment, fired by Faith*

**WHEN** the Pope visited Cuba in 1998, he electrified audiences across the island with the words: “Do not be afraid to be protagonists of your own history.”

The sight of vast crowds at his Masses and other celebrations breathed new hope that oppression against the Church in Cuba was finally at an end. But the years since have shown that in key aspects of the Church’s life such hopes have been dashed.

The Church is still severely hampered by restrictions, which are the legacy of ruthless acts of repression carried out in the early 1960s during the first years of the regime. The Church’s every move is monitored by Cuba’s Office for Religious Affairs. It means Catholics continue to face:

- A ban on all religious schools
- No Church access to the media
- A prohibition on religious processions and festivals
- Frequent expulsions of foreign missionaries
- Propaganda against the Church in schools and the workplace
- State refusal to allow the Church to reclaim buildings lost to the regime 40 years ago at the start of the regime.



*A missionary hands an Aid to the Church in Need rosary to a teacher of the Faith.*

The problems mean there is a huge shortage of priests. There are barely 300 priests in Cuba in a population of 12 million people. And yet in Chile, a country with a similar-sized population, there are about 3,000 priests.



*Two youngsters in a temporary chapel.*

And yet the sheer dynamism and resourcefulness of its faithful shows the Church in Cuba possesses a spirit undaunted by fear. There are 80 students for the priesthood in Havana Seminary alone.

As one priest said: “In the early days, people were very influenced by the propaganda against the Church ... Now, people have great confidence in us because when they come to Church they can express their wish to know God. At last, they can feel free.”

## Winter of despair gives way to springtide of hope

*I was moved beyond words. During Mass in a rural Cuban church, the priest asked me to stand up and the people burst into spontaneous applause.*

The priest told how Aid to the Church in Need had funded everything that the parishioners could see around them – the pews they sat on, the new church roof, the tabernacle – even the fans so important in this hot climate. Even the young priest – Fr Casper – had his training funded by ACN.

The church, north of Camaguey city, was just one of countless projects throughout Cuba, which received help from the charity.

Cardinal Jaime Ortega, the Archbishop of Havana, said: “Without the help of organisations such as Aid to the Church in Need, the Church in Cuba would be like a car without wheels – going nowhere.”

Critically, the communities benefiting from our support were a people whose faith was thriving.

In Fr Casper’s church that Sunday morning, two youngsters were baptised, several people received a special blessing and some women sitting in front of us were preparing for reception into the Church.

Aid to the Church in Need gives crucial support for Church communities throughout Cuba. For example, the charity helps:

- Train students at Havana Seminary who cannot support themselves
- Re-build churches in villages without anywhere to worship
- Buy and furnish homes for religious at work in the community
- Train catechists in areas short of priests

In the space of just two weeks, we received no less than 40 requests for help from Church leaders desperate to meet the needs of expanding Catholic communities.



*Water of life: Father Casper baptizes a little girl*

## Idyllic beauty masks suffering

*BEHIND* the veneer of Cuba’s seductive brand of sun-drenched faded grandeur lurks a sadness that teeters on the brink of weary resignation and outright despair.

*The dream of equality and prosperity that climaxed with the 1959 revolution led by Fidel Castro has curdled into massive disappointment for the many saddled by oppression and poverty.*



*Street scene in Central Havana*

OFFICIAL statistics say Cuba has no unemployment and yet we heard reports that at least 15 percent of people are jobless – many of them because prostitution and the black market are better payers than the government.

SURVEYS show that the vast majority of people in Cuba consider themselves Catholic but less than 5 percent go to Mass regularly because it is discouraged by the regime.

WHILE the Catholic Church struggles to get government permission every time it wants to reclaim redundant churches, Protestant churches have doubled to 1,700 in the last decade. The Catholic Church’s opposition to the government’s intolerance has meant it is a regular target for oppression.

