

Pilgrimage to Cuba—Part I

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Summary: Departs for Cuba to see for herself life under Castro's communism, especially farming communes, the life of the family, and religious freedom. Humorously comments on the 40 rules in fine print on her steamship ticket. Deflects critics who say she won't be truthful and see much. Reaffirms her pacifism even though Cuba "is an armed camp." "I will try to make the Cuban story come alive." (DDLW #793).

[Note: This is part one of a four part series on Cuba. See documents 795, 796, and 800]

So now I am going to take our readers with me to Cuba, those who wish to read about it, even those who read what I write with doubts as to whether I am going to be truthful, or see the whole picture. I'm afraid there will be plenty of readers who will say that I am going to see only what "they" wish me to see. They will say that I will see only what I myself wish to see. I have been thinking about that, because I wish to be truthful. But the trouble is if you have only managed to survive the filth, the misery, the destitution of our U.S. Skid Rows by seeing Christ in the people thereon, you've got yourself pretty well trained to find the good, to find concordances, to find that which is of God in every man. The trouble is that our country has severed relations with Cuba, a country the size of Pennsylvania, 90 miles away from Florida. I am afraid that I can only look upon this original breach of friendly relations as a cold war over possessions, what we claim are our own possessions in Cuba. When the revolution which we cheered at first turned out to be very radical, getting to the roots of the troubles of our day, and when a start was made to build a new social order (not within the shell of the old, as Peter Maurin always recommended) but by doing away as quickly as possible with the old, then the trouble began. The history of it is in all our journals, the history of the past as well as the history of the present.

The fact of the matter is that now Cuba is a Marxist-Leninist country, a Socialist Republic, and we are supposed to have no relations with her. To get permission to visit Cuba, I wrote to the State Department and also to the Czechoslovakian Embassy which is representing Cuba in Washington. (The United Nations and the Vatican both recognize Cuba still, and of course England, Canada, Mexico, etc.) If I wish to be in touch with my own country in Cuba I must go to the Swiss Embassy there.

Permission To Travel

One of our readers tells me to be sure and say that the U.S. granted permission first, and that there was more delay on the Cuban side. Someone else said that the Czechoslovakian Embassy had twice their own work to do now. I looked them up in the World Book, a very good encyclopedia which my grandchildren use in high school in Vermont, a thoroughly conservative and republican state. It was printed in 1961 and stated that Czechoslovakia had outstripped all communist block countries in economic gains and was second only to Russia in granting foreign aid funds to underdeveloped nations.

When the permissions were in order I went to the offices of the Garcia Diaz line and got my ticket, tourist class, for eighty dollars. It is a big office on the ground floor of the Cunard building, and there were twenty-two desks there and only five of them occupied at the time. It was eleven o'clock in the morning. Unless I wished to go by bus to Miami and by plane from Miami to Cuba where there are two flights a day, this was the only way I could go by boat from New York. The Bull line used to go there, but now all trade has been cut off.

There was no one else but me there as I got my ticket, which when delivered turned out to be three pages like a bill of sale, the first for me, the second yellow sheet for the purser and the third the passage contract, a blue sheet full of finely printed rules and regulations, forty of them.

Under Franco Rule

I read them all, and learned that I would be under the rule of Spain while I was on the boat, and probably sitting under a picture of General Francisco Franco. There is also a chapel on board, and though the trip will be mid-week, I was assured there would be Mass on board. But the contract speaks only of Sundays.

There is medical care on the boat, I will be in a cabin with three other passengers, and rule sixteen says, "no passenger will pretend to use a cabin by himself unless he had paid for sole occupancy of same." So if there are no other passengers, I will keep strictly to my fourth of the cabin and not "pretend to use it by myself."

It is to be understood moreover that there may be delays in sailing and that the captain can change the route. Also the captain and company is not to be considered responsible for "total or partial non-execution of the transportation contract caused by the cessation of labor, total or partial strikes, boycott of patrons, workman, officers sailors or employees of whatever class, whether in the service of the Company or otherwise; or because of the disarming or total or partial stoppage of the steamers of the company, owing to a general or partial lockout, regardless of who are the promoters. It is understood that the expense and risk of such delays shall in each case, be borne by the passengers." Rule 9 says that neither the company nor the ship is liable for loss of, or injury to the passenger or to his property . . . occasioned by accidents, fires, explosion, peril

of the sea, or any unforeseen circumstances or by barratry, fault or negligences whatsoever of the Captain Pilot, sailors or members of the crew or passengers.

If I did not remember that the Spanish have been sailing the high seas for hundreds, perhaps thousands of years, I might begin to get worried at this point.

Keep Your Place

Furthermore, I am not permitted to trespass the limits of my class which is tourist. Rule 25 says that I must deliver to the purser, for his custody, “fire arms, munitions and any other dangerous articles, otherwise the passenger will be responsible for all the dangers resulting therefrom.” Rule 28 says that passengers are responsible for all “injuries or prejudices caused during their stay on board.”

At this point I stopped considering the rules and regulations and tucked the ticket away in the beautiful new passport case which Stanley V. bought for me as a going away present. I also have two ten dollar checks from friends and a Spanish missal from Fr. La Fontaine who is pastor at Holy Crucifix Church.

That brings up the question of money for travelling. Our lives are such open books at the Catholic Worker that we not only “have to give an account of the faith that is in us” as St. Peter told us to, but make an accounting of our expenses besides. So let me say here that a legacy enabled me to contemplate travelling, and the money which will come in for speaking engagements this winter will reimburse the office later. I shall travel as usual by tourist, bus, and so on and be grateful for hospitality offered.

