News



Havana Cathedral, in Havana, Cuba (NCR photo/Soli Salgado)



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For the first time in decades, Cuba's official leader will not have the last name of Castro.

The country's National Assembly selects a new president April 19, replacing Raúl Castro. He had taken the reins in 2006 when his older brother, Fidel — dictator since the country's 1959 revolution that put the Communist Party in power — fell ill. Heralded as an historic change by some, others deride it as meaningless because Raúl Castro remains the first secretary of the Communist Party and retains influence over decisions behind the scenes.

Yet real changes are quietly being made by the second-largest institution after the government in Cuba: the Catholic Church. Connections forged with Cuban-Americans are strengthening parishes, shoring up social services and extending beyond the Cuban church by offering business and entrepreneurship training to help rebuild civil society.

Pope John Paul II's 1998 visit to Cuba signaled a new era for the beleaguered church in which he urged, "May Cuba, with all its magnificent potential, open itself up to the world, and may the world open itself up to Cuba." Twenty years later, Cuban Catholics on both sides of the Florida Strait are joining together to do exactly that.

Cuba's outsized role in geopolitics is evident in visits by the last three popes, including Pope Francis in September 2015, just months after he helped broker the renewal of diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Cuba.

Yet the changes go far beyond the headlines generated by papal visits, and involve numerous bishops, priests, women religious and lay members of both countries. Building on a 20-year gradual reconciliation with many Catholic Cubans in the U.S., even in Miami — long a bastion of anti-Castro hardliner exiles who eschew any relations with Cuba — the efforts are marking a way forward and bridging the communities, even as relations between the two countries cool under the Trump administration.

"There's been a revitalization of the church" in Cuba, said Miami Archbishop Thomas Wenski, who has been to Cuba more than two dozen times since 1996, including the three papal visits. "The church has made progress — it's small steps. It's not what it used to be and it's not what it should be."

Openness after hardships

The Cuban Catholic Church is still recovering from the repression imposed shortly after Fidel Castro took power in 1959. By the end of 1961, hundreds of priests were jailed or expelled, lay leaders arrested and some killed, and Catholic schools nationalized, prompting hundreds of women and men religious to leave. Tens of thousands of Cubans fled to the U.S., Spain and other countries.

Practicing Catholics in Cuba were excluded for decades from the Communist Party, denied teaching and other jobs, and faced harassment. In meetings throughout dioceses on the island in the early 1980s, bishops, priests, women religious and lay people prepared for the National Encounter of the Catholic Church (ENEC) in 1986, "the first systematic grass-roots effort by the Catholic Church to come to terms with the changes wrought by the revolution," according to a working document.

The assessment was grim: Less than 2 percent of Cubans regularly attended Mass, there were about 200 priests, and discrimination was widespread. Yet from that meeting, the church emerged with renewed vigor and embraced its missionary role.

In 1992, Cuba officially declared it was a secular but no longer atheist state. But John Paul's 1998 visit "marks the before and after in the relation with the church, with the state and also with Cuban society," Wenski said. It "was almost a signal that it was safe to go to church again." A subsequent visit by Pope Benedict XVI in 2012 and Fidel and Raúl Castro's warm welcome of Francis in 2015 strengthened the church's footing.



A statue of Pope John Paul II in Santa Clara, Cuba, in the place where he addressed the city in 1998. (NCR photo/Soli Salgado)

An estimated 60 percent of Cuba's population of about 11.5 million is Catholic, according to Vatican statistics. The U.S. Department of State cites 40-45 percent are at least "nominally" Catholic, and adds that Catholic officials say about 10 percent attend Mass regularly.

Key to the revitalization of the Cuban church is reconciliation, not only between Cuban-Americans and Cubans but among Cubans themselves, Wenski and others said. Surveillance is common in Cuba, with neighbors, students, teachers and others reporting activities viewed as contrary to party ideals to Communist Party and government officials.

