

Written testimony of Presbyter Mario Félix Leonart Barroso
For the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere hearing on
“Deplorable Human Rights Violations in Cuba and Venezuela”
6 November 2015

Following the fall of socialism in Eastern Europe, and given its need for international support to continue in power, which is its supreme objective, the Havana regime attempted to deceive the world by trying to make some believe that, in Cuba, they were no longer violating religious liberty as they had before. The constitutional changes in the beginning of the 1990s, when the State stopped calling itself atheist and instead identified as laïque (secular), and the various papal visits were the main arguments that the same government used to try to call favorable attention to itself.

The truth is that the policies of the highest levels of the central government continue to trample on religious freedom on a daily basis. The Office for Attention to Religious Affairs of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party is the entity, at the very highest power, which dictates all guidelines as far as how to treat each religious group or individual who wants to exercise their faith freely, whatever it is. It would be unbelievable, if it wasn't already the case that the political monopoly of the Only Party, which is ideologically communist, would have an office dedicated to pressuring, manipulating and blackmailing historically established religious groups, and dedicated to containing, confronting or eliminating new religious movements when they do not align with their political interests which is to maintain themselves in power, at any cost.

In the specific case of religious freedom, it is perfectly understandable that authoritarianism cannot betray its own violating nature. The internal blockade imposed by the national authorities impedes any of the benefits, regarding the exchange of religious materials with the island, that are part of the numerous opportunities offered to Cuba through licenses granted by the Department of the Treasury of the USA.

To show an example that I have personally experienced and which I have every right to speak about, I will refer to things that my church, my family and I have suffered – some of those things repeated in recent weeks:

- They have blocked my every attempt to travel to urban communities, including for example to the city of Bejucal, a few kilometers outside the capital, Havana City. In this way they restrict my pastoral activities in rural communities where they are also trying to slow down and stop any religious activity.
- They have blocked my wife and me in our attempts to study for a doctorate in Theology inside Cuba. They made our exclusion from the program a condition for its ability to take place at all.
- They have detained and taken us to police stations on numerous occasions; these arrests have been denounced when they took place. These arrests were extra-legal.
- On other occasions my movements have been restricted, a kind of house arrest, but also illegally imposed. During the recent papal visit, hundreds of people suffered this kind of violation. Mr. Leonardo Rodríguez Alonso, present in this very room, is a member of a Masonic lodge in Cuba, and can share abundant information about how the rights of these fraternal institutions are violated. He himself was able to video with his cellular phone, the moment in which political police agents put him under house arrest in order to prevent him from attending the Papal Masses.
- Numerous members of my church have been the targets of threats, coercion, blackmail, and warnings simply because they form part of our congregation. Some of them have had to seek political asylum in order to avoid this kind of persecution. Many of them can now be found living in various cities in the United States.
- People in our communities have been coerced or intimidated in order to stop them from attending our church; this constitutes a real campaign against our work.

- Since January 2013, when Cubans were first able to travel outside the island without having to obtain permission from the system, I have been detained in the airport itself or interrogated various times upon arriving back on the island.
- Every time I have returned from a trip to the island my luggage has been searched as if I was a drug trafficker, but the confiscated materials have never been drugs, but rather literature, in many cases religious literature, and including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The most recent of these occasions was just two weeks ago (on Saturday, October 24) when they confiscated from my luggage 64 copies of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which I had planned to share with members of my congregation in Cuba.
- The local Communist Party leaders hold regular meetings, convened to direct their followers in multiplying their efforts to confront my pastoral ministry
- The roof of the Baptist church, where my church meets, is in urgent need of repair. In order to carry out these repairs a permit is needed – we requested the permit two years ago but while there has been no official response, the political authorities have said verbally that as long as I am pastor they will not issue the permit. This is a shameful attempt to blackmail my church.
- The State has a monopoly on the education of all children in Cuba. They impose a strong indoctrination and this is used to transmit political propaganda, in many cases of a violent nature (the icon is Che Guevara). This has traumatic effects on my two daughters, Rocío and Rachel, and especially on little Rachel who is only seven years old. Now in second grade, and despite having shown excellent development in preschool and in first grade, she has cried almost every night in September and October about the fact that she has to go back the next day to a school where they teach her principles that directly contradict those which we teach in our Sunday school.
- On some occasions they have tried to protest our religious services through the use of mobs manipulated by the authorities. Last night, when I arrived in Miami coming from Cuba I uploaded video onto YouTube of such acts which took place only a week and a half ago, on Sunday, October 25.

