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Are Roman Catholics allowed to practice freely and if so, since when

An article by *Reuters* in November 2010 states:

“The Catholic Church opened on Wednesday its first new seminary in Cuba in half a century in the latest sign of improving church-state relations after decades of hostility on the communist-led island” (Reuters (3 November 2010) *Catholics open first new Cuban seminary in decades*).

This article also points out that:

“...relations between the Church and government quickly soured after the 1959 revolution that put Fidel Castro in power and transformed Cuba into a communist state. After years of tension, things slowly improved following a 1998 visit of Pope John Paul II and advanced significantly this year when Raul Castro, seeking to defuse international criticism, used the Church to broker the release of more than 50 political prisoners...Despite its precarious position for so many years, the Church is one of the country's largest and most socially influential institutions” (ibid).

BBC News in March 2012 states:

“The Church was never banned, but the island was officially atheist until 1992. Practising Catholics could not join the Communist Party” (BBC News (28 March 2012) *Cuba's Catholic church still cautious as Pope arrives*).

This article also states:

“Cuba today is secular, the faithful are free to worship and the Catholic Church is busy reasserting itself” (ibid).

A report in March 2012 by *Reuters* notes:

“Under 49 years of rule by Fidel Castro, the Roman Catholic Church lost its schools, hospitals, access to media and its prominent role in Cuban society. But Raul Castro, who succeeded his ailing brother four years ago, has improved relations with the Church and is using it as interlocutor on issues such as political prisoners and dissidents as he undertakes potentially disruptive reforms to the country's struggling Soviet-style economy” (Reuters (28 March 2012) *Pope meets Cuba's Fidel Castro, slams U.S. embargo*).

A report published by *Reuters* in September 2008 points out that:

“After Fidel Castro came to power in an armed revolution in 1959, Cuba expelled priests and Catholics faced decades of official atheism. Ties improved after Cuba guaranteed religious freedom in 1992 and Pope John Paul II visited six years later” (Reuters (29 November 2008) *Castro attends Cuba's first Catholic beatification*).

In September 2010 *Reuters* states:

“Sidelines for decades by the communist authorities until Pope John Paul II's visit in 1998, the Church has now carved out a visible role as an interlocutor with the government, and as a possible catalyst of change” (Reuters (18 September 2010) *Analysis: Catholic Church raises hopes of role in Cuban change*).

This article also states:

“A 1998 visit by Pope John Paul II began a slow warming and the government showed a greater tolerance of Church activities while the Church became less of a focal point for unrest. In the latest sign of improvement, the church was permitted for the first time in decades to make a pilgrimage with the figurine of the Virgin de la Caridad del Cobre, the patron saint of Cuba, across the island” (ibid).

In March 2012 *Reuters* states:

“This week's three-day visit to Cuba by Pope Benedict marked another milestone in the Roman Catholic Church's cautious efforts to expand its role in the communist-run island” (Reuters (29 March 2012) *Analysis: Springtime in Cuba?*).

This document also notes:

“Even so, the visit seems to have ensured a growing role for the Church in Cuban society and politics, a potentially significant shift in the balance of forces in a country where religious faith was once scorned... The Church hopes primarily that the papal visit will help spark a spiritual revival in Cuba, where religious faith was stigmatized for decades after the 1959 revolution. Despite that, a much diminished Church survived and remains the largest and most socially influential institution outside of the government, a fact that Cuban leaders now seem more willing than ever to recognize - and perhaps reward” (ibid).

The article also points out that:

“Benedict's visit came 14 years after Pope John Paul's groundbreaking trip in 1998, which many Cubans say was the beginning of the thaw in church-state relations. While Fidel Castro received the pope warmly in 1998, his brother and current president, Raul Castro, was even more attentive on this latest papal visit, attending the two Masses celebrated by Benedict, seated in the front row” (ibid).

