

On Pilgrimage In Cuba—Part II

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Summary: Comments on the campaign to make everyone literate in Cuba and the impassioned style of Fidel Castro's oratory. Asserts that she found freedom of religion. Includes an extensive quote from Castro where he says one can be a revolutionist and a Catholic as long as anyone holds to the aims of the revolution and justice holding religious beliefs in his heart. (DDLW #795).

When the **Guadalupe** sailed from Harborside, Jersey City, on Sept. 5, there was a chill in the air and the sea was rough. But within a day the weather became very hot and so it has remained, day after day of fearful, tropical heat, which keeps one bathed in perspiration from head to foot, which makes dressing a burden. Imagine trying to dress after a shower, without drying off! But I prayed for strength daily, to cover the assignment I had set for myself which would take a month. I could not stay longer if I wished to, because the visa granted by the Cuban government was for only thirty days. Our own government gave me leave to stay for three months.

Red Tape

To synopsise, the first three of those thirty days I spent hours each morning in various offices of the ministry of foreign relations, to get my credentials ostensibly, which consisted of a little green card with my picture on it, stating that I was of the Press. But the hours were fruitful. They asked me questions about the States, and I asked them questions about Cuba, about the revolution, about religion, state farms, schools and so on. I talked to Raul Lazo, to Olga Finlay, to Rodolpho Saracino and others and they all most hopefully asked me what I wanted to see in Cuba, and there was some talk of tours but none of it came to anything, which was just as well. It was far better that I should find by own way, pay my own way, and in the long run I “covered” the island, as much as is possible in a month.

St. Anthony was my guide and I called upon him continually. Recalling his unsuccessful foray into Morocco, among the infidel, I asked him to protect me, and all I found was friendliness and help everywhere.

The neatest favor he granted me was to enable me to slip under the barrier set up suddenly by the government preventing correspondents from leaving Havana, and ordering them to turn in all press cards which were now obsolete. But when the order came by individual courier on a motorcycle to each correspondent, at ten o'clock at night, marked urgent, to be opened in my absence by my host where I was staying, I was already sitting on my suit cast in a long line in the bus station, in a mob of soldiers, campesinos, and their wives and children, all on the way to Oriente province, the furthest province away from Havana, an eighteen hour trip. It was a good thing I did not know of the new order since I had to sit there until four in the morning, because if I had I would have either had to obey or look upon each militia man with trepidation. (I would have obeyed out of courtesy to the country which permitted the entry of an enemy.) My companion on the trip was a young man by the name of Charles Horwitz, graduate of the University of Chicago, who had worked at teaching in one of East Harlem's schools for the past two years. He aimed to stay for a year and teach in Cuba, but on the day of our return, he was picked up by security police and taken to the immigration office and held there for two nights—then put on a plane for Miami.

It took us a long time to find the reason for his detention. He was permitted to telephone us and to see one of our friends, and he said he was treated well. The reason for his expulsion was undoubtedly because he had been detained for his visa in Miami the month before and had talked too much to counter-revolutionaries there. He is an insatiable questioner and as such was invaluable to me on our trip inland.

In Havana

I had, of course, no interviews with Fidel Castro, Che Guevara or Raul Castro or any other revolutionary leader. However I listened to some of them at a meeting in the Chaplin Theater which holds 5,000, five hours, until two in the morning. They all spoke loud and long and there was much audience participation. After a particularly rousing paragraph, and it could be for more faithful attendance at the schools set up all over the island as well as a call for resistance to United States aggression, the cheers and rhythmic hand-clapping and chanting began and continued until, in the case of Fidel, a motion from him meant a band blaring the opening chords of the National Anthem which quieted them at once.

But sometimes the interruption was to sing a ballad about the revolution or about the “year of alphabetization,” specially composed for the purpose. These were the hymns of the new order. (It is hard to get used to the words coined for the new regime. To “alphabetize” meant to teach someone to read and write. Just as in the case of Frank Laubach, the Protestant missionary and mystic, “each one teaches one” was being worked out religiously. To be an **analphabetico**, means to be an illiterate. My hostess in speaking of Marjorie Rios, said she had alphabetized Rosa, her maid. And every night in Havana every person, hotel

clerk, waiter, dishwasher (who belong to the union of gastronomics) goes to school for an hour and a half. This goes for the entire island in every town, I was later to find out. In the case of the **gastronomics**, the first emphasis was on cleanliness.

This year is “the year of planification” which is an easier word to say.

That first meeting in Havana was a memorable one. I had been staying at a cheap little hotel off the Prado, which was formerly the red-light district. All hotels have been nationalized, and the prices set. Rooms were hard to get, since many hotels were occupied by students and couples coming in from the provinces on their vacations which are compulsory, one month a year.

I had talked to Lopez, the hotel clerk who got \$150 a month, paid eighteen a month for rent on a little house which he would own in five years. I had talked to the waiters in the corner counter restaurant, and to the boys who cleaned the rooms. I did not know that slogan, “A tip makes the heart of a workingman sick,” and had given one of the boys a dollar. He came back a few minutes later with a can of evaporated milk as a present to me! (About the food situation, more later.)

