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From: OpsNewsTicker Sent: Saturday, February 18, 2012 03:45 PM To: NEWS-Mahogany Subject: Pope wants to see Fidel Castro on Cuba trip-source (Reuters)

VATICAN CITY (Reuters) - Pope Benedict wants to see Fidel Castro on his trip to Cuba next month but the meeting will depend on the health of the communist country's revolutionary leader, a senior Vatican official told Reuters on Saturday.

The official, speaking of the sidelines of a ceremony after the pope elevated new cardinals, said the status of the meeting was still pending.

"It will depend on his health," the prelate said.

At present, the pope is only scheduled to meet Fidel Castro's younger brother, President Raul Castro, 80, whose formal title is president of the Council of State and president of the Council of Ministers.

Raul Castro is due to welcome the pope at Santiago de Cuba on March 26, hold private talks with him in Havana on March 27, and see the pontiff off when he leaves Havana for Rome on March 28.

There is no mention of Fidel Castro on the official programme.

Fidel Castro, 85, ruled Cuba for 49 years before his brother succeeded him in 2008.

The elder Castro now seldom appears in public, but occasionally meets in private with visiting foreign leaders and writes columns about international affairs.

One purpose of the papal visit is to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the discovery of Cuba's most famous religious icon, the statue of the Virgin of Charity.

Last month a replica of the statue completed a 16-month pilgrimage around the island that was the first such religious display since the 1950s.

It was another signal of improved relations between the government and the Catholic Church, which were at odds for many years following the 1959 revolution led by Fidel Castro.

Relations began to warm in the 1990s, a process that was aided by a 1998 visit by Pope John Paul II, and intensified in 2010 when the Church brokered a deal with Castro to release political prisoners.

The late John Paul met Fidel Castro twice, once at the Vatican and then during his 1998 trip to Cuba

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Benedict's visit to Cuba is part of a March 23-28 trip that will take him first to Mexico.

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