

Table of Contents

- ***Cuba OKs organized religious services in prisons***
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Cuba will allow inmates to attend Roman Catholic Mass and Protestant services inside prisons, a top religious leader said Tuesday, in a significant easing of the communist government's policy toward organized religion.

Authorities from the religious affairs wing of the Cuban Communist Party agreed to authorize organized worship behind bars after a meeting with prison officials and the Protestant Cuban Church Council last week, said Jose Aurelio Paz, a council spokesman who attended the gathering.

Paz said Cuban prisoners could previously worship "on a personal level." When inmates sought guidance from a Catholic or Protestant leader, they were allowed to meet with one individually.

"Now they are going to not only be able to meet, but also use hymn books, Bibles and crosses as part of ceremonies," Paz said by telephone.

The policy change follows a 2007 request by representatives from the Latin American council of Catholic bishops for the right to celebrate Mass in Cuba's prisons.

The decision only applies to prisoners of Catholic or Protestant faiths, but communist officials said they were considering extending the relaxed rules to Jewish inmates and those belonging to other religions, including the Afro-Cuban religion Santeria, according to Paz.

Council of Churches President Miguel Hernandez confirmed the government's decision, but declined to comment further. The Communist Party also did not comment.

Relations between the church and Cuba's government have often been strained. The single-party state never outlawed religion but openly harassed and even expelled priests and closed religious schools after Fidel Castro's 1959 revolution.

Tensions eased in the early 1990s when the government removed references to atheism in the constitution. They warmed more with a historic visit to the island by Pope John Paul II.

About 600,000 Cubans are believed to belong to Protestant churches and the council has 47 official churches and other places of worship. The government does not release figures on the number of prisoners in Cuba.