

# “TO EVANGELIZE THE PEOPLE AND THE CULTURE” - CATHOLIC MISSION IN CONTEMPORARY CUBA

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## Introduction

The existence of the Catholic Church in communist Cuba has been characterized by polarization for more than half a century. Ever since the revolution of Fidel Castro in 1959, the Catholic Church has operated under the political rule of socialism and communism. The coexistence has resulted in confrontations and conflicts between the church and the state.

For more than half a decade, the life of the church within the revolutionary reality has been characterized by mutual suspicion and unwillingness to cooperate, and the church-state-relations have been constantly strained. Yet the Catholic Church has nevertheless existed and operated on the island through the decades of revolutionary rule. Most recently, after decades of stagnant tension, the church has gained a stronger and more visible foothold in the Cuban society, representing one of the few independent, autonomous actors of civil society. In the current processes of change taking place in Cuba, the church defines itself as a missionary church with the aim of evangelising the Cuban people and culture.

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This paper explores the current missionary policy of the Catholic Church in Cuba, focusing on the historical roots of the church's agency within the revolutionary reality, and the current plan of evangelisation that suggests the church is both invested in cooperation with the Cuban state and portraying itself as a voice of critical otherness in the Cuban revolutionary society.

## A church within the revolutionary reality

When the revolution of Fidel Castro triumphed in January 1959, the Catholic Church in Cuba was in favour of the new revolutionary regime. The church saw the necessity of ending the previously predominant right-wing dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista and carrying out a series of political, economic and social changes on the island. For these purposes, the church initially supported Fidel Castro's newly-formed regime and the policies Castro announced as the primary objectives of the revolution.

However, the positive tone of the church began to change when the early 1960s saw the arrival of socialist and, ultimately, communist ideology to the island as a result of the Cuban government's intensified cooperation with the Soviet Union. As the revolutionary regime declared itself communist, the church removed its support for the revolution and resigned from cooperation. Following the Catholic teaching on Marxism, the church in Cuba declared that Catholicism and

Communism were intrinsically opposite ideologies that could never exist within the same society. Condemning Communism as atheist and materialistic, the Catholic Church engaged in a global battle of ideologies stemming from the Cold War era polarization and tension.<sup>1</sup>

### The Revolution defined the frames of ideology, expressions of opinion, behavioural culture and boundaries of dissent.

What ensued was a cycle of mutual resentment and a continuous conflict between the church and the state. While the Catholic Church began to oppose to revolutionary policy, at the same time, the Revolution set boundaries on what was to be considered the publicly approved ideological basis of the new Cuban society. As Fidel Castro famously pronounced, "Within the Revolution, everything. Outside the Revolution, nothing"<sup>2</sup>. The Revolution defined the frames of ideology, expressions of opinion, behavioural culture and boundaries of dissent. 'Revolutionary' became the synonym of good citizenry and good Cubanness. Institutions, individuals and phenomena that wouldn't fit into the frame of the revolution were ostracised from the social and public spheres by marginalization.<sup>3</sup>

In the midst of the tense ideological confrontation, the church sought opportunities to survive within the communist society, on one hand, and resist the ideology, on the other. Meanwhile, the regime limited the space allowed for the church. When the Revolution

marginalized the church to the outer spheres of the society, practicing religion was defined as an expression of personal spirituality without any domain in the public or civic spheres.

The ostracism was at its most tense stage in the late 1960s and 1970s when, on institutional level, the Catholic Church had lost its agency in the social and civic life. As a result of nationalization of all private property and domains confiscated by the revolutionary regime, the Catholic Church in Cuba had lost all its schools, hospitals, orphanages, nurseries and retirement homes. The loss of domain and property was crucial as the church had previously been the primary provider of these services on the island. Equally drastic was the expulsion of all foreign clergy and religious from Cuba in 1961, for two priests out of three had been of foreign, mostly Spanish, origin. The same year the revolution forbade all public demonstrations of faith, such as processions on streets, and dissolved all Catholic publications on the island.<sup>4</sup>

### The conflict between the church and the revolution resulted in individual Cubans choosing their ideology.

The conflict between the church and the revolution resulted in individual Cubans choosing their ideology. When the revolution established the boundaries of inclusion, dissidence and ideology, Catholic faith was defined as counter-revolutionary and therefore treacherous and unpatriotic. In the collapsing civil society of the 1960s,

1 See for example, Crahan 1989, Domínguez 1989, Kirk 1989, Super 2003, Tejada 1997.

2 Castro 1961, Words to the Intellectuals.

3 Interviews 17, 19, 20.

4 Interviews 17, 19, 20.

where Revolution was both the core of the national identity as well as the sole reference to the national narrative, many chose to estrange themselves from the Catholic Church by either fascination or enthusiasm for revolutionary ideology or in order to secure the wellbeing and safety of themselves and their families.