When I telephoned Lou and Lanna Jones, friends of Bill Worthy, of the Afro-American, they told me of this final meeting of educational leaders at which Fidel was to speak. (Everyone says “Fidel.” There are pages of Castros in the telephone book.) They both worked in the ministry of education, one as a psychologist and the other as a social worker, and they would get an extra pass for me. We were accompanied by Helena Freyre de Andrade, a beautiful young woman whose grandfather had been mayor of Havana and who was head of one of the departments.

The place was jam-packed of course, outside as well as in, and the first rows were reserved for foreign delegates, of which Ghana was most outstanding, and of others with special passes. We had seats in the third row, right under the rostrum from which Fidel was to speak. Confident as he was of his audience, he came last, not beginning until almost twelve. In my opinion, having heard him on radio many times and this time face to face, he is a truly great speaker, clear, distinct, and repeating the points he wishes to strike home over and over again. “He is the greatest teacher in Cuba,” Lou Jones says. Like all people with enthusiasm, he tends to the kind of happy fervor we at the Catholic Worker are well used to.

“They love him so,” Lou said solemnly, “that when he went to the scene of a bomb explosion, and a second explosion followed, the crowd threw themselves on him as in football tackling, to save him! Once when he was speaking at one of the **concentrations**, (the huge outdoor meetings) it began to rain, and they would not let him continue speaking, because he had had laryngitis, chanting ‘Cover your head, cover your head’ and he finally had to do it.”

I quote Lou because I have heard it said in the States that Fidel has gone insane with power, that he is a madman, used by the Communists, and now more

recently that he is losing his hold on the people. He did not at all look like a madman to me. He is taller than those about him and he holds his head high. He has a trick of pulling himself up, taking a deep breath which throws his chest out still further, as though he were putting all he has into what he is saying.

This night, in that packed theater, heavy with heat and the smell of nardo lilies which bordered the platform and table at which sixteen people sat, President of Havana University, Marinelli, an old time Communist and outstanding educator, considered a man of integrity even by non-communists, Nunos Jimenez, who had fought with Fidel, and whose text on the geometry and geography is used in all the schools, and many others. I heard this leader of revolution, Fidel Castro, speak for the first time, and his talk was all directed to the youth of the country, for whom, he said, the revolution had been fought.

“Children are born to be happy,” is a slogan one sees over and over again, and he pointed out that youth could best help the revolution by perfect attendance at school, by devotion to their studies, by emulating others who led, by self-sacrifice, discipline, self-abnegation. I heard these religious words, spoken with fervor, with passion even, and I kept thinking, “To seek for wisdom is to seek for God. The more we know of the natural world around us, in science as well as in philosophy, the more we know of God.”

Freedom of Religion

Television, radio, and each daily paper of course runs the complete speech of Fidel the morning after it is given. The presses are held up until the last words come in. And in this place, as of more interest to our readers and to show his style, I want to reprint some of another speech, that famous speech of March 13, which to Catholics seems to guarantee freedom of religion. Let me insert here that I went to Mass and Communion daily, that churches, but not schools are open, that almost 200 priests remain and more are coming in for those who left voluntarily (intimidated, insulted, in some cases threatened, but not coerced to go) that two minor seminaries are open, active catechism classes continue and the presence of sisters and an active secular institute of women rejoices the heart.

One Speech

This speech was delivered to a University of Havana meeting, commemorating the fifth anniversary of the unsuccessful attack on Batista’s palace. It was in the presence, Fidel said, “of the sons and daughters of the workers, the humble, of the masses from the countryside.” During the ceremonies the master of ceremonies read, among other documents, the political testament of Jose Antonio Echevarria.

“He **began** to read it,” Fidel said. “He read the first paragraph. He read the second paragraph. He began to read the third paragraph and when he was at

the end of the third paragraph we noticed that without reading three lines he skipped to the fourth paragraph. Listen, **companeros**,” (This word is different from comrade, and means literally those with whom one breaks bread.) “Listen, **companeros**, and do not be hasty to pass judgment, nor even to blame the companero. It seemed to us that he skipped. And out of curiosity we read that part since he had skipped it. And it says—I am going to read the third paragraph ‘Our pledge to the people of Cuba was given in La Carta de Mexico which united the youth in one line of conduct and action. But the circumstances needed for the student sector to fulfill the role assigned to it were not present at the right moment forcing us to postpone the fulfillment of our pledge.’ From there he skips. . . ‘If we fall may our blood. . .’ and I read the three lines which are: ‘we believe that the time has come for us to fulfill our pledge. We are confident that the purity of our intentions will bring us God’s blessing so that we may bring the rule of justice to our nation’”

Fidel commented that he asked the master of ceremonies when he finished reading about the omission. The **companero** replied: “When I entered I was given instructions. I told them that I was going to read this and they told me to take out these three lines.”

