

CUBA

Cuban priest says religion is growing

A Cuban archbishop said during a visit to Miami that religious freedom is slowly growing despite restrictions.

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A top Catholic prelate in Cuba says religious practice is slowly spreading in the communist nation despite rigid restrictions.

Archbishop Dionisio Guillermo García Ibañez, named earlier this year to lead Catholics in Santiago, Cuba's second-largest city, said the church has been able to expand its reach, though it will be years before it achieves goals of even more openness.

"The faith of our community has manifested, it has been reborn," he said in a recent interview during a visit to Miami. "The Catholic faith in our community has resurrected."

García would not pin the loosened restrictions on Cuban leader Fidel Castro's decision to temporarily hand over the government last year to his brother Raúl. He said he has witnessed piecemeal improvements since his ordination in 1985.

Catholics once hoped simply to knock on doors and spread the Gospel, García said, a dream that has since been realized. They prayed they could hold religious processions in the streets; he says there have now been more than 90. They pushed for Catholic radio broadcasts, which are now allowed once or twice a year.

"Hope is relative," the 62-year-old archbishop said after a Mass at Ermita de la Caridad, the spiritual heart of Cuban exiles in Miami. "We always need to work toward what we think is necessary, is fair."

García was cautious in his statements and steered away from any criticism of the Cuban government, for which his predecessor, retired Archbishop Pedro Meurice Estiu, became known. One of García's hosts, Bishop Felipe Estévez, said he was encouraged by the changes the archbishop noted, but said Catholics need to understand Cubans are still living in a closed society.

"That is a society that is not pluralistic, it is unidimensional and somehow they have to live with that reality," said Estevez, an auxiliary bishop with the Archbishop of Miami who was born in Havana and came to the United States as a teenager. "They are kind of talking out of adversity."

Despite huge expectations, Pope John Paul II's 1998 visit to Cuba didn't bring the changes many had hoped. The pontiff had urged the island to "open to the world" and called for Castro to increase liberty for the church and society.

"Life in Cuba continues without greater transformations," the archbishop acknowledged.

Associated Press writers Anita Snow in Havana and Damian Grass in Miami contributed to this report.