A report published by *Reuters* in April 2012 notes:

“Relations between the Church and Cuban government have warmed under Raul Castro, who since succeeding his brother in 2008 has undertaken economic reforms that could bring increased unemployment and attendant social problems as he tries to remake the island's struggling Soviet-style system. Benedict, who was in Cuba March 26-28, asked that the Church be able to expand its education and social programs, which he said could help Cuba through its time of change. The Church also wants more access to mass media, which is controlled by the state, and got it, at least on Friday, with the televised Mass. For years, the Church was shut out from television, radio and newspapers. People attending Ortega's Mass said a renewal of religion is occurring in the country, which for 15 years starting in 1976 the government declared officially atheist. The Church says about 60 percent of Cubans

are baptized Catholics, but only 5 percent regularly go to Mass.” (Reuters (7 April 2012) *After half century, Cubans again celebrate Good Friday*).

A report published in September 1999 by the *United States Department of State* points out that:

“Cuba historically has been a largely secular society without an especially strong religious character. Church and state have been constitutionally separate since the early 20th century. The Marxist-Leninist ideology of the current Government led to strong confrontations with institutional churches in the early 1960's. During that period, many church leaders and religious professionals left the country, fearing persecution. Over 130 Catholic religious workers, including priests, were expelled, and a few served long prison terms. In 1965 the Government forced many priests, pastors, and others "who made religion a way of life" into forced labor camps called Military Units to Aid Production (UMAP's), alongside homosexuals, vagrants, and others considered by the regime to be "social scum." The UMAP system ended in 1967. However, over the next 30 years, the Government and the Communist Party systematically discriminated against and marginalized persons who openly professed their faith. Although the Government abandoned its official atheism in the early 1990's, most churches had been weakened seriously by then, and active participation in religious services had fallen drastically. Nevertheless, church attendance has grown in recent years in some denominations, and has increased substantially at Catholic Church services in the wake of the Pope's visit in January 1998” (United States Department of State (9 September 1999) *U.S. Department of State Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for 1999 - Cuba*).

A publication in December 1998 by the *United States Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services* notes:

“Religious institutions in Cuba include the Roman Catholic Church, a number of Protestant denominations, an array of Pentecostal and evangelical congregations, and Santería, a syncretic system which combines African and Catholic belief. Historically, the Castro government has been highly antagonistic toward the Catholic Church, Pentecostals, and evangelicals...After seizing power in 1959, the Castro government decreed Cuba to be an atheist state. Catholic Church property was nationalized and Catholic schools closed. A great number of foreign priests were expelled. In 1959 there were over 700 priests in Cuba, whereas in 1988 there were less than 225. Churches were forbidden to use broadcast communication media. Christians were not allowed to join the Cuban Communist Party (PCC) or hold public posts, and were discriminated against when seeking work from the state, Cuba's sole employer...(United States Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services (1 December 1998) *Cuba. Systematic Repression of Dissent*).

This report also states that:

“The Cuban government began to ease the restrictions on the Catholic Church as the economic crisis deepened following the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the Soviet Union in 1989-1991. Faced with mounting discontent, the government evidently believed that greater freedom to worship would provide a non-political outlet for the expression of people's discontent. At the fourth PCC congress in 1991, the Constitution was amended to allow religious adherents to be members of the PCC, and the state, previously atheist, was declared “secular.”...Since then, most ordinary Cubans have been able to practice the Catholic faith without facing punishment, as long as the government senses no political overtones. The Church hierarchy

welcomed the measures and decided to test the limits of the regime's tolerance in 1993 when the Cuban Bishops Conference issued a pastoral letter highly critical of the political system. The letter called for, among other things, an end to single-party rule and the state security system. The government responded with blistering attacks in the official media which called the Church "counterrevolutionary." For some time this cooled considerably the relationship between the Church and the government, but appeared to enhance the credibility of the Church with disaffected Cubans as more and more worshipers began attending mass...As the Cuban Catholic Church began preparing for the Pope's visit, it was given greater freedom by the government to conduct its mission. During the summer, Jaime Cardinal Ortega, the Archbishop of Havana, held two open-air masses, the first outdoor religious services permitted in more than three decades..." (ibid).