"Every Cuban has been betrayed by somebody else," Wenski said. "If you're going to have what I like to call a 'soft landing' rather than a 'hard landing' when this changes — and I think the changes are going to happen inevitably — what the church is hoping for and trying to promote is a soft landing without a lot of violence and disorder. For that to happen, there's going to have to be a lot of reconciliation."

> "The greatest witness has been to open the doors to those who left the church or fought against us and do it without any reproach and integrate them into our communities."
> —Laura Maria Fernandez

That point is underscored by Laura Maria Fernandez, secretary of the Cuban church's coordinating team Encuentro Eclesial, a group of Cuban bishops, priests, women religious and laypeople both on the island and in exile. For 20 years, the group has been building connections and trust.

"For me, the greatest witness of faith of the church that lives in Cuba were not the sufferings of the decades from the '60s to the '80s," she said in an email to NCR. "The greatest witness has been to open the doors to those who left the church or fought against us and do it without any reproach and integrate them into our communities. I think that is precisely what the Cuban diaspora does not understand very well in the United States."

While the Cuban church maintains connections with Latin America and Spain, support from the exile community in the U.S. is notable, given the long-standing bitterness and prevailing hardline view for decades, especially in Miami, that helping Cubans helps the Castro regime retain power.

That stance is softening amid waves of successive Cuban refugees who still have families on the island, and as younger Cuban-Americans take leadership roles. Even former hardliners such as business executive Carlos Saladrigas, who five years ago helped start and finance an entrepreneurship training program run by the church in three Cuban dioceses, have found common Catholic connections as a way to engage with the changes slowly taking place in Cuba.

"The most important role for the Cuban-American community, period, is one of support for Cuban civil society," he said. "We are a chorus, behind the scenes staffers; that's what we need to be. We need to facilitate this process, but it's up to the Cubans. We are Cubans; I don't want to diminish that, but we don't live there, and when you do not live with the consequences of what you're proposing, it creates a very high ethical standard."

Saladrigas led vocal opposition against then-auxiliary bishop Wenski's proposal to have a cruise ship bring Miami pilgrims to Cuba for the visit of John Paul II. The plan was dropped. While watching the papal visit on television, Saladrigas said, "I began to say to myself, 'What have I done? I've made a huge mistake.' And I began to regret very much taking that position."

That marked a change in his approach to Cuba — be more measured and less reactive. He and other Cuban-Americans formed the Cuba Study Group, whose stated mission is to "help facilitate peaceful change in Cuba." He still faces "vicious" attacks by hardliners in Miami on radio stations and other media publications but stands by his convictions.

"It is far better to help the Cuban people even if it provides a collateral benefit to the regime, than it is to hurt the regime and at the same time collectively hurt the Cubans," he said. "That became a fundamental transformation for me."

Jesuit Fr. Alberto Garcia, who left Cuba in 1961 at age 17, faced some initial backlash from his family when he returned to Cuba between 1992 and 2001 and then received permission to enter as a Cuban national from 2001 to 2015 to minister in three parishes.

"My family here in Miami was not happy at all that I was working in Cuba," he said. They "figured I was not very loyal to democratic ideals, working with [the] Communist state," said Garcia, now a spiritual counselor at Belen Jesuit Preparatory School in Miami. While there is still suspicion and some opposition toward Cuba, he finds that attitude changing.

"The church here in the States has been a little bit more open to what has been happening to the church in Cuba than the regular Cuban-American population, which has been a lot more militant against any kind of help to the Cuban church," he said.

Some Cuban-Americans criticize the church in Cuba for conceding too much to the government and not supporting dissidents. Yet close observers say it must work within the boundaries or risk being shut out of influencing change, particularly at this critical time.

"The church is orchestrating a very difficult balancing act — it has to balance the internal dynamics with Cuba, relations with the state and the Cuban exile community," said Enrique Pumar, department chair of sociology at Santa Clara University, who has studied Cuba and the Catholic Church in Cuba. "So far they are

doing a good job, but others would like them to be more active."

Rebuilding parishes

Fundamental to strengthening the Catholic Church is building — and rebuilding — parishes. Cuba's first new church in six decades plans to open within months, in the town of Sandino, in the region of Pinar del Rio, an initiative undertaken by one of three historically Cuban-American parishes in Tampa, Florida.

