

About Cuba

Dorothy Day

The Catholic Worker, July-August 1961, 1, 2, 7, 8.

Summary: Addresses the issue of supporting the Cuban revolution while the Church is being persecuted there. Reaffirms solidarity with the poor and is critical of clergy who ignore the poor. Affirms opposition to violent revolution and the ultimate triumph of good over evil. (DDLW #246).

Each day there is some new word about Cuba and the revolution going on there, and we have had many letters from our readers asking us to clarify our position. This is extremely difficult to do, since we are religious in our attitude with a great love for Holy Mother Church; and we are also revolutionaries, in our own fashion.

No matter what we say, I am afraid we will not be able to make ourselves clear. I shall write from my own point of view, from my own experience, which is a long one, among the poor, the workers, organized labor, and throughout a long series of wars, "imperialist wars," class wars, civil wars, race wars. Shall I say that it is almost fifty years of struggle, since at 14 I began to read the class-conscious fiction of Upton Sinclair, who is called the Dickens of America, and Jack London, who is a best seller in Russia, not to speak of the *Day Book* in Chicago which was a socialist, ad-less newspaper on which Carl Sandburg worked, and one of my brothers also.

A good part of this will probably be written in Church where I'll be groaning and sweating, trying to understand and clarify my ideas to present them so that our 70,000 copies of the paper will be read and understood. I won't say 70,000 readers, since libraries and schools get copies and many read them. Who knows who reads the paper or who will be makeso influenced by the paper that they too will try to see things in the light of the faith, in the light of the history of the Church, and the history of the poor, who are the first children of the Church.

In the pile of mail waiting for me when I returned from the west coast shore there was a clipping from *The Sunday Visitor*, read by millions of Catholics and found in practically every church in the land. It certainly influences the thinking of our Catholic people.

The first part of the clipping is about the counter revolutionary movement in Cuba and among the exiles in Miami, the move towards an invasion and the formation of a peoples' revolutionary front which had defected from Castro and "possibly deliberate Communist plants, designed to, retrieve the revolution after the fall of Fidel Castro." "What is even more disturbing and frightening is the indication that the formation of this leftist dominated provisional group was-facilitated by men within our own government."

Then the clipping goes on to discuss the Catholic Worker, calling Dave Dellinger's article "so blatantly filled with misstatements, out and out lies, that it does not seem to me possible it could have been written in good faith."

There is a great deal of name calling in the article as well as name dropping, so the article gives the impression that the writer is "in the know," is acquainted personally with everyone he mentions, as indeed he may be, having been a journalist and having lived in Cuba for some time. But I too come from a newspaper family and know well the widely divergent points of view that there can be in one family on men and events. One brother was a foreign correspondent for twenty years, another the editor of a Hearst paper in New York. We are, as a family, trained journalists, one might say. And we interpret the news quite differently.

I have not been in Cuba, except as a stopover coming home from Mexico, but I was in Mexico City during the persecution of the Church in the 20's, when the Churches had just reopened in 1929. The laws of the state against the Church are still on the books in 1961, though the church is functioning as normally as it can in our materialist civilization. While I was in Mexico, at the same time that the Church was being persecuted and Mexico was being denounced by the Catholic press as being communistic, my friend Tina Medotti was being arrested and other communists were going into hiding. When I interviewed General Sandino, the Nicaraguan leader, who was opposing United States troops in his own country, he stated clearly he was a communist for his own country not for Russia; that he was a communist because he was for the poor.

Aided by Communists

When the CIO was being organized in 1936 there was many a communist organizer whose skill and courage was made use of by non-Communist top brass, including Joseph Curran who even testified as to this position before the House UnAmerican Activities Committee. "Sure I accepted help from the Communists," he stated flatly. (I was present at the hearing in Washington D.C. with Mrs. John Brophy, whose husband was vice president of the CIO and worked closely with John L. Levis.) "Who else gave us any help?" he asked boldly, ignoring the fact of the CW headquarters on Tenth Avenue where tons of coffee, peanut butter, cottage cheese, jam and bread had been consumed during the three months' strike of 1937. Though it cost us thousands, and many a ship's crew took up collections for repaying us this aid, it probably was but a drop in the bucket in building up the organization of the National Maritime Union, its headquarters, publications, officers, legal help, etc.

