



(Caridad Caballero and family. Credit: Pedazos de la Isla)



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CUBA | Hundreds of dissidents released as Pope leaves

As Pope Benedict XVI left Cuba yesterday, hundreds of dissidents across the country were released after spending the week in prison or under house arrest to stop them from attending any of the religious activities surrounding his visit.

Caridad Caballero, a Catholic dissident from Holguin, was arrested along with another woman, Isabel Peña Torrez, on their way to Mass last Sunday morning. Caballero told Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) that the arrest was carried out by a mob of state security agents, male and female, who violently pushed the two women against the car. “We were never told we were under arrest, but were threatened with violence if we did not cooperate.”

The two women were taken to a local prison where officials attempted to strip search them. Caballero refused to allow them to remove her underwear but said another woman had her top violently torn off. An estimated 30 dissidents from Holguin were held in the same prison and eight additional activists had been transported from Santiago province, to the east of Holguin, where some of the main activities surrounding Pope Benedict XVI’s visit took place. The dissidents were detained separately in cells alongside prisoners accused of violent crimes. Lights were kept on round the clock.

The dissidents were not allowed anything except the clothes they were wearing at the time of their arrest and were prevented from receiving Bibles. Caballero said she and other prisoners spent the week praying and fasting, refusing all food and water. “During the time we [Caballero and another Catholic prisoner, Marta Diaz Rondón] spent the whole time praying. We went on a complete fast – no food or water until we were released. I tried to stay in silence as much as possible. We prayed and prayed so many prayers that God would open the doors and prayed that no one else would have to suffer like this just for speaking the truth. It was God who gave us strength and He even took away our hunger.”

Caballero was released at 5:25pm on Wednesday, the eve of Pope Benedict XVI’s departure. She was left to find her own way home and told CSW that another prisoner, Marta Diaz Rondón, had been dropped off by herself in an isolated location in the countryside, miles from her home in Banes. Caballero returned home to find that her son and husband had been kept under house arrest all week.

Caballero, who has been prevented from participating in any religious activities at her local church since the beginning of the year, wonders whether she will now be allowed to practice her faith unmolested. “My First Communion should be on April 8th. We will have to wait and see if the authorities will allow me to go to church and do this.”

CSW’s Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston said, “While we are glad to learn that Caridad and others have been allowed to return to their home, CSW is deeply disappointed in the violently repressive tactics employed by the regime to prevent ‘undesirables’ from participating in Pope Benedict XVI’s visit. Men and women who are members of the Catholic Church and derive deep strength and inspiration from their faith were arbitrarily deprived of the right to participate in what could be a once in a lifetime religious celebration. Once again, we urge the Cuban government to remove all restrictions on religious freedom and to allow its citizens to practice the faith of their choice without interference.”

