

back for Church in Cuba



Fr Ó Conaire at a pre-Covid feast with local children.

communicating through Facebook and other mass media, most of the people we work with don't have this kind of connectivity. If they do, they have to be very selective in what they spend their time looking at or communicating, because it means more expense."

Economy

Finances are an issue for many Cubans, as Covid and the US embargo have squeezed the economy. A recent plea from religious in Cuba to the political leaders of the dioceses of Camagüey illustrates the issues the population currently faces. According to their parishioners, rising costs of food and rent have rendered wages sorely insufficient; an inability to shop in stores which accept foreign currency only; and the health system lacks the resources for basic treatments.

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“People with common, chronic or psychiatric illnesses often lack essential medications and medical interventions such as antibiotics, pain relievers, sedatives, medical supplies, working equipment, etc.,” the religious say in their letter. “The queues in pharmacies and at emerging points that have been created are endless. People affected are of all ages, children, youth, adults and the elderly. It is the cause of a lot of anguish, suffering and exhaustion.”

The situation regarding foreign currency is especially difficult.

“The Government is desperate for foreign currency and introduced a number of Cuban style supermarkets at which one can purchase foodstuff

and electric appliances, but only by credit card in US dollars or Euros,” Fr Ó Conaire says. “Cash is not accepted. There was a mad rush to take out foreign exchange credit cards which can be topped up from abroad, at least that was the idea.

“However, with an embargo by US banks sending money, which has now affected many European banks and the exit of Western Union from the country more recently, families have struggled to find the means to transfer cash. It is well nigh impossible, including from Ireland, to make bank transfers to Cuba! It was a surprise to see and experience endless queues of people trying to access these supermarkets. One religious’ woman, who runs a canteen for the elderly, waited in line for twelve hours to purchase some essentials, only to be met by empty shelves when she eventually gained access.”

Hope

However, there are definite signs of hope, both for the Church and for the country. The Government has done a good job in controlling the spread of Covid – at the pandemic’s height, the country averaged just a thousand cases a day. Given that Cuba had a population of 11 million,

this compares well with responses around the world.

Cuba has also now moved into phase three trials for two of four vaccines, which will hopefully be completed in early summer and distributed for free. This bodes well for the island-economy and leaves many hopeful that they will be able to welcome tourists and more family members back soon. For the Church, they have increased their outreach through social media during the pandemic. Equally, as Fr Ó Conaire points out, he has more freedom to celebrate Masses in Cuba than he had in Ireland until recently.

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“In the parish, we’ve set up a WhatsApp group, for communications, reflections on scripture and Church teaching,” Fr Ó Conaire says. “But we’ve also managed well here from March to November, apart from a couple of months when the



Analuisa Negret Triana and Daniela Gurerro Argus, members of the parish community with Fr Ó Conaire.



The six Franciscan friars based in Cuba (from left) are Br Manuel Pineda OFM (Guatemala), Br Luis Pernas OFM (Cuba), Br Félix Padrón (Cuba), Br Gerard Saunders OFM (USA), Br Gearóid Ó Conaire OFM, Br Jesús Aguirre-Garza OFM (Mexico).

lockdowns were quite intense and we were not celebrating publicly at that time.

“But coming towards the end of last year, we started to celebrate, and we kind of had the main doors closed, but slowly and surely, we opened the side doors. Taking all the precautions, we started to let people back in. In Ireland people have got in trouble for distributing communion – here, funnily enough, we can do that!”

Post-Covid Church

Covid interrupted the friar’s efforts to improve their outreach to the local people. But as hopes increase for the availability of vaccinations, they can begin to focus on the future once more. And that future must be more reliant on Cuban vocations, Fr Ó Conaire explains.

“We’re trying to organise ourselves and look to the future – the future has to be a Cuban Church for Cubans,” he says. “There’s still interest by missionaries in working in Cuba. But the number of people who actually come and the number who eventually stay here, is very small. We have to take that into account when we’re building for the future. Six of our friars have come and gone in the last three years. We’re expecting three other friars to offer their services between now and 2024. We’re unsure for what length of time those who are currently serving, will stay. The initial commitment is usually for three years.”

His own Order is indicative of the challenges facing the Church: “Now, there’s only two Cuban Franciscans in Cuba,” Fr Ó Conaire says. “But we have three men studying in the Dominican Republic and we’re inviting two postulants to enter. Part of our work, back in March of last year we were already starting to go out and visit people in their homes. We were thinking of setting up alternative education programmes around art and drama and music and sport, the plastic arts and language.

“Through these programmes we wish to connect with younger people, and with children. In each of the courses we have a component for ethical and social responsibility promoting reflection on fundamental human values.”

Political uncertainty

Efforts to minister in any country across the world will be in part determined by the country’s political situation. Cuba emblemises this fact perfectly, being affected by politics within and outside its borders. When Joe Biden was elected president last year, there were hopes that he would lift the severe restrictions Donald Trump had placed on them.

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Thus far, however, President Biden has not prioritised relations with Cuba, nor has he revoked any of the legislation issued by then-President Trump in relation to Cuba, including making it more difficult for families to transfer funds. The unprecedented increase in public protests in recent times may be one of the reasons the US is biding its time, as well as waiting to see the composition and projection of a new leadership for the Communist Party, after the withdrawal of Raul Castro.

This, of course is the second area of political uncertainty. Although a new Communist Party leader was elected April 20, with Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel taking the role, the extent of political change remains to be seen. He is a layman and has the blessing of Raul Castro.

“Raul Castro encouraged more tourism and opened up to foreign investment,” Fr Ó Conaire explains. “The Government says that they are opening up private enterprise to foreign investment in 2,000 different areas. But there are 120 very key areas that will still be in exclusively state control, such as in education and health, communications and the media in general.”

Regardless, the Church in Cuba will continue to plug away in its crab-like manner, taking a few steps forward, a few back – always with hope for the future.