As with many efforts in Cuba, it began as a people-to-people connection, explained Fr. Ramon Hernandez, now a retired priest who assists at St. Lawrence Catholic Church in Tampa. A priest from his hometown of San Luis in Pinar del Rio was visiting him in 2010 and discussed the idea of building a new church in Cuba. They approached the then-pastor of St. Lawrence, who supported the effort. As publicity spread, about $95,000 was raised through the parish and from donations across the country and even abroad.

The 250-seat church, Sagrado Corazón de Jesús, will serve a parish community of about 600 active Catholics in a town of about 9,000, though there are many more who are baptized, Hernandez said. Catholics now meet in a house; there are about 5,000 such "house churches" in Cuba.

"The church has more space in the society and this put another step in this process," Hernandez said. Permits for new churches have been issued in Havana and Santiago, which he attributed to the efforts in Pinar del Rio.

New and repaired church buildings are important signs of vitality for the church in Cuba, but fostering strong church communities is even more so.

In his years in Cuba, "people started coming back to the church," said Garcia, who served in parishes in Havana, Matanzas and Camaguey. "There were a number of young people who came back with a great deal of hunger for values, and practically no religious background. So the parishes had kids tremendously hungry for knowledge, desperate to get Bibles."

There was a critical need for priests as the number had been capped at about 200 for decades. More priests were allowed in after the papal visits, including some from Miami for limited periods. There are now more than 350 priests in the country.



San Lazaro Catholic Church and Shrine in Hialeah, Florida, bordering Miami. The parish community, mostly Cuban exiles, helps support catechism programs in Cuba. (NCR photo/Soli Salgado)

Building parishes in Cuba is a slow process but yielding results, said Fr. José Espino, pastor of San Lazaro Catholic Church and Shrine in Hialeah, Florida, bordering Miami. In 1999, he was one of 132 religious workers allowed into Cuba and spent five years there, initially in the newly created parish of St. Joseph the Worker in the city of Guantanamo, his hometown. He had left Cuba at age 5 as part of Operation Pedro Pan, a mass exodus of unaccompanied minors out of Cuba, from December 1960 to October 1962.

"A lot of it was sitting on the porch and welcoming people and inserting yourself slowly into the community," he said of getting non-practicing Catholics back to church. "That's basically one of the first things I did — just welcoming people."

Mass was celebrated in the living room of a house until numbers grew and it moved outside. The parish community numbered about 100 when Espino left in 2002 for another parish in Cuba. He returns every year and notices growth in the number of parishioners and that a small chapel has been built.

In 2002, he became pastor of a church in Baracoa, the oldest parish in Cuba, established in 1512 in an isolated, mountainous region. A lot of flexibility was needed, as there were still tensions with local government officials, Espino said. The parish would plan an event for a day, only to have local party officials plan something for that same day. Music would blare from a nearby park, disrupting Mass. "That tension has slowly diminished," he said.

Now from his vantage point in Hialeah, he sees support for the church in Cuba continuing to grow in the Miami community. Young priests from Cuba often come to him and other Cuban priests in Miami to ask for help. "Anytime there's a priest or a layperson from Cuba here, people help them out monetarily — and you build the bridges — it's people-to-people bridges."

He gives mission talks for Cuban parishes and a lay-led effort in his parish helps support catechism programs on the island, providing $50 a month for snacks, transportation and some outreach. He has worked with a food program for the elderly in Santiago. The efforts are low profile — not just for lingering sensitivities in Miami, but also for the watchful eyes of the Cuban government.

"It's done very quietly — everything is done very quietly," Espino said. "With Cuba, the less you talk the more you do."

Also quietly filling the gaps in social services are congregations of women religious in Cuba, who tailor their ministries to local needs: some run day cares, offer alternative education courses, or run a home for those with disabilities. Other efforts are led by laypeople and operate with the help of Catholic U.S. organizations, opening community centers and chapels in impoverished farmlands.