A report issued in October 1983 by the *Inter-American Commission on Human Rights* points out that:

"Until the rise to power of the present government, the Catholic and Protestant churches had carried out activities similar to those performed in most of the countries of Latin America. Thus, in addition to activities related to religious worship—including those of public dissemination of beliefs—were joined those activities indirectly related to religious worship, among which special mention should be made of education and social assistance to disadvantaged sectors. Furthermore, religious denominations, in particular the Catholic Church, possessed a status that provided them a relative degree of political influence" (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (4 October 1983) *The Situation Of Human Rights In Cuba, Seventh Report, Chapter VII, Right To Religious Freedom And Worship*).

A report issued in February 1986 by the *United States Department of State* points out that:

"The practice of religion is actively discouraged and in some cases prohibited, despite an effort by the Government to appear open to a dialogue with the Catholic church" (United States Department of State (February 1986) *Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1985, Cuba*).

In June 1990 research issued by the *Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada* citing an external source notes:

"According to the Conference of Catholic Bishops in Ottawa, as stated in a telephone communication on 28 November 1989, a relative improvement in relations between the government of Cuba and the Catholic Church has occurred over the last years, including occasional exchanges of views between the Cuban Conference of Bishops and government officials" (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (8 June 1990) *Situation of Catholics*).

In August 1990 the *Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada* released research which states:

"Although the Catholic Church has traditionally been weaker in Cuba than throughout Latin America, a country where no political parties other than the ruling one are allowed soon saw some of its people channelling their political grievances through the relative safety of the religious institution" (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (22 August 1990) *Overview on current Human Rights situation in Cuba, including reasons for possible flight at this time*).

Research issued in May 1993 by the *Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada* notes:

“...although the government's attitude towards Catholicism and the Catholic Church has been less hostile in recent times, relations between the Catholic Church and the government continue to be tense” (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (17 May 1993) *Information on the current treatment of Catholics and whether someone in a public enterprise can be demoted because of his or her religious beliefs*).

The *United States Department of State* in a report published in January 1996 notes that:

“Despite continued restrictions and harsh rhetoric, the Roman Catholic Church has observed that it has relatively more latitude in which to carry out its pastoral mission” (United States Department of State (30 January 1996) *U.S. Department of State Country Report on Human Rights Practices 1995 - Cuba*).

In November 1996 the *Inter Press Service* notes in an article that:

“A majority of the clergy opposed the revolution and the Church became identified with opposition and dissident movements. This caused tension between church and state. The situation was aggravated when the government closed Catholic schools and denied religious organizations access to the state-controlled media. Then in 1991 the governing Communist Party began a series of gestures by altering its official designation of itself as "atheist" and accepting that religion was just one more aspect of Cuban society” (Inter Press Service (26 November 1996) *Cuba-Religion: Detente Continues Apace*).

In November 1996 a report in *Inter Press Service* states:

“The Cuban government is now ready to provide openings for the Catholic Church, a notion which would have been rejected out of hand only a few years back, in return for greater Vatican support against Washington's 34-year blockade” (Inter Press Service (19 November 1996) *Cuba: Castro Ends Cold War With Church*).

This document also notes:

“The lack of communication between the Church and the Cuban state dates from the early sixties, when the Catholic hierarchy took a stand against measures declared by the revolutionary government. And although the government declared religious freedom earlier this decade, relations between Cuba's Council of Bishops and the authorities are largely dominated by the long-standing situation, and consist mainly of declarations made by the two sides against each other” (ibid).

Utilising other sources a research released in August 1997 by the *Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada* states that:

“Shifts in government policy have seen a greater acceptance in Cuba of the Roman Catholic Church, once identified with dissident movements” (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (August 1997) *Report on treatment of political dissidents*, p.3).

