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11 years later!  
The church  
in Cuba.

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The following detailed survey comes to us from LADOC, Division for Latin America of the U. S. Catholic Conference. It appeared originally in Mensaje Iberoamericano, the publication of OCSHA, a Spanish agency that has sent hundreds of priests to serve in Latin America. The author is Manuel Fernandez.

The Cuban revolution is now eleven years old. In those years it has eliminated or transformed the institutions of the old society, as all Marxist revolutions do, in order to construct the new socialist order and the future Communist society.

One of the few institutions to survive in Cuba—perhaps the only one—is the Catholic Church. Its survival has been precarious, but at least it is still there. Has the church come through unscathed, under this regime that has so radically modified everything that existed before? . . . I shall try to look at the church objectively, relying on my personal experiences in Cuba, on statistical data and on firsthand information from Cubans—either those who still live there or those who have fled—and visitors to the island . . . .

## the church's people

*Bishops.* There are eight bishops in Cuba today: one heading each of the island's six dioceses, plus two auxiliary bishops in the Archdiocese of Havana. In the

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past decade, Cardinal Arteaga of Havana died at an advanced age and in broken health; Archbishop Perez Serantes of Santiago and Bishop Marin Villaverde of Matanzas also died. In addition, Bishop Riu Angles of Camaguey resigned, and Auxiliary Bishop Boza Masvidal was expelled, together with more than a hundred priests. Two new auxiliary bishops were named for Havana in that period: Mons. Llaguno Canals and Mons. Azcarate. In summary: three prelates died, one resigned, one was expelled, and seven were consecrated. Today all the hierarchy is Cuban, and their average age is 55.

*Priests.* The total number of priests in Cuba is 228, of whom 99 are diocesan and 129 are religious. This provides one priest for approximately every 33,700 persons—a far worse average than even Honduras (1:11,700), the weakest in Latin America, shows.

In 1960 there were 723 priests—495 more than today. Both the revolutionary government and many foreign Catholics explain the departure of so many priests as a senseless flight from the initial problems—or an attempt to prove there was religious persecution.

Those explanations may be valid in some cases, but the majority of priests who left did so under compulsion, from threats, psychological pressures or, in the case of teaching religious, because their work was made impossible once all Catholic schools were seized.

A few priests—some Cubans, some foreigners—even of those who had been expelled, have returned to Cuba. A number of foreign priests have also arrived for the first time. Some, too, have been “invited” to leave the country, through the diplomatic offices of the Holy See, in most cases without very explicit reasons being given for their removal.

At least seven priests have been tried and jailed for various “counter-revolutionary offenses,” among them the three chaplains who came with the Bay of Pigs invasion. All have been released. Today, one Franciscan priest is still in prison for a crime that has never been sufficiently proven. The Franciscan church in downtown Havana, with its attached residence, was seized by the military and has not been returned to the church or the Franciscans.



The precarious situation of the clergy has none the less produced at least one happy result pastorally. There no longer exists in Cuba the typical difference between the ministries of diocesan and religious clergy. The diocesan priests have incorporated the religious into parish work, and they collaborate today in doing together what is literally the church's work.

In the occasional gatherings of the diocesan clergy, one notes not only the lofty spirit that animates the great majority of them, but also, unfortunately, the absence of clear guidelines for pastoral action, spelling out how the church should act in the present circumstances.

*Religious.* We know of 327 religious in Cuba today: 129 priests and 198 sisters. In addition, there may be a handful of brothers: no figures are available. The dramatic drop in the number of women religious (in 1960 they totaled 2,225) is due to the reason given above: nationalization of Catholic schools and the consequent uncertainty about the future of those thus displaced. The women religious who remain are either contemplatives or social workers: the great majority are still concentrated in the capital.

*Seminaries and seminarians.* There are two seminaries today: that of St. Charles and St. Ambrose in Havana, and that of St. Basil the Great at Santiago. Only the former has a theologate. Seminarians of the six Cuban dioceses number 108. A number of these, however, are studying abroad, principally in Germany, Belgium, Canada, Spain, France and Italy. They are the remnant of a numerous group sent out of Cuba in 1961 and 1962; that group is much smaller today, of course, since some have been ordained and others have abandoned their studies. Of those ordained, few have been able to return to Cuba; most are incorporated into various Latin American dioceses.

It is only too clear today that it was a mistake to disperse the Cuban seminarians into seminaries and houses of study abroad. At present, therefore, efforts are made to train them in Cuba, despite the difficulties involved. It is



increasingly difficult, though, to staff the seminaries with qualified teachers.