- My and my wife's property has been confiscated by the police, for example in the case of our personal laptop computers. The worst thing was not the confiscation but rather the degree of helplessness that we felt when we tried to seek redress from the judicial institutions, which supposedly exist to defend us, but from which we didn't even receive a response, in violation of their own regulations.
- The leaders of the Baptist Convention of Western Cuba, to which our churches are affiliated, are constantly pressured by the Office of Religious Affairs of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party to take action against us.
- My personal correspondence is constantly violated without any respect, even for international and prestigious services like DHL. A recent example which I just experienced was with the package Number 5441892820 which was sent from Argentina last October 9 and although it arrived in Cuba on the 14th I was not able to claim it until October 30, after calling out and denouncing the situation on my twitter account.
- My cellular phone service is also constantly interrupted, the provider is Cubacel, which has a total monopoly over the telephone lines in Cuba but which is completely manipulated by the political police.

The worst of all of this is that I am just one, trivial, example and to cap it all off, I am associated with a church that has been legally recognized and registered since 1939, where violations like those I describe, as well as others, are experienced by many of our pastors and churches. This includes properties like the land which, in the past, belonged to our Baptist high school in Yaguajay, which was illegally expropriated by the very authorities. If this happens to us, who at least have legal recognition in Havana, and are associated with the Baptist Convention of Western Cuba, which has been established since 1905, what happens to the hundreds of groups who for years have existed on the island without legal recognition? Among those, I would like to highlight egregious cases like that of the apostolic groups and that of the Berean Baptist Mission, whose leaders and members are constantly subjected to all kinds of harassment.

Taking into account all of the acts that contradict the claims of the Cuban system, that it is no longer the violator religious freedom that it once was (as if the unquestionable fact that violating religious freedom in the past does not invalidate them from continuing to exercise power today), in September 2013 with the support of Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), we developed at least thirty questions directed at the regime in Havana. The answers continue to accuse them without even touching on the rest of the civic, social and political rights. Of the thirty questions, only question 13, referring to Alan Gross has changed, the others, unfortunately remain unchanged. The following are our questions:

- 1. Why is the Office for Attention to Religious Affairs of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party maintained if , if, as a political power, it is not in its power to define who should or should not believe, or how they should believe?*
- 2. Why don't they return the majority of properties confiscated during the years of open persecution, or reimburse the affected religious groups for their losses?*
- 3. Why do they threaten to confiscate properties which are used for religious services, arguing to that they are not legal churches or house churches, when they themselves are unwilling to legalize them?*
- 4. Why haven't they asked forgiveness for the imprisonments, for those interned in the concentration camps known as UMAPs, or even the murders of those who held different ideologies?*
- 5. Why hasn't anyone been held to account for the wave of repression which took place during the visit of Pope Benedict XVI when hundreds of people were arbitrarily detained and threatened? (and now we see similar events in relation to the recent visit of Pope Francis)*

6. *Why do they continue to deny access to mass media to the entirety of religious groups?*
7. *Why does there continue to be a monopoly on education in their hands, without allowing religious groups to open campuses, despite their own urgent admission that the Cuban people need a moral and civic education to re-instill the values held by Cubans all over the world and which today are absent?*
8. *Why do they impose an education that is supposedly secular, but is full of atheism and political doctrines which uphold violence, upon the children of believers, for example the symbols and slogans that students are forced to wear and repeat?*
9. *Why are religious groups, which request registration, and which have the same rights as those which are historically recognized, denied access to the Registry of Associations at the Ministry of Justice?*
10. *Why are new religious groups coerced, threatened and repressed, taking advantage and using the same legal limbo to which they have been condemned against them?*
11. *Why does the Office dedicated to religion in the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party, assuming pontifical airs, meet regularly with leaders of the historically recognized religious groups to encourage, promote and instigate divisions and hatred towards other religious groups to which they do not extend the same rights that are their due?*
12. *Why haven't religious groups which have been declared to be illegal, for example the notorious case of the Jehovah's Witnesses, been reinstated on the Registry of Associations of the Ministry of Justice?*