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The official statement of the Cuban government is that there has always existed a freedom of religion and a tolerance for privately practiced religion. Cuban Catholics, however, describe the period from early 1960s to late 1970s as a time of discrimination, repression and persecution. The marginalisation has been most tangible in educational and professional trajectories Cubans: those known for actively practicing Catholic faith were denied opportunities of certain fields of study in the academia, such as philosophy and pedagogy, and were directed towards professions such engineers, technicians and mechanics. In addition to this, Catholics were not allowed to work in social or political positions not for the regime. At workplaces and schools, officials of the state carried out surveys with questionnaires inquiring religious beliefs and activities. Oral histories narrate emotional personal experiences of children who were questioned in front of the class by their teacher on their family's affiliations to Catholicism.<sup>5</sup>

These experiences of social marginalization led to polarization between the church and the state as well as to a division between Catholic and non-Catholic Cubans, often defined either by revolutionary commitment and ideological support to the revolution or a policy of maintaining a careful balance between not portraying oneself as neither Communist nor opposed to the revolution.<sup>6</sup>

The polarization has led several generations of Cubans to lead a life without religion in the public sphere. Two generations have grown and been raised without religious education, which was a standard at least in Cuban towns prior to the revolution, and continuous presence of religious elements in their daily lives. This has naturally led to alienation, Christianity becoming 'the other' of the Cuban society. Awareness and recognition of Christian traditions, teaching, and practices has declined.<sup>7</sup> However, on institutional level, the Catholic Church in Cuba has begun to portray itself as an active agent of the society, willing to have dialogue and cooperate with the revolutionary regime and Cubans not confessing or practicing Catholic faith. The historical polarization and marginalization are still, nevertheless, present and visible in the current theology and practices of the church on the island.

As Cuba remains the last communist country of the Western hemisphere, the Catholic Church in Cuba continues to search for space and possibilities for existing and operating on the island. A church forming an active part of an ideologically communist society is a paradox rarely witnessed in history of Christianity. The revolution has formed a physical space in which the church has operated and a mental reality to which the church has adjusted and responded by

5 Interviews 1-3, 6, 8, 9, 11-20; Baez & De la Hoz, 2015, 51-64; Kirk 1989, 65-89; Tejada 1997, 24-35.

6 Interviews 14, 17, 18, 20.

7 Interviews 14, 17, 18, 20.

creating specific theological frameworks and pastoral practices. The revolution has been the concrete and mental context for the church to live and grow in. Therefore, it can be argued that the current theological formation of the church in Cuba is a result of existing within the revolutionary reality.

### Emerging missionary spirit

A distinct feature of the ecclesiological identity of Catholic Church in Cuba is the conscious ambition to create and develop Cuban Catholic theology, stemming from the national circumstances as a response to the socio-political context. The ecclesiological identity is rooted in the present, and today more than ever taking into consideration the current processes of change in Cuba.

The identity of the church, however, also includes a historical dimension. In contemporary Cuba, the history of the revolution is the officially perceived national historiography. For the church, a specific Catholic narrative of history and Catholic historiography are still strongly present in today's church. This is partly because it's considered such a vital aspect to the self-understanding of the church, and partly because, due to the short historical distance, the contemporaries of the earliest stages of the revolution and the church-state confrontation continue to influence the life and thinking of the church.

In these forms of remembrance and narratives, history is still processed and interpreted within the church, and the living memory is a part of the self-understanding of the church. They also suggest that the identity of the church in Cuba includes a specific Cuban Catholic cultural memory: a collective experience shared by Cuban Catholics, reinforced and forming an aspect of collective identity

through active remembrance, narration and continuous reinterpretation.<sup>8</sup>

## In contemporary Catholic theology in Cuba, mission is a key concept in the self-understanding and ecclesiological identity for the church.