BE they in rural parishes or in busy city centres, churches across the country have Aid to the Church in Need’s Lumen Christi candles produced to mark the Jubilee Year. They are a sign of the extent of the charity’s work across the island and the affection in which they are held by the local people.

JUST eight of the 20 priests in Pinar del Rio diocese in the east of the island are native to Cuba. The rest are missionaries. The age-old oppression against the Church has made it difficult to foster vocations among the young. And yet dozens of young people are now trying their vocations.

REPORTS say that suicide rates among women are the worst in the world. Tens of thousands of abortions take place every year there. The Church is responding to these problems with magazines and courses highlighting the dignity of human life.



**RESPONSE FORM**

**Aid to the Church in Need**

PO Box 6245

Blacktown DC NSW 2148

Ph/Fax No: (02) 9679-1929

e-mail: [info@aidtochurch.org](mailto:info@aidtochurch.org) Web: [www.aidtochurch.org](http://www.aidtochurch.org)

*Block Letters Please*

Mr/Mrs/Miss/Sr/Fr:.....

Address: .....

Postcode:..... Tel No:.....

**I/We enclose \$\_\_\_\_\_ to support the work of the Church in Cuba**

A04/12/2/10

I enclose a cheque/money order payable to Aid to the Church in Need **OR** please debit my Bankcard, Visa or Mastercard:



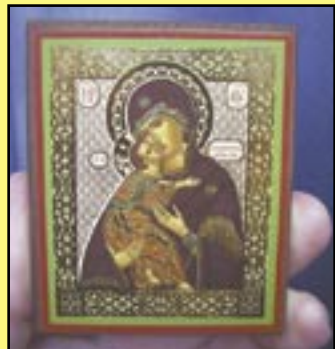
Expiry date: ...../.....

Signature: .....

**A beautiful Icon of Our Lady of Tenderness made in Russia will be sent out to all those who give a donation of \$10 or more and tick this box.**

The icon portrays Mary as the tender mother full of compassion, not just for her Son, but for the whole of suffering humanity. In Jesus reaching out to embrace his mother with infinite compassion, we see more than a mother holding her child, but also God clasping his creation to himself.

The small wooden backed icon measures 63 mm x 77 mm. **Please tick the box above if you would like to receive the icon.**



**Keeping the Church on the road**

“AN Aladdin’s cave full of goodies” is one way to describe the hoards of basic supplies built up by Church workers ready for despatch to those most in need. Behind the high walls of a home like any other is just one such example.



Inside, a dust cloth is pulled back to reveal a gleaming array of soaps, tinned food and clothing.

“We are constantly being asked for the most basic supplies and we just can’t turn people away,” said one Church worker.

Elsewhere, a bishop stands beside an old car being mended with machine parts smuggled in by anonymous sources. The car is badly needed for a priest with a huge parish.

“We are nothing if not resourceful,” he said with a smile. But behind the good cheer was an earnest request for continued support for more aid to keep the car on the road and the Church active in the community.

**Faith renewed by the young**

***“IF Jesus was not afraid to give his life, why should we be afraid?”***

Such were the staggering words of 21-year-old Juan, just one of 20 or more young people who go out into Cuba’s villages talking to people about the Faith and giving people a light of hope amid the bleak prospect of endless poverty and despair.

The group – some of who have gone onto try their vocations – enjoy summer camps in which they celebrate the Eucharist and meditate on the word of God. “They are an example to us all,” said their proud bishop.

One village they visited was subsequently hit by a hurricane. The missionaries returned offering food and clothes. One missionary recalled: “When we went back, the people said: ‘Now we believe you. When you came the first time we heard you say how you wanted to give us hope and by coming back you’ve done just that.’”



*Faith ablaze: missionaries in rural Cuba*



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**Cuba Report**



*Young and old in Jorobada village, rural Cuba, gather for worship. Lacking any church they pray in front of a barn.*



**Aid to the Church in Need**