In 1966, the building of the Havana seminary, situated outside the city limits, was taken over by the revolutionary government because of its strategic location, and its occupants moved back to the former seminary building. It is an edifice hallowed by long traditions of Cuban culture, but quite insufficient for today's needs. In addition, it had been rebuilt in order to serve as Cardinal Arteaga's residence. On the other hand, it has the advantage of being inside the city, in touch therefore with people for the seminarians' apostolic labors and more accessible as a possible center for religious culture.

Seminarians are exempt from military service, but many of them participate in the "volunteer work" organized by the regime to help agriculture.

*The faithful.* The faithful, i.e., those who come to church and are the active element in the Christian community, are feeling the critical impact of absenteeism: the departure into voluntary exile of so many, from all classes and beliefs. This impact is particularly felt in small parishes where regular attendance at worship makes the absences that occur obvious.

This confronts those responsible for pastoral planning with the need to stress the obligation on all to be apostles to their fellow citizens—and perhaps to convince Christian militants of their duty to give witness, even in a revolutionary society. Such a witness is heroic indeed, because of the obstacles the regime places between religion and the revolution, and the material difficulties of survival.

Accustomed to a pastoral of mere conservation, the priests are now disheartened by the steady shrinking of the communities that till now had been the exclusive object of their pastoral ministrations. At the same time, on major religious feastdays the people still come in great numbers to the churches and sanctuaries.



### the church's work

*The lay apostolate.* The departure of so many from Cuba has crippled not only the grassroots groups of the "faithful," but also the cadres of leaders, at all levels, for Catholic Action and other lay activities.

A few years ago there was an effort to restructure Catholic Action in keeping with today's needs, but the project followed too closely the lines of centralized Catholic Action and this led to bickering, and practically a rupture, between some dioceses and the national committee. On top of that, when the government reintroduced an old Law of Associations that complicated the very existence of such groups, some bishops decided they should postpone further attempts at reviving Catholic Action.

No doubt one of the problems in organizing the lay apostolate is fear of the accusation of "politics" as a result of the temporal options made by Catholic leaders in the past, both under the Batista dictatorship and in the early years of the revolution. Besides, the government wants complete control of all associations.

For these reasons, Catholic Action, which still has some very capable leaders, is at present in a state of virtual hibernation. In any event, a formula will have to be found to make possible the presence of convinced Catholic laymen within today's social ambience without the deadweight of outmoded structures that are politically suspect—and of little practical help.

*Worship and pastoral activity.* Since worship is the church's only public activity in Cuba and its only means of communicating with the faithful, it is not surprising that the Council's liturgical reforms were introduced eagerly and thoroughly. But since liturgical reform has not been matched by a profound rethinking of the church's missions at this historical moment in Cuba, and consequently of its entire pastoral activity, one can legitimately ask if liturgical reform in Cuba has been a mere external application of guidelines for worship or if it has also enabled the faithful to "express in their lives, and manifest to others, the mystery of Christ and the real



nature of the true church" (Vatican II, *On the Liturgy*, 2).

The Cuban church suffers from a crushing weight of inertia, but this lack of dynamism is the consequence of long years of routine and of a *laissez-faire* pastoral policy that has long delighted the church's enemies. To illustrate the attitude, one need only mention that in the past twenty years, while various lay organizations throbbed with a new surge of life, not a single diocese in Cuba was divided and only 36 new parishes were founded.

*Education.* May 1, 1961, by the government's ukase, 324 secondary schools, with an enrollment of 67,026 students, were confiscated from the church—or rather from religious congregations. Similarly, the Catholic University in Havana was seized. At one stroke, the church's educational effort and its approach to a sector of Cuban youth were thus reduced practically to zero. All it was allowed to do was preach, organize study courses in religion, like those that are occasionally given in certain parish churches, and offer religious instruction—but under the sharp eye of the regime. The state monopolizes education for its own ideological purposes and is quick to suspect interference even in catechism classes.

In that attitude, is the government acting out of the Marxist belief in atheism—or out of some pragmatic revolutionary tactic? In other words, is that a philosophical attitude toward religion as such, or merely a posture inherited from prerevolutionary days, when the church was quite passive and hence could be judged counterrevolutionary? The question is vitally important for planning not only catechetical instruction but all pastoral activity.

*Communications media.* The Cuban church had no effective communications media of its own for molding public opinion. The most important and promising one, the magazine *Quincena*, published by the Franciscan Fathers, never achieved wide readership; indeed, because of its mildly progressive posture it was viewed with suspicion and mistrust by a large segment of Catholics. It continued to appear for a bit more than five years, till the growing tensions between church and revolutionary government made its continuance impossible. Neither was the



church able to make much use, after that date, of the "neutral" communications media, for they very soon fell under complete state control. Until some time ago, the Havana daily *El Mundo* used to publish a small section entitled "Catholic World," but this was eliminated recently when the editors were changed.

