

Pope meets with Fidel Castro, urges more freedom

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March 29, 2012

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VATICAN CITY (RNS) Pope Benedict XVI ended his three-day visit to Cuba on Wednesday (March 28) with an appeal for more religious freedom for the Catholic Church, ahead of a highly anticipated meeting with the island's historic leader, Fidel Castro.

And while he stopped short of openly criticizing the island's communist regime during the trip, Benedict nonetheless said Cuba needed "change" and a "renewed and open society."

The pope celebrated Mass on Wednesday in Havana's Revolution Square for about 300,000 people, according to the Vatican's top spokesman, the Rev. Federico Lombardi.

Cuban President Raul Castro was in attendance and joined in the crowd's applause when the pope entered the stage.

Benedict and Raul Castro had had a 40-minute private meeting on Tuesday where, according to Lombardi, the pope asked Castro to consider making Good Friday a national holiday and made some "humanitarian requests." No details were given about the details of Benedict's requests.

On the plane that was flying him to his earlier stop in Mexico, Benedict urged Cuba to look for "new models" beyond its "Marxist ideology," which he said could no longer "respond to reality."

But during the Mass on Wednesday, Benedict only acknowledged that both "Cuba and the world need change," adding that change would come only through "love" and by "sowing reconciliation and fraternity."

Benedict's more strongly worded appeal on Monday to "build a renewed and open society, a better society, one more worthy of humanity," was promptly rebuked by Marino Murillo, a vice president in the Council of Ministers, who told journalists on Tuesday that "political reform" was not on the agenda.

"We are talking about the update of the Cuban economic model to make our socialism sustainable," he said of the country's steps towards opening some economic sectors to private initiative.

At Wednesday's Mass, Benedict acknowledged Cuba's progress in granting the Catholic Church greater freedom, but called on the government to allow the church a wider role in society, especially in the "fields of knowledge." The Cuban government doesn't allow the church to open schools or universities.

Before leaving Cuba, the pope met for 30 minutes with the island's leader Fidel Castro. Castro had stated his desire to meet for "a few minutes" with the pontiff in a column published on the Internet.