

Cuba Opens First Church Since Communist Rule Began in 1959

Cuba is opening its doors to the first Catholic church on the island since the 1959 Communist Revolution ushered in an era of atheism.

The Parish of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, one of three churches approved by Cuba following improved relations between the Vatican and the communist government, was inaugurated Saturday in the far-western town of Sandino.

The new church opened in large part to the financial aid from members of St. Lawrence Church in Tampa, Florida, after Father Ramon Hernandez, a Cuban-born priest at St. Lawrence, reached out in 2010 to Father Cirilo Castro, then a priest in Sandino, where people worshipped in their homes.

"Donations came from as far as San Francisco, New York, Wisconsin," Luisa Long, coordinator of Hispanic ministries for the Tampa church, told the *Tampa Bay Times*. "This was handled through St. Lawrence but made possible by many."

For the Cuban town of 40,000, the church gives them hope, amid international tensions.

"[Everyone] is excited about the new church," Hernandez said. "Not just the Catholics but the whole town."

The communist-ruled state cracked down on the Catholic church in the first decades after the revolution, expelling priests and taking over churches. It wasn't until the 1990s that Fidel Castro started easing restrictions on religion, and both Popes John Paul II and Francis have visited since then.

The opening of the new church in Sandino was particularly significant because the town is home to families relocated

from Cuba's Escambray region, where residents fought the communist government in the first years after the revolution.

"This is a historic event for the church," Juan Hidalberto Hernandez, a Sandino church member, said. "Many families and their descendants left their saints behind and didn't have a church to pray in."

The Tampa congregation donated about \$95,000 for the new building, which holds some 200 worshippers and was built on land granted by the state.

A new church in Havana is also being used for worship but remains structurally incomplete. A third sanctuary in Santiago has yet to begin significant construction.

Tensions between Cuba and the U.S. have heightened in recent weeks as the Trump administration has threatened new sanctions on Cuba and its ally, Venezuela. {eoa}

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