13. *Why don't they free the US citizen, Alan Gross, who is a prisoner in Cuba for having supported the Cuban Jewish community with technology, and who now serves as a warning and a lesson to anyone else who would decide to show solidarity with any other existing religious community?*
14. *Why are the members of the pro-human rights women's group, known as the Ladies in White, denied access to churches, for example in recent weeks as they have been violently repressed especially in Eastern Cuba and in the province of Matanzas?*
15. *Why are those religious leaders who insist on opening the doors of their places of worship to any Cuban, regardless of political affiliation, threatened, punished and harassed?*
16. *Why do they attack the group of pastors and churches in the east of Cuba, known as Pastors for Change, who were blocked last year from distributing donations to those affected by Hurricane Sandy in Santiago de Cuba?*
17. *Why do they arbitrarily punish historically established churches when they adopt any position that conflicts with their exclusionary and unjust political positions, denying them the rights that are theirs by law?*
18. *Why do they attempt to isolate specific religious leaders, blocking any access to them; this is exemplified in the detention and unjust deportation of foreigners who attempted to visit the Catholic priest, José Conrado, a living example of this?*
19. *Why do they take advantage of their monopoly on banks, using churches' bank accounts against them as a means of coercion? This is illustrated in the frozen dollar account of La Trinidad Baptist Church in the city of Santa Clara, where they also refuse to legally recognize the Luis Manuel Gonzalez Peña Baptist Theological Seminary.*

20. *Why did they announce that, as of January 2014, each religious association will be limited to only one bank account and that bank accounts of individual religious institutions will be eliminated, like the account of the Baptist church in Santa Clara?*
21. *Why, when the Office of Religious Affairs approves the visit of religious delegates from abroad, do they limit the movement of those who have received visas, forcing them into a rigid and extremely exclusionary and monitored itinerary?*
22. *Why do the content of minutes and agreements taken within religious associations have to be made available to and approved by the Office of Religious Affairs?*
23. *Why do lodges and fraternal societies, whose services are not open to the public, forced, ignoring their right to confidentiality, to turn over lists of their members?*
24. *Why, as they themselves have admitted on their television program “Las Razones de Cuba”, do they have religious and fraternal groups under strict surveillance, including infiltrating them with spies at the highest levels, as in the notorious case of the highest leader of the Grand Masonic Lodge of Cuba?*
25. *Why do they refuse to give legal recognition to new churches, submitted by the associations, and in the few cases when they do, why do they impose such strict limitations upon the operation of these recognized house churches?*
26. *Why are they so reticent to give permission to build new churches and make essential repairs on existing ones?*
27. *Why aren't the majority of the biblical and theological seminaries in the country recognized by the Ministry of Superior Education, despite being recognized by*

their religious associations, and why doesn't even one of the universities in the country have a Faculty of Theology?

28. Why, if they claim that the strange deaths of believers like Juan Wilfredo Soto García, Laura Pollán and Oswaldo Payá Sardiñas, were not extrajudicial executions, do they refuse to permit any impartial investigations, as have been requested and which would only confirm their innocence?

29. Why is there such a notable absence of any Law of Worship, which is necessary for a nation as profoundly religious as Cuba?

30. Why do some prisoners, especially political prisoners, continue to be denied the right to religious attention and why does the government continue to reserve the right to approve or block specific religious leaders from carrying out prison ministry, including those who have been approved by their denomination to do so?

There are many more questions that could expose the falsehood of the regime's claims of religious freedom in Cuba. Those who, today, attempt to deceive the world into believing that there is religious freedom in Cuba are the very same people who years ago tried to destroy religion. The pastoral letter, "Hope Does Not Disappoint", by the Cuban Conference of Catholic Bishops states that political changes are necessary. In our view the fundamental political change necessary, to obtain real religious freedom, is that those who have gripped power for almost sixty years and who have an ample, scandalous and systematic history of violating religious freedom must give up their power to others who can allow for a democracy and who will respect those rights. We pray that this will take place in a peaceful but immediate manner because too much time without freedom has now gone by. We hope for a new Cuba, where all of us hope there will also be religious freedom and that not even one of these thirty questions which we formulated two years ago will need to be asked.