

## Let us not forget the Christians in Cuba

"I do not know if many of you have seen the stuff, but I was caught, it says, rowing to Cuba in a canoe, by the U.S. coastguard. Well, you know, the truth is that I was going to Cuba in a canoe, but this was in 1961, and some friends of mine...it was a sporting event." (Prime Minister, Pierre Elliott Trudeau, 1968)

In 1961 Trudeau tried to cross from Florida to Castro's Cuba by canoe. With this trip he wanted to demonstrate that a canoe was seaworthy enough to cross the treacherous Florida straits. He proved that it was an impossible venture by making it only half way. He was picked up by a shrimp boat and taken back to Florida.

The canoeist of 1961 is now prime minister. In this capacity he visited Castro's Cuba, the largest island among the West Indies. His visit has drawn mixed reactions. Some call it poor timing as Castro's forces are operating in Angola. Others feel that he should have talked about cutting off Canadian aid as a rebuke to Castro's Cuba.

Millions of dollars are given to Cuba while this nation seems to have money for military action in Africa and subversive activities in South America. Some others feel that Trudeau was too generous in his praise for the Cuban leader. His enthusiasm for Castro has been called more than generous, giving the wrong impression of Canada's attitude towards a communist power. Some believe that his visit will foster a helpful dialogue between two nations of opposing political persuasions.

Castro is no doubt a leader with charisma. But did he conquer Cuba with popular support?

When he was fighting along with Cuban patriots against the military forces of Fulgencia Batista to dispel political corruption and abuse of power, he didn't let on that he was a convinced communist. It was not until December 1961 that Castro announced in a speech that he had been a dedicated Marxist-Leninist since his student days, but had concealed this fact until he could gain power. He also made it clear that his government will not become democratic but maintain its dictatorial powers.

As a minister of the gospel I don't want to enter into the political questions of our Prime Minister's visit to Cuba, but I am naturally interested in the welfare of my fellow Christians in that communist controlled nation.

Prior to Castro's regime there was complete religious liberty for all Cuban citizens. Although most Cubans are Roman Catholic, this freedom was guaranteed by the constitution of 1940. Before Castro came to power on January 1, 1959, Protestants were making considerable progress.

It is estimated that in 1958 some more than 100,000 Cubans had become members of Protestant churches. Their secondary schools ranked among the best and enjoyed community support and appreciation. What happened to Cuba's religious freedom soon after Castro's take-over? All private schools were abolished. Both Protestants and

Roman Catholics suffered harassment. There is no longer freedom of speech and press. All opposition has been stilled in the usual communist fashion.

Castro's regime has been hard on Christians, many have suffered for their faith. Many have endured economic hardship and direct persecution while others were forced into exile and joined the thousands of political exiles in Florida and other parts of the US. Pastors were imprisoned and sent to forced labour camps because they openly witnessed for Jesus Christ.

I wonder if our Prime Minister has discussed the harsh lot of the Christians and other non-communists in Cuba? I hope that he has, but I have not read about it in newspapers or magazines. Let us not forget to pray and speak for the afflicted and isolated Christians in Cuba.

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