

Exiled priest brings hope back from Cuba

■ During his first trip to his homeland in 19 years, the Rev. Ramon Hernandez is reunited with original members of the church where he was ordained.

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CARROLLWOOD — When the Rev. Ramon Hernandez left Cuba 19 years ago, the exile held a hope that he would one day return.

That wish came true last month when Hernandez trekked to his homeland with a group of other Cuban-Americans for Pope John Paul II's landmark visit to Cuba.

Hernandez, who has been a parochial vicar at St. Paul Catholic Church for four years, left Cuba with his family in 1980. He lived in Spain and Puerto Rico before settling in the United States.

At the Seminary of San Carlos in Cuba, Hernandez was among six graduating seminarians in his 1973 class. On his recent visit, Hernandez celebrated his 25th ordination anniversary with original members of the church in which he was ordained and in the cathedral where he said his first Mass. He also participated in the baptisms of two relatives.

"People were so grateful for my visit," he said. "People there are so grateful that you go to see them. It gives a real sense of solidarity."



Father Ramon Hernandez grew up in Cuba and lived there until 1980, when he became an exile.

After Fidel Castro and his Marxist rebels took power in 1959, they declared Cuba an atheist nation. Castro has relaxed that rule in the '90s, allowed believers to join the ruling Communist Party and tolerated more open religious practices. Hernandez, 52, said there are now 80 seminarians studying to be priests at his alma mater.

The son of a tobacco farmer, Hernandez grew up in Pinar del Rio and heard a religious calling early in life.

"In the '60s, the bishop appealed to the young people about a shortage of priests," he said. "That put it in our minds to go into the priesthood."

He said the country is very much changed from when he last saw it.

"People are coming back to the church," he said. "More people now agree with the church. I see more interest in the young people coming back to the church. They are in very good spirits there now."

He recalled celebrating Mass before 50 people while living in Cuba, but said more than 200 people can be seen crowding churches for religious ceremonies today.

"It is now a place for people to all get together, people of all beliefs," he said. "There now is a hope in the future," he said, "and a hope in national values."

Hernandez said he always hoped to revisit his homeland. It took a visit from the pope to bring him back.

"Five years ago, we never would have thought the pope would be there," said Hernandez, who helped plan the trip for nearly a year. "If this happened now, there's no telling where we can go from here."

He said he is happy serving the 3,800 families that make up St. Paul's parish. They call him Father Ramon and flock to the cathedral to hear his sermons in the spacious sanctuary with sunlight shining through stained-glass windows in hues of blue, rose and lavender.

He and other local priests and parishioners who went on last month's trip plan to meet later this month to discuss what they've learned. Similar meetings are planned with groups in New York, Miami and Puerto Rico to brainstorm ideas that might help Cuban seminarians.

"I see the future as a time for problems to be solved," he said. "People in the middle are the ones who suffer. Cuba needs to reopen to the world, and the world needs to reopen to Cuba."



Times photos — TONY LOPEZ

The Rev. Ramon Hernandez of St. Paul Catholic Church in Carrollwood just returned from a trip to Cuba, his home until 1980.