



Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

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May 31, 2013

The Honorable John Kerry
Secretary of State
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Kerry:

As Chairman of the Committee on International Justice and Peace of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), I encourage you and the Administration once again to act courageously to deepen engagement between the United States and Cuba. The relaxation of U.S. travel restrictions and rules governing remittances announced by the Administration in 2011 was a positive step. More can and must be done.

Having travelled as part of a USCCB delegation to Cuba during the visit by Pope Benedict XVI in March of 2012, I can testify that these modified policies have borne fruit. I have met individuals who were able to visit Cuba after many years of separation from their loved ones. They welcomed the opportunity to assist their family members financially.

Commentators have suggested that Cuban-American citizens are increasingly disposed towards such engagement and reconciliation with Cuba. The desire to overcome the troubled legacy of the past, with its hardened divisions and recriminations, is palpable on both sides. I recently had the opportunity to meet with senior representatives of the Cuban government here in Washington. They shared a sincere interest in dialogue that was echoed in meetings with your colleagues in the State Department with whom I have also consulted. American leadership can play a positive role in fostering human rights as Cuba faces inevitable economic and political transitions.

In concrete terms, we urge lifting the existing embargo against Cuba, so that greater support and assistance can be provided to ordinary Cubans. While in Cuba, I visited Catholic programs that provide food and medical attention to poor and vulnerable persons. Staff members and senior Cuban Church officials told me that the efficacy of their work was hampered by their inability to obtain products from the United States due to the trade embargo. Civil society, a critical ingredient for a healthy public square, would be strengthened by lifting the embargo.

In speaking with the U.S. Interests Section in Havana, our delegation was encouraged by their positive assessment of the work of Catholic charitable organizations in Cuba. These organizations must not be encumbered by outdated policies that harm the most vulnerable people. All restrictions should be systematically eliminated so that the complete abolition of the embargo and its harmful effects can be achieved. These burdens are not borne by the members of the Cuban governing elite, but rather by “ordinary” Cubans, and most especially by those who are poor.

Other policies of our nation also deserve review. The time has passed to warrant the designation of Cuba as a sponsor of state terrorism. Such an obsolete classification prevents engagement between our countries and peoples, and potentially undermines that nation’s current constructive role in Colombian peace negotiations. We acknowledge serious human rights concerns in Cuba, but the terrorist designation is another matter.

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When such barriers to dialogue are removed, our two countries will also stand to gain from governmental and scientific exchanges, in areas such as interdiction of drugs and weapons trafficking, health and welfare concerns, environmental considerations and climate change. For example, there are reports of Cuban medical research advances which might benefit the people of the United States. Similarly, past mishaps caused by unsound exploration practices highlight the importance of collaborating on the safe exploitation of natural resources, particularly in off-shore oil drilling in the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean.

The Catholic Church in our country and in Cuba has long maintained that greater, rather than less, engagement with Cuba can bring about positive change in that country. This dialogue already exists except with the United States. This anachronistic anomaly needs to be rectified. The U.S. bishops renew their long-standing call for purposeful engagement rather than ineffective isolation. In this way, we will act on the words of Pope Benedict who, in his farewell remarks in Havana last year, noted, "May no one feel excluded from taking up this exciting task because of limitations of his or her basic freedoms, or excused ...when restrictive economic measures, imposed from outside the country, unfairly burden its people."

New efforts must be made to resolve concerns for our respective nationals who are being held prisoner by the other country. We appreciate in particular the case of Alan Gross. These situations represent seemingly intractable problems precluding the possibility of progress between our nations on other fronts. Our Church stands ready to assist in any attempts at resolution of these difficult situations, in a way that recognizes humanitarian concerns and the need for reconciliation.

It is long past time to establish full diplomatic relations with Cuba, to withdraw all restrictions on travel to Cuba, to rescind terrorist designations aimed at Cuba, to encourage trade that will benefit both nations, and to facilitate cooperation in the areas of the environment, drug interdiction and scientific exchanges. Such actions are consistent with a stated mission of Pope Francis: "One of the titles of the Bishop of Rome is Pontiff, that is, a builder of bridges with God and between people. My wish is that the dialogue between us should help to build bridges connecting all people, in such a way that everyone can see in the other not an enemy, not a rival, but a brother or sister to be welcomed and embraced!"

As the positive results of the visits to Cuba by Pope John Paul II and Pope Emeritus Benedict have amply shown, more engagement will help the people of Cuba achieve greater freedom, human rights, and religious liberty. I am sure that your own personal experience in fostering reconciliation with our former enemies in Vietnam will help in this work. We look forward to meeting with you on this crucial issue, and to supporting positive initiatives in U.S.-Cuban relations.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Richard E. Pates". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

The Most Reverend Richard E. Pates
Bishop of Des Moines
Chair, Committee on International Justice and Peace