But none describe themselves as supplements to government programs, and instead are careful to stress that these efforts are related to evangelization.

Home churches — "casas de misión" — are important signs of missionary vitality of the church, said Fr. Juan Sosa, pastor of St. Joseph in Miami Beach who travels to Cuba frequently. Sosa also was the coordinator for many years for the Encuentro Eclesial group of priests, women religious and laity who meet periodically.

"It's marvelous, the activity that they do. Since they couldn't build churches in 59 years, they gather in [the] homes [of] sisters or a layperson, and the priest goes and they have a celebration of the word and then those places become parishes or

communities."



Fr. Juan Sosa, pastor of St. Joseph Catholic Church in Miami Beach, points to a photo of participants in Encuentro Eclesial, a group of Cuban and Cuban American bishops, priests, women religious and lay people who have been meeting 20 years to help bridge divisions and foster better communication. (NCR photo/Soli Salgado)

Caritas Cuba is a key example of the growing connection between the church in Cuba and the church in the U.S., particularly the exile community. Caritas Cuba runs day care, feeding programs for the elderly, and disaster relief assistance, supported by the Friends of Caritas Cubana, a Boston-based fundraising program run by Cuban exiles. Besides the money raised to help Cubans, the program has helped build connections between Cubans on the island and exiles, says Consuelo Isaacson, chair and president.

"I take people with me who are interested and the connection when we get there is so real and strong – we are the same people," Isaacson said. "We travel with the Caritas people to see the programs and can sit down to chat with them as if we have been best friends forever. There has been reconciliation in the air on both sides."

One impediment to rebuilding the church in Cuba are the large number of priests and trained laity who leave for the U.S. and other countries. "The problem with Cuba is that we train laypeople and they leave — that's a reality," Espino said. "There's a brain drain. If you want to see the fruits of the church in Cuba, look to the church in Miami."

Yet a lay-led retreat program called Emmaus is cited by Wenski, Sosa and others as a sign of both connections between the Cuban-American church community and growing vitality of the church in Cuba. The parish-based spiritual retreats originated in St. Louis Catholic Church in Pinecrest, near Miami, and have since spread throughout the U.S. and other countries including Colombia, Guatemala and Spain.

First efforts were rocky. One group that tried to hold the retreats in Cuba a few years ago had their Bibles confiscated and were turned back by the government. At the invitation of Cuban bishops, Cubans from Miami traveled to Cuba to conduct the first men's Emmaus retreat last year.

"We had to be very careful on what we said because people are taught that Fidel Castro is God — it's 60 years of having this impounded on their brains," said one of the Miami organizers, who asked that his name not be used for concern that the Cuban government might stop the retreats. Five men's retreats have been held in Cuba since the beginning of 2017, and the first women's retreat took place last year.

The retreats are effective, he said. "Now men are going to church where before it was just women," the organizer said, emphasizing the importance of it being done at the lay level. "That's where change really happens. It strengthens the belief that no matter if you're a communist, if you have this encounter with Christ, no political agenda is going to change that."

Related: Encuentro Eclesial event unites Cuban Catholics, bridges US-Cuba division



The Felix Valera Cultural Center in Havana (NCR photo/Soli Salgado)

Training entrepreneurs

One of the newest endeavors for the church in Cuba is alternative education and entrepreneurial training — often with support from Cubans in the U.S. and elsewhere. The operations are sensitive and keep a low profile for worry that the government might shut them down.

At the Felix Varela Cultural Center, a former Jesuit seminary in Cuba before a new seminary was opened in 2010 just outside Havana, bachelor's and master's programs are offered in humanities and business. Some 2,500 students have graduated from the program in five years, certified through the University of Florence, a public university in Florence, Italy, under an international education agreement. The center also screens movies and hosts music lessons, as one of its

chief objectives is to expose students to the humanities.

Also offered is an 80-hour, one-month course program on entrepreneurship, which Saladrigas helped start. The Proyecto Cuba Emprende (Cuba Emprende Project) now operates through archdioceses in Havana, Cienfuegos and Camaguey, and has trained and graduated more than 5,000 people. About 70 percent have started businesses within the small business spectrum permitted by the government, said Saladrigas — in information technology, manufacturing, candle-making, consulting, and telephone repair — though the efforts are heavily taxed and regulated.