And since when have there been free elections in any of the great unions of the United States? Once the workers get a leader who delivers the goods, they hold on to him. And when they want a change, it is a bitter struggle to bring about democratic elections. Joseph P. Ryan, of the East Coast Longshoremens for many years used to call meetings with a gun on the table in front of him. Strong-arm tactics, the use of force and bribery, are well known in our unions.

But there is no use in the pot calling the kettle black. It is not the "clean hands" policy that I am speaking of. I know how complicated all these problems of justice are, how deep the roots of corruption in our human nature. "The just will be judged first," St. Peter said, and

we must think of the power of example. “What you do speaks so loudly that I cannot hear what you say.”

With the Poor

It is hard too to say that the place of The Catholic Worker is with the poor, and that being there, we are often finding ourselves on the side of the persecutors of the Church. This is a tragic fact. It is hard too to be writing from New York, where one is not in danger. It is hard to write this way, when I know that were I in Cuba and I heard a mob shouting outside a church for the blood of the priests and worshipers within, I would then be on the side of the “faithful.” Of course persecution is deserved and undeserved. And also it is promised us. “The servant is not above his master and if they have persecuted me they will persecute you also.” If we are not being persecuted there is something wrong with us. This is not having a persecution complex.

One could weep with the tragedy of denying Christ in the poor. The Church is the Cross on which Christ is crucified and one does not separate Christ from his cross, Guardini wrote. Christ has left Himself to us in the bread and wine on the altar; He has left Himself to those who gather together, two and three in His name; He has left Himself to us in the poor. “There I am in the midst of you.” “If you do it unto the least of these my brethren you do it unto me.” “I am Christ whom thou persecutest”. Saul was imprisoning and putting to death those who walked in the Way, and Christ cried out on the road to Damascus, “Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?”

Fidel Castro says he is not persecuting Christ, but Churchmen who have betrayed him. He says that he differentiates between Christ and the clergy, the Church and the clergy. He reassures the people that they can administer the sacrament of baptism themselves. That a marriage is consummated by the act of marriage and is blessed by the priest. The fact that he has to make these things clear to his people shows how deeply religious they are, that they need reassuring. He asked the clergy to remain and to teach when he took over the schools and nationalized church property. God knows he needs teachers to send out all over the island to reach the furthestmost corners of it. But the reply according to our diocesan press, was that priests and nuns would not teach communism to their students And Castro in his turn taunted them with the fact that all they thought of was money and property.

We are a spectacle to the world, we Catholics, fighting each other like this, flinging taunts back and forth. (After all Castro is a Catholic.)

California

A few months ago I came back from the west coast where I saw the hierarchy silent in the face of the slavery and exploitation of the bracero and the agricultural worker. There had been a lettuce strike in the Imperial Valley where thousands of braceros imported from Mexico, were harvesting the crop. The Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee and the Packinghouse Worker’s Union held meetings at the entrance to the fields urging the workers to come out on

strike and not to take the jobs of their brothers. There were many arrests and some of the organizers were put in prison. Some sympathetic priests came to speak at the meeting and were rebuked by the diocesan Officials, some of whom even went so far as to say that some communists masquerading as priests had appeared at the union meetings.

The strike was over by the time I reached El Centro, and I talked with some of the townspeople, all of whom thought it had been a great loss of crop and manpower, a real defeat for worker, for grower and for “broker.” I went to the large Catholic Church and found a notice in the door “Anyone asking for jobs or help, go to the police department.”

Later I heard Billy Joe Shelby, one of the agricultural workers and himself an organizer, tell how the police were filling up the jails with workers. It was obvious that those in need were not going to go to the police department. And how strange it is that the very priests who complain of the State taking over and of what amounts to state ownership of the indigent, should be the ones to shout communism when the principle of subsidiarity is being put into effect through efforts to organize into unions, and who send the poor to the police and to the State.

Stockton

Later I went with Andy Arellano to skid row in Stockton at five o'clock in the morning and saw the artificial labor shortages created to bolster up the importation of braceros, to make it appear that it was absolutely necessary for the harvesting of the crops to import men without families whose wages are filched from them by profiteering store keepers, who are charged exorbitant sums for cashing checks, for sending money orders.

