

The Importance of Small Acts on the Road to Transition

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St. Thomas Aquinas once said that small errors at the start may have serious consequences in the end. I like to think that early good-deeds in support of human rights and democracy may have beneficial consequences in the end. So following the advice of Aquinas and in the tradition of Jonathan Swift, I would like to suggest a number of "modest proposals" for building a sense of international solidarity in support for opponents of the communist dictator of Cuba, Fidel Castro.

My proposals addressing activities and initiatives in and outside Cuba are directed to all who are willing to assist the Cuban people in regaining the sovereignty and human rights that were hijacked and taken away forty years ago.

It is easy to think in big terms: policy, political processes and public opinion. So my first and foremost suggestion will appear mundane. It is also the most pressing. I urge you to explore all ways possible to provide basic humanitarian assistance: common medicines, cooking oil, soap, and shoes. Most of Cuba's dissidents do not have jobs any more. They lost their jobs because they publicly expressed political views at odds with those of the Castro regime. They now are totally at the mercy of that regime.

The Chinese dissident Harry Wu once told me in Geneva that we are all like flies. Initially I did not understand what he was saying; I believed I had lost something in the translation. Then he smiled and added, "You know, Frank, how sometimes a dictator opens the windows a little bit and flies get in? Well, we are the flies."

I would like to urge that any crack in the window be used to help Castro's victims. This is already being done in a very limited way, but it must be expanded if the opposition on the island is to survive.

There was a time when Castro routinely tried to export his revolution. He continues to support violent groups around the world today, but he also has a new strategy — to isolate, exile and export his domestic opponents.

As Easter approaches and later Christmas, some governments may take advantage of these seasons of good will to provide or to help distribute care packages to those in need in Cuba.

Granted, as some will point out, humanitarian assistance is often but a symbolic gesture. What's most important is the message sent to those who receive packages: "You are not alone. You are not forgotten." No one should underestimate the value of symbolic gestures. At the same time, let's clarify and call attention to the fact that there is nothing symbolic in giving antibiotics to parents who are caring for a feverish child going into convulsions when they have neither aspirin to reduce the fever nor antibiotics to treat the cause. Those parents might know that the medications their child needs are available at the international pharmacy in Havana, but they also know that even if they had the money, they would not be allowed to purchase them because such medicines are reserved for sale to foreign residents and tourists.

Beyond humanitarian assistance, there are a number of other important ways to assist. It is essential to keep the gates of foreign embassies open to dissidents and their families and not just for symbolic reasons.

For more than a generation, Castro has imposed a strict censorship. In the rest of the world, people can buy subscriptions to Mexican or Spanish weekly magazines, Chilean journals, or the Sunday editions of Costa Rican or Uruguayan newspapers. Cubans have no such access to information. Such newspapers, magazines, books cannot be sent through the mail. Although it is a violation of international accords, banning foreign publications from the mail is part of the Castro regime's systematic censorship. Foreign embassies in Havana, however can receive and distribute such publications. Subscribers can go to different embassies on the island to pick them up.

Supporting the extraordinary Cuban magazine, *Vitral*, which the Bishop of Pinar del Río sponsors, would be another productive initiative. Those of us who do not live in Cuba could purchase subscriptions for our universities, public libraries and news media — if we can find a way to get the magazine out of Cuba. Would it not be possible for a foreign embassy in Cuba to receive, say, 300 copies a month and ship them by diplomatic pouch back home to be distributed to would be subscribers?

The U.S. Interests Section in Havana has tried to help many Cubans, but Castro does not allow American diplomats to travel outside Havana. Will diplomats representing other democratic governments help us to reach victims of the regime outside the capital?

The Center for a Free Cuba has been involved in a number of humanitarian activities; in particular, it provides aid and assistance to those supporting the building of a civil society. I am not interested in self-promotion; I am interested in getting things done, in getting help to the Cuban people. When Castro finally disappears, the historical record will be set straight: the Cuban people and the world will then learn who provided help to Cubans and who took advantage of their misery and despair. In the meantime, let us outside of Cuba work together to help Cubans survive and liberate their country.

As for what to do politically outside Cuba, let's begin by agreeing that the Cuban people need more help from the European Parliament, the U.N. Commission on Human Rights and European and Latin American non-governmental organizations.

These bodies could take advantage of several opportunities. For example, the General Assembly of the United Nations in New York could effectively reach out to the international community. The International Committee to Promote Democracy in Cuba can reach out to Brazil, Argentina and other Latin American democracies to join the effort. We can support and extend radio broadcasts. I was delighted to learn that Radio Prague is now broadcasting in Spanish to Cuba.

We should support the expansion of such broadcasts to include simultaneous retransmission from as many places around the world as possible in what could become "The Freedom Network." If Prague were to broadcast one hour per week and the program were to be carried out at the same time from Spain, Argentina, Central Europe, the Caribbean and other places, the Cuban regime would have much greater difficulty blocking the signal and enforcing its censorship.

In our time we have seen the beneficial impact of international solidarity on those who struggled for freedom in Central Europe, Chile, South Africa, the Philippines and elsewhere. The specifics might not always be applicable to Cuba, but the overall effort is feared by the regime and welcomed by millions of powerless Cubans who one day will undoubtedly discover the power of the powerless.