Then, during the Council a few publications appeared, with considerable circulation, to inform Catholics about what was happening in Rome. The relatively recent attempt to launch a Catholic magazine in Cuba failed for a variety of reasons, not the least of which was the lack of agreement among the Catholics sponsoring it. Today, two quite unprofessional parish bulletins exist, but they give little evidence of the new dynamics of the church in their contents, and in their appearance they are woefully lacking in imagination.

#### relations with the revolutionary regime

Despite the difficulties that the former nuncio, Mons. Luigi Centoz, encountered in fulfilling his diplomatic mission at a moment of grave church-state differences—and of public humiliations inflicted on the church—relations between Cuba and the Vatican were never threatened. In 1961, Mons. Centoz was relieved of his post, and in his place the Holy See sent Mons. Cesare Zacchi as charge d'affaires.

The revolutionary regime has always kept a diplomatic representative at the Holy See with the rank of ambassador. It is public knowledge that Mons. Zacchi has been able to smooth over many tensions between church and state. The most evident index of his success was the two visits Fidel Castro paid to the nunciature in Havana, the more recent one being in December 1967, when Mons. Zacchi was consecrated as bishop.

How solid this rapprochement has been—and what price the church has had to pay for it—is something known only to the inner circles of Cuban and Vatican diplomacy. It is certain, however, that the situation has changed to such an extent that the church today enjoys in some ways quite preferential treatment.



For example, it is relatively easy for bishops, priests or even laymen to secure a prompt exit from Cuba—and return, of course—not only for attending congresses but even for periods of study and relaxation. The significance of this becomes apparent when we think that an exit visa is normally granted only after seven or more months of waiting, because of the enormous number of requests and the limited availability of transportation. This same diplomatic channel has also made it possible to arrange the entrance into Cuba of priests and religious.

Relations between the church and revolutionary government are implemented by the Holy See's charge d'affaires, on the one side, and by the Cuban government's Office of Religious Matters, on the other. The bishops discreetly do not intervene. These relations, are, of course, purely functional, and for the time being at least no effort is being made to discuss even a partial return to earlier positions or the granting of legal status for the church. In fact, the church's position is extremely variable and subject to the vicissitudes of revolutionary praxis, with no likelihood at present of reaching a legal understanding—as has been done in Poland, for example.

Yet there is no doubt that while the church's situation in Cuba has not substantially changed, these channels of diplomatic dialogue have contributed to easing the tensions that a few years ago were considered insuperable. Reproaches are made, none the less, that these diplomatic initiatives of the Holy See's representative do not justify, for example, soft-pedaling the appeals made in favor of political prisoners, among whom are many Catholic leaders. Such appeals, indeed, can hardly be said not to be truly evangelical demands.

#### communications abroad

One of the most aggravating problems of the church in Cuba is its isolation and lack of contact with other churches. Economic as well as ideological limitations deprive Cuban Christians of the printed materials (books, magazines, etc.) they need to get into step with the ecclesial thinking of today. A restricted number of copies of certain publications are allowed into Cuba, and they



are then circulated among as many readers as possible by being duplicated and passed from hand to hand—or by being placed in open libraries. Thanks to aid from abroad, these and other materials have been admitted to Cuba with government approval.

The possibility of obtaining permission to leave the country has undoubtedly brought the church great advantages. Thus, at least four bishops from Cuba were able to attend three sessions of Vatican II. There were likewise some at the synod in Rome and the Marian Congress in the Dominican Republic, at CELAM's Assembly in Lima and the Eucharistic Congress in Bogota; a numerous contingent of Cuban bishops and priests were on hand at Medellin, too, for the CELAM General Conference. Six laymen and the bishop who heads the Episcopal Commission on the Lay Apostolate came from Cuba to attend the World Congress of the Lay Apostolate. Delegations from Cuba were also present in Mexico City for the Latin American Catholic Press Congress and in Berlin for the International Catholic Press Congress. Others went to Uppsala for the Ecumenical Assembly and to Mexico City and Berlin for the congresses of the International Catholic Film Office. A number of religious have also been allowed to attend general chapters and regional meetings of their orders. The enrichment that this provides for those who guide the people of God in Cuba has an importance that should not be minimized or disdained.

