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Religious Freedom Week helped highlight Cubans Pay dearly for living their faith

BY TEO A. BABUN

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The United States conference of Catholic Bishops recently observed Religious Freedom Week, a time to “pray, reflect and act to promote religious freedom,” as its website reads.

The observance considers religious freedom in the United State and abroad. In view of this, it is fitting that the U.S Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) held a hearing that same week on worsening religious freedom conditions in Cuba. Held at the American Museum of the Cuban Diaspora in Little Havana in Miami, this was the commission’s first hearing outside of Washington, D.C.

As the president of Outreach Aid to the Americas (OAA), a faith-based non-profit organization in Miami that works to empower and advocate for fundamental freedoms in Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela, among others, I was privileged to testify at this hearing.

I shared that, in Cuba, leaders of various faith traditions are frequently on the front lines of human-rights defense, promoting peaceful dialogue and advocating for democratic change. They do this at great risk because they face constant

surveillance, harassment and threats by state security agents charged with carrying out a policy of control and repression of religion on the island.

A poll released recently by the Madrid-based human rights monitor *Observatorio Cubano de Derechos Humanos* showed that 68% of Cubans on the island know someone who has been harassed, repressed, threatened, or obstructed in their daily life for reasons related to their faith.

The survey concludes that religious freedoms are not respected or guaranteed in Cuba. The regime continues to use its surveillance and control systems to limit public expression by those who assume a political or civic posture inspired by faith. As a Cuban Jewish leader said in a webinar we hosted recently: “The [Cuban] communists tell you, ‘You can believe in whatever you want, but you have to kneel in front of the dictatorship. You are going to believe, but I am going to put limits on your belief.’” By its nature, religious belief deals with ultimate things and an ultimate authority, one who has a lot to say about truth, justice and the responsibilities of earthly rulers. But Cuba’s communist regime brooks no competitors to its authority and it will not tolerate criticism.

In my testimony, I recommended to the U.S Department of State and the international community the following: Keep Cuba on the State Department’s list of “Countries of Particular Concern,” its list of the world’s worst violators of religious freedom, unless conditions improve measurably (Cuba was placed on this list in 2022 for the first time a well-earned recognition of its brutality); impose new sanctions on officials orchestrating religious repression, including through denial of travel visas, as well as restrictions on international banking and investment; and continue to robustly fund programs to support Cubans in their struggle to ensure greater respect not only for religious freedom but also for such complementary fundamental rights as freedom of expression and freedom of assembly.

Also testifying on Wednesday was my friend, the brave Catholic priest Father Rolando Montes de Oca, who lives in Cuba. In 2021, when a journalist asked him if he was afraid to speak freely despite living under totalitarianism, he replied: "I am afraid of not being true to my conscience. I am afraid of distancing myself from my people. I am afraid of listening to fears, and not to values, and not to God, and not to the cry of my people."

Cuba's communist rulers may have the power to hurt, jail and kill those who speak out against it, but men and women like Father Rolando show us that they have more power still: the power of faith that gives people strength and fuels their hope for a free and democratic future for their nation.

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