How sad it is to see men waiting for work, standing in the market place waiting for hours to be hired, sober, industrious men, with a pathetically small paper bag containing a sandwich for their lunch, men with their short handled hoe ready to thin beets at truly backbreaking labor. They say America won't do stoop labor, but there were plenty of Americans there, and Lise Bowman who writes a letter in this issue follows the crops all summer with her husband and a little girl of four. “I earned money too,” the little girl said, and the mother proudly informed us she had earned two or three dollars, picking olives, and had bought her oven shoes.

Where are the priests among the poor, following the crops and those who pick them? You can count them on the fingers of one hand. Assigned to parish work, in towns, there is little chance for close contact.

New York

Only a few days after I had returned to New York, I was on my way up Second Avenue to go to Nativity Church which is in the heart of the slums, where Puerto Ricans are crowded together, where store front churches abound and where some of the worst gangs of the city hang out. At night the streets are alive with children. They cannot go to bed until they are ready to drop with exhaustion because the rooms are too crowded. The parents go out to

the service jobs in institutions, to the heavy jobs in laundries, to the hard and least paid labor. There are few parochial schools in these slums. But there was a boys' Academy and as I went to the eight thirty Mass, crowds of well dressed, well fed young students were crossing the avenue to make their nine o'clock classes. The contrast between their lives and the lives of the Puerto Rican boys they passed was painful. How many parishes, how many of the clergy are there in these sections of our great city of New York, and how many of the Puerto Ricans are they able to reach? Fr Janner and his fellow priests break their hearts over their work. Two teenagers had killed themselves these last months with overdoses of drugs, Fr. Janner told me.

A convent built in the slums for twelve nuns at the cost of \$85,000. A family of twelve Puerto Ricans living in a two-room tenement house apartment. These things should not be. Billions of dollars in buildings, plants, as they have come to be called, including Church, school, convent and rectory, and nothing spent on the family, on youth.

Even worse, it is the family who pays for all this, the working man who wants his children to have a "Catholic education," who is afraid of delinquents, who thinks of the sisters and priests as a police force to keep his own children protected, and the Sacraments as an insurance policy against suffering in the life to come. A fearful view of the Church. Yet it is to the Church we must go or starve for the bread of life. It is the priest with his anointed hands who serves us in the great moments of life and love and death throughout our lives.

Catspaws

Another thing. As I passed through Texas there was an account in an El Paso newspaper of Catholic gangs going over the border to fight pro-Castro demonstrators. Was this a way of diverting their energies into safe channels? Perhaps there would be no police action against a gang of young toughs breaking up a meeting of Mexicans who were siding with Castro. They could indulge their desire for fighting with impunity. They were engaging in a holy war, they were fighting for religion, for the "Faith," for "Holy Mother Church." But on the other hand they might be catspaws building-up anti Castro sentiment to prepare for the defeat of Castro and the taking back of the nationalized property. They might be fighting the battle of the rich, of the American corporations.

St. Catherine of Sienna preached a Crusade, saying that it was better to go fight the heathen and regain the holy land, than for the Italian cities to be fighting among themselves. And on the other hand our Lord said through her, "I have left myself in the midst of you, that what you do for these, I will count as done for myself." And in this she was thinking of the poor.

And St. Teresa of Avila prayed that before her nuns became rich and lived in fine buildings, the walls would fall upon them and crush them. Yet she accepted money from her brothers who went to the New World to make their fortunes. Those fortunes were made by robbing the native population, enslaving them, even wiping them out completely (after baptizing them and anointing them first perhaps.) Hard not to be cynical, hard not to judge. Fr. John J. Hugo said that one could go to hell imitating the imperfections of the saints. He also said that we loved God as much as the one we loved the least. What a hard and painful thing it

is to love the exploiter. When I was interviewed by Mike Wallace on television, and he asked me, "Do you think God loves a Hitler and a Stalin?" I could only quote, "God loves all men. God wills that all men be saved."

One needs to read Raissa Maritain's essay on the Development of Conscience in the Old Testament since the time of Abraham," published in **The Bridge**.

I realize that such a piece of writing as this is more like a meditation than a carefully worked out article, and I hope our readers will forgive me. It is because so many of them have asked me why we printed former articles about Cuba. After all, I am the editor of a monthly paper, presenting a point of view, about what is going on in the world, and these events are vital happenings. They are matters of life and death. Our lives, the salvation of souls depend upon our thoughts, words and deeds in relation to them. Certainly our peace of mind does.