In contemporary Catholic theology in Cuba, mission is a key concept in the self-understanding and ecclesiological identity for the church in Cuba. Mission accounts for more than simply a method: it is an attribute of the church as well as a stance the church has taken in the contemporary society. The church defines itself to be "a missionary church".<sup>9</sup> For a church still reflecting its past and writing its history, evangelisation and mission serve as anchors of the present time and guidelines for future. The theology is brought to life through developing a variety of practices encouraging missionary approaches and methods in parishes and communities.

As there were no means to carry out evangelisation nor missionary activities in Cuba for the first 25 years of the Revolution, the virtually only mission of the church was to survive and serve those who stayed as actively practicing members of the church even during the years when practicing Catholics were excluded from social life and positions in the society.<sup>10</sup> Due to this marginalization the church faced in the 1960s and 1970s, the missionary spirit of the church surfaced in the mid-1980s. The decade marked a period of extensive internal reflection and processes of internal dialogue, followed by a gradual easing of tension of the church-state-relations. The

8 Interviews 1, 4, 13, 24; Baez & De la Hoz 2015, 66-72.

9 Mensaje Final del ENEC; Plan pastoral.

10 Interview 2, 3.

emerge of mission and evangelisation are a result of both the church's willingness to re-evaluate its position and role in the society and revolutionary regime's willingness to gradually allow the church more space and visibility in the public sphere.

The central event and process of contemporary Cuban Catholicism is *Encuentro Nacional Eclesiástico Cubano*, commonly referred to as ENEC. The national Catholic synod, organized in February 1986, brought together the hierarchy of the church, priests and religious as well as large bodies of representatives of laypeople from all Cuban dioceses. The synod was the first point of reflection organized by the church for itself in the revolutionary reality: it still remains the largest national synod with formulations of thinking and practice currently in use.

### The ENEC synod was for the Cuban church what the Vatican II Council was for the universal Catholic Church.

A popular way to describe the meaning of ENEC within the Cuban church is that the synod was for the Cuban church what the Vatican II Council was for the universal Catholic Church. As the Cuban church was practically isolated from the international Catholic community in the 1960s, information on and influence of the council (1962-1965) arrived slowly and only partially. ENEC was therefore also a concrete way to channel the Vatican II Council in Cuba: the synod implemented to council on a local level by liturgical renewal, encouraging lay activism, supporting use of

local cultural elements and granting more autonomy to local ecclesial authorities.<sup>11</sup>

Prior to the actual synod, the church had organized an extensive project of diocesan reflection, known as REC (*Reflexion Eclesiastica Cubana*). Initiated in 1979, REC was a project focusing on collecting experiences on living in the revolutionary reality as Catholics, reflections and ideas from all Cuban dioceses and all groups of Catholics actively immersed in the life of the church: the authoritative figures, priests, religious and laity all expressed their opinion and drafted new visions for the church. What the preliminary reflections showed was a renewed willingness to adapt to the Cuban society and create opportunities for mutual dialogue and eventual cooperation. REC therefore marked a period of transition and assimilation within the church.<sup>12</sup>

For the church in Cuba, ENEC marked an end of a certain period of adjustment. ENEC stemmed primarily from the locally, nationally perceived need to re-evaluate the theological and social location of the church in the society. The decades of conflict had left the church asking, "Are we die as a church, or are we to live?"<sup>13</sup>. The church sought solutions from new engaging in the society and from taking the initiative to dialogue with non-Catholics, primarily ideologically confessing Marxists, who had estranged from the church as a result of choosing an ideology in the revolutionary reality. As a result of the searching, an aspiration of the church and the Cuban state for social justice became the common ground on which the two began to gradually recognize the other's value.<sup>14</sup>

ENEC also reflected a change in regional focus. Prior to the extensive

11 Interview 11.

12 Discurso inaugural del ENEC; Kirk 1989, 169-171.

13 Interview 12.

14 Discurso inaugural del ENEC; Mensaje final del ENEC.

internal reflection, the Cuban church had predominantly represented a European voice of Catholicism, inherited from the colonial origins of Catholic faith in Cuba. ENEC directed the church more towards the Latin American community of Catholics. Although the church was careful not to commit to or even as much as recognize Theology of Liberation as a theological reference, it seems to have drawn inspiration from the Latin American currents of theology.