What I Want To See

To get back to my initial paragraphs and amplify them—of course I am going to see what I want to see, and that is the farming communes, whether they are state farms or collectives. I want to see how far they have gotten in diversified farming. I want to see how the family fits into the new economy, what the school situation is, what the church is permitted to do in giving religious instruction, whether any new churches are being built in the country districts or on the new collectives. I want to see a country where there is no unemployment, where a boy or a man can get a job at any age, when he wants it, at some socially useful work. “There is nothing better for a man than to rejoice in his work.” Ecclesiastes.

Cuba And Peace

Of course I know that the island is an armed camp, that all the people make up the militia. It is too late now to talk of nonviolence, with one invasion behind them, and threats of others ahead of them. And according to traditional Catholic

teaching, the only kind Fidel Castro ever had, the good Catholic is also the good soldier.

Several of our old editors have accused us of giving up our pacifism. What nonsense. We are as unalterably opposed to armed resistance and armed revolt from the admittedly intolerable conditions all through Latin America as we ever were. In Chile, land is being redistributed and reforms are taking place in many Latin American countries. But how much land, and to whom, and with what means to cultivate it? Is it good land, or waste land, and is the redistribution made in the spirit of Ananias and Saphira? See the story in the first chapter of the Acts of the Apostles in the New Testament. We are against capital punishment whether it takes place in our own country or in Russia or Cuba. We are against mass imprisonments whether it is of delinquents or counter revolutionaries. Incidentally Judge Liebowitz spoke of the rehabilitation of prisoners in the Soviet Union on his return from a visit to the penal institutions of that country.

No one expects that Fidel will become another Martin of Tours or Ignatius and lay down his arms. But we pray the grace of God will grow in him and that with a better social order, grace will build on the good natural, and that the Church will be free to function, giving us the Sacraments and the preaching and teaching of the Man of Peace, Jesus.

I know from long experience how few pacifist priests there are and how patrioteering is liable to incite the youthful middle class to such incidents as that of last week, when a group of students, in two yachts, shelled Havana, delivering sixty rounds into a suburb where Castro was supposed to be speaking. The State Department denies any knowledge of this attack, and considering the exposed activities of the CIA I would not wonder that the right hand does not know what the left is doing. And since James Donovan, famous lawyer, had just been sent to Cuba to negotiate for the release of more of the prisoners taken at the time of the invasion a year ago last April, it stands to reason that such a weekend attack must have been embarrassing to the U.S. State Department. An assignment like this is interesting but also presents the greatest difficulties. I am most of all interested in the religious life of the people and so must not be on the side of a regime that favors the extirpation of religion. On the other hand, when that regime is bending all its efforts to make a good life for the people, a **naturally** good life (on which grace can build) one cannot help but be in favor of the measures taken.

The motive is love of brother, and we are commanded to love our brothers. If religion has so neglected the needs of the poor and of the great mass of workers and permitted them to live in the most horrible destitution while comforting them with the solace of a promise of a life after death when all tears shall be wiped away, then that religion is suspect. Who would believe such Job's comforters. On the other hand, if those professing religion shared the life of the poor and worked to better their lot and risked their lives as revolutionists do, and trade union organizers have done in the past, then there is a ring of

truth about the promises of the glory to come. The cross is followed by the resurrection. Orwell said one of the tragedies of the present day was the loss of a sense of personal immortality. But are those to be believed who see their brother in need and do not open their hearts, their doors, their purses to them? Whatever we have over and above what we need belongs to the poor, we have been told again and again by the fathers of the church and the saints up to the very present day. But how much does a man need to cultivate the talents God has given him? To raise his family and educate them and to take care of his older ones. How much land does a man need?

The land in Cuba is very fertile according to the American Peoples Encyclopedia, and grows not only sugar cane. One and a half million acres is devoted to this crop in 1937 and American capital has spent millions on this industry. Tobacco was the second crop and is grown everywhere. Bananas, corn, coffee, tomatoes, lima beans, egg plant, pepper, okra, cucumbers, potatoes—the list is endless, and then from this out of date encyclopedia which can tell us much of Cuba in the past, we learn that 95 per cent of the crops are sent to the United States. The extent of the mineral deposits is unknown. Iron deposits believed to be 3 and a half billion tons, held largely in reserve by U.S. Steel companies. “Copper, manganese, nickel, chrome, gold and asphalt—extensive. The U.S. was Cuba’s chief customer. Raw materials were imported for manufacture by cheap labor.” Canned goods, sugar, syrup, molasses, cigars, tobacco, canned fruits, lobster, condensed milk, peanut and castor oil, sisal rope and cordage, cigar boxes and pencils, shoes from alligator skins, sponges, mother of pearl, tortoise shell, paper, furniture, cement, brick, leather, starch, textiles, alcohol and rum. The list is endless. But why was everyone so poor?

Forests used to be one half of the island and now in 1937 they were one sixth. Fish the year round and now provides large part of the food supply. There were railways, bus lines, cart roads and Cuba was an important point for steamship lines. There was a great influx of tourists. The Pan American and Royal Dutch Air Lines flew there.

Now there are no tourists, there is no trade with the United States.

When Columbus discovered Cuba (so named by the Indians) he found “mild, inoffensive tribes,” ruled by chiefs who had religious beliefs in God and a future life. Cities were founded in 1512 and 14 by Velasquez: Baracoa, Santiago, Trinidad, San Cristobal de la Habana. The Spanish could not exact labor from the Indians so they were exterminated and Negro slaves brought in. Slavery was only suppressed in 1845. According to the World Book, 1961, the rural population makes up 70 per cent of Cuba’s population. Seventy per cent white, 25 per cent Negro and five per cent Indian.

Perhaps all these facts are known to our readers but I know I had to refresh my memory though I had read many books and articles about Cuba these last years. But what one reads in books is not enough. I will try to make the Cuban story come alive.