

THE IMPACT OF POPE JOHN PAUL II'S VISIT TO CUBA

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More than any other Pope before him, John Paul II has traveled far and wide. Few of his visits, however, have captured the imagination as much as his visit to Cuba, a country that when he visited in January 1998 had been under the communist rule of Fidel Castro for 38 years. This international drama was played out alongside many personal dramas, such as my own. The Cuban revolution deeply divided both sides of my family—the Pedrazas and the Lubiáns. Like many families in Cuba, my family split between those who left, rejecting it, and remade their lives in exile, and those who remained, became integrated, and ascended in social status within it. (See Carol Morello, “A Family Divided: Reunion, Reconciliation, as Pope Arrives Today,” *USA Today*, January 21, 1998.)

A child of the Cuban exodus myself, I had long committed myself to helping my aunts, uncles, and cousins who remained. In recent years, as my understanding of the Cuban reality matured, my efforts also turned to promoting peaceful, democratic change in Cuba. Many Cubans who left the island as exiles, or the children of exiles, returned to Cuba—some for the first time—to share this dramatic event on Cuban soil. Prior to the Pope's visit, I had made eight trips to Cuba since 1979, the first year that Cubans in exile were allowed to return to their homeland for family reunification purposes. But no other trip was as thrilling as this last one, as it showed the most change in Cuba.

THE SPECIAL PERIOD

Even before he arrived, Cubans prepared a warm welcome for the Pope. All over the city posters of the

Pope against a true blue sky were pasted on the walls. They said: John Paul II, *¡Bendícenos!* (Bless Us!). When he arrived, the response of the Cuban people was nothing less than joyful, as was evident even on television. Thousands and thousands of people on the streets and at the masses waved flags, chanted their support for the Pope in unison, and expressed their sense of happiness. Even young men from the Rapid Response Brigades, who were in charge of keeping order on the streets while the Pope passed by on the “papamobil” shouted and jumped with joy when they saw him.

To really understand this response one has to realize the enormity of the changes that have taken place in Cuba with respect to religion over the course of the Cuban revolution, and especially in this decade during the period that Castro euphemistically called “the special period.”

With the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, the heavy subsidy which Cuba received from those countries came to an end. Now Cuba had to rely on itself, and the result was a steep decline in economic conditions and a society that was devastated. The real impact of the U.S. trade embargo was finally felt when these subsidies evaporated. Hunger, malnutrition, disease, and poverty became the daily lot of people. The talents of the well-educated Cubans are also going to waste. For example, Cuba has many well-trained doctors, and due to its advances in public health during the early years of the revolution, Cuban medicine was once a model for other Third World countries. But in recent years, the medical infrastructure has de-

cayed to the point where doctors work with no medicine, not even over the counter drugs. Hence, doctors can diagnose, but they can not cure. The Cuban economy has remained stagnant, even with some foreign investment from Canada, Spain, and France.

Professionals not only can not find employment in their fields, but take other jobs that are more likely to be paid in dollars, such as cab drivers. The “dollar economy” dominates and many Cubans invest considerable energy in developing ingenious schemes and crafts that will earn them dollars so they can feed their families. With the sugar harvest at the lowest point in this century, tourism has become the mainstay of the economy, and Canadian, European, and Spanish visitors predominate. However, the luxuries afforded to tourists—good accommodations, meals, and medicines—are not available for average Cuban citizens, who oftentimes are not even allowed to enter the hotels. Side by side with the tourist industry have grown other social problems, such as that of the *jineteras* (teenage prostitutes) that promote a sexual tourism.

A NEW CHURCH

In the early years of the revolution when Castro, due to his immense charisma and popularity with the people, was able to redirect the revolution along the road to communism, the church and the government collided with each other. Many of the institutions run by the Catholic church—schools, Universities, seminaries, hospitals—were taken over by Castro's government. Most priests and nuns were also expelled from the island. Cuba then defined itself as an atheist state. Thereafter, the churches were nearly empty, except for the many old ladies that, rosary in hand, never ceased attending. For many years, religious affiliation and participation entailed very serious social costs, such as a promotion at work, or a fellowship to the University, or the award of a major consumer goods, such as a television or refrigerator. But the “special period” constituted not only an economic crisis but also a crisis of disbelief. Cubans on the island began to feel that their leaders were less than capable and the promise of a future communist society with a decent life for all faded. Little by little, they began going to churches—not only the Catho-

lic church but also the many Protestant churches, the Afro-Cuban *santería* cults, the Jewish synagogues. And Cuba changed its self-definition to that of a secular state. Today the churches are full. And along with this change came a new generation of young Cuban priests, rather than priests from Spain and other countries. The Pope's visit affirmed and strengthened this new church.

In this period of scarcity, today the church is also a source for tangible help. While the religiously-based social services are not fully developed, informal help is available. Through the international organization *Caritas*, the church is able to offer some food, some medicine, when there is something to share. More important, however, the church presents an alternative vision of society, one where social classes and races are not pitted against one another, but where the social message is about justice with mercy—helping others through compassion.

THE POPE'S VISIT

The Pope offered four masses while in Cuba, two of which I attended—the first one in Santa Clara, in the middle of the country (where both sides of my family, the Rodríguez de Arciniega and the Lubiáns, were among the founding families in the early 1700s) and the last one at the Plaza of the Revolution in Havana. The other two—in the Eastern part of the country, Camagüey and Oriente provinces—I watched on television, along with millions of Cubans in the island. People really came out for these masses, something no one could have predicted. Posters, banners, and flags welcoming the Pope went up everywhere. And Cubans who came out to the masses in support of the Pope were of all social classes, all races, all ages—truly *el pueblo* (the people).

