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A Cuban's Prayer for Pope Benedict

What will the Castro brothers hear during the first papal visit in over a decade?

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Havana, Cuba

Next week, Pope Benedict XVI is coming here to Cuba, marking the first papal visit to my country in over a decade. During the planned three-day trip, His Holiness is set to meet with both Castro brothers and their subordinates, and to bring his spiritual message to the Cuban people.

The stakes couldn't be higher. This trip is a unique opportunity for the leader of the Catholic Church to leverage his considerable prestige and influence to support the oppressed and help the Cuban people claim our liberty and establish democracy.

My country continues to be run by a brutal regime that oppresses the people, systematically violating our basic freedoms. That regime is a relic of the Cold War, and there's little hope for change without substantial international pressure.

Cuba is a police state. Government agents spy on and harass anyone advocating for human rights. They beat and imprison anyone seeking peaceful political change. They arbitrarily arrest and detain Cubans for Orwellian infractions like "disrespecting patriotic symbols" and "insulting symbols of the fatherland."

Cuban state security closely monitors citizens' daily life, including all of our incoming mail, telephone calls and emails. The only legal press and the only newspaper are run by the dictatorship. Independent journalists who seek to challenge state propaganda are threatened and jailed.

Cuban jails are living hells in which flagrant violations of human dignity occur daily. I've spent over 12 years incarcerated, most recently for "crimes against state security"—that is, asking the Cuban state to respect the fundamental human rights of every Cuban citizen.

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meet with dissidents.

The prison system in Cuba flagrantly violates the minimum requirements for prisoner care established by the United Nations. During my years in prison, I personally witnessed prisoners left for 12-24 hours with their hands and feet handcuffed behind their backs, stripped naked in groups without any regard for human modesty, tortured physically and psychologically with tasers, beaten to death for requesting basic medical attention, and kept for months in cells without ventilation, natural light, drinkable water or restroom facilities.

If prisoners attempt to push for better treatment, they risk death. In one case in 2010, on the second floor of the Combinado del Este prison in Havana, a young prisoner who suffered from two chronic medical conditions—asthma and cardiac problems related to valve pathologies—was beaten and died after complaining that he was not allowed to see a doctor. While I was imprisoned, three prisoners tried to assassinate me on different occasions. Two of them later told me that

they had been hired to do so by military officials.

I continue to witness the personal ruin that the regime inflicts on anyone who offers an alternative voice. For me, the harassment started in 1998 when, while giving a conference at a hospital on the right to life, I was violently attacked and expelled by a mob dispatched by the Communist Party. Since then, I've been denied the ability to practice medicine.

My wife and son have had their lives threatened and have been pressured to abandon me. We have been evicted from our house. I had my right foot fractured from a beating by state police.

Yet there are still thousands of brave Cubans standing up to the Castro brothers and demanding their basic rights, even under threat of torture and death. Our ranks are growing. But we need the help of the international community.

The Arab Spring is simply the latest demonstration that organic,

people-driven democratic change is possible. In past years we have seen peaceful, democratic movements succeed in the rest of Latin America and in the former Soviet bloc. In most places, their advent has brought freedom, national reconciliation and prosperity. We can achieve the same results in Cuba, and we will do just that—building a Cuba where the people are free and sovereign.

The international community, for its part, has the responsibility to provide the attention and diplomatic resources that the movement can't muster from here.

The Pope's visit is important because the Catholic Church has played a crucial role in expanding and protecting Cuban freedoms in the past. My own most recent release from prison, along with that of other dissidents, was chiefly negotiated by the Catholic Church.

For those of us desiring a free Cuba, our demands are simple: free speech, freedom of association and assembly, free and fair multiparty elections, and a country from which no person will ever again be exiled for political beliefs.

Pope Benedict's visit represents a unique opportunity for the Cuban people to pressure their tyrants to hold elections in which all Cubans can unite with the free and democratic countries of the world. I ask Pope Benedict to focus on this idea so that there can be rapid change in my country, and so we can live in freedom. I pray that he will

succeed.

Dr. Biscet, a physician, is president of the Lawton Foundation for Human Rights. While in prison in 2007, he was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President George W. Bush.