Down in South America, during Adlai Stevenson's recent visit, the heads of State indicated that they did not wish to interfere with the Castro regime which had to work out its own salvation in fear and trembling.

While these events are going on in Cuba there have been stirring events in Africa, in Laos. It is because Cuba is only 90 miles away and has now become a Socialist State that it is pertinent to write about it. But one must write also in the light of world history, and all that has happened in these stirring times. "It is not time for anyone to be mediocre," Pius XI said.

Yesterday I got a postal from Mike Gold, Communist columnist for the *Sunday Worker*, who is now in Moscow. I have known Mike since he and I were eighteen and twenty. His wife is a French woman and we collect rocks and seaweed and shells on her occasional visits. Once they came with their two sons, and played French Christmas carols on their recorders for us, and once he brought me a poster of St. Anne of Brittany to hang in our dining room at the farm. (St. Anne, pray for them.) Mike has diabetes and he writes:

"I was invited by the Writers' Union here for a visit. Liz and I are also being given one of the famed 'cures.' They can't give one a new body but they sure restore some of the life juices. Our next stop is a sanitarium on the Black Sea—the water and the sun cure. All the best, Mike (friend of socialized medicine and Soviet Humanism.)"

Another friend said recently, "my son is studying medicine and another son the violin. I will have to work a long time to educate them. If they were in Russia they would have the best; they are such gifted children."

Another friend: "the only way my children can get a college education is by entering the armed forces."

Fr. Joseph Becker, S.J., an old friend, told me as I passed through St. Louis that unemployment would increase, that there would be an increasing number of unemployables due to automation, and only those with a college education, and training in their chosen fields would be able to get work. Man needs work as he needs bread.

The Problem

So here we have the problem. The education of the people. Fifty percent of Cuba's millions were illiterate. No wonder Castro had to talk for so many hours at a time, giving background and painting a picture of what they were aiming at, for a multitude who could not read. He has pleaded for peaceful co-existence, and he has said that the Church has endured under the Roman empire, under a feudal system, under monarchies, empires, republics and democracies. Why cannot she exist under a socialist state? He has asked the priests to remain to be with their people and a goodly number of Jesuits, God bless them, have elected to remain and do parish work instead of run schools. They know what it is to be persecuted and even by Churchmen too. They were suppressed by the Pope; expelled from Spain, in their own history.

The word socialism has many meanings and Martin Buber used it one way in his great book (now a paper back) **Paths in Utopia**. In Russia it is understood as Marxist socialism as opposed to Utopian Socialism. And "atheism is an integral part of Marxism," Lenin said. If this is the type of socialism which will be taught in Cuban schools which are springing up all over the island, of course we are against it. But there is an atheistic capitalism too, and atheistic materialism which is more subtle and more deadly. The former editor of the *Osservatore Romano* has called attention to this cancer on our social body. Certainly we have kept God out of our own school system here in the United States. What is worst of all is **using** God and religion to bolster up our own greed, our own attachment to property and putting God and country on an equality.

We are certainly not Marxist socialists nor do we believe in violent revolution. Yet we do believe that it is better to revolt, to fight, as Castro did with his handful of men, he worked in the fields with the cane workers and thus gained them to his army—than to do nothing.

We are on the side of the revolution. We believe there must be new concepts of property, which is proper to man, and that the new concept is not so new. There is a Christian communism and a Christian capitalism as Peter Maurin pointed out. We believe in farming communes and cooperatives and will be happy to see how they work out in Cuba. We are in correspondence with friends in Cuba who will send us word as to what is happening in religious circles and in the schools. We have been invited to visit by a young woman who works in the National Library in Havana and we hope some time we will be able to go. We are happy to hear that all the young people who belong to the sodality of our Lady in the U. S. are praying for Cuba and we too join in prayer that the pruning of the mystical vine will enable it to bear much fruit. God Bless the priests and people of Cuba. God bless Castro and all those who are seeing Christ in the poor. God bless all those who are seeking the brotherhood of man because in loving their brothers they love God even though they deny Him.

We reaffirm our belief in the ultimate victory of good over evil, of love over hatred and we believe that the trials which beset us in the world today are for the perfecting of our faith which is more precious than gold.

"Be glad in the Lord, and rejoice you just and be jubilant all you upright of heart." Because "All the way to heaven is heaven, because He has said, 'I am the Way.'"