

Pope Plans Visit To Cuba Next Year

Castro Calls Meeting in Rome 'a Miracle'

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VATICAN CITY, Nov. 19—Pope John Paul II, the flinty anti-Communist crusader, received Cuba's gray-bearded Communist revolutionary, President Fidel Castro, for the first time today and emerged to say he has accepted an invitation to visit Cuba next year.

The long-awaited papal trip to Cuba, the only Latin American country John Paul has not visited, was announced by the Vatican following a meeting between the 70-year-old Castro and the 76-year-old pope in John Paul's private library. The two spoke alone in Spanish for 35 minutes, and as they said goodbye, according to a Vatican spokesman, Castro said, "Your Holiness, I hope to see you soon in Cuba."

"For me it is a miracle that I have been able to greet the pope," a delighted Castro said later in remarks broadcast on Cuban state television, Reuter reported.

No date was set for the visit, but it might come in October, when the pontiff is scheduled to be in Brazil.

Such a trip would represent a historic opening for religious freedom in Cuba, where expressions of faith long were officially discouraged after Castro's dictatorship, now 38 years old, came to power following a guerrilla war in which the island's Roman Catholic hierarchy sided with the U.S.-backed government. Only in 1992 did the Castro government expressly allow religious freedom, with a constitutional amendment permitting open worship and organized church activities for the first time.

A papal visit also could pose a risk for Castro's socialist rule in Havana, where an unfettered church could become an alternate pole of power with access to nongovernment resources and greater popularity than the small circle of often-quarreling secular dissidents who form the only current opposition.

Without supplying details, Vatican spokesman Joaquin Navarro-Valls told a news conference here that be-

yond agreeing to plan a 1997 trip, the two men discussed "normalizing" the role of the church and the place of the faithful in Cuban life. He said their private conversation, and another Castro had with Vatican's secretary of state, Cardinal Angelo Sodano, also touched on the "position of Cuba in the international community" and "national reconciliation on the island."

The first phrase is understood to mean the economic embargo and other U.S.-led trade sanctions that have squeezed the Cuban economy for more than 30 years, a policy the pope and the Cuban president both deplore. The second refers to the issue of greater political openness in a society that Castro continues to rule without legal opposition.

When Navarro-Valls was asked who might be involved in any "national reconciliation," he said, "Everyone—within the island, outside the island." More than 1 million anti-Castro Cubans, many of them active in trying to bring down the government, live in exile in the United States.

The theme of reconciliation echoed a 1993 letter from Cuba's Catholic bishops, the most vocal internal opponents of Castro's regime, that pointedly asked, "Why do we not try to resolve our problems with all Cubans together, from our own national perspective, without anyone trying to set himself up as the sole defender of our interests and the arbitrator of our problems?"

Castro's state visit to the Holy See, which continued with a tour of St. Peter's Basilica and lunch with a dozen cardinals who have visited Cuba in the last decade, capped four high-profile days in Rome for him.

A dramatic papal pilgrimage to the island would bring the pope, long active against communism, through the doors of one of the world's last bastions of Marxist rule. The gamble Castro is taking is that an image of respect for human rights certified by a papal visit will help him beat back the U.S. isolation of the island—but that the reality of whatever the pope

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evokes among the Cuban people will not turn out to be Castro's undoing.

In the context of his long struggle to overcome a U.S. embargo, the timing is good for Castro. With rare solidarity, the world community has condemned the new U.S. law that punishes foreign businesses that "traffic" in American property on the island that was expropriated in Castro's 1959 revolution.

[In Washington, State Department spokesman Glyn Davies said a papal visit to Cuba could be a positive development, the Associated Press reported.]

"The historic meeting between Fidel Castro and the pope," commented Gianni Riotta in the centrist Corriere della Sera newspaper, "will perhaps be the final blow to the United States's policy of total closure [and] give the Clinton administration a chance to take the difficult road of mediation with the Havana regime."

Although Castro has been cast by some here as the still-wily exploiter of world attention and even as the menacing co-opter of the aging pope, the fact is that both have much to gain from the planned visit.

The Polish-born pope, who actively encouraged the end of Communist rule in Eastern Europe that came seven years ago, has saved the last arrow in his quiver for the last Communist regime in Christendom.

Under Castro, the practice of religion was for more than 30 years deemed legally incompatible with membership in the Communist Party, which has been the source of personal well-being for most Cubans. The constitutional change in 1992 abandoned state-enforced atheism and permits religious activity by Cuba's 11 million people. But Cuba under Castro has turned a largely Catholic population into an overwhelmingly nonpracticing one.

Castro's appearances in Rome, where he dressed in a dark suit, and his effort to win a return visit by the pope stirred talk among some he met of a "new Castro."

According to one report, he told Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi, "I've always had a great respect for religion. I studied in a Catholic school, and the Cuban Revolution has never made martyrs of men of the cloth."