After the isolation of the 1960s and 1970s, the authorities of church in Cuba were also allowed by the regime to communicate with the Latin American Catholics of the 1980s: for instance, Cuban bishops were allowed to travel to the gatherings of the Latin American Episcopal Conference (CELAM, *Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano*). This enforced greatly the emphasis on mission and evangelisation as it brought a new focus on the visibility and activity of the church in the social sphere and social commitment, following the trends of Latin American Catholicism.

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What ENEC outlined as its final result was a new engagement of the church in the Cuban society and an active, future-orientated church. ENEC also marked a recognition and a strong emergence of laypeople into positions of decision-making and execution both on local and national levels. Ultimately, ENEC marked a delicate shift in the balance of Cuban church-

state-relations, as the synod portrayed the church as an active voice in the society. The final document of ENEC expresses this new voice by outlining three characteristics of the Cuban church. According to the synod, the Catholic Church in Cuba aspired to be missionary, praying and incarnated:

"A missionary church. - - We will fulfil the mission in a new way, courageously present among the people, with pastoral activity. - -

A praying church. - - A church that will, in order to deliver the Gospel, announce its own and profound experience: proclaim God and have him as the only Lord, who for us is the core of our identity, our liberty and our hope. - -

An incarnated church. - - That shares the fights and wins, sorrows and joys of the people. - - A church that wishes to be actively present in the Cuban and Latin American historical reality, with a clear and consistent vocation to peace. - - <sup>15</sup>

Mission was highlighted as the new central focus of the church. It was a radical new voice, albeit it had been developing in the recent years as a response to the social context. ENEC marked a difference in the church mission: the church directed itself from turning inwards into opening to the society, including both religiously non-committed and ideological atheists. It was the beginning of the modern Cuban Catholic missionary spirit.

### **Concepts of mission**

In the 21st Century Cuban Catholicism, mission is a key feature of the church. It is a profound element in the

15 "Una Iglesia Misionera. - - Esta Misión la cumplimos con un estilo renovado y audaz de presencia entre los hombres y de acción pastoral. - - Una Iglesia Orante. Una Iglesia que, al llevar el Mensaje, comunica su propia y profunda experiencia: proclamar y tener a Dios como única Señor, que es para nosotros la condición misma de nuestra identidad, de nuestra libertad y de nuestra esperanza. - - Una Iglesia Encarnada. - - Que comparta con su pueblo las luchas y los logros, las angustias y los gozos. - - Iglesia que quiere estar activamente presente en la realidad histórica cubana y latinoamericana con una clara y consecuente vocación de paz." Mensaje Final del ENEC.

ecclesiological identity of the hierarchical, officially defined Catholic Church. In addition to this, on the level of practiced and experienced religiosity, the missionary spirit is equally represented by the laypeople and considered as a vital facet of personal Catholic formation, commitment and expressions of faith.

The most recent indication of the development of Cuban missionary ecclesiology and its incarnation in a strategy of evangelisation is the current pastoral plan of the Catholic Church in Cuba, produced and published by the Cuban Catholic Bishops Conference (*Conferencia de los Obispos Católicos de Cuba*) in September 2015. The plan, entitled "On the Road to Emmaus", reflects on the current socio-political and ecclesiological realities on the island. The plan both argues for the need of evangelisation and suggests concrete approaches and practices for mission and evangelisation.

The first part of the plan invites the Cuban Catholics to look beyond sociological aspects, at the life of the church and of the Cuban society, in order to discover the need and possibilities for evangelisation. While the second part consists of a hermeneutical reflection on the Gospel passage about the disciples on the road to Emmaus and the use of the passage as a source of inspiration for Cuban Catholics, the third and final part of the plan suggests direct means and measures of evangelisation in contemporary Cuba.

The current plan is the first one with a directly formatted operational approach, as the document remarks itself: as such, it seems to suggest that it is possible for the contemporary Catholic community not only to maintain its position in the society but also aim at increasing its volume and influence both on national and local levels.<sup>16</sup>

A vital theological feature of the Cuban Catholic ecclesiology and mission is the concept of *testimonio*, testimony. It is a concept strongly affiliated with history and historiography: it derives from the self-proclaimed ecclesiological identity of surviving as a minority in a socio-political context hostile to religion and faith.<sup>17</sup>

Silent testimony refers to testifying for faith and Gospel through attitudes and actions when it is not possible to testify with words. This is often seen as a form of mission. In socialist Cuba, still defined by the revolution and its officially accepted historiography, the testimonies are both a discourse of reminiscence and a tool of remembrance. Currently, testimonies also serve as a tool of evangelisation.