Students play instruments at the Felix Valera Cultural Center, which emphasizes the humanities. (NCR photo/Soli Salgado)

The project operates through the dioceses and is locally run, he said. The Cuba Emprende Foundation provides overall guidance and financial resources. Participants are "highly educated and with incredible experiences," Saladrigas said. It is known only through word of mouth, but the government still keeps a watchful eye on the program.

"We try to be as low-key as we can, but the operation is so large and so visible that it's impossible to keep low-key," he said. "But from day one, we made sure that there are no politics involved, absolutely. That is clear and everybody knows that this is strictly to help people gain the skills they need to operate a small business."

St. Thomas University, sponsored by the Miami Archdiocese, will graduate its first 30 students next month in Santiago, Cuba, with master of science in management degrees, offered primarily to clergy, staff and lay leaders.

Challenges ahead — church's role

While a lot of the major initiatives under the Obama administration are still in place, President Donald Trump's harsh rhetoric and a State Department travel warning has chilled tourism. The U.S. has also withdrawn most of its personnel from the embassy after they complained of unexplained medical symptoms. That makes it harder for Cubans to get visas to the U.S. and has encouraged hardliners in both Cuba and Miami who want to keep relations distant and with little contact between the countries. The change is hurting tourism to Cuba and affecting small businesses, which are down 50 to 60 percent from 2016, Saladrigas said.

Tensions are also rising amid the challenges facing Cuba's new president — anticipated to be Miguel Diaz-Canel — a weak economy in need of major reforms, damage from 2017's Hurricane Irma, an aging population and a younger generation eager for change.

For Saladrigas, that means the church has a particular role to play.

"The church has a magisterial duty toward the people of Cuba, and it has a duty to provide a certain kind of moral leadership for society, and as Cuba faces its normal issues and mounting difficulties, I think the voice of the church needs to be heard in a calm, thoughtful, prayerful and intellectual way," Saladrigas said.

"It has weight. The church needs to look for ways to be relevant to Cuba's future, and it won't do that by falling back into a safe, quiet, pastoral role. It needs to do more."

He is disappointed, for instance, that Cuban bishops didn't do more to support a January letter written by three priests to Raúl Castro, published on Miami-based website CubaNet outlining economic and social issues facing the country and asking

for true and open elections.

"The bishops were totally silent about the priests' letter; it's like it didn't even happen," Saladrigas said. "The church needs to show more leadership."

Yet Wenski, Pumar and others caution that the church is limited in its actions.

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"It has dissenters on both sides but the church is moving forward gradually and incrementally and is banking on a very long-term process," Wenski said. "They know this reconciliation isn't going to happen overnight — it's going to take a generation or two, but if you're consistent and work toward that goal there will be benefits."

The personal relationship that developed between Raúl Castro and former Havana Archbishop Jaime Ortega was crucial to the cooperative relationship that developed between the church and the state, said William LeoGrande, a professor of government at American University and a specialist in U.S. foreign policy toward Latin America. Archbishop Juan Garcia Rodriguez replaced Ortega, who retired in April 2017. While LeoGrande doesn't expect major changes between the Cuban government and the church, "We have a new archbishop and a new Cuban president and will see what kind of relationship develops," he said.

The Catholic Church in Cuba has to steer clear of political involvement, but its growing ties with both the community in Cuba and Cuban-Americans makes the church an indispensable player in the political future in Cuba, Pumar said.

"This is an important source of leverage for the Catholic Church," Pumar said. "The opposition is very weak in Cuba, so the only institution that can really talk to both sides and appear to be objective and is protected in some forms by the Vatican is the Catholic Church."

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Editor's note: *Watch for more stories on Cuba, coming later this week on NCRonline.org and Global Sisters Report.*

Read this next: Where Cuban government can't provide, sisters and Catholic organizations fill the gaps