At the masses, people waved the Vatican and Cuban flags together with enormous joy, a sight I never thought I would see. In Cuba, there is a culture of mobilization—where people come out on the streets and plazas and express themselves in chants and songs. Like much else in Cuban culture, it has both Spanish and African origins. It is the culture of people who for centuries would go out on the streets, *arroyando*—singing and dancing in unison—during Carnival, as well as during religious processions.

During the revolution, Castro used this same culture of mobilization for political purposes, as during his speeches he would elicit this same response from the masses of people around him. During the Pope's visit, Cubans used this same culture of mobilization to express themselves. The crowds chanted, rhythmically, their support for the Pope and his message, with rhymes such as:

<i>Juan Pablo, amigo, el pueblo está contigo.</i>	Juan Pablo, our friend, the people are with you.
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and

<i>Se ve, Se siente, el Papa está presente.</i>	We can see it, we can feel it, the Pope is with us.
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While in the first mass, in Santa Clara, people were still hesitant in their behavior, after the masses in Camagüey and Santiago de Cuba they had lost all reticence. The mass in Santiago de Cuba was particularly moving in a number of ways. The Archbishop of Santiago, Pedro Meurice, spoke loudly and boldly in defense of human rights when he underscored that the Cuban nation lives both in the island and in the diaspora, and Cubans “suffer, live, and hope both here and there.” The church's commitment, as affirmed in Puebla, is, indeed, with the poorest of the poor; and, he added, the poorest among us are those who lack liberty.

Moreover, since Santiago de Cuba is very near El Cobre, the shrine where Cuba's patron saint, *la Virgen de la Caridad* (Our Lady of Charity) resides, at the Santiago de Cuba mass the Pope symbolically crowned her. Our Lady of Charity has long been a symbol of identity and nationhood in Cuban society. Like the story of Mexico's Virgin of Guadalupe's appearance to Juan Diego, a poor Indian, shortly after the Spanish conquest, the story of the appearance of Our Lady of Charity symbolizes the origins of the Cuban people. A Spanish Catholic virgin, legend has it that she appeared in the early 1600s to three Cuban fishermen—two Indian brothers that set out with a 10-year old African slave—that were caught in a tempest at sea. In their fear, they fervently prayed for help and protection, which came when an image of the virgin appeared floating on a board as

the sea and sky became calm. Religion and nationalism became deeply in the figure of Our Lady of Charity when Cubans who fought in their long struggle for their independence in the 19th century prayed to her as a symbol of nationhood. Even more, she is also special to followers of *Santería*, the Afro-Cuban religion, who worship her as *Ochún*.

The importance of this devotion in Cuba itself can be seen in the way Cubans express their present plight in Cuba in paintings that depict Our Lady of Charity herself in the traditional manner yet substitute the *balseros* of the nineties—the thousands of Cubans who desperately put out to sea on anything that floats—for the rowing boat with the three fishermen. The paintings sometimes depict the *balsas* as empty, while the seas continue to rage, expressing the tragedy that Cubans in despair live today. Moreover, when real *balseros* finally arrived to the shores of Key West, oftentimes a representation of Our Lady of Charity was found among the few belongings they had with them, evidence that while at sea many fervently prayed for her help and protection.

Hence, the devotion to Our Lady of Charity has many meanings in Cuban society, as she is a symbol of both faith and national identity. And when Pope John Paul II crowned her, the Cuban people accompanied him in song, to the tune of *Virgen Mambisa*—the Lady to whom Cuba's patriots who fought for independence from Spain in the 19th century prayed. The *Virgen's* crowning, therefore, constituted a deeply moving *rencuentro* of the Cuban people with themselves—a newly found tradition.

By the time the last mass took place in Havana, Cubans came out very massively—running to the Plaza of the Revolution, where it was held. The happiness and joy with which they sang could not be contained. And in the middle of the mass repeated shouts of “liberty” could be heard. The Pope's visit was a meld of religious and political purposes. As he has for many years, the Pope both criticized the U.S. embargo of Cuba as a form of violence against a poor country that hurts the poorest there the most, as well as Castro's human rights violations as a denial of individual human dignity. Throughout, he called for Cubans to assume their protagonist role within their

own history—not to seek their liberty elsewhere by leaving the island but to seek it within.

In this “special period” in Cuba's history, something very powerful and special happened, indeed. The Cuban government refuses to engage in any real democratic reforms, such as a plebiscite and elections, or even in a dialogue among the major political actors in the society (the government, the church, the dissident movement, and the exile community) that both the dissident movement and the church have called for. Yet the Pope's visit seems to have changed the personal biographies of many Cubans, and the context in which they live.

The Pope's visit holds various meanings for Cubans. First is that which John Paul II himself intended, as expressed in one of his homilies: to defend a larger space for the church, and along with it a larger space of liberty for all Cubans. The impact of the Pope's visit needs to be understood as part of the process of the return of civil society—a process that is already

underway in Cuba and which the experience of other countries tells us constitutes the *sine qua non* of successful democratic transitions. Second, since the Pope himself called “for Cuba to open itself to the world, and for the world to open itself up to Cuba,” within the U. S. it has reopened the debate and controversy on whether to continue the U.S. embargo of Cuba and sparked efforts at humanitarian assistance of food and medicine. Third, Cubans in the island came out clearly and massively in support of the alternative values the Pope articulated regarding the central importance of the family, the school, the church, as independent social institutions that need to play leading roles in society not totally usurped by government. And, in so doing, they issued a call for change. And, as if that were not all, for me personally, as for so many other Cubans, his visit prompted a family reunion and reconciliation. A month after I returned, I received a letter from my cousin in Cuba that said, “The best thing about the Pope's visit was that he brought you to us.”