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Another term often related to testimony is a church of silence. It is a concept with a strong historical connotation: the same concept has been in use in the churches of Eastern Europe, referring to churches living under communist regime and rule. The concept often includes a sense of oppression, marginalization and alienation. The Cuban Catholic contemporaries of the most tensed times recall the church of silence as a church remaining present in the society yet limiting its being to within the temples. This, in turn, is perceived as a collective testimony.<sup>18</sup>

16 Plan pastoral.

17 Interviews 15, 17, 19, 20.

18 Interview 4, 5, 6.

Testimony as a theological concept, according to the documentation of the Cuban Catholic Bishops' Conference in the 21st Century, is a *derivant* of the early Christian testimonies of faith as a mean of preserving the tradition and evangelisation. Often interpreted through the Biblical origins of testimonies, they seem to represent for the Cuban Catholics a way of including themselves in the spiritual community of the faithful, the generations of the people of God and the universal church with its history, even though the physical circumstances of revolutionary Cuba have at times prevented the church from joining the concrete international Catholic community.<sup>19</sup>

Currently, perhaps the most vivid concept adapted by the Catholic Church in Cuba, closely related to *testimonio*, is the concept of *comunidad*, a community. The spiritual life highlights the importance of a living community witnessing and announcing the Gospel and testifying for it through words and actions of both individuals and communities.<sup>20</sup> The communities also seem to position themselves as repositories of memory, Catholic formation and Christian identity. Through the task of witness and *testimonio*, both the silent testimonies of the past as well as the oral and concrete testimonies of the present, the communities identify themselves as units of mission and evangelisation, which is visible in the daily operation of the communities.

A concrete singular example of this is the widely-spread custom regarding new visitors to the Sunday mass. For example, in the city of Havana, the majority of the Sunday services conclude with welcoming of the newcomers to the community. Often the task is carried out by a layperson who, from the pulpit in front of the church,

invites all newcomers to join them. At times the newcomers are invited to present themselves in front of the congregation and are received with a welcoming song and a small token of welcome, such as an image of the patron saint of the community.

Since the earliest years of Fidel Castro's revolution, the church in Cuba has occupied a special role of importance for the Holy See. At the most tense of times, it has been the concrete inventions of the Holy See that have kept the Cuban church-state-relation resulting in open confrontations and physical conflicts. The diplomatic corps of the Holy See has been on watch of Cuba throughout the decades.<sup>21</sup>

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However, the most visible presence of the universal Catholic Church on the island has been conveyed by the Popes personally invested in Cuba. Altogether three popes have visited Cuba - remarkably, three succeeding popes: John Paul II in 1998, Benedict XVI in 2012, and most recently, Francis in 2015. Each of the visits has marked a specific moment in the development of the church-state-relations.

When John Paul II visited Cuba as the first pope to do so, he demanded Cuba to open itself to the world and the world to open itself to Cuba. The visit marked a striking difference to the past: it was a proof that the church existed on the

19 Interviews 15, 17, 19, 20.

20 Plan pastoral.

21 Kirk 1989, 177-121.

island and possessed a certain influence in the society, even though paradoxical by nature. The visit of Benedict XVI focused more on encouraging the Cuban Catholics spiritually and promoting further freedom for the church to operate within the social and public spheres instead of remaining inside the temples. Finally, the visit of Pope Francis to Cuba in September 2015 suggested that the church had reached a foothold steady enough to start focusing on issues directing the church even more outwards, away from serving and nourishing its own flock to attracting newcomers and assuming a position of influence and authority in the emerging civil society.

Currently, Pope Francis seems to be very well-acquainted with the missionary character of Cuban Catholicism. As a Latin American and a native Spanish-speaker, he knows the Cuban reality well. His theology and plans for the church in Cuba seem to be very well in line with the theology and policies presented in ENEC. During his visit to Cuba, Pope Francis addressed the topic of evangelisation several times. He seemed to argue for the need of evangelisation by underlining the positive influence of Christianity on social life: Francis mentioned, repeatedly, the role of faith as a provider of charity, values and humanity. He also emphasized the national identity of Cuba as a Catholic country – something also the Catholic Church in Cuba highlights in order to argue for an inherited position of the church in the society.<sup>22</sup>

During his visit, Pope Francis reminded Cubans that the island was Catholic long before it became revolutionary, and that the nation is Catholic by heart and heritage. Pope Francis repeatedly used Virgin Mary as an example of Cuba's Catholic past and missionary future.<sup>23</sup> The patron saint of the island, known as Our Lady of Charity

of *El Cobre* (*Nuestra Señora de la Caridad del Cobre*), is a common feature for Cuban Catholics, practitioners of the most popular Afro-Cuban religion, *santería*, and even those without confessional commitments. The devotion of Our Lady seems to bring together different spiritual backgrounds and serve as a common ground for mission and evangelisation from the point of view of the church, as the patron saint is seen as a cultural symbol of Cuban heritage and historical roots both within and outside the Catholic Church.