“Is it possible, **companeros**?” Fidel cried out. “Let us analyze it. **Companeros**, could we be so cowardly, and could we be so politically warped, as to come here to read the political testimony of Jose Antonio Echevarria and be so cowardly, so morally wretched, as to suppress three lines?”

“It is known that a revolutionist may hold a religious belief. He may hold it. The revolution does not force anyone. It does not go into his heart of hearts. It does not exclude the men who love their country. The men who want justice to exist in their country, justice which will put an end to exploitation, abuse and obvious imperialist domination. It does not force them. Nor does it hold them in disgrace simply because they may have in their heart of hearts some religious belief.”

He goes on to say that throughout history exploiters have used religion as a counter revolutionary weapon. "Even the criminals who came to Playa Giron brought with them four priests, he said.

"But what fault is this of any good Catholic, a sincere Catholic, who may be a member of the militia, who supports the revolution, who is against imperialism, who is against illiteracy, who is against the exploitation of man by man, who is against all social injustices? What fault is this of his?

"Very well now. We write a revolutionary document. We publish it in several different languages. And the people support it. More than a thousand citizens, who are present when it is read, vote for it. It creates an extraordinary impression in Latin America. And what do we say? We say that in the struggle for national liberation, in the struggle against imperialism, all progressive elements, all patriotic elements, should be united and that in that front there should be

not only the sincere Catholic, who has nothing to do with imperialism or with latifundismo, but also the old Marxist fighter.

"We declare this to the whole world and we come here with an unheard of display of cowardice to delete from the testament of a **companero** the invocation he made of God's name. While on the one hand we tell them that they have to unite, and that if they are patriotic and revolutionary in the fight against **latifundismo** and exploitation, no obstacle is posed by the fact that one is a believer. That one has a religion, is a Christian or any other—and that other may be a Marxist, putting his faith in Marxist philosophy—that that is not an obstacle: and we come here with this display of cowardice to suppress a phrase. This could not be overlooked. Because what is this? A symptom! A wretched tendency—cowardly, warped—of someone who does not have faith in Marxism, of one who does not have faith in the revolution, of one who does not have faith in his ideas.

"Into what is the revolution changed by this? Into a tyranny! And that is not revolution! Into what is the revolution changed? Into a school of docile spirits? And that is not the revolution. And what must the revolution be? The revolution must be a school of revolutionists. The revolution must be a school of courageous men. The revolution must be a school of unfettered thought. The revolution must be a forger of character and of men. The revolution must above all be faith in one's own ideas, application of one's ideas to the reality of history and to the reality of life. The revolution has to induce men to study, to think, to analyze in order to possess profound conviction, so profound that there will be no need to have recourse to such tricks.

"If we constantly speak of this, it is because we have faith in the people, because we believe in revolutionary ideas, because we know that our people are a revolutionary people, and because we know that our people will be more revolutionary each day, because we believe in Marxism-Leninism, because we believe that, Marxism-Leninism is an undeniable truth. It is simply because of this, because we have faith in our ideas and in the people that we are not so cowardly as to be able to accept such a thing."

This was not all of his talk. And will it be shocking to our readers to learn that as I heard him speak three other times, the sound of his voice, his manner of oratory, his constant repetitions, reminded me of Peter Maurin? whose ideas, whose way of expressing himself, whose example of poverty and work, whose great message, if taken up by teachers throughout the church might have achieved in its time, the green revolution he was always speaking of.

But ours is the Way of the Cross, and not the least of the suffering is the recognition that so much of it is unnecessary, that it is the scribes and pharisees, the priests and the levites of the present day who are shouting "Lord, Lord" and denying Him, in His poor, denying Him in their acceptance of the armies of the State, denying Him in not working for that kind of society where it is easier for men to be good.

Fidel called for self-criticism, and he went on in his speech, more of which we will print in future articles, to criticize the young bureaucrat who pulls down a fat salary, and all those who pull down a salary of more than they need, while the campesino continues to work for a large and hungry family.

Later

I will write more, of my visits to Guantanamo, Santiago de Cuba, the schools of Camilo Cienfuegos, that present of the army and built by them for the youth of the Sierra Maestre, of the visit to the fishing cooperative and new village at Manzanillo which used to be known as Red Manzanillo; of Santa Clara, of the state farm or **granja** at Bainoa; of nursery schools, hospitals, including a huge mental hospital where the man in charge is a former fighter with Fidel, who is a devout Catholic and who said the rosary daily with the troops in the Sierra Maestre.

I will write of food of the body (there is no famine in Cuba) and of food for the soul, the conditions of the churches, and also of the Americans I met in Havana, including the exile Robert Williams and his lovely wife, who were finally driven out of Monroe, North Carolina, and of the events and charges that led up to it. And of the needs of coexistence with communism which will never be overcome by troops or embargoes, but only with the most true and strong love of brother, which is the only way we have of showing our love of God.

(continued in Document #796)