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Miami, FL

Testimony Fr. Rolando Montes de Oca

On December 14, 2022, Catholic priest Alberto Reyes published an article on his Facebook wall where he enunciates why it cannot be affirmed that there is religious freedom in Cuba.

At the top of the list is the "Office of Religious Affairs of the Communist Party of Cuba" in charge of controlling the practice of the faith, controlling every movement of the Church, and calling the bishops and superiors when what a priest or religious says or does bothers them, in order to try to get them to be the ones to "put that priest or religious in order" while those really interested are left with their hands clean.

Father Alberto also refers to the limitations on "access to the mass media and the exclusion of religious institutions from the education system."

He also notes the dependence "on permits to publicly manifest the faith, and the impossibility of "the construction of temples in those places where there are established Christian communities that in the absence of a temple have to meet in private homes."

He also speaks of the demolitions of temples considered "illegal", which were made without the corresponding permits because those permits never arrived; and of the impossibility of registering in the official registry the new Christian denominations that want to exercise their right to evangelize in Cuba.

Likewise, Fr. Alberto denounces the impediment to the participation in religious celebrations of Christians whose thinking is different from the official government discourse, and the continuous harassment with "calls for attention" to lay people, religious and priests who express opinions different from those of the government and, of course, they would not be "regulated", preventing their mobility, nor would they be expelled from the land in which they want to remain and serve.

And Reyes Pias concludes his denunciation by expressing that: "If there were religious freedom in my land, there would be no accusation or denigration of priests, religious men, and women and lay people who, moved by their faith, raise their voices to exercise their baptismal identity as prophets, denounce social injustices and seek to accompany those who are victims of those injustices".

These violations of religious freedom, as described by Fr. Reyes, which are neither few nor minor, are confirmed with the 2023 report of Religious Freedom of the Cuban Observatory of Human Rights, recently published. These are perhaps the most evident and certainly denounceable. In Cuba, there is a profoundly serious aggression toward religious freedom, which operates in the shadows and that is why it is more complex to show and, sometimes,

even to define. I am referring to the continuous and harmful infiltration of informants and counterintelligence agents in religious institutions.

This presence undermines trust. In this way, it attacks the heart of the institution, because an institution is a set of relationships. In the case of a religious community, these are very deep relationships, where what is shared is often the sacred ground of people's consciences. In this type of relationship, trust is vital.

Moreover, these infiltrations often destabilize the rhythm of the institution and damage key leaders and individuals, provoking situations that undermine their morale, weaken them, and make them vulnerable to the pressures of the regime.

Infiltrators frequently misinform and launch discrediting campaigns, especially against leaders or consecrated people who do not pay with the ideological currency of silence or support to the officialism. This is verified at the media level, especially in social networks with the so-called "cyberclarias" (agents working for the State Security replicating fakes, encouraging hate and discredit campaigns, through their personal profiles and many other false ones).

It also happens more directly through visits that seek to terrorize the faithful in their churches or schools, denigrating the religious to diminish their disappointed or frightened parishioners, so that the leader feels alone and weak.

The infiltrators are blamed for the loss of documents in archives, the placing of microphones in places of trust, depression, and in general the illness of priests and religious who in some cases have had no choice but to go into exile or abandon their vocation. They also foment disagreement and division in parish groups and even within the clergy.

It should be noted that the presence and actions of infiltrators and informers in the churches harm concrete persons in their conscience and faith. They often damage them in an irreparable way, and in this way, they hurt first those "recruited" for this work.

I remember that when I was about to begin my ecclesiastical studies, that is, to enter the Pre-Seminary of Camagüey, I was drafted for Compulsory Military Service. Despite the requests of the then Archbishop of Camagüey, Monsignor Adolfo, and the promise of the Communist Party that I would be discharged in a few days, these few days turned into a year and three months. During that time, the "Intelligence" agents set out to recruit me and pressured me hard to make me work for them as an infiltrated Seminarian in their service. I was convinced that I would not do it and thank God, with His help, I stood firm and did not allow them to involve me in something that it was directly against my conscience and my principles. This is at the cost of suffering a crisis of arterial hypotension at the age of 17, and at a psychological level suffering symptoms of depression.

From that early age, I was able to see clearly that rejecting the enormous pressure of State Security required a lot of courage, intelligence, and very firm convictions: three conditions that not everyone has. This has helped me to banish from me the hatred or anger that should never poison the heart of a Christian. The infiltrators are very pitiful, they make me feel sorry for them, even if their actions are despicable.

As a priest, I have had to deal with infiltrators repeatedly. Some have worked to put obstacles in the way of my mission and have filled out dossiers about me and my words; others have confessed to me with shame and pain what they have been asked to do and in confidence have assured me that, although they are ashamed of not having had the courage to reject the initial proposal, they will not do anything to harm me or the Church. For others, too, it has been an opportunity to discover the beauty of the Gospel, and they have regretfully told the priest their original purpose.

Recently the independent newspaper "La Hora de Cuba" published the case of the young Catholic Jesús Javier Abelarde, demonstrator of the 11-J, who in fear of being imprisoned accepted the proposal of the Cuban Intelligence and ran to confess to a priest his assent to the proposal, according to his own testimony: he fought to get out of that network, managed to escape from Cuba and finally told both the pressure received and the inner torment it produced in him.

In my time as formator of the Propaedeutic Seminary of Camagüey, a young man collapsed before his conscience that accused him because being a good Christian his fragile psychology did not resist the pressure of the Cuban Intelligence. He became a spy inside the seminary and living there, receiving from the Church only good, in a moment of community prayer he burst into tears and confessed with shame his condition as an infiltrator. He went home from where he was taken without his consent, and confined in the Psychiatric Hospital where he was subjected to strong medications and kept incommunicado for several days.

As a Cuban Catholic priest, when we talk about violations of religious freedom, I am not only seeing temples, institutions, or written declarations on paper. I see concrete faces, concrete lives, sometimes wounded, sometimes broken. And this is my contribution and my invitation to those who have in their hands the ability to influence so that religious freedom in my country is respected: think that your decisions can impact or less in the lives, in the consciences, in the souls of concrete people with concrete stories, many of whom are living a hell on Earth. Thank you.