

Castro's Session With Pope Unsettles Cuban Americans

Chip

By Catharine Skip
Special to The Washington Post

MIAMI, Nov. 20—Cuban Americans here are struggling to make sense of the cordial meeting between the man they revere as an anti-communist hero and the tyrant they pray will be overthrown.

Fidel Castro met with Pope John Paul II at the Vatican Tuesday and invited the tireless crusader against Marxism to one of the world's last communist outposts. For Cuban exiles, the shock of seeing Castro being escorted through the halls of the Vatican is tempered by the knowledge that the pope contributed to the downfall of the Soviet empire. And in Latin America, John Paul II's visit to Nicaragua in 1983 helped solidify opposition to the Castro-backed Sandinista government, which was voted out of office in 1989.

But for many in the exile community, the Vatican meeting flew in the face of their decades-long effort to ensure that Castro is isolated from respectable society. The pope, said one caller to a Spanish-language radio talk show, "is a traitor, because he is absolving a murderer."

"The pope should never have received this tyrant," Elioja de Ferrer told El Nuevo Herald, the Miami Herald's Spanish-language edition.

Clearly, the meeting between the two aging leaders carries powerful political and spiritual symbolism. "I believe it shows a great degree of desperation and weakness on the part of Castro to have requested a meeting with the pope," said Sylvia Iriondo of the group Mothers Against Repression. "This is the same regime and the same Castro that banned God from Cuba."

Last February, Iriondo flew near Cuba as a passenger, searching for Cubans escaping the island by raft. Cuban MiGs shot down two planes that were accompanying the one in which she flew.

But many exile leaders here say a papal trip could give the Cuban people the spiritual fortitude to overthrow Castro.

"Let's hope that the visit will be at least as successful as [the pope] has been in changing the situation in Eastern Europe," said Francisco J. Hernandez, president of the Cuban-American National Foundation. "But let's hope the pope takes some time to look into the real situation of the Cuban people. Let's hope there's some words of encouragement to the opposition in Cuba."

Rep. Lincoln Diaz-Balart, a Cuban American Republican who was once related by marriage to Castro, also expressed concern at indications that the pope may not take a militant anti-government position in Cuba. Castro "probably feels that the pope

will not speak in Cuba like he did in Poland," said Diaz-Balart, a co-sponsor of the Helms-Burton Act, which tightened the U.S. embargo against Cuba.

The pope has opposed the embargo, a stance that has also troubled—or angered—many in the exile community.

In light of the pope's tenuous health, Diaz-Balart said, "I think that Castro would prefer that intervening circumstances call off the visit, because there is always the risk of his not being able to control it."

Lisandro Perez, director of Florida International University's Cuban Research Institute, noted that the Vatican meeting follows several years in which Castro has gradually loosened restrictions on the Catholic Church. "The government has determined that, so far, this relationship with the church is not a threat to stability," he said.

Many exiles said the pope's connection with the Cuban people is far weaker than outsiders might assume, despite the fact that Cuba has been an overwhelmingly Catholic country since its colonization by Spain. The church has had no parochial schools on the island since the revolution. Priests and nuns are scarce, and the church doesn't have its own vehicles—not to mention broadcast stations or newspapers, as in other countries.

"We don't have the same trust for the clergy in Cuba as for the pope," Hernandez said.