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All of these concepts are ultimately defined through a missionary approach. With the changes currently taking place in the Cuban society, the Cubans may be re-estimating their ideological stances and beliefs. The active role of the Catholic Church in political and social development on the island – such as the pivotal role played by Pope Francis and the Cuban church in mediating the negotiations of President Raúl Castro and President Obama, ultimately leading to the establishment of diplomatic ties between Cuba and the United States – have raised attention and interest in the church among the previously religiously non-committed Cubans.

As the officials of the church pronounce it, there is both a need and a growing possibility for mission on the island. For the church, evangelisation is a

22 Homilies of Pope Francis in Cuba 2015.

23 Homilies of Pope Francis in Cuba 2015.

concept rooted both in the past and the future. As the personal and collective testimonies are preserved by both individuals and communities: they are both repositories of remembrance and agents of evangelisation.

### Practices of contemporary mission

In 2015, there were 306 Catholic parishes in Cuba. According to the pastoral plan, there were a total number of 357 priests, of which 177 pertain to a religious order; 84 permanent deacons; 585 female and 191 male members of religious orders. Altogether there were 96 orders present in Cuba: 70 orders for females and 26 for males.<sup>24</sup>

Contemporary mission is strongly a bottom-up process within the Catholic Church in Cuba. The highest authority on the national level, the committee of mission in the Cuban Catholic Bishops' Conference, coordinates the evangelisation and mission as a whole, but also shares the majority of responsibilities with the local agents. On diocesan level, evangelisation and mission are carried out by laical participation in substantial measures. This is naturally due to the small number of priests and members of religious orders on the island, but also the active role reserved for laypeople to fulfil their commitment and mission in the community. A specific theological focus of local mission is a strong emphasis on catechesis and teaching of catechism for all age groups. Local priests are responsible for catechesis leading to baptism but the teaching itself is often carried out by religious orders or laypeople, especially with children and youth. Catechesis is also considered a particularly significant for children, teenagers and young adults who may have a religious upbringing or are considering joining the church with their families. Correspondingly, the church

also underlines the need for theological education and increase of information and knowledge on Catholic teaching. In education of adults, the church pays special attention to those Catholics affiliated with *santería*, an Afro-Cuban religion, either by a syncretised cult of Catholic and Afro-Cuban religious practices or committed practices of *santería* merging with popular Catholicism.<sup>25</sup>

There is a relatively large number of laypeople actively participating in the development and execution of missionary work.

*Casas de misión*, mission houses, serve as the daily locations of evangelisation throughout the island. As the number of priests on the island is not sufficient for covering all the pastoral work, it is apparent that the active participation of the laity is needed in order to organize and maintain activities throughout the island. The missionary, evangelising spirit of the devoted Cuban Catholic laity is commonly referred to as "laical vocation", a rooted commitment to the church and its local community. In larger cities, such as Havana, Santiago de Cuba, Pinar del Rio and Santa Clara, there is a relatively large number of laypeople actively participating in the development and execution of missionary work. However, in the countryside, where there is a constant lack of both priests and religious as well as facilities such as churches and houses of mission, the responsibilities are often carried out by single individuals or families.<sup>26</sup>

24 Plan pastoral.

25 Plan pastoral.

26 Plan pastoral.

The need for evangelisation breeds new innovations for carrying out mission. In contemporary Cuba, the church is undeniably an existing agent in the society but nevertheless operating within frames defined by the regime. It seems, however, that the church is growing to claim more space in the public sphere. The activities of the church, especially in regard to public visibility, are increasing steadily. In evangelisation, it must also be noted that policies and practices, ideals and realities, do not always meet in Cuba. Even though the official policy of the state regulates the activities of the church, in many cases the ground has been cleared for a long time on local level. Even though the Cuban infrastructure does not permit the church full access to media, the church uses what it has.<sup>27</sup>