In December 2001 a report released by *Freedom House* includes the following description noting a:

“...still-shackled Roman Catholic Church...” (Freedom House (18 December 2001) *Freedom in the World - Cuba (2002)*).

This document also notes that:

“In 1991 Roman Catholics and other believers were granted permission to join the Communist Party, and the constitutional reference to official atheism was dropped the following year. Religious freedom has made small gains. Afro-Cuban religious groups are now carefully courted by Cuban officials. In preparation for the papal visit in 1998, Catholic pastoral work and religious education activities were allowed to take place at previously unheard-of levels, and Christmas was celebrated for the first time in 28 years” (ibid).

A report issued by the *Library of Congress* in September 2006 notes:

“Cuba has no official religion and is officially a secular state. In 1991 the Communist Party of Cuba (Partido Comunista de Cuba—PCC) lifted its prohibition against religious believers seeking membership, and a year later the constitution was amended to characterize the state as secular rather than atheist. Nevertheless, the government, through the Ministry of Interior’s Office of Religious Affairs, restricts religious freedom. Although state restrictions apply to the independent Roman Catholic Church, they are enforced mainly against unregistered religious groups. About 85 percent of the population was nominally Roman Catholic before Fidel Castro seized power. Although Roman Catholicism continues to be the largest organized religion, after more than four decades of an atheist regime, most young people are not religious, nor do they have any religious training” (Library of Congress (September 2006) *Country Profile: Cuba*, p.8).

In December 2011 *BBC News* notes:

“Thousands of Roman Catholics in Cuba have gathered for an open-air mass to mark the end of a 16-month tour of a statue of the island's patron saint. Some 3,000 people crowded along Havana Bay for the ceremony and to pay tribute to the Virgin of Charity of Cobre. During the mass, Church leaders called for reconciliation among Cubans and urged further economic reform. The tour was the first such religious display since before the Communists came to power in 1959” (BBC News (31 December 2011) *Cuban statue of patron saint ends historic journey*).

A report released in 2012 by the *United States Commission on International Religious Freedom* points out that:

“Relations between the Catholic Church and Cuban government continue to improve, although the government maintains strict oversight of, and restrictions on, church activities” (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (2012) *Cuba*, p.2).

In March 2012 the *Washington Post* states:

“Once shunned, Catholics in Cuba now openly practice their religion, as the church here and the visiting pope pursue soft-power politics, gently pushing for change”

(Washington Post (27 March 2012) *Catholics in Cuba, no longer shunned, seek a new role*).

A report issued in July 2012 by the *United States Department of State* notes that:

“Most religious groups reported increased ability to cultivate new members, hold religious activities, and conduct charitable and community service projects, while at the same time reporting fewer restrictions on religious expression, importation of religious materials, and travel” (United States Department of State (30 July 2012) *2011 Report on International Religious Freedom - Cuba*).

This document also states:

“There is no independent authoritative source on the size or composition of religious institutions and their membership. The Roman Catholic Church estimates that 60 to 70 percent of the population is Catholic but that only 4 to 5 percent regularly attend mass” (ibid).

It is also noted in this report that:

“As part of its campaign of repression of human rights activists, the government prevented many Catholics from attending religious services” (ibid).

A publication released by *Christian Solidarity Worldwide* in January 2013 states:

“CSW documented 120 reported cases of religious freedom in 2012, up from a total of 30 in 2011, some of which involved entire churches and denominations and hundreds of people. The number does not include the men and women who were arrested and imprisoned for the duration of Pope Benedict XVI's visit in March which local human rights groups estimate to be upwards of 200. While Roman Catholic churches reported the highest number of violations, mostly involving the arrest and arbitrary detention of parishioners attempting to attend church activities, other denominations and religious groups were also affected” (Christian Solidarity Worldwide (3 January 2013) *Cuba: Dramatic increase in religious freedom violations in 2012*).

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This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Refugee Documentation Centre within time constraints. This response is not and does not purport to be conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Please read in full all documents referred to.

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