A number of Catholics also, priests particularly, have visited the island. Most established contact with church circles; some, however, like the priests who came to the Havana Cultural Congress in 1968 and issued a statement on that occasion, came only as guests of the government. Unfortunately, most of these visits were not as productive of good for the Cuban church as they might have been, either for lack of a proper perspective or for failure to co-ordinate with local Catholics. When one comes with preconceived notions and is determined to find them verified, failure to enter into contact is inevitable. At least one planned visit (by specialists who proposed to vitalize pastoral life in Cuba) failed to take place because entry permits were not granted.



### ecumenism and dialogue with marxists

The situation of the Protestant churches and sects in Cuba is even more precarious than that of the Catholic Church, and their ability to adapt to the changed conditions has also been less. The Jehovah's Witnesses, who "for reasons of conscience refused to don prisoners' uniforms, give the official salute to prison officials, and work under military discipline," the Adventists and Gideonites, "who refuse to work on Saturdays," may be extreme cases, but they are illustrative ones. It would be unfair, however, not to mention that Cuban Protestant theologians have published a number of serious studies interpreting the present situation in Cuba in the light of gospel teaching.

Amid all these difficulties, it is clearly hard to carry out ecumenical programs. None the less, attempts have been made, such as the 1967 series of lectures on Teilhard de Chardin, in which Catholics and Protestants of different denominations collaborated. The lectures were held, in fact, in a Methodist student center. Efforts were made to bring in Marxists for those discussions; a professor of materialistic philosophy from the University of Havana was listed on the program as participating, but the final result seems to have been rather disappointing.

It is significant that four books by the Marxist theoretician Roger Garaudy have been made available in Spanish—but that requests for publication of his book on Christian-Marxist dialogue, *De l'anathème au dialogue*, have not been answered. Other individual attempts to dialogue with Marxists have come to naught. The Cuban church has, with *Pacem in terris* and all the conciliar documents—especially the final one, *On Relations With Non-Believers*—copious material for such dialogue, but it can come about only if there is a widespread attitude of openness and understanding. Only then can it be learned whether the Castro brand of Marxism is wedded to atheism as one of its essential principles.

### conclusion

From what we have seen throughout this article, then, the situation of the Church in Cuba, after ten years of



coexistence with a socialist regime, is far from ideal. At the same time, one should not call it a persecuted church—even less a subterranean church, however much some Catholics would like to use that word; for in the revolutionary context of Cuba, that would make it a conspiratorial church, which the government would not tolerate, nor should the church desire to be such. The government makes every effort to show that there is religious liberty (when the cassock was replaced by suits some while ago, there was an initial resistance against the change from the revolutionary authorities), and Catholics make sure that their activities are always open and above board (doors and windows have literally been left wide open during certain religious meetings so that there can be no suspicion about what is being said and done.)

Yet it becomes increasingly apparent that the church, though now "marginal," is no longer—as it had been till recently—"under attack." For one attacks only that which is a threat from within its hideout—and Cuban Catholics are certainly no such threat today.

The challenge for the church, then, is to be vitally present within the new society that is being born. It is a mighty challenge, because the church must strive to be a sign of union and a place of encounter for all in this island that is ideologically divided (not everyone, by any means, supports the revolutionary regime), and for the government such an attitude will be judged counter-revolutionary—just as for many Catholics it would be proof of vacillation. It is a mighty challenge, further, because it arises at a moment when theoretical and tactical principles must all be reconsidered. Those who formulate the pastoral guidelines have so far been unable to devise practical norms for a church in a revolutionary world. They have come up with only that awesome dilemma: total war or unconditional surrender.

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### *new Communities*

*In 1968, Ann Ryan of San Antonio, Texas, issued the first listing of "new communities" in order to help former religious looking for some form of non-canonical community life. Since then thousands of letters have indicated a far wider interest than could have been anticipated. Beginning with communities of women only, later expanding to cover men and mixed groups, the bulletin is presently addressed to all who seek a form of "religious life" outside the congregations and secular institutes recognized by the Catholic Church. Excerpts from the three editions reflect the growth of the movement. A short selection of communities follows with abbreviated accounts of their nature and work. Further information can be had from Miss Ryan, 704 E. Pyron, San Antonio, Texas 78214.*

#### **1968: definition**

1. A postconciliar group who consider themselves "religious," i.e. persons who have dedicated themselves entirely to God, and are living in community in order to assist one another in developing this consecration. 2. Such groups, while they may be formed with the approval and assistance of a bishop or priest, are not subject to the Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes, or bound by a special promise of obedience to a bishop. The avoiding of these restrictions is chosen not because of any desire to be outside the regulation of the church or to live