

Cuban Catholic leaders hope cardinal's visit reinforces faith

HAVANA - A decade after Pope John Paul II's historic trip to Cuba, church officials hope a Feb. 20-26 visit from the Vatican secretary of state, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, will reinforce the faith of the island's Catholics.

The itinerary planned for Cardinal Bertone is almost the same as the one followed by the pope in January 1998, said Havana Auxiliary Bishop Juan de Dios Hernandez Ruiz, secretary-general of the Cuban bishops' conference.

"This is a visit, thanks be to God, highly awaited by the Cuban government, its authorities, which shows great willingness to facilitate everything needed (for the visit) and fulfill our expectations," Bishop Hernandez said.

He added that "the first expectation is to continue the confirmation in the faith" that was the fruit of Pope John Paul's visit. He said the goal of the 1998 visit "was to confirm this church in the faith, and that was accomplished very well."

Such confirmation "means authenticating the long, sometimes difficult process that this church has gone through, confirm the ways in which the church has been able to face difficulties without confrontations that would complicate, impede or close off dialogue (with the government), allowing the church to maintain its identity and its purpose," he said.

Bishop Hernandez said the visit from the Vatican secretary of state "follows the same line of continuity" and that Cardinal Bertone "will be awaited and received for what he is, an important person in the church hierarchy."

This will be Cardinal Bertone's second visit to the island since November 2005. While the agenda for the trip has yet to be finalized, it will include meetings with Cuban government officials, church leaders, and possibly the island nation's acting president, Raul Castro, who has led the country since his brother, Fidel Castro, delegated power to him 18 months ago when he was hospitalized with a severe intestinal illness.

Among the first things on the cardinal's tentative schedule are meetings with the Cuban bishops, another with religious, and a visit to the Diocese of Santa Clara, in the center of the island, where Cardinal Bertone will celebrate Mass in the cathedral and dedicate a monument to the late pope.

He will then travel to the Archdiocese of Santiago de Cuba on the far eastern side of the island, where he will pray the rosary in the basilica dedicated to Our Lady of Charity of Cobre, the island's patron saint, and attend a youth rally.

He also will visit the nearby Diocese of Guantanamo-Baracoa, created by Pope John Paul, and bless the new diocesan offices.

On his return to the Cuban capital, he will speak at the University of Havana, and he may visit the Latin American School of Medicine and San Carlos and San Ambrosio Seminary. Bishop Hernandez said Cardinal Bertone will not visit the Archdiocese of Camaguey because of a lack of time.

In the 10 years since Pope John Paul's trip, the Catholic Church has seen slow but steady improvement in its relations with Cuba's communist government, although church officials say they still need greater access to state-run media and would like a church role in education.

"We have been moving ahead slowly, and both sides have the intention of continuing improvement," Bishop Hernandez said. "In this gradual process of church-state

relations, although the people with whom we are in dialogue do not have the gift of the faith, I have seen an effort to understand what the church is and what it does.”

Relations between the Catholic Church and the Cuban government have had ups and downs since Fidel Castro’s revolutionary government came to power in 1959.

Cuba was officially atheist until 1992, when that word was struck from the Cuban Constitution. Catholics and local analysts say Pope John Paul’s visit to Cuba paved the way for dialogue, became a rallying point for Cuban religious spirituality and allowed Catholics to recover faith traditions that had been outlawed for years, such as the official celebration of Christmas and authorization for public processions.

Cardinal Jaime Ortega Alamino of Havana said in a recent interview that Pope John Paul’s visit “marked the life of the church in Cuba and our history as a nation.”