

Cuban archbishop seeking global pilgrims for anniversary celebration

WASHINGTON - By the time they reached Washington, Auxiliary Bishop Octavio Cisneros of Brooklyn, N.Y., had been on a travel circuit for several days with Cuban Archbishop Dionisio Garcia Ibanez of Santiago and there was more to come.

With Bishop Cisneros and Mario Paredes, the board chairman of the Catholic Association of Latino Leaders, as his guides, Archbishop Garcia, the president of the Cuban bishops' conference, was meeting with Cuban-Americans and church leaders in U.S. cities that included New York, Miami and Boston.

Among the goals of the meetings, receptions and dinners was to solicit support for Archbishop Garcia's dream of a fitting 400th anniversary celebration for the statue revered as representing the patroness of Cuba, Our Lady of Charity of El Cobre.

La Caridad nos une (The Virgin of Charity) "unites us," said Archbishop Garcia, "whether inside Cuba or outside Cuba, there is a sense that we are all one church."

For several years, Archbishop Garcia has been laying the groundwork for what he hopes will be a global pilgrimage next year to the small southeastern Cuba town of El Cobre, home to the Basilica Sanctuary of the Virgin of Charity, long the home of a petite statue of Mary recovered by three fishermen in 1612 in the nearby Bay of Nipe.

The image is revered as the patroness of Cuba and the sanctuary hosts thousands of pilgrims annually, concentrated around the Sept. 8 feast of the Virgin of Charity. Most of those visitors come from within Cuba, however, and Archbishop Garcia has long dreamed of bringing many more pilgrims from across Cuba and around the

world. For decades, the lack of diplomatic relations and a 50-year U.S. trade embargo have made it difficult for the vast majority of expatriate Cubans, who are now U.S. citizens, to legally visit their homeland.

However, with the recently announced loosening of U.S. restrictions on travel to Cuba for religious purposes and the end last year of limits on how often Cuban-Americans may visit family in their homeland, the timing of the anniversary may well make Archbishop Garcia's vision possible.

At a Feb. 23 reception at the Vatican Embassy in Washington, guests - mostly Cuban-Americans - chatted with the archbishop and watched a short film about a preparatory pilgrimage for the 400th anniversary, which is taking a copy of the statue, known as the Virgin Mambisa, on a yearlong tour around Cuba. Masses, prayer vigils and processions have been attracting crowds of thousands at a time.

Although there's a long history of harassment and persecution of the church by the communist government, Archbishop Garcia said the activities have encountered no difficulties from authorities. In fact, he said at a small meeting with personnel at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops that the government has been cooperative in accommodating processions and large gatherings in public plazas and parks.

"The government knows she is very popular," said Archbishop Garcia.

At the embassy reception, guests shared their stories of visiting relatives in Cuba recently, while others explained that they are unable to make the trip. One man said his U.S. government job makes him ineligible to get the necessary license from the Treasury Department. Another fears that if he returned the Cuban government might have him on a list to be arrested.

But others laid plans to visit El Cobre and the sanctuary.

Bishop Cisneros, a Cuban who came to the United States as a teenager through the resettlement program known as Operation Peter Pan, founded a New York-based charitable organization last year to support Archbishop Garcia's plans for the sanctuary at El Cobre. Renovations and modernization of the chapel and grounds would make it handicapped-accessible and include meeting rooms, additional residential space for two orders of nuns and the retired archbishop of Santiago, a Marian museum and lodgings for pilgrims.

Outside of Havana and some resort areas, hotels are a rarity in Cuba. Visitors tend to stay with relatives or in some of the country's former convents and rectories.

Toward the end of the reception, Bishop Cisneros held a handful of envelopes with donations destined for the foundation and ultimately the sanctuary in El Cobre. He said he had yet to learn how to maneuver through new administration regulations for donations to religious institutions.

Another of the changes announced by the Obama administration in January will permit U.S. citizens to send money to nonfamily members or to religious institutions in Cuba. Until now such remittances were limited to exchanges between family members. Those restrictions - and the continuing prohibition on travel to Cuba for tourism and requirements for U.S. citizens to obtain licenses from the Treasury Department for any trips there - are part of the U.S. trade embargo that has been in place since Fidel Castro came to power in 1965.

Fidel Castro's brother, Raul, succeeded him as president in 2008 after the elder Castro became ill.

Contributions to the reconstruction of the basilica in El Cobre may be sent to: Our Lady of Charity of Cobre Foundation, P.O. Box 40368, Glen Oaks, NY 11004-0368.