

One step forward, two steps



Irish Franciscan Fr Gearóid Ó Conaire OFM tells Ruadhán Jones about the plight of the Church in Cuba against a background of transition in leadership and Covid

It's hard for us in Ireland to grasp the complexities and challenges of life in Cuba for Catholic clergy, religious and laity. This has only become accentuated by the country's worst economic crisis in decades. Franciscan Fr Gearóid Ó Conaire OFM, the only Irish religious in Cuba, has spent three years ministering in a parish in Habana, the capital city, and knows some of the complexities of life in Cuba.

"We have friars who come here and it's only after several months that they begin to understand the complexities of life," Fr Ó Conaire says. "We encourage friars to come initially for three months to see and experience life here, because it is a vocation within a vocation. It presents challenges in most aspects of life. Not every friar finds it easy to adapt and stay."

Remaining

Cuba is one of the last remaining Marxist-Leninist Communist states in the world. After the 1959 revolution, in which the Communist rebel forces were victorious, it had been hostile to religion, officially recognised as atheist and maintaining strict control over religious freedom. This has improved in the 20 years since Pope John Paul II visited.

"Before John Paul's visit back in 1998, there were 40 religious congregations," Fr Ó Conaire explains. "Until then there had been a limit on the number of priests permitted to minister, keeping it at about a 100, either for those ordained in Cuba or missionaries coming from abroad. Now after '98, things have improved, including getting the state to recognise Christmas as a day of rest and holiday and then Pope Benedict was able to get Good Friday added to the list as well."

"Over the years, it has become much easier for religious congregations to establish themselves in Cuba. The number has grown from 40 to 120. The diversity of religious is also noteworthy. At a week-long orientation given by the Conference



Fr Jesús Aguirre OFM with people of Santa Cruz taken in the church yard on the morning of the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, December 12.

of Religious to newcomers in 2019 of the 30 participating orders, there were 21 different nationalities."

Freedom of religion

However, these improvements are relative; as a former Papal Nuncio put it, in Cuba today there is "freedom of cult, but still obstacles for freedom of religion". By that he meant there is freedom to worship, but limited possibilities for more general evangelisation. The historical experience until more recently for Cubans has been one of religious intolerance. Following the revolution, pressure was often exerted on Catholics to apostatise by excluding those who professed the Faith and their children from specific jobs, from places in university and more. For many families, faced with the possibility of a contentious and challenging future for their children, they desisted from coming to Church, leading to a loss of practice and of faith for many.

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Fr Ó Conaire was one of three friars who travelled to Cuba three years ago following a plea from the Franciscan community for new missionaries, he explains. He is now one of six remaining Franciscan friars in

Cuba – to put that in context, before the revolution there were 104 friars in seventeen presences in most parts of the country. He and his brother friars minister in a largely Cuban district to a population of roughly 50,000. His parish, named the Holy Cross of Jerusalem, averaged a pre-Covid attendance in the parish church of 120 to 130 people at both Masses on a Sunday. There are two other churches; one ministered to by another OFM fraternity and the other by a Capuchin fraternity.

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"For now, our vocation is really one of presence and accompaniment of the people by listening and creating the space for them to win back trust and to keep hope alive," Fr Ó Conaire says. "Since the visit of St John Paul II in 1998, many aspects of Church life have improved. Someone the other day compared the pastoral and fraternal challenges to the walk of a crab – a backward movement!"

Unique challenges

The unique challenges presented by life in Cuba are part of the reason why few friars who come to the



Fr Gearóid Ó Conaire OFM, pictured on Palm Sunday in front of the church in the parish of the Holy Cross of Jerusalem.

island remain. Fr Ó Conaire gives the example of social outreach.

"The state considers social outreach, particularly in formal education and in health, to be exclusively their responsibility," Fr Ó Conaire. "If a religious comes and has experience in pastoral ministry in other countries, you have to be an awful lot more creative in looking for ways to evangelise and reach out, particularly to young people. Pastorally we are also more restricted."

These challenges have been accentuated by a worsening eco-

nomical situation, as Covid and a crippling embargo by the United States have taken their toll on the economy.

One of the issues facing the Franciscan friars during Covid was internet availability. "When we arrived here three years ago, internet was just beginning, it was starting to be rolled out," Fr Ó Conaire explains. "Most people have difficulty paying for internet. We managed to connect through the conference of religious just before Covid struck, which was a great blessing for us because it allowed us then to communicate with family and friars and people outside, but less so with people inside."

"That's the difference for us from other churches around the world where internet is more readily available, where they can have liturgies online. Even though people are

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