In Facebook, testimonies of baptisms, anniversaries, meetings and conferences as well as liturgical celebrations are particularly popular among Cuban Catholics

While the Internet has arrived in Cuba relatively recently, and is still available only to a small percentage of Cubans at a price considered high in comparison with average wages, the church is already engaged in social media as most of the dioceses and offices have their home pages. Although all Internet connections on the island are regulated by the government, the Catholic Church is among the institutions with most continuous access to the Internet. Facebook, for example, is an increasingly popular platform for the church. In Facebook, testimonies of baptisms, anniversaries,

meetings and conferences as well as liturgical celebrations are particularly popular among Cuban Catholics, and diocese regularly share information on their activities through their Facebook profile pages. Social media is also a particularly useful mean of communication for reaching the Cubans living outside the island and with more regular access to the social media: a considerable amount of the Catholic American-Cuban community of Miami, United States, for example, follows the daily life of Cuban Catholic communities on social media.

Apart from digital media, the church also actively publishes national and diocesan periodicals and magazines with both informative and spiritual content; as the church is not allowed to access national television nor radio, the printed publications are the broadest channel of communication at the moment. It must be noted that some of the Catholic periodical also engage actively in discussion and debate on politics, economy and matters of social justice - and thus portray the church as one of the few autonomous institutions on the island taking part in social discourse.<sup>28</sup>

The church is also exploring possibilities of alternative forms of missionary work. For example, in the spring of 2016, the diocese of Santa Clara, located in central Cuba, produced its first weekly package of church-related materials. The weekly package is a renowned and widespread concept in Cuba, referring to USB flash drives circulating in communities, packed with latest episodes of popular television shows, recently released movies, recent volumes of American and European newspapers and playlist of hit songs of pop music. The first ecclesiastic packages, released for circulation in the spring of 2016, included, for example, homilies,

27 Interviews 17, 19, 20.

28 Interviews 17, 19, 20.

prayers, catechesis, photos and videos of Pope Francis as well as collections of religious publications in digital format.<sup>29</sup>

In the gradually re-emerging Cuban civil society, the missionary activities of the Catholic Church are strongly related to diaconal and social work. This gives the mission a role as a social activity in the Cuban society. The Catholic Church is currently the only independent, international actor on the third sector and civil society: it is the largest and, at times and in certain locations, the only provider of charitable social services such as care of the elderly and food charity. This emphasizes the role of the church not only as a spiritual institution but also a participant in social development. This, as a feature of missionary activity, also increases public interest and provides further opportunities for evangelisation.<sup>30</sup>

**The Catholic Church is the largest and, at times, the only provider of charitable social services.**

The social, at times also political, aspects of Catholic mission in Cuba have been brought to attention in the recent years with the changes taking in Cuba. The new archbishop of Havana, Juan Rodriguez, who took possession in May 2016, is also expected to reinforce the missionary spirit of the church. It seems his vision to amplify the evangelisation and establish the church as a fully competent and active agent in the society. The church is preparing to make use of all opportunities of evangelisation possibly opening with the social and political changes; to evangelise the people and the culture, as pronounced in the current pastoral plan.

29 Interviews 17, 19, 20.

30 Interviews 17, 19, 20; Plan pastoral.

## Conclusion

Having evolved from operating solely inside the temples in the 1960s to an active agent of both spiritual and social influence in contemporary Cuba, the Catholic Church is currently strongly focused on evangelisation. The Catholic Church in Cuba is missionary by self-understanding and identity, and has created distinct Cuban Catholic theology to respond to the socio-political challenges of the Cuban revolutionary reality. The church engages in social and political discourse while it strives to develop its own possibilities and forms of evangelisation.

Starting from the 1980s, the specific Cuban context has been a platform of creating new means of evangelisation, focusing on lay activism and laical vocation and reinforcing the role of local communities in missionary activities. Currently the church is gaining more visibility in the Cuban public and civic spheres, corresponding to the changes taking place in Cuban politics, economy and international relations. As a part of this, the church explores new opportunities of evangelisation. However, the church still operates within the framework of the revolution and the Cuban model of socialism, with the historical polarization of church-state-relations still affecting the current role of Catholicism in the Cuban revolutionary reality.

## WHAT DO YOU THINK?

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## **Discurso inaugural del ENEC**

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