

President Fidel Castro gives church to Ecumenical Patriarch

January 30, 2004



President Fidel Castro of Cuba surrounded by Orthodox bishops who were present for the event.

The Orthodox Christian Mission Center (OCMC), St. Augustine, FL— A new Orthodox Christian church was built and consecrated in Havana, Cuba on Sunday, January 25, 2004. This historic event began with Cuban President, Fidel Castro, handing over the key to the new St. Nicholas cathedral to His all Holiness, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople. A head of state presenting a key to the head of a church was not an uncommon practice in Christian history, but is rarely seen today.

Cuba, a once officially atheist country, built this church as a gift to Orthodox Christians. There are an estimated 2,000 Orthodox Christians on the island which, in addition to a number of Cuban nationals, include diplomats, foreign business people and many who immigrated there from Eastern European countries before the fall of communism. Until now they have gathered for religious services in borrowed locations including Catholic churches, office buildings and private homes.

More than a decade ago the government removed references to atheism in the constitution and allowed religious believers to join the Communist Party. Patriarch Bartholomew's visit to Cuba is the first Latin American destination ever for an Orthodox Patriarch.

Eusebio Leal, the historian of Havana, spoke in the name of the Cuban government and thanked the Patriarch for the consecration which represented "a symbol of friendship and devotion to you and to the Orthodox Church."

The church, which seats about 50 people, is made of limestone with red-brick trim and is in a prestigious and historic part of Old Havana. It is built alongside the Roman Catholic San Francisco Basilica on a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The Orthodox in Cuba will be under the jurisdiction of Metropolitan Athenagoras of Panama and Central America, which covers twenty countries, under the Ecumenical Patriarch. This is a growing Metropolis which has expanded from 6 to 23 clergy in the last decade.

Coinciding with the Ecumenical Patriarch's visit to Cuba was a trip by the National Council of Churches U.S.A. to participate in a region-wide consultation hosted by the Cuban Council of Churches. The aim of the consultation is to develop plans for collaboration in mission and to seek ways to improve relations among their countries. His Grace Dimitri, Bishop of Xanthos, Ecumenical Officer of SCOBA along with OCMC's Executive Director, Fr. Martin Ritsi, were members of this delegation.



A mosaic of the Patriarch and the President on the outside of the church.

"The giving of the church by President Fidel Castro was a historic event marking the potential for a new era in Cuban history and accentuating the increasing role of Orthodox missions around the world," said Fr. Martin Ritsi commenting on this momentous occasion.