

Pope tells Cubans to look beyond Marxism

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VATICAN CITY (RNS) Pope Benedict XVI on Friday (March 23) urged Cuba's communist government to look for "new models" beyond its "Marxist ideology," saying it is clear that Marxism "no longer responds to reality."

Speaking on the plane taking him to Mexico for his first visit to Spanish-speaking Latin America, the pontiff also stressed that though the church "is not a political power," Catholics must do more to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor and to promote "social justice."

The plane carrying Benedict and his staff, as well as around 70 Vatican-accredited journalists, left Friday morning from Rome. After a 14-hour flight, the pope will arrive in Guanajuato, Mexico, where he will stay for three days before moving on to Cuba.

Asked about the situation in Cuba after recent timid steps toward reform, the pope recalled John Paul II's first visit to the island, in 1998, which opened a "way of cooperation and dialogue" between the church and the Cuban government.

It is a "long road that requires patience, but that leads forward," he added, according to media reports and a Vatican Radio report.

Even though no meeting with dissidents is scheduled on the island, Benedict stressed that "the church is always on the side of freedom" of conscience and religion.

Referring to Mexico's "enormous" drug-trafficking problem, Benedict said the church must work to "unmask" this "evil," which is "destructive of mankind and (especially) of our youth."